The Shifting Paradigm of Dharma: A Study of Select Modern Retellings of the *Mahabharata*

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by

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CERTIFICATE

This thesis titled **"The Shifting Paradigm of Dharma: A Study of Select Modern Retellings of the *Mahabharata*,"** submitted by **Ms. Komal Agarwal**, Centre for English Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy**, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.

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DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE

This thesis titled, **"The Shifting Paradigm of Dharma: A Study of Select Modern Retellings of the *Mahabharata*,"** submitted by me for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.

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To my dear father, who left me midway in this journey . . .

Acknowledgements

For the past five years, I have spent my nights reading the Mahabharata and its various retellings, raging over the humiliation of Draupadi, agonising over the many injustices meted out to Karna, questioning the dharmic-ness and idealism of Yudhisthira, grieving over the unfairness of the death of Duryodhana, trembling with horror during the war scenes, experiencing pity for the lamenting widows, and feeling utter disdain for the night-work of Ashwatthama, to wondering about the entire purpose of the Pandanvas' ascent to heaven and the deeper meaning of Draupadi's fall, Yudhisthira's reply to Bhima and his unspoken question to Draupadi! My tryst with the epic literally began with and came full circle around the plight of Draupadi!

So much for the nights, where an unusual text like the Mahabharata became my bed-time read! The days were initially occupied by hunting for the newest retellings in the market and critical material in various libraries in Delhi, and later, a rigourous engagement with my 'enviable' collection of books and photocopies on the epic!

However, all credit for initiating me into this profound journey goes to my supervisor. I thank Dr. Dhananjay Singh, my professor, who would encourage me to work on this prodigious text, delighting me with examples from the text during our M. A. course on Natyashastra, gently exhorting me later when I joined the Centre as a research scholar, saying, "You are going to become a popular Mahabharata scholar in future! Go for it!" No amount of gratitude for encouraging me to embark on this seemingly endless journey can express how indebted I feel.

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I could never have been what I am today were it not for my father. My deepest regret today is that he is no longer there to hear that I finally achieved what I always thought would make him exceptionally proud of me. I wish he were here, but I also firmly believe that it is with his blessings and continuing love that I have been able to accomplish this task. To my mother, who has tried her best to step into the shoe of my father on all fronts, who tries to call me up often as my father, so that I never miss him as much. But let me take this opportunity to ask her to be what she has always been, a forever support and a miraculous reader and knower of my emotions and troubles. To my brother, uncle and aunt, you are dear to me and will always be.

My fiancé, Pawan, who has stood by me, in all my hard times, who was there to hear me out, patiently, whenever I would share my moments of epiphany about a certain episode in the Mahabharata, cheering me all the way! I am, and will always remain, truly indebted to him for standing with me like a rock when I lost my father and had almost given up, nursing me back to work and life with extraordinary patience, and keeping me sane and motivated in this seemingly endless enterprise! If there's one person who can credited with the completion of this rather tiresome, but enriching journey, it's him!

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Contents

INTRODUCTION

> *We'd had to cobble it together from rumors and lies, dark hints Dhai Ma let fall, and our own agitated imaginings. Perhaps that was why it changed with each telling. Or is that the nature of all stories, the reason for their power?*
>
> —Panchaali in *The Palace of Illusions*[1]

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's protagonist Panchaali muses, in the lines quoted above, not only over how stories are constructed (by bringing together an assortment of "rumours," "lies," "dark hints," and "agitated imaginings"), but also how stories change "with each telling," wondering if this methodology lies behind the genesis of all stories, her final question being, is it the above mentioned manner in which stories take birth that accord them their "power." One can discern Divakaruni engaging in a self-reflexive act – her thoughts about the birth of narratives and their nature and functions is partly directed towards herself; she is theorizing her own act of not only telling a story, creating a work of fiction, but also of retelling one of the most popular and voluminous epics of the country (and the world).[2] Perhaps all writers attempting to recreate narratives from existing stories, or retelling a people's staple, suffer from some degree of anxiety and self-doubt, largely pertaining to the function and the reception of their work.

We live in a world permeated with stories and narratives, anecdotes and legendary sagas. This is true of all cultures, but perhaps more so in the Indian context. Ancient Indian philosophers, astheticians and litterateurs—and there were no neat divisions like these in those times—delineated the truth about life, literature, reality, art, existence and beyond, through the medium of texts and narratives, In fact, more often than not, moral lessons or

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[1] Divakaruni 15. Panchaali and her brother Dhri try to recreate the stories behind their births and their father's past through these techniques.

[2] In fact, it seems that in so doing, Divakaruni is only carrying the Indian tradition forward. Hudson draws attention to what A. K. Ramanujan says in "Where Mirrors are Windows: Toward an Anthology of Reflections": "that works of Indian literature are inherently self-reflexive in that they offer reflections on themselves as stories" (Hudson 50).

didactic values were intertwined with the stories.[3] Myths and narratives were passed down generation after generation, especially stories from the two epics. In fact, A.K. Ramanujan has famously remarked, "no Indian ever hears the *Mahabharata* for the first time," and it was a given that children and young adults, grown-ups and grandparents alike—everyone had at least some sketchy idea about the popular characters and incidents of the two epics, and was equally familiar with the tales of 'the crow and the pebble,' 'the lion and the man watching a painting,' or 'the forsaken child growing up in a forest' from other ancient narrative literature (qtd. in Doniger, *Hinduism* 134).

Big family structures and community living ensured that children were fed on mythological stories. Of course, the primary purpose was to entertain and enthral young minds, but the latent purpose was to imbibe social, moral, and cultural values in young minds. So, much before the Western subject of moral science was introduced to school classrooms owing to westernization of Indian education, children in the country were taught dense philosophical treatises like *Tarkasangraha* and the *Mahabharat* of Suryakant Tripathi Nirala (both of which claim to be texts designed especially for children). Thus, learning about moral and ethical conundrums and inculcating values from lessons in social behaviour was implied in the very act of narrating and re-creating mythical stories. Corroborating this view, Bimal Krishna Matilal maintains that "the story-telling activity has . . . one important aspect. It is an unconscious concretization of an abstract moral discourse" (*Ethics and Epics* 109).

At several places in *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni highlights other aspects of her act of telling a story or re-telling a mythical story/epic poem by employing fascinating revisionist strategies. At one point, Panchaali expresses her wonder at her discovery that "a story gains power with retelling" (Divakaruni 20), and at another, she claims: "Stories were important. Even when I was a child, I'd realized that they had to be understood and preserved for the future, so that we didn't make the same mistakes over and over" (Divakaruni 270). While the former sounds more like a vindication of the genre of retellings, the latter a vindication of a literary historiography.

Writers of retellings offer their own versions of the epic-mythic narrative, reading the 'originals' from their individual vantage points, stepping into the gaps and fissures,

[3] Though didacticism, if any, is mostly associated with the Vedas and the scriptures, and never with the ancient narratives in the Indian context.

playing with or tying up the loose ends of the 'epic original' or 'original myth'— like an explorer stepping on to a new, undiscovered land.[4] In so doing, the writers of retellings breath fresh air into the older tales, place their protagonist centre stage, add an imaginary incident or two, replenish the mundane details with vibrant ones, and weave an altogether new world in their retellings. Needless to say, in such novelistic (or poetic/dramatic) ambience, the readers are bound to get overwhelmed, the stories are destined to leave deep impact, and overall, the retellings are set to infuse the older tales or epic stories with greater power, and hold greater sway over the populace.

But one may ask, where does the legitimacy to meddle with the original come from? One can attempt an answer from the point of view of the flexibility of attitude which is especially characteristic of the Indian tradition. The classical Indian philosophical tradition has always had a lot of room for individual interpretation of dharma, morality, ethics and values, and has seldom, if ever, propounded 'doctrines' which are to be strictly adhered to by posterity. Furthermore, the Indian philosophical tradition accords great value to pliancy of interpretation as well as a prying spirit. This spirit of questioning has always been encouraged in India, right from the time of the Upaniṣads. Questioning thus becomes a very significant part of the discourse on Indian ethics and the pursuit of knowledge. Almost all the texts and philosophical systems of India have authorized individuals to decide their own course of action in relation to the here and the hereafter. Debroy also lends support to this view in his observation that in the traditional Indian philosophical worldview, one is supposed to ask questions. He explains how traditional stories are so designed that they do not leave readers with a sense of an ending. At that end of ancient narratives, one is left groping for answers, for a sense of closure. That, according to Debroy, makes one a thinker.[5] Debroy cites the example of the tone of the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is not that of a sermon, though it is touted as one. Krishna says to Arjuna, who is in a fix, caught in a genuine moral dilemma: *pariprashnena*, *pranipaatena*, *sevya* "ask, bow down, and then serve." So, before anything else, maintains Debroy, questioning becomes a very important part of the discourse in India. Thus, one can conclude that the right to

[4] Shivprakash's in his lecture on "Folklore and Its Modern Adaptation" drew attention to the impossibility of tracing an 'original' of an epic or a folkoristic narrative, while agreeing that the original 'might' exist. See bibliography for further details.

[5] Debroy, Bibek, and Amish Tripathi. "JLF 2015: The Conflict of Dharma in the Mahabharata." Refer to bibliography for further details.

question the ambiguities of the story or the text and jeopardize the moral and ethical certainties therein has been granted by the tradition of enquiry in India.

In terms of ideological positioning, the perspectives that the writers of the retellings of epic stories or ancient narratives adopt is also significant. It can be explained by borrowing some concepts from Rajendra Prasad. As opposed to a historian, whose perspective towards the ideas of the past is "objective," writers, academicians or anyone interested in analyzing the ethical and literary discourses of the past and gaining some perspective towards its applicability adopt the "practicalisic" perspective (Prasad, *Historical-Developmental* 8).[6] The latter is an alternative perspective in which the enquirer's "concern is always directed at ascertaining whether or not these ideas can be lived out by him, or by any other relevant person, in present-day context, whether or not the life in which they were actually lived in classical India was a morally viable life, etc." (Prasad, *Historical-Developmental* 9). Having viewed the epics through this lens, the writers then proceed to revise, modify, refine, adopt, and sometimes, even reject the values they do not find justifiable or useful. However, the "practicalistic" perspective should not be guilty of "presentism, consists in using a present-day yard-stick to measure the value or viability of a classical idea or theory" (Prasad, *Historical-Developmental* 10). Debroy also strictly warns against using modern value judgements anachronistically, and Rajendra Prasad calls such a tendency an intellectual vice. In this regard, Rohit Sharma's statement holds an element of clarity: "The idea behind the practice of rewriting ought to be a perpetual re-interrogation and re-evaluation o certain cultural norms / values / principles – existed and proposed in the original epics or in the later rewritings of the same – to make them compatible for the present social structures" (156).

So much for the creative, ethical, and philosophical stance that the writers of retellings adopt for their works. In terms of the choice of a genre, there is a general tendency of most creative writers preferring to write novelistic retellings rather than poetic or theatrical, though some, like Karthika Nair experiment with visual and experimental techniques in

[6] The objective perspective consists in "looking at classical ethical ideas in a neutral, impersonal, detached, manner, i.e., in looking at them as *objects* or things to be characterized as faithfully as possible, without caring for whether or not they can be put to any used by the historian in his own life-style or by anyone else in his" (Prasad, *Historical-Developmental* 9).

writing.[7] The choice might be determined, partly, by the "polyphonic" tone of a novel, which also permits "heteroglossia," both of which together permit different view points on the same incident or character.[8] Writers of retellings, like Divakaruni, Ray, Raghunathan and others, usually employ diegesis or dialogism, or both, to provide an internal view of the world of the heroine/hero of their respective novels, mostly delineating their characters through plentiful dialogues. More often than not, the narrator is the eponymous heroine or the hero of the novel, though it might not always be the case. All in all, it is as if the writers of these retellings engage in "fictional life-writing" for the character which is at the heart of their plot.

Why *Mahabharata*? The answer might not be as simple as it may seem. Sukthankar has rightly pointed out that the *Mahabharata* is "dateless and deathless poem. . . which forms the strongest link between India old and new" (32). The *Mahabharata* proclaims about itself: *yannehāsti na tadkvacit* "what is not here is not found anywhere else." The epic is thus "an encyclopedic repository" of ancient Indian myths, legends, ideals and concepts (Miller, "India's Great Epic" 123). As has already been discussed at length above, stories from the *Mahabharata* form an essential, inextricable part of the growing up years of each child in India. In contemporary times, however, it may happen—in addition to the means mentioned above—though the numerous televised representations of the epic, or through narratives and maxims heard in the family/neighbourhood/school, or through the medium of the retellings of the classical epic flooding the Indian market today.[9] The *Mahabharata* is undoubtedly the shining glory of the collective memory of India. Sukthankar remarks that the epic "is still living and throbbing in the lives of the Indian people" (29).

Also, the epic refrains from taking positions on what is right and what is wrong, moral and immoral. Also, no character in the *Mahabharata* can be seen as black or white, and all

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[7] Nair narrates the *Mahabharata* from the perspective of its minor characters, especially women. She uses poetry written in a visually appealing design, much like the African American slam poets of the 1970s.

[8] The terms feature in Mikhail Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and *The Dialogical Imagination* respectively.

[9] On a visit to a popular bookstore in the city some two years ago, I was taken by surprise, when I overheard a teenager, who must have been around the age of twelve or thirteen, recommending her sibling/cousin/friend Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* as a summer vacation read. Little did I realize that children and teenagers these days form a large share of the market of retellings, mythological and graphic fiction.

of them are shown to be weak and vulnerable, rather than flawless, ideal or completely villainous. This accords much of its popularity to the epic – the readers or creative writers tend to identify a connect with different epic characters. The narrator of a recently aired television series, "Dharmakshetra," announces at the beginning of each episode: "In this great saga, the characters who appear to be heroes and villains did not originally take on those roles of their own accord. Subsequent stories, tales, heroic sagas, fables of ethics and righteousness have rendered them into the 'good' camp or the 'bad' camp" ("Draupadi," my translation). Needless to say, different characters from the epic are recognized as cultural heroes or anti-heroes, and this may even get partially reversed in due course of time. Thus, the role of continuous evolution in the moral value accorded to fictional characters cannot be overlooked. That is why, perhaps, the writers of retellings also seek to make a 'hero' out of a character who is traditionally considered to be a villain (like V. Raghunathan does in *Duryodhana*), and even though the attempt might not receive complete sanction immediately, what matters in the end is that such an attempt has been made, and that it is never completely rejected or trashed, but engaged with.

Another significant feature of the retellings is the manner in which the writers deal with moral dilemmas. Bernard Williams has proposed that "we look for inspiration for the modern day ethical understanding in ideas of the past" (Chakravarti, *Philosophical Inquiry* 97). The *Mahabharata* comes in handy for this purpose. Matilal has discussed how "over the ages . . . these epic stories, various episodes, and subplots have been retold with great ingenuity in various regional and vernacular versions of the epics, in folk-tales, plays, dramas, etc. Each new version may be regarded as a novel attempt to resolve the dilemma inherent in the original version" ("Insights" 3). Whether or not the writers are successful in solving the paradoxes is not significant. What is praiseworthy is that they attempt to wrestle with some aspect of the tensions inherent in genuine moral dilemmas in the epic. This will be discussed with further illustrations in the ensuing pages.

The epic, which was composed over a period of hundreds of years, is "a sprawling narrative," which, in its received form, "is the product of more than one hand (or mouth) over a span of centuries," presents more challenges than one can ideally handle (Lipner 232).[10] The *Mahabharata* was transmitted orally over a few centuries through various

[10] Various scholars have ascertained different dates for the period of composition of the novel, but one is referring to Hopkins, who placed the text between 400 BCE-400 CE.

sages and bards, before it began being written down around the beginning of the first century CE.[11] However, as Doniger maintains, "the *Mahabharata* is not just a story . . . Onto the central were grafted, over the centuries, hundreds of myths and folktales . . . philosophical discourses and religious parables. It is thus 'great,' as its name claims, not only in size but in scope" (*Hinduism* 132). By its very nature, the *Mahabharata* is a text that is ever growing, and the retellings only add to the body of literature associated to it or inspired from it, thus testifying to its reputation of being "a work in progress," or a literature that "does not belong in a book" (Doniger, *alternative history* 263).

The *Mahabharata* has constantly been retold, re-written and re-performed in Sanskrit, Hindi, different Indian languages as well as in English. Doniger suggest that "it flickers back and forth between Sanskrit manuscripts and village storytellers, each adding new gemstones to the old mosaic, constantly reinterpreting it. The loose construction of the text gives it a quasinovelistic quality, open to new forms as well as new ideas, inviting different ideas to contest one another, to come to blows, in the pages of the text" (Doniger, *alternative history* 263-64). In fact, Hiltebeitel goes a step ahead in suggesting that "one must . . . interpret the *Mahābhārata* not only retrospectively but, in a sense, prospectively. Possibly the epic simply anticipates later forms. . . . It is . . . impossible to study the epic as a story frozen in its Sanskrit textual forms" (*When the Goddess* 57-58).

Of course the *Mahabharata* can never be a frozen text, it was never meant to be! Perhaps more than any other ancient text in India or the world, the *Mahabharata*'s versions "recur throughout India in a wide variety of literary, performative, ritual, and political contexts" (Brodbeck and Black 1). Alf Hiltebeitel, for example, has carried out extensive anthropological research on the cult of Draupadi in southern India. Numerous retellings of the epic appeared in Sanskrit literature since the ancient period, noteworthy among them being Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam* and Bhasa's *Urubhangam* and *Karnabharam*, to name a few.[12] There have also been numerous retellings of the epic in

[11] Hiltebeitel (2011) made the suggestion that the poem began to be transmitted as a written text only around the first century CE. However, Hudson differs from Hiltebeitel's point of view. She suggests that "until recently, most scholars believed that the text was originally an oral composition that was later committed to writing. Most now agree, however, that the *Mahābhārata*, in the form that we now have it, was composed in an environment in which writing and orality were intertwined in complex ways" (9).

[12] Bhasa is credited with seven extant Sanskrit plays based on the *Mahabharata.*

Hindi and other Indian languages. In Hindi, Suryakant Tripathi 'Nirala' wrote *Bhisma Pitamah*; Ramdhari Singh Dinkar wrote poems entitled "Rashmirathi," "Kurukshetra" and "Parashuram ki Pratiksha;" and Dharmaveer Bharti wrote a play called Andha Yug, all of which became very popular and the adaptations of which are still performed in contemporary theatre circuits. So one can also see how the epic *Mahabharata* also leads to a chain of retellings, where one retelling leads to another in an infinite progression.

The history of the English retellings of the *Mahabharata* (or retellings written in Indian languages but were later translated into English and other languages) is rather long. In the year 1898, Romesh Chundar Dutt translated select verses of the *Mahabharata* with "a motive to preserve the character and spirit of the original . . . He calls the *Mahabharata* the greatest work of imagination that Asia has produced and finds the incidents of the epic very striking and significant . . . As a condensed version Dutt's *Mahabharata* serves as an introduction to the epic for the English reader but does not provide new insights into the epic" (Jagannathan 38).[13] After a long hiatus, C. Rajagopalachari's prose rendering of the *Mahabharata* in Tamil was translated into English in 1951. Till date, it has retained the position of a pocket-friendly abridged version of the *Mahabharata*, serving as a *Mahabharata*-primer for young school and college students, as well as for people who find the sheer length of the epic too daunting to engage with it.

K. M. Munshi produced an English rendering of the epic in prose in seven volumes in 1962, the first Indian writer to do so. He called his work *Krishnavatara*, "though each volume has a separate subtitle. Munshi seems to have been enthralled by the divinity of Krishna," which might have been a result of the stronghold of Vaishnavism in the state of West Bengal during the time (Jagannathan 39). In 1978, Indian English writer R. K. Narayan published his retelling of the epic *Mahabharata*. Narayan's "characters are well-formed" and his version of the epic "ends with the coronation of Yudhishthir" (Jagannathan 39).

Summing up the literary activities in 1980s, Pradip Bhattacharya writes that "the eighties have been overwhelmingly the decade of the resurgence of myth. Peter Brook's

[13] I am indebted to Prema Jagannathan for tracing succinctly the history of the retellings of the *Mahabharata* in her book. My discussion of the same significantly draws from Jagannathan.

dramatization of the epic on the International scene is a reassertion of the epic's universality:"

> In the eighties, suddenly, the literary scene, as a matter of fact, the best seller market came throbbingly alive . . . In Oriya Pratibha Ray spoke for Draupadi in her novel . . . in Marathi it was Shivaji Sawant writing Karna's autobiography the massive *Mrityunjaya*, in Kannada the tears, sweat, blood and mire of Kurukshetra were brought frighteningly alive by S. L. Bhyrappa's *Parva.* On the Bengali stage the agony of Draupadi husbandless though with five husbands was unforgettably brought home . . . in Shaoli Mitra's one-woman performance. (qtd. in Jagannathan 40)

In 1987, Maggi Lidchi Grassi's *The Battle of Kurukshetra* was published. Grassi "retells the story of the epic through . . . Ashwathama and Arjuna. The second volume of her trilogy is entitled *The Legs of the Tortoise* (1996) . . . [which] vividly depicts Yuddha Parva, beginning with the conflict of Arjuna" (Jagannathan 40-41).

Shivaji Sawant's*Mrityunjaya*, published in 1989, was translated from the Marathi original into English by P. Lal. It is a recreation of the epic from Karna's point of view. The novel is "an autobiography of Karna projecting him as a tragic hero, a victim of the circumstances" (Jagannathan 42). The novel was a runaway success. M. M. Thakur's *Thus Spake Bhishma* appeared in 1992, where Bhishma gives "a first-person account" of the entire epic while on his death-bed of arrows (Jagannathan 43). M.T. Vasudevan Nair's *Second Turn* was first published in English in 1997, the Malayalam original of which was written in 1977. The story is narrated from Bhima's point of view, and is also a first-person account of Bhima's life. In 1996, Pavan K. Varma wrote a poetic narrative titled *Yudhishthir and Draupadi*. A Gujrati novel entitled *Kurukshetra*, written by Manubhai Pancholi Darshak, gives "an entirely new perspective to the story of the *Mahabharata* by making the central issue a conflict between the races, the Aryans and the Naagas" (Jagannathan 46).

In the last two decades, the literary market has witnessed what one can call a profusion of mythological fiction. Most of the recent retellings merely cater to the trend, to the demand and supply curve, but one can find some novelistic retellings or retellings in other genres as well in this clutter which are worth our read. Talking about retellings of the *Mahabharata*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* published in the year

2008 is an extraordinary work which almost revolutionized Draupadi's narrative, and it will be discussed in detail in the chapters that follow. The study will also engage with the English translation of Pratibha Ray's *Oria* novel *Yajnaseni*, which was written in 1984, but the English translation was published only in 1995. Anand Neelkathan has also attempted, what he calls, "the counter telling of mythology." He has an Asura trilogy to his credit, the first of which is from the perspective of Ravana, the villain of the *Ramayana*, and the next two novels have been written from the perspective of Duryodhana and the Kauravas. However, instead of engaging with Neelkanthan, the present work studies the novel *Duryodhana* by V. Raghunathan (2014) in one of the chapters that follow. H. S. Shivprakash rightly said in a lecture that "retellings show the predilections of the reteller, her context," and that has been my guiding force in choosing the novels for the present study.[14] The novels taken up for study, not only reinterpret the characters, but also interrogate the moral quandaries that they face or throw into relief.

In addition to novelistic retellings, the last four-five decades have also witnessed the epic story being served to the public in various other forms and genres. The film Kaliyug (1981) and Rajneeti (2010), for example, and the TV serials, "*Andaz* and *Parampara*, . . . tell of stories with parts of the plots borrowed from the leitmotifs of the *Mahābhārata*" (Prithipaul 54). Numerous plays and theatrical performances have also been based on the epic.[15] The *Mahabharata* continues to be reproduced in various other media. Graphic novelists like Amruta Patil and the 'mythologist' Devdutt Pattnaik combine the epic story with illustrations, and have garnered a lot of attention and popularity in recent times.[16] Additionally, there have been numerous games, podcasts, comics and spoofs based on the *Mahabharata* which have thronged the market in recent times. While not all of them engage in serious retellings of the epic story, nevertheless, they do contribute their bit towards the ever-growing popularity of the epic through its retellings in the recent times.

The present work attempts to delineate that the idea of the "paradigm shift" in the concept of dharma that the *Mahabharata* is believed to have brought about can be extended to the retellings of the epic too. Since dharma is the heart of the *Mahabharata*,

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[14] Shivprakash, H. S. "Folklore and Its Modern Adaptation."

[15] I recently watched *Draupadi* and *Chakravyuha* by Film and Theatre Society, and a play based on Karna, an adaptation of Karnabharam, by an Indore based theatre group.

[16] Pattnaik is a self-styled 'mythologist.'

the retellings of the epic, one is inclined to assume, also critique, comment upon, expand, expound, or denounce – as the case may be, with the semantic world of dharma in the epic. One can expect this exercise to bear useful results for the future because of two reasons already cited and discussed above: one, it has frequently been proposed by scholars that the *Mahabharata* should not be read as a singular, unitary text, but as a text that is simultaneously constituted by and constitutes all its creative, performative, ritualistic and critical renditions, thereby making a legit case for the retellings to be read in conjunction with the epic; and two, because the tradition of flexible, shifting, and evolving meanings and interpretations of concepts and practices (moral, ethical, value-based, social, and so on) has also been sanctioned by the greater tradition itself – and this may apply to the possibility of enquiry, interpretation, and re-evaluation of dharma from the epic to the retellings of the epic down to this day.

The present work aspires to fill in a significant gap in the scholarship on the *Mahabharata.* There is no dearth of scholarship on dharma, morality, ethics and philosophy in the epic *Mahabharata*. However, as far as my knowledge goes, there has been no systematic study of dharma, morality and ethics in the contemporary retellings of the epic.

In terms of the methodology employed, the study primarily attempts a close textual analysis of select narratives which address and critically engage with the concept of dharma or morality. The study simultaneously also employs a comparative methodology to compare the ways in which the original epic delineates dharma, morality and moral dilemmas, pitting them against the unique creative and imaginative approaches adopted by the modern retellings of the epic to grapple with the same, thereby also highlighting the creative-philosophical solutions the retellings sometimes seem to offer in such cases. Wherever possible, the study engages with the writers by conducting/reading interviews of the writers of retellings. The theoretical engagement of the study comprises theories and philosophies from the classical Indian system. Thus, the research employs the tools of a literary/cultural analyst as well as that of a philosopher, both complementing each other in order to provide an insightful analysis of the question of dharma in the modern retellings of the *Mahabharata* vis-à-vis the original epic.

The first chapter entitled “Pluralism, Relativism and Beyond: The Evolving Semantic World of Dharma” establishes a trajectory of the development of dharma in the ancient

textual and philosophical tradition. The primary aim of the chapter is to substantiate how the semantic world of dharma is volatile and ever open to newer interpretations, thereby providing the ground for the sort of study undertaken. Additionally, the chapter explores the various sources of dharma in ancient India and dharma in terms of social hierarchy, the two topics illuminating the way of dharma for an ordinary man. Having dealt with the basics, the chapter then launches into a topic which is the mainstay of the present study: moral dilemmas. Additionally, the concept of moral dilemmas also gives way to an allied discussion on moral will and moral weakness (akrasia), and dharma in times of distress. No discussion of dharma can be complete with conducting a study into the theory of value and dharma directed towards the ultimate, universal good. So the chapter also delves on these topics, albeit briefly. The chapter also discusses dharma in relation to the epic *Mahabharata* under five sub-heads: dharma and moral dilemmas in the *Mahabharata*, *dharmayuddha* and the Mahabharata war, Krishna and his dharma, Dharmaraj's Yudhishthira's rejection of dharma, and the concept of adharma. Although these discussions do not aim or claim to be exhaustive in any way, they sufficiently lay down the basic concept and conflicts of dharma which will be put to scrutiny in the subsequent chapters. The first chapter will hopefully serve the purpose of laying bare the enormous interpretive potential in the Indian tradition, especially with respect to dharma, that could be opened up and engaged with.

Having laid out the basic argument of the text, I turn to the task of analyzing dharma's relationship with gender. The initial layout of the thesis eventually gave way to two long chapters on dharma and gender, which will figure as 'Dharma and Gender – I and II.' In both the chapters, the central point of discussion will be Draupadi, and how her life is determined by the choices that are thrust upon her by the patriarchal society, also exploring the subversive possibilities latent therein, trying to find out if Draupadi has been successful in employing them and challenging the gendered dimensions of the society. In the discussions, the focus will entirely be on the characterization of Draupadi by the two novelists, Pratibha Ray and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, in the light of their novels *Yajnaseni* and *The Palace of Illusions* respectively.

The second chapter entitled "From the Sacrificial-Altar to the Altar of Marriage: Draupadi's Journey from Girlhood to the Threshold of Womanhood" explores the trials and tribulations of Draupadi as a young girl, who is unique because she is the only woman character to have a wombless birth in the epic, and the significance and ramifications of

the prophesy at her birth. The chapter gleefully explores the childhood and adolescence of Draupadi, aspects of her life which do not find a place in Vyasa's epic. The chapter then comes to its moment of tension: Draupadi's svayamvar and her (lack of) choice in a ceremony of choice, and its aftermath of a polyandry imposed on her against her will. One embarks upon an exploration of Draupadi's psyche and her heart even as she jostles her way through life. The chapter also discusses such 'prohibited' topics like love and sexuality, and a neglected topic like motherhood in the context of Draupadi. The chapter closes with a discussion of dharma and gender in relation to the concepts of *pativrata*, *sahadharmini*, *stridharma* and *svadharma.*

The third chapter entitled "Demystifying Games, the War and the Final Journey: The Adharmic Violation of Draupadi and her Reclamation of Dharma" pans out into an examination of Draupadi's life at the time of and after the fateful game of dice, the adharma involved in her humiliation in the assembly hall; an exploration of her intelligent, desperate, and still unanswered question, the debate in the assembly hall, the violence perpetrated on her, the attempt at her disrobing, her consequent exile and suffering, her anger and her one-mindedness for revenge, repeated attempts for her abduction, the war and its aftermath, and the final journey she embarks on along with her husband. The chapter is an exploration of how Draupadi reclaims her dharma whenever an act of adharma is committed on her. This chapter will engage in a discussion of Draupadi's grit and determination in the face of violence and hardships, resulting in her final triumph at the hands of the novelists, when she is redeemed from her husbands, hopefully, forever.

The fourth chapter entitled "The Dharma of Adharma: Duryodhana's Philosophy of Morality and Rajadharma" deals with the character of Duryodhana in the novel *Duryodhana* by V. Raghunathan. This chapter explores the interface of dharma and adharma, in the light of discussions on rajadharma. This is a relatively uncharted or less-explored terrain: the possibility of arriving at a new dharma of the evil, the vanquished and the underdog, rather than relegating the conduct of such characters as adharmic, negative, evil, and hence unwarranted. The chapter interrogates and questions the law of primogeniture, the concepts of heroism and virtue, honesty and deceit etc. against the larger backdrop of dharma. One of the other allied agendas of this chapter is to expose the slippery distinction between dharma and adharma that one finds in the modern retellings as much as in the original epic.

CHAPTER I

Pluralism, Relativism and Beyond: The Evolving Semantic World of Dharma

> Reasoning [*tarka*] is without foundation; the sacred texts are at odds with one another; there is not even a single sage whose opinion could be considered authoritative. The truth about dharma is hidden in a cave. . . .[17]
>
> —Vanaparva (Forest Book of the *Mahābhārata*), Verse 117

Yudhisthira, variously known as Dharmaraja and Dharma, sired by Dharma himself, is considered to be an authority on dharma in the *Mahabharata.* In response to the *yaksa*'s question on the nature/truth of dharma, Yudhisthira gives the reply reproduced above. Coming from a person who holds the reputation of being a knower of dharma, the aforementioned lines serves to point to the complex and variegated nature of dharma. According to R. N. Dandekar, the word dharma implies "the whole complex of theories and practices relating to the actualities and aspirations of the material and spiritual life of the individual and the society . . . Dharma is co-extensive with life. It may be said to signify the entire way of life, which, however, is not necessarily and in all respects identical" (*Insights* 2, italics removed). Bilimoria refers to dharma as "an all-embracing concept," which should not be taken to mean that it is a unitary concept.[18] In fact, if anything, the term dharma is "rather diffuse as it has many and varying meanings, ranging from 'ordinance, usage, duty, right, justice, morality, virtue, religion, good works, function or characteristics' to 'norm', 'righteousness', 'truth' and much else" (Bilimoria 37).[19]

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[17] Qtd. in Shulman 54

[18] Dharma, Sukthankar maintains, is "not simple and unitary, but manifold and complex. There are thus, for instance, *rājadharma* and *prajādharma, jātidharma and kuladharma, varṇāśramadharma, dānadharma, āpaddharma* and *mokṣadharma, strīdharma* and so on and so forth. They must all be known accurately, if one is to act rightly, that is, according to the dictates of Dharma in all the various situations in life. . . ." (82, my italics)

[19] The reference to characteristics refers to "natural qualities" or attributes of objects and phenomena, like "burning (of fire), liquidity (of water) and fragility (of glass)" (Chattopadhyaya, *Historical-Developmental* xxxiii).

Sukthankar borrows the following explanation of dharma from Bhagavan Das's *The Science of Social Organization*: "Dharma is characteristic property, scientifically; duty, morally and legally; religion with all its proper implications, psychologically and spiritually; and righteousness and law generally; but Duty above all" (81).[20] Thus, the types of meanings of dharma are numerous—"legal, social, moral, religious or spiritual, and even ontological or physical" (Chattopadhyaya, *Historical-Developmental* xxxiii).

Chattopadhyaya clarifies that dharma, a concept which finds its origin in Sanskrit-rooted languages, is ordinarily taken to be the "conceptual equivalent of the English word religion. But, while the meaning of religion is primarily theological, that of dharma . . . [is] manifold" (*Conceptual-Analytic* xxv, italics removed). So dense and multifaceted is the concept that it has been termed as "subtle," "multivocal or omnifarious," "untranslatable" variously, in the *Mahabharata* to the work on the *Mahabharata* by contemporary scholars.[21] Etymologically, the word dharma is derived from the root *dhṛ* which means 'to sustain.' So, dharma, in an initial analysis, means that which sustains the world, "that which is established or that which holds people steadfastly together" (Chattopadhyaya, *Historical-Developmental* xxxiii).

Since dharma means both ethics and morality, it will be useful to begin by exploring dharma as encapsulating both ethics and morality in the Indian society.[22] Explaining ethics as a normative inquiry, Rajendra Prasad writes: "Ethics . . . it is a *normative* inquiry into man's goals or *values*, *virtues* or desirable qualities of character, *obligations* or *duties*, and

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[20] The exploration of the shifting and evolving meaning of dharma in the sense of morality, ethics and duty will primarily be the meanings explored in the current work. However, the task is not as simplistic as it may seem, because more than an exploration of the truth-value and universal validity in these concepts, the work will delve into situations of moral conflicts and dilemmas in the characters of the epic and dicey situations demanding different kinds of conduct from the individual – both/all of them being apparently sanctioned and morally acceptable actions. So, in the final analysis, the question boils down to the moral choices made by the individual characters in situations of moral quandary, that should eventuate actions which are both morally 'right' and legally 'just.'

[21] In the epic, both Bhishma and Yudhishthira refer to dharma as *ṣūkṣma* (subtle), while many scholars in the recent past, like Gurcharan Das, for example, have attributed the quality of untranslatability to the word. The terms "multivocal or omnifarious" are associated with dharma by Rajendra Prasad (*Conceptual-Analytic* 271).

[22] One will be relying heavily on Rajendra Prasad's lucid exposition of dharma as ethics and morality. Prasad's work is unprecedented, and is endowed with clarity of thought and expression, as well as demonstrated frequently through examples. See Prasad (2009), and also, Prasad (2008).

rights or justified (or justifiable) claims. It is said to be a normative inquiry or study because it is a study into what he ought to do or be, and not just one into what he actually does or wants to be" (Prasad, *Conceptual-Analytic* 1, emphasis in original).[23] The basic assumption on which such a study then proceeds is that man is an individual living in a society, and "ethical problems arise generally, or more visibly, in his social transactions" (Prasad 1).[24]

In India, ethics is designated by the term *nīti*, and the study of or an enquiry into ethics, *nītiśastra.* Since an individual is never divorced from the society or community in the Indian worldview, one can interchangeably use 'ethics' as well as 'moral philosophy' or 'philosophy of morals' as the English equivalents for *nītiśastra. Nīti* is an "abstract noun meaning that which takes one to, or enables one to attain. It can thus be said to denote or stand for any technique, plan, policy, direction, strategy, management, conduct, behaviour, expertise, etc., which takes one to" (Prasad 6). But one may ask what is the 'to' that *nīti* will take us towards. The answer is: towards "one's objective, goal, the object one aims at, or intends to attain" (Prasad 6).[25] The objective or goal may vary for people depending on their station in life, age, other individual, familial, and social expectations and responsibilities. However, the unanimous opinion of classical Indian thinkers is that ethics is "essential for a meaningful and purposeful private as well as public life" (Prasad 8). "Morality," states Prasad, is "conceptually intertwined with sociability, more specifically, to the welfare of others. . . . In fact, it is one's social relations stemming from being a

[23] All references to Rajendra Prasad will be from his book *A Conceptual-Analytic Study of Classical Indian Philosophy of Morals*, unless otherwise indicated.

[24] Prasad further explains that in the Indian social set up, 'society' comes to acquire the meaning 'community': "The idea of the society as the community of all humans, or of all humans and nonhumans, is clearly visible in a classical Indian saying that a man of morally sensitive character (*udāracarit*) treats the entire world (*vasudhā*) as his family (*kuṭumba*)" (Prasad 1). Hence, Indians have believed in considering the entire world as its family: *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam.*

[25] However, one has to bear in mind the fact that the objective may also, sometimes, be immoral. Prasad clarifies: "An immoral strategy will also be *nīti* . . . the best policy to adopt to achieve something which is immoral. This is the sense in which Vidura uses it when he tells Yudhiṣṭhira that he should know Duryodhana's *nītiśastra* to protect his family from Duryodhana's antagonistic actions" (Prasad 6). This warning is given by Vidura to Yudhiṣṭhira when he and his other family members are leaving Hastināpūra for Vāraṇāvata.

member of a social network, which generate one's obligations and duties . . . including those one's immediate family, . . . and others" (*Historical-Developmental* 2).

To begin with, one may want to 'know' what one's objective is, and then, consequently, how to attain it, for the purpose of which she will need a guide or teacher, or even a theory or a rule book. The problem, however, is that classical philosophers in India do not present "clear-cut, neat, ethical theories in treatises which may be called works on *nītiśastra.* Ethical ideas occur in multifarious types of contexts and in discussions of different types of problems" (Prasad 8). So, one has to be vigilant and attentive to be able to receive guidance or direction towards the attainment of one's goal, or, in the first place, even to know what that objective is.

India boasts of a very rich "classical, ancient, intellectual corpus a good part of which is constituted by philosophical—ethical—cultural—theological ideas" (Prasad 12). The style of Indian moral philosophizing in very different from that of Western ethics, and this has been generally agreed upon by various scholars. Tiwari, for instance, suggests that in Indian moral philosophizing, the reference point is the self, and sometimes, also others (in the sense of a community), while in Western moral philosophizing, the reference point is the 'other' or the society (which may not strictly be in the sense of a community, and is definitely not equivalent to the Indian sense of community). Prasad notes:

> The Indian philosopher's style of ethical theorizing "consists in doing piecemeal, topical, analysis of moral issues as rooted in concrete contexts, real or imaginatively pictured, expressed in a description, sometimes of a real situation, sometimes of a mythological one; sometimes . . . in a life-like fable . . . Therefore, in Indian classical ethics generally no problem arises . . . as to how to bridge the gap, if there is one, between theoretical ethics and applied ethics, metaethics and normative ethics, general ethics and professional ethics, human-centric and non-human-centric or environmental ethics, etc. (Prasad, *Conceptual-Analytic* 74)[26]

[26] Prasad also quashes the claim made about the absence of any ethical theorizing in Indian philosophy: "The Western or Indian interpreters are right when they say that a list of maxims do not make an ethical theory but not right when they deny the existence of ethical theorizing in Indian philosophy. They deny it . . . because they have in their mind only one model of ethical theorizing, i.e., theorizing which results in the formulation of general theories of moral value, obligation, rightness of action, etc" (Prasad 157).

In a similar vein, writing about the methodology of Indian ethical, Mahapatra maintains that "ethics, . . . is a product of the society and social living that aims at promoting values conducive to effective and desirable social living. In this sense it operates at the empirical level of social process and so moral principles grow out of taking due note of the peculiarities and relevance of particular cases of moralizing" (21). Both Prasad and Mahapatra bring us home to the unique style of moral philosophizing in India since ancient times, which has fundamentally been based on texts which are not only scriptural in nature, but also through epics, legends, narratives, stories, fables, and anecdotes, never viewing them or dismissing them as mere stories meant for entertainment.[27] Matilal sheds further light on this:

> *Dharma* is a popular subject of inquiry, often found in all this narrative literature. The nature of *dharma* is often hotly debated and argued about; no other principle has been regarded as sacred. . . . neither in Buddhism nor in Jainism, or even in Hinduism, was God cited as the authority on *dharma*. Hence the search for a rational basis of *dharma* is often compatible with these religious traditions. There were, of course, the Hindu scriptures. But these scriptures proved to be flexible, sometimes to the point that they seemed to have meant whatever their interpreters chose to make them mean. (Matilal, *Ethics and Epics* 51)[28]

This insight is particularly significant for the present work, the primary aim of which is to locate shifting morality and oral philosophizing in modern narratives based on the epic the *Mahabharata.* One can thus notice how these modern narratives and retellings, in their

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[27] While this may also be true of other ancient cultures and religions of the world, going strictly by the size and variety of such a narrative tradition in India and the multiplicity of both 'scriptures' and philosophical texts and narratives, one can claim that the Indian corpus of ethical literature is perhaps unique.

[28] Alf Hiltebeitel has pointed out that "once *dharma* became a flourishing literary topic in classical India, a division emerged between texts that treated *dharma* primarily as a legal matter (the *Dharma Sūtras*, *Śāstras*) and ones that explored it predominantly through narrative (the epics). This "legislative/narrative" divide also corresponded to a division between texts that attempted to assert *dharma's* clarity, order, and perfection (the legal texts) and those that emphasized its subtlety, ambiguity, and profundity (the narrative texts), although Hiltebeitel is careful to point out that single texts can be expected to hold these tensions within themselves and cannot be expected to have just one view of *dharma"* (Hudson 37).

handling of the subject of dharma, are only taking the interpretive tradition further ahead, also adding to the corpus of contemporary literature.

In the Indian corpus, one finds ethical values in what Prasad refers to as "philosophically non-technical works . . . in the epics . . . some *Purāṇas* . . . some *smṛtis* . . . in some ethico-socio-political works, like Cāṇakya's *Arthaśāstra*, *Sūtras* and *Nītisutras* in Vātsyāyana's *Kāmasūtra* . . . books of fables like Nārāyaṇa Paṇḍita's compilation *Hitopadeśa* and Viṣṇu Śarmā's *Pañcatantra*" (Prasad 74).[29] Interestingly, Prasad adds, "none of them contains any comprehensive, well-structured, full-fledged, ethical theory" (Prasad 74). Prasad also rejects the view that the *Bhagavad Gītā* "presents a complete ethical theory" (Prasad 74).[30] Righteousness and ways to perform duties have diverse references in the Indian philosophical texts, making it extremely difficult to formulate a set of codes and conduct. While it might seem that some texts promote the philosophy of ethical absolutism, yet, the very same texts lead to varied interpretations when done in conformity with the principles of the different schools of thought, and the focus may shift to ethical pluralism, contextualism and relativism, and rarely, if ever, nihilism. To add to this seemingly endless and fathomless maze, Prasad explains that ethical ideas in the Indian context "have occurred generally in mixed contexts i.e., in context in which metaphysical, theological, mythological, historical, legal, sociological, even logical or epistemological, etc., issues have been talked about" (*Historical-Developmental* 6). In fact, Prasad also draws attention to how the classical Indian concept of *āpaddharma* [i.e. dharma in times of distress] is indicative of how "no ethical theory can claim to have reached the final terminus of ethical theorizing" (Prasad 112).[31]

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[29] Matilal writes: "What philosophers failed to do was accomplished by the epic writers and other story-tellers. Indeed the epics were not just heroic tales . . . [T]hey were also practical lessons in morals and *dharma* deliberations. The *dharmaśāstras* supply only a skeletal account of *dharma.* The epic stories and narrative literature add flesh and blood to this skeleton. The richness and ambiguity of the concept of *dharma* is interwoven with the narrative at every step" (*Ethics and Epics* 39)

[30] The *Bhagavadgītā* presents the ethical theory of *niṣkāma karma* (non-attached action), which may be one of the moral principles to live one's life by, but not a complete principle applicable in all contexts and situations.

[31] The ever-open-to-interpretation-and-revision nature of the Indian moral and philosophical literature is what lends creative writers and artists to offer their own interpretations of key moral issues and dilemmas in the epics through the medium of their retellings and art.

This also brings one to the most crucial element in the purview of Indian moral philosophizing: an individual's decision-making power with respect to his morality and social ethics. Prasad states that "decision-making is a constitutive feature of anyone's acceptance and application of a moral principle in normal as well as in non-normal, unusual, circumstances. The individual has to decide which principle is relevant to the situation he is in and whether it is to be applied in its usual, unaltered form, or in a form modified, augmented, or toned down in some way; . . . ." (Prasad 113) The individual may "take the help of past precedents, or his society's ethical corpus, in making up his mind. But ultimately it is he who makes up his own mind, i.e., decides which way to go. In fact, it is his decision-making ability and its exercise by him which enable him to deserve the title of being a moral agent" (Prasad 113).[32] While the individual is vested with the right of decision-making, she is also free to raise doubts, pose questions and enter into debates on the understanding and implementation of morality, ethics, traditions, rights, obligations, and virtues and values. In a nutshell, a moral agent has been considered to be a free agent, who should decide her own morality and the right course of action when in a dilemma.[33]

Indian philosophers have always believed in the fact that "ethical ideals are realizable—that 'ought' presupposes 'can'. . . . Indian thinkers . . . insist that the ethical ideals are realizable. The matter can be further explained by the fact that the purpose of ethics is to provide guidance for practical life, for a morally desirable life, and if this is so, it should be possible to live an act in accordance with the principles of ethics" (Mahapatra 19). One needs to ensure that "an ethical concept, or . . . theory stating a criterion of its application . . . must be usable or helpful in actual decision-making in real situations on most of the occasions it is relevant to. But in some . . . situations . . . it may not be *definitively* applicable, or helpful in telling an individual in an unambiguous way what he should do" (Prasad 155).[34] If, and when such a situation arises, "it provides to a theorizer an occasion

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[32] It is not as if there is no chain or 'hierarchy' of morality in India. An individual is first expected to look to the Vedas (the scriptures) for guidance, and if she does not find an answer, go looking for precedents in the lives of great people who were morally upright, and if they do not find an answer even there, then she should listen to her voice of conscience, and in the event of not finding an answer there, one should use one's reasoning and logic. The decision-making, in the last resort, rests with the individual or the moral agent.

[33] There are numerous such instances in the narrative tradition of India, especially the epics, and the present work will engage with quite a few of them.

[34] Prasad explains further: "This kind of uncertainty may arise in the application of any moral concept matter whether it is the concept of rightness, obligation, value, virtue, or claim or right" (155).

for doing some rethinking" (Prasad 155).[35] Such a situation may arise, because, as Prasad suggests:

> . . . no set of moral maxims, however large it may be, can be large enough to cover all possible ethical problems or issues which may arise in all possible situations in man's private and public transactions . . . ethical thinking is an ever-going, unending or open-ended, process . . . the solutions the corpus may suggest have to be rethought keeping in view the context, the situation, in which a problem has risen. (157)

Having said that, it should not be taken to mean that there are no rules, precepts or codes or a conduct book to follow in the tradition, owing to its open-ended and ever-growing nature. "Morality," Prasad notes, "works as a conflict-resolving, cooperation-producing agent among the constituents of any society, as the cement of social cohesion . . . used . . . to reduce conflict and to promote cooperation and cohesion. When it is so used, it is prone to give rise to generalizations or emergence of principles which may be used in the future, ..." (Prasad 170) Thus, it is in this manner that Indian ethical theorizing seems to have grown into a distinct body of literature. Prasad notes:

> . . . classical Indian philosophers . . . themselves derive their theoretical generalizations from concrete instances of people's resolving their conflicts, and illustrate them later, if required, by referring to past precedents, or, anecdotal reconstructions. This is one reason for there being available even now a rich stock of classical Indian ethical anecdotal literature, a rich treasury of moral tales. It is obvious from all this that classical Indian ethics, or moral philosophy, has from its very beginning developed in the context of the classical Indian social order. (Prasad 170)

This brings one back to the idea of the individual vis-à-vis the social order which determines her existence in a given time, place, context and culture. Morality, according to Prasad, "is conceptually intertwined with sociability, . . . to the welfare of others. Looking after one's own welfare is not immoral or counter-moral, but an individual who looks only after his own welfare cannot be rated as highly moral, nor a goal, howsoever noble it may

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[35] This is precisely the kind of exercise that writers of retellings and interpreters of mythology engage in through their fiction or art.

be, attainment of which is only a personal attainment of the attainer, cannot be called a moral goal" (Prasad, "Historiography" 2). One needs to understand this conundrum before embarking on a journey to understand the various other manifestations of dharma. This opens up the topic of how and when the idea of dharma (morality) got linked to social existence, and what ensured its implementation and compliance.

Dharma: The Evolving Word and its Meanings

Writing on the evolving and pluralistic worldview of Hinduism (and thereby the moral and philosophical concepts included in its ambit), R. N. Dandekar notes: "*Hinduism* has, by and large, always tended to *incorporate and assimilate* rather than to choose and eliminate . . . [It] has always been *variable, elastic and receptive* . . . It has never hesitated to sponsor new scriptures . . . [and it] represents different levels of religious belief and practice and different stages of cultural development, and . . . spiritual possibilities" (*Insights* 5). However, one must remember that dharma is the central concept "not only in Brahminical/Hindu traditions but also in Buddhist and Jain traditions. . . . In various contexts the word may mean law, justice, custom, morality, ethics, religion, duty, nature, or virtue. This semantic range seems to underline links between ways of living, ways of seeing, and ways of relating to life's ultimate issues" (Hudson 36).

The word 'dharma' has a fascinating history of evolution. In the Vedas, the earliest used term for dharma is not dharma but '*ṛta*' (order). It is used to express three different senses, namely "the universal law governing the organization of the whole (*brahmāṇḍa*) and the functioning of its parts (*piṇḍas*);" "moral and ethical duties of a social group;" and "the laws governing the do's and do-not's in the realm of religious norms and practices" (Mahapatra 16). Dharma thus meant "'balance'—both moral balance and cosmic balance" (Das xlii). In the course of its transmission over the middle and late Vedic periods, the term *ṛta* gradually gave way to dharma, derived from the root word *dhṛ* "to sustain," and came to mean that which sustains, and was associated to Varuṇa, the divine king, with the king on earth being his representative of moral order (Olivelle, "Semantic History"). So effectively, a king was only a protector of dharma—"at best a marginal term and concept"—with his divine overlord in king Varuṇa (Olivelle, "Semantic History" 69). Dharma by this time came to mean "the moral law that sustains society, the individual and the world" (Das xlii).

However, several scholars starting with Olivelle have pointed out that "while the term *dharma* originated in the Vedic context, it was part of a specialized vocabulary associated with royalty. . . . The term became central to Brahminical religious vocabulary only after it had been borrowed by the Buddha to locate and articulate his new religion," the rise of king Aśoka and Buddhism being coeval with post-Vedic Hinduism (Hudson 36).[36] Hudson elaborates further, "In the Buddhist context the term *dharma* was ethicized and came to define the good and righteous 'Buddhist' life. After its Buddhist appropriation, the term was then reappropriated by the Brahmanical tradition and employed as a central religious and ethical category, in part in an effort to respond to the Buddhist challenge" (Hudson 36).[37]

The semantic trajectory of the idea of dharma in India spans thousands of years: from signifying purely ritualistic acts in the Vedas (generally understood as the morality of doing) and constituting knowledge/knowledge of the self (expounded as the morality of being) in the Upaniṣads—a dharmic life meaning a life of good conduct and character, to a more detailed code of conduct spelled out in the Smṛtis (the Dharmasūtras, the Dharmaśāstras, the Purāṇas, and the two epics – the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*), which basically follow a three-fold scheme of dharma—*sādhāraṇadharma*, *varṇadharma* and *āśramadharma*. The Indian philosophical systems, both the orthodox and the unorthodox systems—with the solitary exception of the Cārvāka system—agree in their essential ethical spirit, their emphasis on both social and individual morality, and their basic ethical presuppositions.[38] So, the basic concerns of each of these philosophical systems regarding dharma remains the same—they debate on the nature of dharma by application of intellectual reasoning—what changes are the details of the ethical values they preach and the practices that lead to individual and spiritual development. Das asserts: "It is quite extraordinary how a word and an idea from the ancient Rig Veda has evolved

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[36] See, Olivelle (2009), Hiltebeitel (2011), and Hudson (2013), and Doniger (2015).

[37] Hudson clarifies: "Within the Brahmanical tradition, '*dharma* literature' refers primarily to the *Dharma Sūtras*, the *Dharma Śāstras*, and the epics (the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*)" (36).

[38] The basic ethical presuppositions of almost all the systems, except Cārvāka, are their belief in karma (past deeds), *saṃsāra* (the world), rebirth, *avidyā* (ignorance being the root of all problems), and *mokṣa* (also, nirvana or kaivalya, all meaning liberation from the cycle of rebirth and death).

and enriched itself over three thousand years through a process of contestation and adaptation" (311).

The concept of dharma kept "evolving and being contested. The meaning of dharma shifted from "a ritual ethics of deeds to a more personal virtue based on one's conscience and back again" (Das 308). Bilimoria et. al. maintain that "*Dharma*, with its root in *dhṛ* (sustaining) and vedic *ṛta* (order), can open up a more holistic, organic and ecologically enlightened perspective as a contrast to the more nature-subjugating, individualistic and competitive environment within which we conceptualize ethics" (25). They also suggest that "*karma*, and even the ideas of *āśrama* (life-cycles) and *puruṣārthas* (end-states), may suggest other possibilities for integrating the disparate elements of human life into this organic whole" (25).

The Sources of Dharma

Dharma in the Indian philosophical and ethical discourse is a subject of rational inquiry, and not really a matter of blind faith. Dharma as "enjoined duty or as right conduct, is not something absolutely given, but something to be determined" (Kapoor, "Hindu Women" 44). There are various sources of dharma as delineated by the various texts in the ancient Indian tradition. The primary authority rests with Vedas. But even the Vedas are not given the supreme authority, and are subjected to rational investigation. But the Vedas and even the later scriptures (i.e., the *smṛtis* – philosophic/sociological texts, as well as *sāstras*) mostly contain injunctions, and for practical purposes, one requires guidelines. In the second resort, then, an individual is expected to find solutions to her problem by following *ācāra* – "the commonly accepted line of conduct," or emulate *śiṣtavyavahara* – "the conduct of the cultured." In situations where all these fail to provide a guideline, one should appeal to one's good conscience, and in the event of not finding a way out here as well, one should apply one's logical reasoning to achieve a rational resolution of conflict-situations. It is quite an interesting phenomenon that "satisfaction of the mind" or the "heart's approval" is cited as the last authority on *dharma* in Verse 6 and Verse 12 of the *Manusaṃhitā* , after the scriptures, the *dharmaśāstras*, and the conduct of the good (Matilal, *Ethics and Epics* 57).[39]

[39] It serves to enlighten us about "the human side of *dharma*-morality. Whatever action is prescribed by *dharma* must also meet the approval of the heart of the honest and the wise" (Matilal, *Ethics and Epics* 55).

Dharma and Social Hierarchy

Hindu philosophy's "belief in the ideological complex of *karma-saṁsāra-mokṣa* on the meatphysico-ethical plane and the acceptance of . . . [*varṇa*] system on the socio-ethical plane" is perhaps a unique feature unparalleled in world cultures (Dandekar, *Insights* 5). By the time of the *smṛti*-literature, one had specific categories of dharma, designed in a grid of social/general dharmas as well as individual dharmas. They were the dharmas a common man could follow, as not everyone might have had the intellectual capabilities to engage with the definitions of dharma propounded by the different philosophical schools of thought.

Social dharma or general dharma is variously described as *sāmānya dharma*, *sādhāraṇa dharma* and *mānava dharma*; while individual dharma is also known by various names like *svadharma*, *varṇadharma*, *varṇāśrama dharma* and *viśeṣa dharma.* The former are the duties of everyone by virtue of his or her being a human being (virtues like non-violence, kindness, and compassion, to name a few), whereas the latter sets of duties are specific to persons belonging to a particular group or caste (*varṇa*), and to the specific stage of life of a person (*āśrama*), also collectively known as *varṇāśrama dharma*. Both the categories of duties are "obligatory and normally inviolable," and constitute a "very fundamental normative structure of Indian ethics and the Indian value system" (Mahapatra 19). Both types of duties, *varṇadharma* and *āśrama dharma*, and *sādhāraṇa dharmas* are "categorical imperatives," because "they ought to be performed not because of any consequential considerations, but because each is the right thing to do or each is a *duty to be performed*" (Mahapatra 19, italics in original). However, this should not be taken as an imposition. Robert Lingat (1973) asserts that dharma "is not imposed but proposed" (qtd. in Matilal, *Ethics and Epics* 42).

Sādhāraṇadharma is the set of general duties directed towards the aim of a social good, to be observed by all individuals irrespective of their *varṇa* and *āśrama*. One is supposed to follow the *varṇāśramavyavasthā* to make one's personal life worthwhile. Dandekar explicates, "If the scheme of the *āśramas* represented a kind of ethical organization of an individual's personal life, the scheme of the four *varṇas* or social order, . . . could be regarded from a certain point of view, as the ethical organization of the social life of the

Hindus" (670).[40] *Varṇadharma* is the collective of the duties to be observed in accordance with one's *varṇa*, or caste/sphere of work that has been assigned to one, namely those of a *brāhmaṇa* (whose duty it was to engage in learning and imparting knowledge), *kṣatrīya* (whose duty involved fighting and protecting one's kingdom), *vaiṣya* (whose duty it was to trade) or *śūdra* (whose duty lay in performance of humble and laborious tasks). *Āśramadharma* comprises duties which are to be divided in one's life span, categorised into four stages, and to be followed in the following order: *brahmacarya* (study of the scriptures and other arts under a guru), *gṛhasta* (leading a life of a married man and procreation, fulfilling all the familial duties and social duties), *vānaprastha* (moving out of one's home and into the forests, living, on alms, the life of an ascetic), and *sanyāsa* (a life of renunciation and deep penance).[41] Prasad observes that "in the fourth [stage, i.e. *sanyāsa*, an individual] . . . places himself outside the zone or boundary of morality or ethics" (203). According to Dandekar, the *āśramadharma* "provides a Hindu with an outline of a well-defined plan of life, complete with the four fixed stages, ... Indeed this pattern of life, though a unique feature of Hinduism, is so universal in character that it can well become acceptable to all people and at all times" (669).[42]

At this juncture, it is necessary to clarify a doubt raised about *varṇa* being synonymous with caste (in the modern sense of the term). Prasad gives a balanced view in this regard. He writes, "Even if *varṇa* (class) originally meant something different from caste (*jāti*), its meaning soon became identical with that of caste. It is almost impossible to date when '*varṇa*' did not mean *jāti*, though many modern scholars . . . hold that the *varṇa* of an individual was determined by his abilities, propensities, etc." (177) There is another manner in which this problem can be understood, and again, Prasad sheds light on it. He maintains that this complexity can be understood in terms of what he calls an "*ability account*" of '*varṇa*' which accords "divine agency" and sanction to the *varṇavyavasthā*, and the other is what he calls the "*mythological account*," which makes the "*varṇa* of an individual hereditary" (Prasad 177). However, one is confounded with yet another problem

[40] Henceforth, all references to Dandekar are from his article "Puruṣārthas," unless indicated otherwise.

[41] It should be noted that most of these duties were prescribed for men, and women were supposed to follow their *strīdharma*, which was defined with reference to the men in their lives.

[42] According to the *Bhagavadgītā*, however, "the real *samnyāsa* is that which manifests itself in man's attitude of non-attachment and not in his actual renunciation of all action" (Dandekar 670).

while believing in this theory too: "That classical India had a four-fold *varṇa* or caste system with well-defined duties is a historical fact. The ability account of its formation is an ethically reasonable one though, . . . it is extremely difficult to explain its implementation because of the changing nature of . . . human capabilities. The birth determined account is a neat one though it lacks ethical reasonableness" (Prasad 199). Moreover, as Prasad notes, the birth-determined account "cannot explain the original allotment of a *varṇa* to an individual because in the beginning no individual's parents would have had any caste-denomination which could have been given to a progeny of theirs," and this would lead us either towards a void or into infinite regression (Prasad 199).

Perhaps one can close this discussion with Dandekar's opinion regarding this debate. Dandekar takes recourse to the *Bhagavadgītā*'s emphasis on *svadharama* to explain that "what is really important is the principle of ethical interdependence involved in this system. Society as an integrated whole can be held together and progress only if its various units properly perform the functions assigned to them. . . . The feeling that, by observing one's *svadharma* or *varṇadharma*, one is actively promoting the solidarity, stability, and progress of the society is in itself a reward greater than any other to be sought for in this world" (671). However, Dandekar also agrees to the fact that "there developed a sort of gulf between the original concept and the actual practice" in due course of time (671).

Moral Dilemmas

In the long history of the various meanings of dharma, the categories of the general duty and the individual duty—not without their problems and limitations—were perhaps the easiest to grasp and follow. Life would have been an easy ride had a moral agent been faced with the choice between a moral act and an immoral act and a morally inclined person or her opposite could make easy choices between the two. However, life sometimes lands an individual in a situation where she is supposed to choose between two equally strong moral paths. Sen maintains: "It is not always possible to keep track of all these multifarious duties that one is required to perform. In some cases, deciding whether a certain action is obligatory or not may not be a mean task. Moreover, while following a certain course of action, one may doubt whether he is doing what is right for him. In such cases, one may have doubts as to its validity" (Sen 158). Matilal lucidly defines moral dilemmas: "Moral dilemmas . . . arise when the agent is committed to two or more moral

obligations, but circumstances are such that an obligation to do *x* cannot be fulfilled without violating an obligation to do *y*. Dilemmas present irreconcilable alternatives, and the actual choice among them becomes either irrational or is based upon grounds other than moral" ("Insights" 6). That is a real moral dilemma, a conflict between two different types of dharma. More often than not, moral conflicts and dilemmas arise due to a clash between one's individual dharma and one's social dharma. Matilal writes:

> Life presents us with many moral conflicts, some of which even amount to genuine moral dilemmas. In genuine moral dilemmas, rational arguments in favour of either prescriptions or actions (where both cannot be done, for the doing of one is the undoing of the other) are equally balanced. Hence if the rational agent is forced to take action, it is usually under unresolved conflict, and the agent may suffer from such emotions as regret and remorse. (*Ethics and Epics* 56)

Matilal defines moral dilemmas succinctly: "Dilemmas . . . are like paradoxes. Genuine paradoxes are seldom solved. They are, generally speaking, resolved or dissolved" ("Insights" 1). This definition highlights the human or mechanical intervention made to provide a quick-fix to the dilemma (in resolving it), or annul the dilemma for lack of a solution (in dissolving it). In fact, what Matilal seems to be suggesting is that genuine dilemmas are seldom solved; one probably only makes efforts to find a way out, there being no universally applicable 'final' or 'ideal' solution to a dilemma. The doing of one duty would 'undo' the other duty, and one must remember that both duties carry equal force and comparable weight. Or, in other words, following dharma, in either case, would mean not following another dharma expected out of one.

The "absolutistic or literal version" of the theories of dharma can sometimes prove to be "bad ethical theories—because they are inapplicable, or disastrous if applied" (Mahapatra 22). In such a situation, "how and why had our great seers tended to stick to them?," asks Mahapatra (22). He attempts an answer readily: "It is mainly because they have failed to know the subtle nature of *dharma* (or duty). To know this, is to know when to follow a *sādhāraṇa dharma* and when to make a justified exception to it" (Mahapatra 22). As indicated earlier, knowing this may not be an easy task, and well neigh impossible, as already pointed out above. However, Matilal also suggests that some moral conflicts "may be resolvable, but due to . . . informational constraints in the situation, a rationally

arrived at decision may seem difficult or even impossible. But, since a decision has to be taken, for the situation demands it . . . the agent may appeal to his own moral conscience, being impartial and not biased by any baser emotions such as greed, and his mental inclination will reveal his preference" (*Ethics and Epics* 56-57)

The Indian epics, especially the *Mahābhārata*, furnish numerous illustrations of genuine moral dilemmas and problems. [43] A well-known case of moral dilemma is the occasion of the *Bhagavadagītā*. Arjuna, standing in the battlefield right before the commencement of the war, is caught between the moral dilemma of fighting as a brave warrior, or abstaining from killing his cousins, elders, and teachers. "It is . . . an 'impossible' situation," writes Matilal, "an apt illustration of the 'action-guide' dilemma . . . He must kill and must not kill" (*Ethics and Epics* 6-7). He is in conversation with Krishna, where Arjuna insists on sticking to his *sādhāraṇadharma* of *ahiṃsā* (non-violence), while Krishna, through an elaborate series of dialogues, advices Arjuna to stick to his *svadharma* (*varṇadharma*) as a *kṣatrīya* (warrior), but ultimately, leaves Arjuna to decide his course of action. The *Bhagavadgītā*, according to Mahapatra, "is virtually a treatise on *varṇadharma*," and it "treats this duty as inviolable and categorical. Krishna urged upon Arjuna to perform his *kṣatriya dharma* and take up arms and kill his adversaries, even if it meant violating . . . the *sādhāraṇa dharma* of *ahiṁsā*" (19). In effect, Krishna just suggests a way out, though insisting that Arjuna should follow his individual dharma of a warrior. This amounts to a resolution, not a solution to the problem of war and the resultant bloodshed and devastation that would follow.

Nevertheless, there are various other types of moral problems, which may not be categorized as dilemmas per se, but as moral weakness, or akrasia. This is in sharp contrast to moral will, or the willingness to take the right and dharmic course of action.

Moral Will and Akrasia (Moral Failure)

Moral agents often engage in what is called "*ātmatuṣṭī*, or a deliberation which satisfies one's moral conscience . . . It is the satisfaction of man's moral propensity or sensibility, his moral reason, or moral earnestness . . . bound to be a reflective, deliberative, process conducted in a cogitative, ratiocinative, manner. This is, . . . moral thinking or deliberation,

[43] There are diverse situations of moral dilemmas in the *Mahabharata*, as well as their handling in the retellings, which will be discussed in the coming chapters.

an exercise undertaken by an individual's intellect, his moral reason, or moral will" (Prasad 298).

Prasad states that "a moral consideration always has the authority, or the logical right, to override a non-moral one, whatever the non-moral one maybe, personal, social, political, theoretical, or even spiritual. But the moral may not, . . . always have the *power* or executive force, to do that simply because it is possible for a potential moral agent to sometimes do the immoral, or the morally unjustified" (*Historical-Developmental* 4, emphasis in original). Besides, there can be numerous situations in a moral agent's life when one knows what is the right course of action to take, but may not be inclined to follow it; however, at the time of acting on the basis of her moral will, the person might choose the morally correct path. This is also a kind of moral conflict or *dharma*-conflict in which "the struggle" is directed "against temptation, or what is called weakness of the will. This type of struggle is well illustrated in . . . Yudhiṣṭhira agreeing to a second game of dice right after the humiliation of the first . . . [and] Dhṛtarāṣṭra incapable of persuading his son to listen to the voice of reason" (Matilal, *Ethics and Epics* 61-62).[44]

Akrasia may be variously defined as "moral weakness, weakness of the will, or moral failure" and it "consists in an individual's doing, or feeling inclined or motivated to do, something which he himself knows or acknowledges to be morally wrong, as well as in *not* doing, or *not* feeling inclined or motivated to do, what he himself knows or acknowledges to be morally right" (Prasad 159, emphasis in original). Bhīṣma, Droṇa and Kṛpa in the *Mahābhārata* suffer from akrasia. All three of them are "committed to fight the war from the side of Duryodhana while admitting in their hearts of hearts, with conviction, that Duryodhana's is a wrong cause. . . ." (Prasad 161) All three of them feel indebted to Duryodhana for the sustenance they draw from him. Therefore, despite knowing that Yudhiṣṭhira's is the just case, they prefer gratitude over justice.

Dharma and *Puruṣārthas* (Human Values)

The theory of *puruṣārtha* constitutes an essential feature of the Hindu system of philosophical thought. Prasad explains that "classical Indian thinkers are of the view that human life is purposive in the sense that man is a *value-seeking individual*" (205). An

[44] Matilal also adds that ". . . according to classical Indian wisdom, weakness of the will is part of human nature . . . and is not ascribed to sin" (*Ethics and Epics* 63).

individual's life is thus "a *purposive*, and objective-seeking, or a value-seeking, progression or procession of attempts or activities. And, it remains purposive irrespective of the nature or character, morality or immorality, of his motivating desires, of his purposes" (Prasad 205). The theory of *puruṣārtha* is "an ethical theory of value. . . . it is logically safe to call the theory a general theory of value, including within itself a theory of *dharma* which is, in the theory, the name for moral value" (Prasad 208-09). Dandekar explains that the "highest spiritual goal of a Hindu is to transcend the limitations of his individuality which binds him to this phenomenal world, and thereby to realise his identity with the Supreme Being" (662-63). [45] Explaining further, he writes:

> They are, in some contexts, described as motivations of human activity. Elsewhere, they are characterized either as individual urges or as human ends . . . said to represent the human needs or desires to be satisfied or the ingredients of experience conducive to human fulfillment. But the most generally accepted definition of *puruṣārtha* seems to be that they are human values, consciously pursued by man. . . . (Dandekar 663)

The literal meaning of the word *puruṣārtha* is "the end" or "destination" aimed at by man. Dandekar makes a very valid observation here. He clarifies: "But it is not clear whether it is an end which is naturally and instinctively aimed at man, or whether it is an end which man ought to aim at prescriptively" (Dandekar 663). Prasad explains that "the concept of *puruṣārtha* denotes in Indian thinking not only that which *is in fact* valued, or desired, but also that which *ought to be* valued, or desired" (Prasad 207). Delineating the theory of *puruṣārtha* further, Dandekar gives details of how the system functions, and how all the values are interlinked and inter-dependent:

> The Hindu thinkers have recognised that man possesses a complex personality which seeks expression mainly through four outlets — his craving for power and property, his sensuous and aesthetic urge, his social aims and his spiritual impulse. They have related these four outlets respectively to the four *puruṣārthas* or ends of man, namely, *artha*, *kāma*, *dharma* and *mokṣa*. The first three ends have relevance so far as his empirical life is concerned, while the last refers to his spiritual life.

[45] This section will significantly base its arguments on Dandekar's "Puruṣārthas."

> According to the most common view, these four *puruṣārthas* do not operate to the exclusion of one another. (Dandekar 663-64)

Moreover, an individual is expected to pursue all the three *puruṣārthas* "conjointly and in a balanced way, for the achievement of an integrated human personality and the fulfillment of human life in this world" (Dandekar 664).[46] Also, the *puruṣārtha*-theory is "not influenced by any consideration of class, caste, or sex" (Dandekar 664).

Dandekar explains that *dharma* as a *puruṣārtha* "never implies a personal experience of the divine. . . . *Dharma* is also represented as a goal of life or as a value to be achieved or as a hypostasis of justice. It is said to be a duty or obligation . . . and a function . . . It is sometimes regarded as a kind of natural law, imposed upon man rather than as a moral obligation deriving from his disposition" (665). In the *puruṣārtha*-theory, "*dharma* seems to relate to the world-order and stability and solidarity of the society. *Dharma* implies the observance of practices which are deemed necessary for keeping the world and the society intact. . . . the well-balanced social organization, as reflected, illustratively, in the *varṇāśrama* scheme" (Dandekar 665). It is often regarded as "an aid to man's spiritual progress. It may be further noted that *artha* and *kāma* hardly ever signify the categorical 'ought' which *dharma* often does. In the case of *dharma*, prescriptiveness is specially emphasized, presumably because the impulse for it is not innate in man" (Dandekar 666). Additionally, in spite of the prescriptiveness involved in its nature, Dandekar emphasizes that dharma is "more practice than theory" (666).

A proper co-ordination between "the physic-ethical ideal of *mokṣa* and the socio-ethical ideal of *dharma*, . . . which is regarded as investing the phenomenal existence with a meaning and a purpose, may be said to constitute the most central problem of Hinduism.

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[46] There is an interesting discussion on the *puruṣārthas* among the Pāṇḍavas and Vidura in the *Mahābhārata*. "Vidura says that *Dharma* is the foremost among the three *puruṣārthas.* He asserts: "The sages crossed over the cycle of rebirths by means of *Dharma* . . . But according to Arjuna, *Artha* is more important and without '*Artah'* the other two cannot exist. Even the ascetics who have renounced worldly pleasures seeks economic well-being . . . Nakula endorses the views of Arjuna but insists that *Dhrama* should be followed before *Artha* is sought after . . . Bhīmasena . . . His argument are based on desire . . . 'without desire one cannot get either *Dharma* or *Kāma.* Even the sages, ascetics not to speak of men in general nurse desire" . . . Having heard the views of his brothers and Vidura, Yudhiṣṭhira ends the debate with a note on self-perfectionism. 'Reflecting on liberation is important,' says Yudhiṣṭhira, "and not doing as one desires. I carry on my work as I am destined to. Destiny guides all beings to do what they are destined to do. All of you, therefore, know that destiny is more powerful than any other one" (Ramanathan 110-11).

Mokṣa . . . is theoretically attainable by any individual by himself, but *dharma* has to adjust itself with a given social situation" (Dandekar, *Insights* 7).[47] There is no disagreement about the fact that *mokṣa* was added to the *trivarga* as the fourth *puruṣārtha* only at a later time. Prasad explains:

> *Dharma*, by its very nature, is a social value in the sense of being pursuable in a society as well as contributive to the preservation of a good society. In this way all the three values are fundamentally, or largely, social values . . . seeking these social values does not exhaust all that a man seeks to have. He also has some sort of a personal aspirations . . . Man also seeks a value which marks the fulfilment, the consummation, of this aspiration and to it they give the name *mokṣa, nihśreyas, kaivalya, nirvāṇa,* etc. That is why perhaps *mokṣa* is a late entrant in the theory of *puruṣārthas.* (Prasad 222)

However, as Dandekar clarifies, "this addition does not make the *trivarga* (which is a self-sufficient scheme) either more complete or more logical and systematic, ..." (667). *Mokṣa* implies "the transcending of this phenomenal world which is characterized by plurality, change, and action, and which is generally believed to be without any reality or significance" (Dandekar 667). However, and Dandekar has a very significant point to add here, "*mokṣa* is intrinsic and not functional; . . . personalistic and not social; it implies liberation and not liberty" (667). The following argument summarizes the primary difference between the values of dharma and *mokṣa*:

> *Mokṣa* . . . forms a sharp dichotomy with the other three *puruṣārthas*, particularly with *dharma*. While *dharma* aims at the maintenance of the world-order, *mokṣa* deliberately rejects it. *Mokṣa* signifies release from the entire realm governed by *dharma*. (Dandekar 667)

The debate on the nature of dharma in the Indian ethical tradition, between the teleological (the achievement of *mokṣa* being the teleos or the goal of life, and dharma being the only means to that end) and the deontological notes (focus on the means, and not the end, the observance of dharma for its own sake) has also been a topic of deliberations in the different philosophical systems. Dandekar also presents a counter-argument to the usual

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[47] Gupta also makes a significant obseravtion: "*Dharma* as *ātma-jñāna* leads to the attainment of last of *puruṣārtha* of man's life" (60).

belief that in the *chaturvarga* system, it is the observance of dharma which leads to *mokṣa* "in the sense that *dharma* embodies and develops certain traits and habits conducive to *mokṣa. Dharma* is regarded as *mokṣa* in the making; . . . ." (668). Explaining further, Dandekar writes, "This is obviously not true; for, the techniques suitable for the achievement of a certain thing cannot be so also for the achievement of the negation of that thing. Moreover, *dharma* cannot be expected to contribute to its own annihilation" (Dandekar 668). Therefore, there is a general consensus that, like Yudhiṣṭhira—who says, in reply o a question by Draupadī, that "I act because I must"—one should behave virtuously for the sake of virtue, follow dharma for the sake of dharma. In the Indian view, what is considered to be more important in ethical consideration is not the external action, but the inner disposition or intention which prompts the act.[48]

Dharma and the Ultimate Good

Das foregrounds his opinion that Hinduism is "not a 'religion' in the usual sense. It is a civilization based on a simple metaphysical insight about the unity of the individual and the universe and has self-development as its objective" (Das xxxvi).[49] In addition to helping an individual live a good life and aim for a higher goal in life, morality or dharma also aims at the preservation as well as promotion of the well-being of all beings. It is because of this feature that dharma has been called "the sustainer of all beings or of the universe" (Prasad 278). Dharma or moral concepts have social relevance, as pointed out earlier. Dharma, in the opinion of Dasgupta, "insists again and again on the discriminative use of one's wisdom in discovering what may lead to social good" (26). According to Prasad, they "have to be applicable to, or instantiable in, concrete, real situations. A distinguishing or necessary feature of being moral is to care and be concerned with the welfare of others, to have a respect for the dignity of each and every person" (Prasad, *Historical-Developmental* 4). According to Kaṇāda, "morality (*dharma*) leads to the moral

[48] "I act because I must. Whether it bears fruits or not, buxom Draupadi, I do my duty like any householder."
—Vanaparva (Forest Book of the *Mahābhārata*), III.32.2–4 (qtd. in Das 63)

[49] The Indian dharma came to be projected as Hindu dharma only in the early nineteenth century. Das writes, "For the first time we find Hindus, especially Bengali Vaishnavs of Chaitanya's school, have begun to use the word 'dharma' as *Hindudharma*, to identify their faith as something different from Islam and Christianity. Till then Hindus had never used 'dharma' //// to mean 'religion'. The pre-Muslim Hindu might have called himself *Arya*—the whole of his life was 'religion' in a sense. This usage was in part a reaction to the Christian missionaries in Bengal who laid claim to 'dharma', using it to proclaim Christianity as the 'true dharma'" (308-09).

man's total well-being or flourishing (*abhyudaya*) in his worldly life as well as to that of his highest objective (*nihśreyasa*)" (Prasad 278). Prasad also projects the concepts of *abhyudaya* and *nihśreyasa* as answers to the questions, "What does morality (*dharma*) mean?' and 'Why should one be moral?'" (279).[50] Thus, *dharma* "followed by men, sustains or preserves the world, particularly the social world, or society, in such a way that in it leading a life desirable in all respects becomes not only possible but a surety" (Prasad 279).

Āpadharma: Dharma in Abnormal Times

Having discussed so many types of dharmas in the foregoing pages, one is also faced with the question of the applicability of the concept of dharma across situations and circumstances. What does one do when following the precepts or dharma, or answering the call of one's morality, becomes absolutely impractical and/or impossible? The answer is, there is a provision for the same in Indian philosophy of ethics. Āpaddharma is the dharma that one is supposed to follow in abnormal times, or in times of distress. The function of dharma, according to Dasgupta, is:

> To enlighten a man, and kindle his power of discrimination, make him fully alive to the needs and demands of life and, finally, help him evolve from within an ideal of conduct for himself. In times of peace, when everything in society is in due order, a person can, however, rely on the king and the codes of scriptures, look up to them for guidance; but in times of chaos he must be awake, vibrating with zeal and intelligence, to grapple with the situation all by himself. (25)

In abnormal times, "preservation of life, and social good, as far as practicable, come uppermost and should be maintained at any cost, even by denying Vedic rites and castes-duties" (Dasgupta 25). Such is the kind of flexibility built into the Indian system of ethics and morality.

Prasad is of the opinion that "the introduction of this concept is a sign of classical thinkers' moral, or rather, conceptual, sensitivity to changing nuances of social reality and the complexity of moral living. But even if this concept had not been introduced in Indian

[50] These terms occur in the twin philosophical school of Nyāya-Vaisheshika.

ethics, it could have handled the problems the concept is supposed to handle by means of the notion of flexibility built into the notion of a moral virtue or principle" (331). So, Prasad concludes that in effect, "there are not two kinds of ethics, but only one—what we call general, or commonly used, ethics with built-in flexibility or potentiality to take care of even abnormal, troubled times in a man's or society's life" (Prasad 333). One can take for example how "Kṛṣṇa persuaded Dharmarāja Yudhiṣṭhira to tell the lie about the death of Aśvathāmā in order that Droṇa, the invincible, may lay down his arms and the battle of *Mahābhārata* could be won by the deserving Pāṇḍavas" (Mahapatra 20). Kṛṣṇa cites the example of the truthful Kauśika to an unwilling Arjuna—who does not want to kill Karṇa through deceit—who had to taste the horror of hell for having spoken the truth which led to the killing of innocents by bandits, when he could have saved their lives by just uttering a small lie (he had taken a vow never to tell a lie in hope of ascending to heaven). Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna: "For the sake of *Dharma* if one tells untruth one will not commit sin" (Ramanathan 103). Similarly, Kṛṣṇa stops Arjuna from killing Yudhiṣṭhira by dissuading him from his vow of killing anyone who disrespected his revered Gāṇḍīva bow. On both the occasions, Kṛṣṇa takes recourse to the logic of Āpaddharma, where one should not act in adherence to what they consider to be dharma, but make exceptions to suit the circumstances. Thus, "the theory of truth telling, taken literally, is a bad ethical theory and needs to be toned down, or even violated in a demanding situation[s]" like the ones mentioned above (Mahapatra 20).

Dharma, Moral Dilemmas and the *Mahābhārata*

McGrath makes a highly significant statement about the meanings of dharma in the *Mahābhārata.* He cautions that "because the poem has been accumulated over the centuries and millennia into a singular whole—a unit epic—there are of course present in its verses many historically different qualities and identities of *dharma*" (*Rāja Yudhiṣṭhira* 22). In fact, both the epics—the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*—present "very few ethical and moral absolutes. The *dharma* of the epics and the *dharmaśāstras* alike varies by its very nature according to differences of *varṇa, āśrama, puruṣārtha,* gender, time, place, and a host of other contextual variables" (Goldman 189). Indeed, for Das, the *Mahabharata* is "an extended attempt to clarify just what dharma is—that is, what exactly should we do when we are trying to be good in the world" (Das xlii). The epic, to use Doniger's phrase, "deconstructs dharma, exposing the inevitable chaos of the moral life"

(*alternative history* 278). Sen suggests that "instead of telling us how people *should* behave, *Mahābhārata* shows how different types of people *actually* act and tend to morally defend their own actions" (Sen 201).

On a literal level, several characters (and creatures) in the *Mahabharata* are embodiments or incarnation of Dharma, namely, Vidura, Yudhiṣṭhira, Kṛṣṇa (who is an authority on dharma in the epic, though he may not be a god or a demi-god or a deity), Yama (the god of death and otherworldly Justice), and the personified Dharma (Yudhiṣṭhira's father).[51] The personified Dharma also appears in the disguises of a *yakṣa*, a stork, a mongoose, and a dog, in order to subject his son to tests on dharma, and also "to teach Yudhiṣṭhira a lesson—about the intractable and the ever elusive nature of *dharma*" (Matilal, *Ethics and Epics* 67). One must also remember that Yudhiṣṭhira is the *dharmarāja*, another reference to dharma, its embodiment and royalty, and is called so even before he becomes King. However, McGrath proceeds to make another ground-breaking observation:

> Yudhiṣṭhira is the *dharmarāja* during a period when *dharma* only obtains on earth to the extent of one quarter of its full potential, due to the fact that the *kali yuga* . . . commences with the beginning of the battle at Kurukṣetra . . . the great probity and moral clarity of Yudhiṣṭhira is constantly distressed or thwarted by situations that demand action that cannot be considered to possess full *dharma*; thus his kingship, or the potential of his kingship, is persistently deflected or constrained, for moral success is only possible in one quarter of all that is thought, spoken, or acted during this aeon. Most of the *Mahābhārata* addresses this asymptotic condition of *dharma.* As a poem, then, epic *Mahābhārata* is a work about the preponderant condition

[51] Karve cites a number of reasons to show that "Dharma seems to be the son of Vidura" (75). It is a study that is corroborated by a number of scholars, including Basu (2013). Also, McGrath observes that the epic makes several efforts to tilt the balance of dharma in favour of Yudhiṣṭhira being Dharma incarnate: "Vyāsa makes the claim that, towards the end of the poem when the spirit of Vidura enters Yudhiṣṭhira's body, this is a representation of the divine *Dharma* itself entering the body of the king. Again, such divinisation and personification of *dharma* is a peculiarly epic conceit. Kuntī claims that she has been informed that she is the *dharmasyajananī* (the mother of Dharma), who in this case is actually Yudhiṣṭhira himself" (*Rāja Yudhiṣṭhira* 22, note 63).

> of *adharma* in the world; it is not a poem about *dharma.* (*Rāja Yudhiṣṭhira* 20-21)

The *Mahābhārata* has been referred to as an epic about dharma. In the last section of the Svargārohaṇa Parva, the *Mahābhārata* concludes with "the straightforward asseveration that its purpose has actually been to illustrate what *dharma* means and is" (Prithipaul 70). It features *dharma* in three main ways: "in didactic sections, in substories listened to and sometimes told by heroes and heroines, and in its main story" (Hiltebeitel, *Dharma* 9). In addition to Yudhiṣṭhira, some other significant characters such as Bhīṣma, Vyāsa and Vidura speak on dharma, on "the ethical life of men and their preachings as exhibited in the background of religious, socio-political, thoughts" (Ramanathan 95-96). Dasgupta asserts that the epic, while it also discuss *mokṣa*, "it lays the same, . . . emphasis on the problems of practical life. It does not sacrifice every-day life in its exuberance for the quest of a life beyond, but sets itself to the task of solving the problems of different ideals opposing one another, the conflict of society and the individual, with deep sympathy and farsightedness" (20). Hiltebeitel delineates the preoccupation of the epic with dharma:

> As in the dice match, so too in the war, *dharma* is repeatedly said to be "subtle," and in the battle, dharmic and adharmic acts are committed on both sides. Characters are often delineated through the dilemmas they face in puzzling their way to righteousness yet still ambiguous solutions. The Pāṇḍavas are helped in this, and ultimately to victory, by both the intervening author and the Kṛṣṇa, who also speaks authoritatively on *dharma* throughout, ... (*Dharma* 10)

The epic heroes embody "order and sacred duty (dharma), while their foes, whether human or demonic, embody chaos (adharma)" (Miller, "Imaginative Universe" 9). Also, "acts of heroism are characterized less by physical prowess than by dharma, often involving extraordinary forms of sacrifice, penance, devotion to a divine authority, and spiritual victory over evil" (Miller, "Imaginative Universe" 9). There are also several "clashes between *Dharma* and *Adharma* which, broadly speaking, represent good and evil, appear in the narrative parts of the epic. Ultimately the victory of *Dharma* over *Adharma* is allegedly established," suggest Ramanathan (96). It is generally assumed that dharma or moral law "brought Yudhiṣṭhira and his brothers to victory, though it is not . . . true, as

they also resorted to some *adharma* or immoral practices . . . .” (Ramanathan 96).[52] Sukthankar suggests that the “contrast depicted in the poem. . . is clearly intended by the author or authors of the poem to portray different aspects of the human personality, to visualize the different types of the subtle psyche of man” (18-19).

There are other contradictions at play in the epic. The epic debates “the clash between, . . . the growing doctrine of non-violence toward all creatures . . . and . . . both the justice of war and the still dominant tradition of animal sacrifice” (Doniger, *Hinduism* 132).[53] For instance, the *Mahabharata* “both challenges and justifies the entire class structure,” Karna being an advocate of the former, and Krishna being a supporter of the latter (Doniger, *Hinduism* 132). It was often “forced to acknowledge the impossibility of maintaining any sort of dharma at all in a world where every rule seemed to be cancelled out by another” (Doniger, *Hinduism* 132). “Dharma,” proposes Das, “is not only untranslatable, but the *Mahabharata*’s characters are still trying to figure it out at the epic’s end” (xv).

The *Mahābhārata* does not believe in “the universality or uniformity of moral standard, which according to it, varies in conformity with the change of time, place, circumstances and other factors. According to it every situation carries its own morals” (Jauhari 315). A primary focus of the epic is to delineate “questions of right and wrong— it analyses human failures constantly. Unlike the Greek epics, where the hero does something wrong and gets on with it, the action stops in the *Mahabharata* until every character has weighed in on the moral dilemma from every possible angle” (Das xxxiii). According to Raja, one character in the epic who “is always in a moral dilemma is Dhṛtarāṣṭra who means well but yields to the suggestion of Duryodhana, caught in a dilemma between affections towards his sons and what he feels as the proper thing to do” (51). However, Dubey suggests that one can find, in the epic, three figures who “do not appear to experience moral dilemmas. They are Duryodhana, Karṇa and Kṛṣṇa.[54] Duryodhana does not feel any dilemma, because he is

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[52] The Mahabharata war as a *dharmayuddha* will be discussed in a later section.

[53] Numerous scholars, including Armstrong (2014), have identified this disagreement in the epic. Moreover, “The issue of noncruelty to animals is a variant on the heavier problem of nonviolence . . . toward both animals and humans, in a culture that views violence—toward humans, as well as toward animals—as inevitable” (Doniger, *Hinduism* 146)

[54] Raja also corroborates this view of Dubey. He writes, “One of the characters in the *Mahābhārata* who seems to be above all moral dilemmas is Kṛṣṇa . . . knowing fully well that success in life cannot be achieved without resorting to what is normally considered as *adharma*. . . .” (51).

blinded by greed and hatred against the Pāṇḍavas . . . His close associate Karṇa also does not feel any moral crisis . . . His chivalrous character and integrity are almost unsurpassed" (38). However, Matilal disagrees with Dubey's assertion about Kṛṣṇa not facing any moral dilemma at all. According to Matilal, Krishna also faces genuine moral dilemmas in the epic.

Vyasa concludes the epic "with the frustrating groan that, although he had been crying himself hoarse extolling *dharma* as the key to *artha* and *kāma*, exhorting people not to jettison *dharma* because of passion or avarice or out of fear or even fear of life, people were not listening to him, but were going their own way" (Iyengar 181). One wonders why! Dharma has been delineated as integral to the existence of all humans. The voluminous epic expounds the 'subtle' nature of dharma thoroughly. If an epic of this length has not transmitted Vyasa's message successfully – his frustrating groan bearing testimony to it – one wonders what will! Translating dharma in Vyasa's concluding statement as "compassion—rather than as duty," P. Lal gives his interpretation of the lament: "In compassion lies the meaning of life, and because both the Kauravas and Pandavas lacked such compassion they destroyed themselves" (qtd. in Gandhi 25).

Dharmayuddha and the Mahabharata War

Rajmohan Gandhi makes a potent observation: "In the Mahabharata, revenge is a fact, reconciliation a fancy; forgiveness is preached, vengeance practiced; healing is conceived, injury executed" (Gandhi 16). The Mahabharata War has been famously referred to as a *dharmayuddha*. It is said that it was fought for the establishment of dharma. The epic often projects the battle "as a great sacrifice, with the warriors offering themselves as victims. . . ." (Doniger, *Hinduism* 132). The primary reasons why it is believed that the war will restore dharma is the Indian concept of time or *yuga* (aeon), and more importantly, because of the involvement of Krishna (an avatar of Vishnu) in the war.[55] "The battle on the field called Kurukshetra," notes Doniger, "is also an eschatological conflict at the moment when the universe is about to self-destruct. For the end of that battle marks the beginning of the Kali Age, the fourth of the four degenerating Ages of Yugas . . . Even

[55] It is famously reiterated at several places in the epic that "Where dharma is, there is victory," and also, "Where Krishna is, there lied victory." By logical syllogism, the statement effectively transforms into "Where Krishna is, there lies dharma and victory."

within this moment of degeneration, Krishna is said to descend to earth . . . to restore dharma . . . when it has declined in the course of the cycle" (Doniger, *Hinduism* 132). The primary role of Krishna in the epic is "to save dharma, though every code of worldly conduct is violated in the process. But in the epic drama, dharma cannot escape the demands of the age, and it falls victim to the age of destruction" (Miller, "India's Great Epic" 127-28).

The concept of "*dharmayuddha* (just war or civilized warfare)" has been elaborated upon, along with some traces of "*kutayuddha* (unjust war)" in Vedic and epic literature (Roy 28). The term *dharmayuddha*, according to Mehendale, may mean: "'a war fought as a duty (*dharma*) by a Kṣatriya'. Kṛṣṇa told Arjuna . . . that there was nothing more beneficial to a Kṣatriya than to fight an unavoidable war in consonance with one's duty as a Kṣatriya" (Mehendale 1).[56] The primary occasion for the war that was fought at Kurukshetra was Duryodhana's refusal to return Yudhiṣṭhira's share of the ancestral kingdom, which he had lost in the game of dice. The contract of the game stipulated that Yudhiṣṭhira's share would be restored to him after the successful completion of their thirteen-year long exile. However, Duryodhana's refusal "to honour the contract was an injustice perpetrated on the Pāṇḍavas. Since resistance to such injustice was the duty of Kṣatriya, Kuntī told Yudhiṣṭhira: "Get back the paternal share of which you are deprived'" (Mehendale 1-2). "If this interpretation of '*dharmayuddha*' is the yardstick," suggest Mehendale, "then the Kurukṣetra war turns out to be a *dharmayuddha* for the Pāṇḍavas, but not for the Kauravas" (Mehendale 2).

However, the aforementioned meaning is not the only possible way in which the expression *dharmayuddha* should be interpreted. Literally, it may also mean "'a war fought according to the rules (*dharma*) of the war'" (Mehendale 2). And this interpretation has a precedent in the *Mahabharata* itself: this latter explanation of the term *dharmayuddha* is given by the great warrior-brahmin Paraśurāma to Bhīṣma.

There were some "generally accepted norms of warfare which the warring parties were expected to observe" in combat (Mehendale 2). In addition, they could agree upon some other specific rules which were binding on both the parties. The side which strictly "observed these rules during the war could be said to have fought a *dharmayuddha*, but

[56] This section will draw significantly from Mehendale's exceptional research on the idea of *dharmayuddha* in the *Mahabharata.*

this would not apply to the violator. It is noteworthy that, if we accept this particular meaning, we cannot immediately declare that the Pāṇḍavas fought a *dharmayuddha* simply because they fought against injustice" (Mehendale 2). Thus, Mehendale draws attention to another logical corollary: "if we accept the first meaning, the issue of *dharmayuddha* depends on the ends and not the means; since the ends are known before actual combat, whether a war is a *dharmayuddha* or not can be decided beforehand. In the case of the second meaning, however, the issue depends on the means, not the ends, and hence the issue can be decided only after the war was over" (2).

According to the first definition then, the Mahabharata war was a *dharmayuddha* for the Pandavas and not for the Kauravas, but if one goes into the details of the war, one realizes that "from the point of view of the observance of the rules of war, the Mahābhārata war cannot be called a *dharmayuddha*, the heroes on *both* sides having to share the responsibility for this" (Mehendale 23). The Pandavas employed various underhand means, guile, tricks, and on some occasions, even magic to win the war, under the guidance of Krishna. Four great warriors from the Kaurava side—"Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Karṇa and Duryodhana were all killed in the war by subterfuges or tricks which violate the strict code of chivalrous and knightly combats" (Sukthankar 17). The "'righteous' Pāṇḍavas, the supposed souls of Dharma, are able to win the war only by Adharma, by a series of frauds or at least by some very shabby and unchivalrous acts, which no know right-thinking person would hesitate to condemn" (Sukthankar 12). The Kauravas "unquestionably behave more honourably and on the whole more magnanimously. They never stoop to employ such base and ignominious tricks on the battlefield against their enemies" in comparison to the Pandavas (Sukthankar 13). So, for example, the killing of the fourteen-year old Abhimanyu by six warriors from the side of the Kauravas cannot be justified as an act of adherence to the dharma of war. Also, after the fall of Duryodhana, the "nocturnal expedition" of Aśvatthāman in "attacking the war heroes while they were asleep," when, instead, as the freshly anointed general by the dying Duryodhana, he "should have engaged his opponents in battle as on the previous eighteen days," is highly condemnable (Mehendale 22). One must also remember here that this happens at a time when, for the Pāṇḍavas, the war had ended with the fall of Duryodhana. Yudhiṣṭhira said: "Duryodhana has been killed, the enmity has ended" (Mehendale 22).

For the wrongs that were adopted to fell the Kaurava warriors, Duryodhana condemns Kṛṣṇa before dying, calling his means "crooked," while Aśvatthāman "did not indict Kṛṣṇa but did list Pāṇḍava violations of the path (*setu*) of *dharma*" (Mehendale 43). Kṛṣṇa himself admits that "there was an element of *adharma* or *anyāya* in . . . means" involved in the killing of Droṇa and Duryodhana (44).[57] As for the death of Bhīṣma, the general defense was that he himself let out the means by which he could be forced to give up arms (because otherwise, he was invincible), and regarding the trick used to kill Karṇa, Kṛṣṇa is unrepentant as according to him, Karṇa invoked rules that were not agreed upon before the start of the war, so his killing was not immoral. In any case, an analysis of the last stanza of the Gītā (18.78) suggests that "that there was no *anīti* or immorality involved if minimum of *adharma* was practised for achieving a just cause" (Mehendale 45). Whether the Pāṇḍavas adopted "minimum *adharma*," however, remains debatable.

Whether a war was won through dharma or adharma, it always leaves the victors grieving too. E.R. Sreekrishna Sarma offers an illuminating discourse in the light of the theory of *rasa*:

> The dominant *rasa* . . . in the *Mahābhārata* is *śānta* (quietitude). This mood usually leads to the saintly indifference towards all worldly pleasure or pain, and thereby leads to the path of *mokṣa*. The [*Mahabharata*] story is supposed to be a grand account of heroism and victory. But, ironically, it is the story of a great tragedy, where nobody becomes happy, and nobody achieves any glory—neither the victorious nor the vanquished. (Matilal, "Introduction" xii)

Both Arjuna and Yudhiṣṭhira suffer from "the moral emotions of guilt and shame for violating the *dharma* principles. . . . Tradition believed that one met moral retribution if one violated any important moral principle" (Matilal, *Ethics and Epics* 65). When the battle of Kurukṣetra is over, both Arjuna and Yudhiṣṭhira regret the loss of lives and are thrown in "doubt whether the throne had been worth fighting for. After all, what kind of

[57] In the *Droṇaparva*, Arjuna "ruefully commented that the so-called 'indirect' or 'white' lie of Yudhiṣṭhira, which killed the great teacher Droṇa, was an indelible black spot in Yudhiṣṭhira's *dharma*-inspired character" (Matilal, *Ethics and Epics* 46). About Duryodhana's death and the foul blow dealt on the him which escalated his defeat and consequent death, Balarāma, the brother of Kṛṣṇa is very upset, and Kṛṣṇa himself is upset about the additional blow dealt on the head of the dying Duryodhana by Bhīma.

kingdom was it in which only old people, widows and children were alive?" (Matilal, *Ethics and Epics* 65). However, Matilal suggest that "regret is not enough; the morally sensitive agent usually feels remorse as well. Both guilt and shame are appropriate feelings for the morally alert agent" (*Ethics and Epics* 66). After the war, Yudhiṣṭhira "was overwhelmed with more shame than guilt; after the battle was over his self-shame, contempt and derision knew no bounds" for having lied to Droṇa, but also because he holds himself responsible for having effected the carnage of the war (Matilal, *Ethics and Epics* 66). He does not want to rule over a kingdom of widows and orphans, and wishes to proceed to the forest and become a *sannyasī* (a renunciant). It takes the joint forces of Draupadī, Arjuna, Kṛṣṇa, Vyāsa and Bhīṣma (and two parvans of discourse in *rājadharma* by Bhīṣma) for Yudhiṣṭhira to give up the thought of renouncing the kingdom and return to Hastināpura and fulfil his duties as a king.

Ironically then, one must remind oneself that the epic "set out to narrate a tale of triumph but, in fact, ended in telling a story of defeat" (Das xliv). The epic drives home the final message that "revenge is peculiarly unsatisfying; at the end of the battle, the Pāṇḍavas have extracted revenge, but it is a catastrophe for the winners as much as for the losers" (Kaviraj 117). Armstrong opines that the epic is about the necessity of a war. She maintains that the Mahabharata is "not an antiwar epic: innumerable passages glorify warfare and describe battles enthusiastically and in gory detail. . . . There is, . . . an implicit assumption that empire—or in the poem's terms, "world rule"—is essential to peace" (64). She also concludes that "both the *Gita* and the *Mahabharata* remind us that there are no easy answers to the problems of war and peace" (Armstrong 68). J. A. B. van Buitenen in his article "On The Structure of the Sabhāparvan of the Mahābhārata," writes: "The epic is a series precisely stated problems imprecisely and therefore inconclusively resolved, every inconclusive solution raising a new problem; until the very end, when the question remains: whose is heaven and whose is hell?" (*Studies* 314) One can now say with surety that there are no easy solutions to such complex questions, neither about one's duty in 'this' world, nor about one's 'fate' in the other world.

Kṛṣṇa, Dharma and *the Bhagavad Gītā*: Towards a Paradigm Shift?

Sukthankar suggests that "the epic itself is *not* in any doubt" regarding "the cosmic characters of Śrī Kṛṣṇa" (63). Whether or not one believes in the divinity of Kṛṣṇa, the fact that he was the master strategist of the Pāṇḍavas who ensured their victory stands

uncontested and generally accepted. For Goldman, he is "the ultimate exemplar for a shifting scale of ethical behaviour in response to changing situations . . . the Machiavellian counsellor of the Pāṇḍavas in the *Mahābhārata*" (207). Krishna believes in consequentialism, his credo being "to win at all cost . . . Krishna justified his actions by arguing that the end justifies the means (an instrumental view of war that is in tune with *kutayuddha*). Krishna says that the Pandavas' war against the Kauravas was fought for a just cause. Hence, in order to win such a war, there was no *aniti* (immorality) involved if a minimum of *adharma* (unjust techniques) were used" (Roy 36). He exhorted the Pāṇḍavas to commit 'small acts of adharma' as a part of his catch-as-catch-can policy. Kṛṣṇa proclaimed that "he had to deviate from the standard norms of war ethics in order to bring about the death of [the Kaurava] warriors . . . so that the Pāṇḍavas could be victorious in the war. He argued that such . . . warriors could never be defeated or killed through honest means. In his own defence, he even said that such tricks were employed in the past by the *devas* against the *asuras* and that the development of such tricks in war was also approved by respectable people" (Sen 188).

However, as Matilal notes, one can also read Kṛṣṇa's ethical policy in the light of the debate between small dharma and big dharma. Kapoor is of the opinion that "Kṛṣṇa's advices to Arjuna to resort to stratagems to get rid of the enemies violates the precepts of *dharma yuddha*, righteous war, but serves the higher *dharma* of getting rid of evil forces not amenable to reason and thereby ensuring wide peace" (*Women and the Dharmaśāstras* 54). "Kṛṣṇa's ethics," suggests Matilal, "had concern for a richer scheme of values, moral or non-moral, presupposing a very complex societal and familial structure. It also envisions a society when saving innocent lives has a higher priority" ("Insights" 14). Hiltebeitel's insight into the well-meditated-upon methodology of Kṛṣṇa also ties up with the present argument: "If in the hands of Śiva and Śakuni the dice reflect the course of the yugas, the increase of adharma, the loss of 'prosperity,' there is a clear contrast with Krishna, who leaves nothing to chance. The arbitrary, addictive, destructive character of dicing runs counter to his application of suitable 'means' for every perilous situation his patient, constructive efforts toward the 'restoration of dharma'" (*Krishna* 100).

Kṛṣṇa's *dharma*, according to Matilal, was "flaccid" and "permissive": "The same Kṛṣṇa who advised Arjuna to fight the bloody war and kill his great grandfather for it was his duty as a *kṣatriya*, prevented Arjuna on another occasion from killing his elder,

Yudhiṣṭhira, although that involved breaking the same code of conduct of a *kṣatriya*: truth-keeping. . . . For Kṛṣṇa, *dharma* is, at least sometimes, situational" (*Ethics and Epics* 47). It seems Kṛṣṇa was "setting a new paradigm, whereby moral laws became flexible, unlike the rigid moral codes that one encounters in the *Rāmāyaṇa*" (Sen 192). "In Kṛṣṇa's world," contends Matilal, "when one *dharma* is violated to keep another equally important *dharma*, the intrinsic value of neither is diminished thereby. The situation only reflects imperfect human solutions in an imperfect world" (Matilal, *Ethics and Epics* 47). Kṛṣṇa counsels Arjuna when the latter is in a dilemma, saying "not everything is enjoined (*na hi sarvaṃ vidhīyate*)," which one can interpret and "not everything has a rule (*vidhi*)" (Hiltebeitel, *Dharma* 25). Hiltebeitel suggest that "what Kṛṣṇa means is that where there is no rule, such cases call for reason if *dharma* is to flourish" (Hiltebeitel, *Dharma* 25). Matilal interprets Kṛṣṇa's rational interpretation of dharma as pointing to "a paradigm shift around Kṛṣṇa," as well as "the *Mahābhārata* as introducing change over time with regard to *dharma*" (Hiltebeitel, *Dharma* 29). Taking cue from Matilal's postulation, Hiltebeitel suggests that "projecting change in *dharma* over time is a large and complex initiative of the *Mahābhārata*" (*Dharma* 29).

Equally novel is Kṛṣṇa's theory of *niṣkāma karma* (non-attachment action) that he relates to Arjuna before the war, which has been read as the central message of the *Bhagavad Gītā.* It is also a solution to the debate between dharma or *mokṣa* being the ultimate value or the final goal of life, by suggesting that an individual can find inner peace by performing her dharma (duty/action) in the material world by adopting a non-attached attitude to the fruits of her enterprise. Armstrong notes, "Krishna introduces an entirely novel idea: a warrior must simply dissociate himself from the effects of his actions and perform his duty without any personal animus or agenda of his own. Like a yogin, he must take the "I" out of his deeds, so that he acts impersonally—indeed, he will not be acting at all" (68). By "purging his mind of attachments," Arjuna can continue to "act in a world of pain without suffering despair. The core of Krishna's teaching is discipline (yoga), which enables the warrior to control his passions" (Miller, "India's Great Epic" 129). There is no running away from one's duty and the action one is supposed to perform—though in the *Gita*, it means adherence to one's *svadharma*. However, Krishna's exposition can variously be applied to different situations to overcome the conflict one is faced with, by taking recourse to unattached or desireless action.

Having said that, it is not as if Krishna was unaffected by moral pangs and dilemmas. Though some scholars contend that he never faced any moral dilemma, some others, like Matilal and Hiltebeitel suggest that even Krishna had to make moral choices and face situations of moral dilemmas, the most prominent example of which is his dismay with Bhima for striking an additional foul blow on the head of a dying Duryodhana. Krishna also feels his strategies to get Drona and Duryodhana killed were not entirely in accordance with dharma, and cannot be morally sanctioned. Roy refers to Mehendale, who is perhaps right in pointing out that "the *Mahabharata* shows that, due to the operation of *dharma* on a cosmic scale, nemesis or retributive justice overtook even Krishna in the end" (Roy 36).[58]

Dharmarāja Yudhiṣṭhira's Rejection of Dharma[59]

> In the end the sole question remains—is dharma worth upholding if it can be maintained only at the cost of great suffering?—Greg Bailey[60]

Hudson writes about the problem that confounds the characters of the epic, as their attempts to adhere to or find out about dharma are repeatedly thwarted. These characters who "struggle to determine the path of *dharma*, . . . are frequently "disoriented" by *dharma's* "subtle" nature and they become confused and often lose their way," writes Hudson (222). Hence, "*dharma* is often transgressed with disastrous consequences that repeatedly entail enormous suffering. The bewilderment of the elders in the dicing scene and their inability to 'solve' Draupadī's riddle-question—a failure that leads directly to Draupadī's violation—is one example among many" (Hudson 221). Hudson relates dharma to the problem of suffering and finds it to be ineffectual. In her study of the final journey of Yudhishthira and his final rejection of dharma towards the end of the epic, she makes interesting observations about the validity of dharma as a moral and ethical principle. One must remind oneself that dharma is the principle by which he has lived his entire life. Hudson explains:

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[58] For the divine incarnation of Vishnu that Krishna is made out to be, he died a rather inglorious death. He was killed accidently by the arrow of a hunter.

[59] Shalom has also conducted an extensive study on this topic. See bibliography.

[60] From, Bailey, Greg. "Suffering in the Mahābhārata: Draupadī and Yudhiṣṭhira" (qtd. in Hudson 218).

> *Dharma* is a category that, supposedly, offers conceptual clarity about the way world is ordered and to be navigated. It also, ostensibly, provides some degree of security against suffering. . . . we are forced to ask ourselves: If the path of *dharma* not only does not protect one from misfortune and sorrow, but, on the contrary, potentially is implicated in the problem of suffering, is the dharmic path even a noble or worthy pursuit? (Hudson 103)

Yudhishthira is disappointed with the idea of dharma even after having lived his whole life on this cardinal principle. Yudhiṣṭhira '"reproaches' the gods and even *dharma*" (Hudson 211). He is upset on seeing Duryodhana in heaven, and his brothers and Draupadi suffering in hell. The entire endeavour of reaching heaven in his mortal body becomes meaningless for him. "For, if the virtuous go to hell and the sinners to heaven, then these categories, *dharma* in particular, are rendered meaningless," writes Hudson (212). Although after his rejection of dharma, the personified Dharma, his father, appears and tells Yudhiṣṭhira that "this was another test that it passed brilliantly since he was determined to stay in hell for the sake of his brothers and Draupadī, . . . [he] has now been "purified" and all his stains have been removed" (Hudson 212). Yudhiṣṭhira is then united with his family and ancestors in the heaven, but one cannot forget his disillusionment with dharma and his ultimate rejection of it. In Hudson's analysis, "Yudhiṣṭhira is indicating that for him *dharma*—or, more precisely, his specific understanding of *dharma*—is meaningless" (218-19).

Hudson's analysis not only establishes the failure of dharma, but also brings to light a fundamental contradiction in the character of Yudhiṣṭhira. Hudson writes:

> For precisely why does Yudhiṣṭhira condemn *dharma*? Isn't it because he assumed that his brothers and wife would be protected from the possibility of experiencing the miseries of hell because they acted in accordance with *dharma*? In short, Yudhiṣṭhira's understanding of *dharma* entails a *dharma* that one performs for the sake of something, some good or positive result that one will acquire either in this life or in the afterlife . . . It is this understanding of *dharma* that is called into question by the presence of Yudhiṣṭhira's brothers and wife in hell, and that he angrily rebukes now. (Hudson 219)

Based on Hudson's analysis, one can go back a little into the discussion and analyze the statements about his adherence to dharma that Yudhiṣṭhira makes earlier to Draupadī on a number of occasions, especially in the Vanaparva (*The Book of the Forest*). The fact that Yudhiṣṭhira attaches desire and a goal to his conduct is made evident by Hudson's analysis of Yudhiṣṭhira's rejection of dharma. However, it also stands in sharp contradiction to his deontological stand which he had been making throughout the epic. This is an interesting point to note, because dharma seems to be in conflict regarding its value in its very embodiment Dharma. Although this is not the right place to take this discussion further, one can draw this discussion to a close by reiterating the many dualities and contradictions that characterize the concept of dharma.

Dharma's Opposite: Adharma

Sukthankar notes that the conflict between Dharma and Adharma is "the everlasting conflict between the powers of Light and Darkness, between Right and Wrong. Though evil is allowed to flourish, even to dominate, for a time, the epic wants to point out, its reign is short, because it carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction" (Sukthankar 78-79). It is not unusual to frequently come across such binaries when dealing with the category of dharma and adharma. Barbara Stoller Miller makes an interesting departure from translating adharma as 'evil,' or anything bad or undesirable because of its worthlessness. She refers to dharma as symbolizing 'order' and adharma as "chaos." She also points out that dharma and adharma coexist, that "dharma . . . cannot exist without its opposite, adharma" (Miller, "India's Great Epic" 128). Explaining adharma as chaos and an integral part of human existence, she writes:

> In the view of the ancient Indian poets, good and bad are always coeval and inextricably mixed, the universe has an ultimate order, but phenomenal existence appears turbulent. This notion of the world's complexity resonates with what modern mathematicians call "chaos," unpredictable behaviour that defies our conventional linear notions of order. They say that nature is in a state of flux and any change in even the smallest component of the system changes the dynamics of the whole system. (Miller, "India's Great Epic" 128-29)

In a parallel fashion, one might see the world of the *Mahābhārata* as "one of ordered randomness—truth and illusion turning into one another, twisting into intricate patterns

that unpredictably emanates from apparently inscrutable origins" (Miller, "India's Great Epic" 129). In fact, as has been pointed out earlier, nothing is absolute in the hierarchy of right and wrong values; they are variables, and in the Indian social set up, right and wrong, moral and immoral are decided "according to kinship, social rank, stage of life, and occasion" (Miller, "Imaginative Universe" 9). Sen suggests that "sometimes, what apparently seems to be a case of *adharma* can turn out to be in reality a case of *dharma*, and vice versa" (Sen 159). We have already seen in the foregoing discussion on *dharmayuddha* how the Pāṇḍavas, the embodiments of good, semi-divinity and morality resort to several wrongs and adharma to win the war. Surely, even the war was not so much about the seemingly incomprehensible notion of dharma, but of setting the chaos (adharma) caused by the kshatriyas right, as the prophecy at the time of Draupadi's birth announces. Also, the epic, Gandhi complains, does not foreground the philosophy of reconciliation: "Justice, revenge, war and even negotiation, all these are superbly delineated in the Mahabharata, but reconciliation is not, even though Vyasa sees its need" (Gandhi 27).[61]

Sen maintains that "moral beliefs, like other beliefs, are subject to revisions, and one cannot expect that the moral views that have been expressed in this epic will be admissible for all times to come" (Sen 198). In the final analysis then, in spite of the existence of so many 'conflicting' and 'shifting' concepts, dharma seems to be as elusive as it ever was. Dharma, though a value worth following, continually confounds individuals and moral agents about the right course to take, or the best solution to arrive at a morally complex problem, especially when two or more dharmas are in conflict. It is difficult to continue discussing this knotty matter without illustrations. The discussion will therefore be resumed in the following chapters, which deal with dharma not only in the epic, but also in select retellings of the epic, and see by way of comparison how the foregoing discussion can be enriched.

[61] Gandhi notes, "Krishna does not ask the Pandavas brothers or anyone else to cultivate forgiveness. True, he mentions it in the Gita as a divine quality, and we also saw Yudhishthira extolling it in fine language. But the epic supplies few instances of someone actually struggling with an impulse to forgive, or praying for the ability to forgive" (Gandhi 27).

CHAPTER 2

DHARMA AND GENDER-I

From the Sacrificial-Altar to the Altar of Marraige: Draupadi's Journey from Girlhood to the Threshold of Womanhood

> At my birth there was a prophesy: "This woman has taken birth to avenge your insult. She has appeared to fulfil a vow. By her, dharma will be preserved on this earth, kshatriyas will be destroyed. She will be the destroyer of the Kauravs. . . ."
>
> Should only woman be forced to be the medium for preserving dharma and annihilating evil throughout the ages? Is it woman who is the cause of creation and destruction? (Ray, *Yajnaseni* 8)

> The voices said, *Here is the son you asked for. He'll bring you the vengeance you desire, . . .*
>
> And then the voices came again. They said, *Behold, we give you this girl, a gift beyond what you asked for. Take good care of her, for she will change the course of history.* (Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions* 4-5)
>
> The story inspired me to make up fancy names for myself: Offspring of Vengeance, or the Unexpected One . . . But Dhai Ma [would call me] the Girl Who Wasn't Invited. (Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions* 1)

This is what, in the words of two novelists, Pratibha Ray and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the heroine of the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi, who was born not from a mother's womb, but a sacrificial altar, might have felt after her birth, listening to all the stories about the doomsday prophecy at the time of her birth, no mention of which is to be found in Vyasa's epic. These also serve to illuminate the plight of the female protagonist who is unwillingly made into a divine instrument of establishing dharma (though she may not have known what all dharma meant for a long time after her birth) as well as the predicament of being

an unwanted offspring for her father, who had only desired a son for seeking revenge. Needless to say, Vyasa's *Mahabharata*, the length of which is approximately one lakh verses, does not even spare a verse or two for delving into the mind of Draupadi, and describing her reactions to the reason behind her birth, the incidents of her girlhood, her being unwittingly pushed into perilous situations throughout the course of her life, especially at the time of her *svayamvara* and immediately after. Such silences in the epic, however, provide food for thought to and serve as crevices which can be filled up by the imaginative flight of the creative writers of retellings. Two such retellings that the present chapter subjects to study are Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* (1995) and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008).[62]

No other woman in Vyasa's epic plays such a pivotal role as Draupadi. The narrator of the battle books in the innermost frame of the epic, Saṃjaya, refers to her as "*rājaputrī satyavratā vīrapatnī saputrā manasvinī* 'a princess, virtuous, wife of warriors, mother of sons, esteemed'" (McGrath, *Strī* 116). McGrath notes that "*yaśasvinī* 'one who possesses glory'" is an epithet intermittently used for Draupadi in the epic; since *yaśas* is a term generally used for qualifying male heroes, "an object of great desire for kṣatriyas, akin to 'fame'. . . [and t]he acquisition of glory supplies the founding basis upon which their lives are predicted," the usage of the feminine derivative, one can conclude, bespeaks the significance attested to the character of Draupadi by Vyasa and his subsequent narrators and redactors (119).

McGrath's estimations of Draupadi might easily lead one to believe that she was an extraordinary woman with superhuman qualities. The truth, however, is that Draupadi, quite unlike the mythological goddesses/ideal heroines of ancient literature, was "quite human with human emotions and feelings like anger, love, hate, happiness and grief," "flawed and paradoxically human" (Bhawalkar, *Eminent Women* 141; Mukhoty 22). Writers, playwrights and artists have been fascinated by the character of Draupadi since times immemorial. Bhattacharya has pointed out how she became "the central figure in a number of bardic epics between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries" (*Panch-Kanya* 102). In recent times, there has been a resurgence of engagement with the character of Draupadi:

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[62] The novel was originally published in Oria in 1984, and subsequently translated in a number of languages in addition to English, including Hindi, Marathi, Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, and Hungerian. Moreover, it has also been adapted as a tele-serial on more than one occasion. (*Pratibha Ray: The Official Website*).

writers have increasingly made attempts to comprehend her complex character.[63] While retellings from the vantage point of other significant women of the *Mahabharata*, namely Kunti and Gandhari, as well as other female characters both from the main narrative as well as the sub-plots of the epic, like Karna's wife, Satyavati, and Shakuntala have been flooding the market in the last decade, there is no denying the fact that the re-narrativizations from the vantage point of Draupadi definitely rule the roost, have been highly appreciated, and immensely popular.[64]

While the novelists and playwrights largely seem to humanize Draupadi, empathizing with her "impossible longings," "small betrayals" and "need for justice above everything else," there is an allied, albeit prodigious development in the field of the folkloristic and ritualistic retellings and transmissions of the myth of Draupadi (Mukhoty 22). An anthropological or sociological investigation of the rendering of Draupadi in folklore and rituals brings to light the deification of Draupadi from a mythological heroine to a folk goddess or local deity. The cult of Draupadi has manifested itself in the form of temples dedicated to Draupadi, celebration of Draupadi festivals, and ritual (and dramatic) enactment of the life of Draupadi in local rituals and practices, from the state of Tamil

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[63] Mukhoty notes that the renewed interest in Draupadi has largely to do with the allure held by her "polyandrous marriage or her imagined love interest," which, for her, amounts to a reduction, a "grave injustice" towards her character (21-22; 22). Mukhoty is perhaps partially correct in making the estimation, but in my opinion, she probably misses the mark. Fictionalization gives creative writers, especially writers of retellings, felicitous liberty to foreground what they think has been underplayed in the original, and not necessarily what qualifies as the 'sensational.' Also, what might, on the surface, seem to be 'a reduction' in a retelling of an epic/classic can alternatively be read as an attempt to valorize the right and decry the wrong, aspects which might have been glossed over or downplayed by the original.

[64] Numerous retellings (English, Hindi and other Indian languages) from the perspectives of Kunti (Madhavi Mahadevan's *The Kaunteyas*), Gandhari (Manu Sharma's *Gandhari ki Atmakatha [The Autobiography of Gandhari]*), Karna's wife (Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife*), Satyavati (Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan's *The One Who Swam with the Fishes*), Shakuntala (by Namita Gokhale and Utkarsh Patel), and a feminist reading of the *Mahabharata* (Karthika Nair's *Until the Lions*) have been written in the last six years. However, literary retellings of the hardships Draupadi are aplenty, and date back to the 1980s in the recent past: Subramania Bharati's *Panchali's Pledge*, Yarlagadda Lakshmi Prasad's *Draupadi*, Pavan K. Verma's *Yudhisthir and Draupadi*, and M Veerappa's Moily's *Draupadi* are just a few examples (in English or translated into English), which far outnumber the narratives from the perspectives of other women characters of the epic. Of course, the question is not of number, but of the widespread curiosity in and popularity of Draupadi amongst writers and readers alike.

Nadu in the southern part of India, up to the states of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand in the north.[65]

Fascinating though this paradox may seem, one can alternately opine that Draupadi as a character retains much of her lustre only when she is read either as an epic heroine or a woman in flesh and blood in the novelistic/literary/dramatic retellings, mired in the entanglements of life and the intricacies of dharma, thereby leading us to interrogate and further our understanding of dharma, morality, ethics and the typical ambiguities of life. Coupled with this is an attempt to investigate how to read dharma as distinct from/in conjunction with *strīdharma* (dharma pertaining to womenfolk), whether there is a "monolithic *strīdharma* for all women in all situations," or do expectations for "modes of speech and behaviour depend on whether one is a wife or widow, daughter or mother, sister or friend, renunciate or queen" (Brodbeck and Black 16). The present chapter, instead of merely delineating the rules of conduct for women or prescriptive gender codes that the retellings under consideration seek to study, would concentrate on how, to borrow a phrase from Brodbeck and Black, gender "plays itself out in the characters" in the worldview of the authors vis-à-vis the world of the epic.

To begin with, Bandlamudi poses a very significant question regarding the social or political relevance of such an exercise, of using a mythic-epic story to understand social and gender relations in contemporary times. In her chapter on the epic-heroine, she begins by asking, "Is Draupadi a necessity for the present day in order to wage the current gender battle?"— a question which is as much relevant for her study as it is for the current study (141). She attempts to answer it in the same breath: "If that is the case, one needs to 'reclaim' her and 'reconstitute' her to suit the individual and cultural needs. In such a

[65] Alf Hiltebeitel, the renowned Draupadi scholar, has carried out extensive researches into the folkloristic and ritual transmission of Draupadi in his *The Cult of Draupadī: Mythologies: From Gingee to Kurukṣetra* (1988) and *Rethinking India's Oral and Classical Epics: Draupadī among Rajputs, Muslims and Dalits* (1999). Recently, most of his seminal research in this field has been brought together by Adluri and Bagchee in *When the Goddess was a Woman: Mahābhārata Ethnographies —Essays by Alf Hiltebeitel, Volume 2* (2011). Cultural identification of people with Draupadi ranges from the practice of polyandry in several tribes, to the celebration of *rajasparva* (a festival celebrating the onset of menstruation and puberty in young girls) in Orissa, to the ritual and dramatic performances in honour of Draupati Amman, and related cults of Arāvan and Kūttāṇṭavar in Tamil Nadu.

reconstitution," she is careful to point out, "she simultaneously becomes both a victim and a victor" (141).[66]

Why and how such an exercise can make far-reaching contributions in a feminist endeavour can also be gauged from what Spivak says about the way we view women (and by extension, female characters) in the first place. She recommends that "instead of viewing women as 'marginalized' subjects, . . . we could view woman as a 'shuttle between the center (inside) and the margin (outside),'" suggesting further that "a strict boundary between the center and the margin does not allow us to understand the complex strategies in confronting patriarchy and the 'traffic' between various positions." (qtd. in Bandlamudi 142). Thus, Bandlamudi applies this understanding of Spivak to her understanding of Draupadi:

> Remembering Draupadi [as also other female characters in the epic] would then mean remembering many social inequalities and injustices; for some [people] . . . her marginal position symbolizes 'age old' gender oppression, . . . she is a 'vehicle,' or in Spivak's words, a 'shuttle' between the past and the present. The shuttle does not simply link various 'time sections,' but also disrupts the structures of patriarchy in both the past and the present." (142-43)

Hence, the archetypes of apparently ideal femininity and self-effacing womanhood in the epics can serve as interesting points of departure, to interrogate their representation in epics and mythology, as well as their reinterpretations and rendering in contemporary literature today, especially in the retellings of the very same epics. This exercise can generate pertinent results only when one proceeds with the realization that "the world of

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[66] Bandlamudi conducted a series of interviews on her diasporic Indian interviewees after screening select episodes from B. R. Chopra's *Mahabharata*, only to notice that the exercise bore mixed results. She received disparate reactions on Draupadi from her viewers: some labelled Bandlamudi's concern with Draupadi "trivial," considering there were many "grand heroes" alongside Draupadi; some were indifferent, some even "infantilized" Draupadi (143). Some other viewers read Draupadi's devotion to her husbands as "exemplary," some others read her as symptomatic of a "lost virtue," while still others as "an anomaly to the ancient virtue" (144-45). Some hailed her sacrifice, while a few others denounced her unwillingness to sacrifice (144).

Metaphorically, however, since translations, adaptations and retellings, by their very nature, are always accompanied by the prospect of gain and loss, one can interpret Bandlamudi's statement as pointing to how a feminist retelling of Draupadi may simultaneously subject her to positive applause as well as scathing criticism. In any case, it turns out to be an exercise worth engaging in.

the *Mahābhārata* is a literary world" and gender roles in a literary product (the epic and its retellings in the present context), even as they intersect with dense concepts like dharma, *varṇa*, and familial and social relations in that world, are "not merely reflections of or instructions for the real world; they are always also artistic and metaphorical literary devices, and sometimes gendered symbolism in the text gives added meaning at a textual level without necessarily referring to a social reality" (Brodbeck and Black 14).

Hiltebeitel makes a considerable observation about the new, 'reconstituted' narratives of Draupadi (as also of other women in the two epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, as well as of Karna, most of them falling within the gamut of the 'othered' characters). He believes:

> Each heroine . . . is 'the subject of a fragmented countertext . . . that the poets leave readers to piece together from segments where she is part of the main story and patches where she is the subject of selected memories—not only others' memories but her own.' The two epics tell us enough about . . . their chief heroines to allow a scholar, novelist, a filmmaker to reconstruct their biographies. (*Dharma* 484)

The reconstruction of the heroine, like that of any 'othered' character,[67] is thus a two-fold exercise: going back to the original "fragmented countertext," and rummaging through one's memory as well as that of the subject of recreation, and curiously enough, this holds true both for the creative writer/scholar and the readers/audience.

It will be useful to refer back to Ray and Divakaruni's reasons for undertaking such a daunting task of retelling the story of Draupadi. In an interview given to Sue Dickman, Ray states the reason for writing *Yajnaseni*: "What made me write on Draupadi and Ahalya? You may ask why I didn't write on Sita. Because these characters are eclipsed and misunderstood. I have always had a weakness towards a misunderstood group, misunderstood people" (qtd. in Jagannathan 88).[68] Elsewhere, Ray writes:

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[67] Notably, also Karna (according to Hiltebeitel), and Duryodhana (in my opinion).

[68] Ahalya, a woman in the *Ramayana*, has been grossly misjudged and sacrificed on the altar of chastity and fidelity by Valmiki and his subsequent narrators. However, feminists and writers of subsequent versions and retellings of the *Ramayana* in the recent past have sought to empathize with Ahalya and project her in a renewed light.

> It has been my lot to speak for such persons in society who are grossly misunderstood and, . . . seem to be mute, inarticulate or voiceless . . . they challenged me to portray their true faces. I believe the truth of a certain event is independent from the imagination of others, who have not experienced it. Even the evaluation of historical narrative may not be the true evaluation. ("Sky is Not" 83)

Ray makes a well-founded estimation of the responsibility entrusted to a writer: "Tradition and revolt in literary phenomenon and tradition and rebellion in the social context are the task[s] of a writer. . . . Challenge in any form is the propelling force of my writing." (Ray, "Sky is Not" 84). In a similar vein, Divakaruni explains in the author's note to her novel, that although she grew up listening to the stories from the epic, she felt unsatisfied, and could discern that something was terribly wanting in those narratives, especially regarding the women characters: "It wasn't as though the epic didn't have powerful, complex women characters . . . But in some way, they remained shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions portrayed only when they affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers or sons" (Divakaruni xiv). She thought of remedying this lack herself:

> If I ever wrote a book, . . . I would place the women in the forefront of the action . . . [and] uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of the men's exploits. . . . I would have one of them tell it herself, with all her joys and doubts, her struggles and her triumphs, her heartbreaks, her achievements, the unique female way in which she sees her world and her place in it. And who could be better suited for this than Panchaali? (Divakaruni xiv-xv)[69]

So much for the creative urge behind the literary endeavours of the novelists. One can now proceed towards a detailed examination of the conscious deviations of Ray and Divakaruni from Draupadi's narrative in the epic, attempting to read them in the light of the debates about dharma in the epic, subject them to scrutiny, and seek to unravel the means by which

[69] All references to Divakaruni, unless otherwise indicated, are from her novel, *The Palace of Illusions.*

the novelists 'subtly' shift the moral paradigms of the epic not only through their narrative innovations, but by rupturing the silences and fissures in the epic.[70]

Ray's *Yajnaseni* is an epistolary novel written as one long letter towards the very end of her life to Krishna, her spiritual companion in the novel (Jagannathan 87). Affirming that she is writing a "blood-drenched autobiography," the dying Draupadi pleads to Krishna: "Only let me tell my story — standing at death's door" (Ray 3-5).[71] When she falls a victim at Himavant, she wishes to recollect all that transpired in her life. As Mohanty notes, she wishes to communicate to Kṛṣṇa:

> [All] her hopes and desires . . . distress and dismay, not as the great queen of the Pāṇḍavas who was instrumental in establishing *dhrama* in Bharat, but very much as a woman of flesh and blood who . . . carried an immense emptiness in herself occasioned by her tortuous and suffering life. Draupadī raises protest against male chauvinism, declares that all war is futile, and finally rejects heaven in favour of this human world, however temporary and limited it may be. (279)

Ray's heroine lays bare "each hair-raising incident" of her life in this long letter so that "the people of Kaliyuga will be able to decide whether the insults Draupadi suffered have ever been borne by any woman of anytime" (Ray 4). Divakaruni structures *The Place of Illusions* like a bildungsroman, where she traces the trajectory of the life of her heroine, Draupadi, right from her birth, to her childhood/adolescence, and her coming of age chiefly though her own efforts at self-education and assisted by other 'lowly' women characters like her Dhai Ma (who is a nurse, but also the mother-figure for Draupadi in the novel) and a sorceress who miraculously enters her life for a brief period to give her crucial lessons in life, love and survival strategies, lessons which are going to help her face the ravages of life as she grows up. Divakaruni's mythical tale unfurls through the eyes of Draupadi, who "resonates the aspirations and anguish; the agony and ecstasy of every

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[70] While this chapter will limit itself to a discussion of Draupadi's narrative from her birth up to her *svayamvara*, polyandrous marriage and its aftermath, the discussion on the episode of dicing, her years in exile, the repeated perpetration of violence on Draupadi not once but twice after the scene of dicing, the apocalyptic war, and her final journey along with her husbands will be discussed at length in the next chapter.

[71] Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Ray are from her novel, *Yajnaseni*.

female in a timeless world" (Multani 221). This, according to the author, is an interesting departure from the established convention of epic-writing and their retellings. Explaining the feminist politics behind her aesthetic choice, Divakaruni asserts:[72]

> [P]lacing a woman in the center of your work is radical enough, giving her the humanity, allowing her to tell her story. It makes her into a hero because she is interpreting the world for us through her eyes. . . . [My] Panchaali . . . is the teller of everything, and everything in the book is what she has seen, heard, and interpreted, sometimes on a literal level, but sometimes through dream visions, which is also a part of the mythic tradition. ("Power of Storytelling" 92)

Needless to say, the protagonist of Divakaruni's novel of epical scale is invested with extraordinary powers of dreams and visions, which enable her to witness those portions of the epic story which are traditionally not revealed to women (the war scenes, for instance), helping her render her narrative complete and effective. In her feminist revisionist representation of Draupadi, the author re-examines, to borrow an apt description from Vaishali, "the most ancient and universal of myths re-articulated by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*: women as sorceress, an enchantress, casting a spell over men and women as a formidable enigmatic 'other'" (212).[73]

Wombless Birth and Doomsday Prophecy

Draupadi has the distinction of being the only female character in the *Mahabharata*, who, like several male heroic figures, "has no mother: she arises from the fire 'in a great sacrifice'. . . In her case though—and in this Draupadī is unique among epic women—there exists no human father either" (McGrath, *Strī* 118).[74] Both the novelists loosely

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[72] K. S. Vaishali asserts that "feminist politics has erased the disciplinary boundary between the political and the aesthetic and brought the concept of mythopoeic imaginary into the discursive domain. It is nothing less than a means of redefining female subjectivity by re-negotiating the distribution of power and the legitimacy of existing centres of power in the socio-cultural imaginary" (213).

[73] Vaishali uses these lines in her study of the works of Namjoshi and Atwood, writers who have been credited with being feminist revisionist mythmakers.

[74] The other comparable example is that of Sita, from the *Ramayana*, who was born from the earth: it is believed that she was found in an earthen pot in the furrow of a field by her father.

retain the accounts of her birth and marriage as in the original epic, with minor narrative innovations.

Draupadi is an *ayonija* (one who has a wombless birth), being born from a *vedi* (earthern sacrificial alter).[75] Drupad got a sacrifice performed to bring about the death of an enemy, a Brahmin named Drona, who was his bosom friend in the *guukul*. However, this is an "abhichara sacrifice, a black magic rite which deals with death" (Mukhoty 10). Hiltebeitel draws attention to another important detail in this context:

> The *Mahābhārata* poets are, . . . rather indirect in telling us about the rite that produces Draupadī . . . king Drupada of Pañcāla, wants a son who will avenge him against his Brahmin enemy Droṇa, who took half his Kingdom . . . His intention is to kill Droṇa, so this would require a nefarious rite since Brahmanicide is the worst of sins. Drupada must thus go to considerable trouble to find priests willing to perform it. (*Dharma* 485)

Ray's Draupadi legitimises her father's reason in performing such a sacrifice. She believes that "a kshatriya warrior can never forget an insult. The insult could not be avenged without the killing of Drona" (Ray 6). In fact, her conviction will be corroborated by the tragic drama that will play itself out during the Mahabharata war, the all-engulfing war which was fought to avenge the insult of Draupadi and the Pandavas.

Equally intriguing is the prophecy that accompanies the unusual birth of Draupadi. In the epic, a disembodied voice says: "Best among all women, Kṛṣṇā will lead the warrior class to destruction. The fair-waisted one will in time accomplish the work of the gods (*surakāryam*) . . . In being born to 'accomplish the work of the gods,' the purpose behind human birth is not human but divine" (Hiltebeitel, *Dharma* 485-87). As already quoted at

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[75] Regarding Draupadī's birth, there is a widespread popular conception that she was born from fire, not the earth; but that is apparently not so in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* . . . the kind of *vedi* Draupadī is born from is an earthen altar with an inner curvature said to resemble a woman's waist (Hiltebeitel, *Dharma* 484-85). This establishes an immediate, intimate connection between Draupadi's birth and Sita's. However, the epic does mention that she has a fire-like radiance, but never that she was born from fire (Hiltebeitel, *Dharma* 485)

In Ray's novel, however, one finds Draupadi uttering a constant refrain when she is challenged or finds herself in crisis: every time, she indulges in an interior monologue reminding herself that she was born from the sacrificial altar, from its flames, can willing sacrifice herself to preserve dharma on earth. For instance, she says to herself: "She who has taken birth from the sacrificial flames can, if the need should arise, immolate herself for the sake of preserving dharma" (Ray 48).

the beginning of the chapter, one can discern that Ray twists the prophecy into one of the instrument of avenging insult, fulfilling a vow, as well as the establishment of dharma, while for Divakaruni, the birth of the girl is indeed momentous because she will lead to a major historical shift in future.[76] Ray empowers her heroine by bringing her at par with her brother, Dhrishtadyumna, who was the one desired by his father for avenging himself upon Drona, while Divakaruni refuses to mince words in illuminating that she was, for her father, an unwanted child all along (though the young Draupadi made all efforts to believe otherwise). Ray also makes her birth on earth more purposeful by projecting it in the light of establishment of dharma, and this also underscores her friendship with Krishna, who is the establisher and protector of dharma, as well as "dharma-promoter" in the novel (Ray 24). Thus, Yajnaseni and Krishna stand united in their common goal of restoration of dharma on earth.

It is interesting to note the novelists' choice of names to refer to their protagonist. In the epic, Draupadi is known by several names: Draupadī, Yājñasenī, Pāñcālī, and Kṛṣṇā. The etymology of these names is quite interesting: As Draupadī, her identity is 'one who is the daughter of king Drupad,' when referred to as Yājñasenī, she becomes 'the daughter of king Yajñasena (another name for Drupad),' Pāñcālī refers to 'the daughter of the king of Pāñcāla (Drupad's kingdom),' and Kṛṣṇā is 'the girl who is dark-complexioned.' The varied usages of these names at crucial junctures in the epic have already generated scholarly attention.[77] Hiltebeitel offers a nuanced explanation of these names:

> Draupadī's birth demonstrates the poets' determination to identify her with a nefarious darkness that arises from the agnostic dimensions of her birth and is resonant in three of her names: Kṛṣṇā, "Black"; Pāñcālī, . . . [and] Yājñasenī. Pāñcālī has powerful overtones: among them an evocation of the number five, *pañca*, which may predispose her to marrying five men; and an extended meaning of "puppet" discernible in the word *pañcālika*, a little doll. . . . The name Yajñasena—meaning "He whose army is the

[76] Ray's portrayal of Draupadi's birth is echoed in Mukhoty's estimation of Draupadi as an agent of destruction, who will bring an end to a yuga itself (also elaborated upon by Iravati Karve's celebrated *Yuganta*): she is "an instrument of the gods, designed to bring about the end of an effete age in which the moral order is crumbling and dharma is uncertain" (Mukhoty 10).

[77] See Biardeau; Hiltebeitel, *When the Goddess.*

> sacrifice" . . . As a patronymic, it gives her the name Yājñasenī, "She whose army is sacrificial." (Hiltebeitel, *Dharma* 488-90)

Elsewhere, Hiltebeitel also refers to Biardeu's explanation that Pāñcālī, 'meaning the puppet,' is a name used for referring to Draupadī with heightened frequency during the dicing scene, its usage interspersed with the generic word for a woman, *devī*, also meaning the goddess 'who plays' (qtd. in Hiltebeitel, *When the Goddess* 198). Furthermore, Yājñasenī may also refer to her birth from the *yājña* (the sacrifice), thereby bringing in associations of the fire and flames, an essential component of every sacrificial ritual, because of the association of fire with purification. But in addition to its role in purging, a fire also burns and rages. Yājñasenī may thus be taken to refer to both the sacrifice as well as the sacrificial fire. Draupadi, one may safely assume, is the only name which does not have deep-seated meanings, and may thus taken to be a patronymic used to refer to her family/descent.

Pratibha Ray titles her novel *Yajnaseni*, and uses this address for Draupadi more frequently than Draupadi or Krishnaa. The heroine, as already indicated in footnote no. 14, assiduously reminds herself that she is Yajnaseni, the daughter of Yajnasena, begotten from a sacrificial altar, raging as a fire, who will not allow any challenge or sacrifice deter her from the path of dharma. Draupadi is the name used by her marital family to refer to her, while she is referred to as Krishnaa only by Krishna, who is her friend and spiritual companion, and Arjuna, who won her in the *svayamvara*, and as Krishna explains, is his "alter-ego," another half or extension of Krishna (Ray 207). Of all the three names used in the novel, Yajnaseni loves to be addressed as Krishnaa only by Krishna and Arjuna.[78] Divakaruni chooses to use the name Panchaali, calling her version of the novel *Panchaali's Mahabharat*.[79] She also permits the address Krishnaa for Panchaali only by Krishna and later, Arjun. Divakaruni's Panchaali says, "Krishna . . . called me by a special

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[78] There is another point of connect between the three: they are all dark-complexioned, and are also committed to the establishment of dharma along with Krishna Dvaipayan Vyasa, the composer of the epic, a relation established by Hiltebeitel in "Two Kṛṣṇas, Three."

[79] Divakaruni might have determined her choice of Draupadi's name by the fact of her polyandrous marriage, as her heroine hardly ever plays the role of a 'doll' or a 'puppet,' and is endowed with unusual visionary powers. Towards the end of her novel, however, she does seem to indicate the formless, sexless existence of all women and men, who are ultimately destined to become one with the spiritual force of the universe.

name, the female form of his own: Krishnaa. It had two meanings: *the dark one*, or *the one whose attraction can't be resisted*." (Divakaruni 12, italics in original)

One ought to take note of the fact that of the four names, except 'Krishnaa,' all the other names reinforce her identity as a daughter or princess of her father's kingdom, simultaneously determining and circumscribing, one would presume, her dharma-role as a daughter and as a *kshatriyani*; in either case, these names will serve as reminders of her father's vengeance she is liable to accomplish (as part of the dharma of a daughter), as well as her life-long engagement with the establishment of dharma by effecting the killing of the *kshatriyas* (her dharma or duty enjoined upon her by the prophecy).[80] Needless to say, both of them inspire an eerie feeling, because the fulfilment of both these dharma-s will eventually lead to deaths, bloodshed and violence.[81]

Filling in the Gaps: Draupadi's Adolescence and Education

One of the missing links in the chain of the epic, especially pertaining to the life of Draupadi, is what follows her uncommon birth: the absence of any characterization of Draupadi preceding her marriage. The epic—one is reminded of the sheer size of the *Mahabharata* at this juncture—seems to maintain a dignified silence about what/how Draupadi learns and conducts herself as a young woman, incidents that dot her stay in her father's kingdom, her female friends and the activities she engages in, and other such features of the female protagonist. The epic narrative immediately proceeds towards a description of the preparations for her *svayamvara* and a nuanced account of the sending out of invitations and how beautifully the kingdom and the palace have been decked up for the prospective grooms. Any avid reader would be eager to know what transpires in between, also mildly regretting that Draupadi was born as a full-grown woman from the altar, and that one has been deprived of anecdotes of her childhood and adolescence. This much-needed information is supplanted by the novelists under discussion, who take upon themselves to travel on the "viewless wings of poesy" and bring to their readers the tales of Draupadi's 'formative' years.[82]

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[80] A woman belonging to the warrior class.

[81] This might not have seemed out of place if the person involved were a *kshatriya* man, whose dharma it was to fight battles and engage in warfare, mostly for the protection of a kingdom and the people.

[82] From John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale."

It is interesting to note that the heroines in both the novels grow up in the absence of the loving care and upbringing of a mother. Though Drupad has a wife, she is a marginal presence in the epic. However, there is a silver lining in this absence/marginal presence. Bhattacharya claims: "The *Kanya*, . . . remains alone to the last . . . The absence of a mother's nurturing, love, modelling and handing down of tradition leaves the *kanya* free to experiment, unbound by shackles of taught norms, to mould herself according to her inner light, to express and fulfil her femininity, achieving self-actualisation on her own terms" (*Panch-Kanya* 106).[83]

Both Ray and Divakaruni compensate for the absence of a motherly figure for Draupadi in their novels by presenting the early life of Draupadi as being dotted with significant female friends, companions and guides, who are integral, almost indispensible for the world of female sorority slowly maturing into one of fierce independence for their heroine. Pratibha Ray endows Yajnaseni with numerous female companions, her favourite being a friend named Nitambini. They frequently engage in friendly banter, with Nitambini bringing her the information about Krishna and divulging her secrets to Krishna.[84] The relationship that was eventually forged between Yajnaseni and Krishna is not amorous but spiritual.[85] However, it is on the insistence of her father, who constantly reminds her that Krishna—being the ideal, dharmic man— is the most befitting groom for her, that she starts weaving dreams of taking him up as a lover/husband. However, when the issue is brought up before Krishna himself, he suggests that Arjuna is the ideal choice of a groom for Yajnaseni. Draupadi is made to shift her affection and desire for Arjuna on Krishna's suggestion as well as to honour her father's wishes, Yajnaseni admits that she is "split into

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[83] A *kanya* is an eternal virgin. Draupadi is one such *kanya* in the epic, who has the boon of renewed virginity even after her sexual union with her husbands.

[84] Such scenes are reminiscent of Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, where two of Shakuntala's female companions play significant roles in her early life, teasing her when she first spots Dushyanta in her father's hermitage, being the only witnesses to her love and her longings, the only knowers of the curse that has befallen their friend, one of them handing her the signet ring of the king as a reminder of their love and marriage when she goes to meet him in his kingdom and lay her claim to being his lawfully wedded wife.

[85] This is in tune with the Bhakti-cult in India, which developed in India in the medieval times, in which Krishna is looked upon as a lover, a protector and a refuge. Vaishnavism (the worship of Vishnu and his many avatars, like Krishna and Lord Jagannath) has been a popular religious cult in Orissa, and Ray an ardent believer in Krishna, admiring him as a source of spiritual power rather than religious. It should therefore not come as a surprise that her heroine is also drawn towards Krishna.

two" (Ray 25). She tries to reason out her shift of loyalties thus: "First I was offered to Krishna. Krishna did not accept me and ordained that I was for his *sakha*, Arjun. I did not feel hesitation, for Arjuna had been born of a portion of Krishna himself. In Arjun's body it was Krishna who was the life and soul. . . . I had thought that in getting Arjun I would find Krishna" (Ray 33).

In *Yajnaseni*, Ray twists the plot of the original epic (in making Krishna the first choice as a son-in-law) to register her protest against women being treated as commodities, passed on from the hands of one man to another. What makes Yajnaseni's plight poignant is that she is expected to shift her emotions—love, desires and loyalty—from one man to another, be it from her father to her lover/groom/husband, or from setting her heart on one lover only to face the reality that she is betrothed to another man by destiny, her father, and her well-wishers.

Divakaruni does a commendable task of sketching out, imaginatively, the childhood/adolescence of Panchaali. Divakaruni's novel offers an eventful childhood and adolescence of Panchaali: her special bond with her brother Dhristadyumna (whom she lovingly calls Dhri); the role of Dhai Ma, her nurse who more than compensates for the absence of motherly love and guidance in her life; the inhibiting palace of her father with whom she does not share an amicable relationship; the identification with Krishna; the brief meeting of Shikhandi and Panchaali; the significance of the unwilling tutor of Dhri in indirectly imparting education to Panchaali; the miraculous appearance of Vyasa and his prophecy for Panchaali's later life; the mysterious arrival of a sorceress who teaches her important life skills— all of this culminating into the preparations for her *svayamvara*, wherein she is given some agency in the matter of her bridegroom choice (in comparison to the epic) in being introduced to all the prospective grooms through the medium of their portraits.

The innocent, young Panchaali, since the very beginning, is very fond of listening to vibrant stories: "I would go to my nurse and ask for a story. And though she knew many wondrous and edifying tales, the one I made her tell me over and over was the story of my birth. I think I liked it so much because it made me feel special" (Divakaruni 1). She grows up believing herself to be cut out for something momentous—she was, after all, "a girl who was supposed to change history" (Divakaruni 5). She frets over her name, Draupadi, and firmly believes that she needed a more heroic name. Panchaali lays bare her feelings

towards her father and his palace, “as I grew from a girl into a young woman, I didn’t trust him completely. I turned the resentment I couldn’t express toward my father onto his palace” (Divakaruni 6). She also dreams of her own palace, which would be different from the present palace, beautiful, colourful and full of flowers, flowing streams and fresh air. She believes she will finally feel at home only when she owns such a palace.

Divakaruni also follows into Ray’s footsteps in projecting a spiritual, other-worldly bond between Panchaali and Krishna. The reason which ignited their bond, however, is interpreted along racial lines by Divakaruni: “Perhaps the reason Krishna and I got along so well was that we were both severely dark-skinned. In a society that looked down its patrician nose on anything except milk-and- almond hues, this was considered most unfortunate, especially for a girl” (Divakaruni 8). With his positive influence on her, she blossoms from disliking her skin-colour to telling herself: “*I, too, am beautiful*” (Divakaruni 9). This is a powerful assertion on the part of a young woman who is beginning to question the very dictates of the society. She also reports that a visiting bard then went on to compose songs about her unique beauty. The result of her reclamation and the bard’s song was that “overnight, I who had been shunned for my strangeness became a celebrated beauty” (Divakaruni 10).

Divakaruni invests significant energy in reimagining the relationship between the two siblings born from the sacrificial altar. Panchaali feels especially indebted to Dhri for holding her hand when she stumbled out of the altar at the time of her birth. She feels that the reason behind their births, the prophecies about them, and their father’s desired vengeance, and their shared destinies of causing a great war and deaths of multitudes tie them up together. “It was my turn to play storyteller,” speaks Panchaali (Divakaruni 13). The siblings try to piece together the story of their father’s past, of Drupad and Drona, and what might have transpired between them often enough, because, as they believe, ‘it was the reason for their existence’ (Divakaruni 15). As they are growing up, Panchaali regrets the effect of the exercise on her brother, whose weakness was his undeterred belief in his destiny and his resignation to fulfilling the same: “I thought, I shouldn’t have chosen this

story. Every time I spoke it, it embedded itself deeper into my brother's flesh, for a story gains power with retelling" (Divakaruni 20).[86]

Divakaruni also takes up the important aspect of Panchaali's education in her novel. Unlike the epic, it is not merely reported that she is a learned woman, well-versed in all the scriptures and knows her dharma well. Divakaruni takes her readers through the logistics of how difficult it was for a young woman to gain access to education. Panchaali is fiercely particular about the fact that she is going to change history when she grows up, for which, she thinks, she needs to know all that her brother is being taught, from lessons in dharma to the techniques of warfare. She believes she has to be extraordinary and proficient with the ways of the world to be able to effect a change historically. Therefore, she becomes the secondary audience to the lessons taught by Dhri's tutor from behind a curtain.

Perhaps Divakaruni illustrates creatively through the medium of her novel what Brian Black notes about the education of strong female characters like Draupadī and Gāndhārī in the epic. Black suggests:

> Female listeners can learn important teachings through eavesdropping . . . she is 'listening eagerly' . . . and remembering the brahmin's teaching for a future occasion . . . to give her words authority and to explain how she knows what she knows. One of the main issues at stake for Draupadī is establishing authority to speak [later in her life] by making claims to be part of a chain of knowledge. Draupadī does not have a proper *paramparā*; she is not part of a traditional educational lineage passed from teacher to student. (Black 71)[87]

The responses of Panchaali's father, Dhai Ma and her brother to her learning also reveal how challenging it was for a woman to desire to be educated in those times. It was only when Krishna insisted that the prophecy at her birth required her to get an education beyond what women were usually given, and that it was her father's duty to provide the same that King Drupad agreed, with reluctance, to the arrangement mentioned above. Even

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[86] As has already been mentioned in the introduction, it is equally true of the retellings of epics: the stories of the epics gain power with retellings, thereby hold sway over their readers/audience. Needless to mention, it is a self-reflexive statement by Divakaruni.

[87] Brian uses this explanation in the context of Draupadī laying claim (to Yudhiṣṭhira in a prolonged debate during their exile) to have listened to a brahmin's lessons while sitting in her father's lap as a child.

Dhai Ma complained that the lessons were making her "too hardheaded and argumentative, too manlike in [her] speech" (Divakaruni 23). Her brother also sometimes wondered if she was "learning the wrong things, ideas that would only confuse" her as she would eventually proceed into "a woman's life with its prescribed, restrictive laws" (Divakaruni 23). But Panchaali was not ready to give up, as she "hungered to know about the amazing, mysterious world" that extended beyond her father's palace and her imagination (Divakaruni 23).

Panchaali appears to be an avid learner, sometimes prompting answers to the queries put forward by the tutor to her brother when the need arose, which seems to upset the tutor. On one such occasion, he instructs Dhri to request his sister to refrain from prompting him. Angrily, he questions Dhri, "Will she be sitting behind you in your chariot in battle when you need to remember these important precepts? Perhaps it is best if she no longer joins us during your studies" (Divakaruni 23). She is bailed out of this situation by Dhri who asks the tutor to pardon her. Panchaali asks for forgiveness too, but "resent[s] the tutor's declaration that women were the root of all the world's troubles" (Divakaruni 24). The tutor's comment does not sound discordant when he admits that he does not really have any special teachings about dharma and conduct to impart to a woman, when asked by Dhri to teach his sister the rules of conduct for kshatriya women. However, he imparts a single lesson before leaving:

> Prince, I have recalled one rule of conduct which you may tell your sister: A kshatriya woman's highest purpose in life is to support the warriors in her life: her father, brother, husband, and sons. If they should be called to war, she must be happy that they have the opportunity to fulfill a heroic destiny. Instead of praying for their safe return, she must pray that they die with glory on the battlefield. (Divakaruni 25-26)

Panchaali is not ready to accept the lesson of subservience and submissiveness lying down. This definition of a kshatriya woman's dharma (here, conduct) is unacceptable to her. She bursts out as soon as the tutor leaves, and one cannot ignore the irony implied in her outburst:

> And who decided that a woman's highest purpose was to support men? . . . A man, I would wager! Myself, I plan on doing other things with my life. . . . I thought of the husband and sons that everyone assumed I would have

> someday. . . . I promised myself I'd never pray for . . . [my sons'] deaths. I'd teach them, instead, to be survivors. And why was a battle necessary at all? Surely there were other ways to glory, even for men? I'd teach them to search for those. (Divakaruni 26)

Little does she know at this juncture that she is going to exhort her husbands and her sons to a war in the future, and will get lessons in peace and "other ways to glory" only after immense loss and a devastating carnage.

Divakaruni is also critical of the meaning of leisure for young princes. She denounces the indulgence of her brother, during the evening. She reports, in a complaining tone: "he played dice, . . . or attended quail fights, or went boating. He visited the homes of courtesans, where he partook of drink, music, dance, and other pleasures" (Divakaruni 27). However, on some evenings, he was taught statecraft, the differences between righteous and unrighteous war, etc. by some of the king's ministers. Panchaali tried her best to elicit these lessons "which conferred power" out of him when he returned from the court.

Panchaali is equally sarcastic about her father's idea of her education. After all, as Panchaali unequivocally announces that her father ensured that "an unending stream of women flowed through my apartments each day, attempting to instruct me in the sixty-four arts that noble ladies must know. I was given lessons in singing, dancing, and playing music. . . . I was taught to draw, paint, sew, and decorate the ground" (Divakaruni 29). The young Panchaali knows her strengths well, and wants to move towards her future with a one track mind. She admits, "I was better at composing and solving riddles, responding to witty remarks, and writing poetry, . . . I had a destiny to fulfill that was no less momentous than Dhri's. Why was no one concerned about preparing me for it?" (Divakaruni 29).

However, Panchaali has other educators too. Dhai Ma teaches her how to behave with her husband's co-wives, lessons that Panchaali considers unnecessary because of her surety that her husband will be loyal to her and not take up a co-wife, and she will ensure this even before her marriage. Laughing, Dhai Ma says, "Kings always take other wives. And men always break the promises they make before marriage. Besides, . . . you won't even get a chance to talk to your husband before he beds you" (Divakaruni 30). Of course, there is Krishna who imparts teachings through convoluted one-liners and witticisms, lessons Panchaali takes time to decode, but decodes them nevertheless. He is "her mentor, who infuses her with confidence; quenches her thirst for knowledge which he brings from

around the world" (Multani 222). Shikhandi also appears briefly to impart some vital lessons.[88] The last 'pragmatic' instructor she has before her *svayamvara* is the sorceress, who enters her life briefly, as if only to brace her with lessons and techniques which will help her tide through her life.[89]

As Draupadi grows up, she notices people and the world around her change. She notices a change in Dhri's attitude, who is getting deeply immersed in his destiny of vengeance. Draupadi wonders if people's (including her father's) keeping their distance from her has anything to do with their "wariness of someone who wasn't born like a normal girl and who, if the prophecy was correct, wouldn't live a normal woman's life" (Divakaruni 32). Her world is splitting into two: one of orthodox people, and the other "of those rare persons who were themselves harbingers of change and death . . . Dhri and Krishna—and Dhai Ma" (Divakaruni 32). So while Ray's Yajnaseni also felt split up between Krishna and Arjuna, Divakaruni's Panchaali also feels her world is divided into two, though for different reasons.

Another interesting episode that Divakaruni innovates is the meeting of Panchaali and sage Vyasa. Out of curiosity for her future, she goes to meet the sage who was briefly staying in Panchal and had become renowned for predicting the future of people when approached. Dressed like an ordinary girl, she goes to meet him along with Dhai Ma. Answering the impatient Panchaali, he proclaims:

> *You will marry the five greatest heroes of your time. You will be queen of queens, envied even by goddesses. You will be a servant maid. You will be mistress of the most magical of palaces and then lose it.*
>
> *You will be remembered for causing the greatest war of your time.*
>
> *You will bring about the deaths of evil kings—and your children's, and your brother's. A million women will become widows because of you. Yes, indeed, you will leave a mark on history.*
>
> *You will be loved, though you will not always recognize who loves you. Despite your five husbands, you will die alone, abandoned at the end—and yet not so.* (Divakaruni 39)

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[88] This topic will be elaborated upon later.

[89] A discussion on the sorceress's influence will follow later in the same chapter.

Panchaali does not believe this is going to be true. She retorts that she will renounce the world and enter a hermitage, but the sage warns, "your own nature is going to speed its process . . . Your pride. Your temper. Your vengefulness" (Divakaruni 40, italics in original). She then requests him to use the power gained from his austerities to change her destiny. The sage says he will not meddle with the great design, but adds:

> I'll give you some advice. Three dangerous moments will come to you. The first will be just before your wedding: at that time, hold back your question. The second will be when your husbands are at the height of their power: at that time, hold back your laughter. The third will be when you're shamed as you'd never imagined possible: at that time, hold back your curse. Maybe it will mitigate the catastrophes to come. (Divakaruni 40)

Clearly, the sage is hinting at the three fateful episodes which are going to prove to be turning points in the life of Panchaali: the debate and the fight at her *svayamvara*, the insult of Duryodhan in her palace at Indraprastha, and the episode of dicing and her disrobing in the assembly hall in Hastinapur. She later discovers that the sage was indeed Krishna Dvaipayana Vyasa, and she had witnessed him dictating the story of her life to another sage with "an elephant's head" (Divakaruni 41). When she comes out of the spell and tells Dhai Ma that she would have five husbands, she replies surprisingly, "You know what our shastras call women who've been with more than one man, don't you? Though no one seems to have a problem when men sleep with a different wife each day of the week!" (Divakaruni 42)

The narrative innovation is indeed remarkable, as it prepares Panchaali for the difficult life she is going to lead, especially for her polyandrous marriage. This part of the prophecy is what she seems to remember distinctly, and also finds herself enthused with a new-found confidence. After the prophecy, she insists that "everyone address me by it. *Princess Panchaali*. A name strong like the land, a name that knew how to endure" (Divakaruni 42). This is a novel interpretation of her name by Divakaruni, and also a deliberate spatial association she reinforces, so that it ties up with the issues of war over land and inheritance, as well as Panchaali's never dying urge for her own palace which she hopes to be starkly different from her father's. The moment one refers back to the title of the novel, the present context also serves as a reminder of the 'illusory' nature of spaces and geographies, as also that the tussle over control, power and the act of naming—all of this

really turns out to be *maya* (illusion), Krishna's *maya* in the novel.[90] At a later point in the novel, Krishna says, "As for being pawns . . . aren't we all pawns in the hands of Time, the greatest player of them all?" (Divakaruni 58).

Panchaali is plagued by another profound worry: "Other nights I considered the mystery of the book the sage showed me, the story of my life. How could such a book be written before I'd lived the incidents it described? Did this mean that I had no control over what was to happen?" (Divakaruni 43). Then she would attempt an answer to the question herself: "Surely it wasn't so. Otherwise, why did he take the trouble to warn me?" (Divakaruni 43) The foregoing discussion appears in a new light once the dimension of predestination and fate is added to the world of illusions. If everything is preordained, are we not merely *panchalikas* (puppets or dolls) in the hands of the spiritual power, and if everything is illusory, does it not decimate the idea of human agency or even predetermination in the first place?[91]

The arrival of Shikhandi and her relationship to Panchaali forms a major episode in the novel. Her arrival is announced to Panchaali with a looming concern that she was not a woman anymore, and had performed an austere penance to exchange her sex with a *gandharva* (a demi-god). Panchaali, however, is eager to meet her, and hopes to find her long-standing desire of a close friend in her. He meets her, and pours his heart out to her: "I had to be a man, because only a man can do what I must accomplish—kill the greatest warrior of our time" (Divakaruni 47). He also narrates the story of his past life as Amba, the princess of Kashi, who was forcefully abducted by Bheeshma from her *svayamvara* hall, shunned by Shalva and later rejected by Bheeshma again. Pouring his heart out to Panchaali, he raises crucial questions on the dharma (conduct) of the two men. She was rejected by Shalva because Bheeshma had abducted her. She wonders, "If someone grasps my hand against my will, how does that make me his? I said, I'm the one who decides to whom I belong" (Divakaruni 48). Turned down by Shalva, she goes back to Bheeshma and

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[90] Interestingly, Krishna will gift a chambermaid named 'Maya' to Panchaali as a wedding gift. A discussion on the same will follow later.

[91] One cannot lose out on the term used for puppets, which is feminine, as also its uncanny resemblance with the name that the heroine has just taken up as a measure of power. One wonders if Divakaruni is trying to build up on the idea that both knowledge and power are ultimately illusory concepts.

requests him to marry her to save her honour.[92] Bheeshma turns down her offer, saying, "Forgive me. In youth I promised my father I would never marry. I cannot go back on my word" (Divakaruni 48). Amba is utterly shocked, "What is a dead vow, compared to a living woman's ruin?" (Divakaruni 48). She tries to get other kings to help her avenge herself upon Bheeshma but no one wants to fight the mighty warrior. She immolates herself, is reborn as Drupad's daughter, undergoes a sex-change after a harsh penance, and finally decides to avenge herself upon Bheeshma without any assistance from any other man. Her advice to Paanchali pre-empts much of the action in the epic: "Remember that, little sister: wait for a man to avenge your honor, and you'll wait forever" (Divakaruni 49).

Panchaali's learning does not only involve conventional teaching of the scripture on dharma and other modes of feminine conduct. A special feature that Divakaruni introduces in the novel comprises the warnings and special training that is geared towards equipping Panchaali for the many adversities she is going to face. Through this technique, Divakaruni introduces elements of practicality and realism into a novel otherwise full of visions, dreams and secretive forces and enigmatic people. For example, Krishna reveals to her the secret of her past birth: she asking for a wish from Shiva five times, though not mentioning what the wish was. So Draupadi in Divakaruni's novel is gradually being prepared for her destiny, not only related to the prophecy, but also regarding her marriage to five men, first by Vyasa and then by Krishna. While some of these prophesies are clearly spelt out, some, like Krishna's, have to be analysed and pieced together to form a complete picture.

Dhri teaches Paanchali also how to play dice, the "most unladylike pastime" (Divakaruni 51). While leaving again for another penance, Shikhandi teaches both Panchaali and Dhri. He tells Dhri, while Panchaali overhears: "the power of a man is like a bull's charge, while the power of a woman moves aslant, like a serpent seeking its prey. Know the particular properties of your power. Unless you use it correctly, it won't get you what you want" (Divakaruni 52). Kate Millet has rightly argued that "gender distinctions not only pertain to different kinds of behaviour for men and women, but also could be seen as cultural differences: 'male and female are really two cultures and their life experiences are utterly different'" (qtd. in Brodbeck and Black 11). Kate Millet's postulation are amply evidenced in the foregoing examples.

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[92] An unattached woman had to lead a miserable life during the times. Rejected by men twice, Amba will not be taken back even by her father.

Panchaali is perplexed: “Wasn’t power singular and simple? In the world that I knew, men just happened to have more of it. (I hoped to change this.)” (Divakaruni 52). Before she can solve the confusion, she is left wondering even more by the parting words of Shikhandi: “You’ll bring about the Great War where I’ll meet Bheeshma and kill him. . . . But I should have begged your pardon instead for all the humiliation you’ll suffer before the war, and all the sorrow afterward. And much of this you’ll endure, sister, because your destiny is linked with mine” (Divakaruni 52). The fall out of Shikhandi’s declaration is that all her lessons with Dhri’s tutor are terminated for her, and the focus is re-directed towards cultivating “feminine interests” in Panchaali (Divakaruni 53).

As soon as the news of Panchaali’s proposed *svayamvara* is announced to her, she is excited, only to realize a little later that it was a trap carefully laid out by her father. She tells Dhri: “Why won’t you ever admit the truth? . . . We’re nothing but pawns for King Drupad to sacrifice when it’s most to his advantage. At least I’m just going to be married off. You—he’s willing to push you to your death just so he can have his revenge” (Divakaruni 58).

As the preparations for the big day are on, another unforgettable woman, a sorceress, enters Drupad’s palace. No one, except Dhai Ma, raises objections to her entry or spares a thought over her uninformed exit from the palace. She is a narrative innovation specifically meant for preparing Panchaali for her future, especially her years in exile and a year in disguise. The skills, most of which are unbecoming of a queen, will come in handy for her. Dhai Ma detests Panchaali learning the skill of hair-dressing: “Ridiculous! . . . Whoever heard of a queen braiding someone’s hair—or even her own, for that matter?” (Divakaruni 61).

Additionally, the sorceress ‘made her lie on the floor at night, made her wear the cheapest, most abrasive cotton saris, made her eat what the lowest of her servants ate, taught her to live on fruits, then water, and then to fast for days at a time. She even taught her a yogic breath that filled her with energy so that she needed no other sustenance’ (Divakaruni 61). She taught her ‘to cook with the best of ingredients and the most meagre; potions to cure illness and potions to cause them; *to be unafraid of speaking out*, and to be brave enough for silence; when to lie and when to speak the truth; to discover a man’s hidden tragedies by reading the tremor in his voice; to close herself off from the sorrow of others so that she could survive’ (Divakaruni 62). Needless to say, both Panchaali and the

readers take delight in the formal teaching of life-skills and practical knowledge that she perhaps gets for the first time, and which can be put to use.

Toward the end, the sorceress taught her the art of seduction, the first role that a wife ought to play: “In bed you must be different each day, sensitive to your lord’s moods. Sometimes a lioness, sometimes a trembling dove, sometimes a doe, matching its partner’s fleetness” (Divakaruni 62). She did not only impart these lessons, but also gave Panchaali “herbs, some for insatiability, . . . endurance, [and] . . . for the days . . . [she would] want to keep a man away” (Divakaruni 62). While one can see the shadow of Vatsyayana taking over the sorceress at this juncture (much to our delight), but what is really noteworthy is the set of lessons that our heroine partakes, which a scripture would have never taught to a woman otherwise. In fact, one begins to wonder if there were any scriptures especially meant for women, in terms of educating them about life, world and the universe, rather than those which were merely prescriptive or prohibitive!

Panchaali is not a passive learner. She demands to be taught how to love her husband, and how to ensure that he reciprocates, a question to which the sorceress laughingly replies , “I can’t teach you that. . . . I advise you to forget about love, princess. Pleasure is simpler, and duty more important. Learn to be satisfied with them” (Divakaruni 63). Nonetheless, Panchaali disagrees, convinced that she deserved more. She also receives two final gifts from the sorceress: a story and a parchment. The story was the tale of Kunti, mother of Arjun. The parchment was a map of Bharat’s many kingdoms, and with them, her last two lessons. She warns her about the seemingly innocuous Kunti: “Understand! Understand what drove a woman like her. What allowed her to survive when she was surrounded by enemies. Understand what makes a queen—and beware!” (Divakaruni 64). About the map, she says, “I had this map made just before I came. . . . But it’s already outdated. . . . The kings are always fighting. . . . All they want is more land, more power. They tax the common people to starvation and force them to fight in their armies” (Divakaruni 65). One finds a powerful indictment of war in these parting words of the sorceress. Panchaali reassures herself regarding the role she hopes to play in avoiding wars, knowing very well that the prophecy of Vyasa about she being the cause of a great war, “I visualized myself as a great queen, dispensing wisdom and love. Panchaali the Peacemaker, people would call me (Divakaruni 66). Of course this sentence reeks of great irony, as Panchaali is only speaking with “the confidence of the untested” (Divakaruni 66).

The Dharma of 'Choices,' Dismissals and Disguises: Draupadi's *Svayamvara*

Even though both Ray and Divakaruni describe the preparations for Draupadi's *svayamvara* at some length, they never relegate their heroine to the background; both of them offer a glimpse into their heroine's psychological distress at the prospect of a contest for bridegroom-choice (which turns out to be no choice at all).

The days leading up to her *svayamvara* generate considerable anxiety in Ray's Yajnaseni. Hearing rumours of the death of the Pandava brothers, Ray's Yajnaseni offers her prayer to goddess Parvati, claiming herself to be a "pre-pledged woman," betrothed to a man who might not even be alive: "If anyone other than Arjun was successful in passing the test, Father would accept him as son-in-law, but how can I take him as husband? If there is truly something called dharma, then preserve my dharma as a chaste wife" (Ray 40, 36). In fact, she critiques the very practice of a *svayamvara*. While entering the hall with her brother, resenting the situation she is being thrust into, she thinks to herself: "I would have to appear in front of everyone . . . I would be on display before all. . . . I was profoundly ashamed to be the target of so many lustful eyes. I wanted to hide my face in the veil . . . Strangely enough, scholars and priests were incapable of sensing this" (Ray 39).

Divakaruni, on the other hand, endows her Panchaali, arguably so, with some agency by introducing an innovative episode in her novel on the eve of the *svayamvara*. Courtesy her brother Dhri, she sees the portraits of her suitors, one of whom will eventually become her husband. This is how a woman's narrative imagines a woman's right to her life-partner like – she should know, if nothing else, at least the faces of her suitors! The exercise transforms into one of elimination, of the kings and princes who are not potent enough to pass the contest set forth by her father. However, it is also during this exercise that Panchaali sees the portrait of Karna, and is instinctually drawn to him.[93] Not only Dhri, but even Dhai Ma and Krishna get a whiff of it, and all of them take their turns to warn her of her emotions, reminding her that there can be no better partner for her than Arjun. Krishna miraculously appears when she is viewing the portraits and cuts short the artist's eulogising of Karna, even his address of him as the King of Ang, declaring him to be no king at all. Krishna announces, "On that crucial day, I'll be there— to keep you from

[93] The subject of Draupadi-Karna relationship in the retellings deserves a full-length discussion, but is beyond the purview of this research at the moment.

choosing wrongly" (Divakaruni 71). She wonders why Krishna said so, as the contest was already predestined in favour of Arjun. Even though she is shown the portraits of the Pandavas on the instructions of Krishna, her mind keeps wandering back to thoughts about Karna.

Later, Dhai Ma and Panchaali discuss about "Gandhari's sacrifice" of blindfolding herself when she got the news of her prospective husband being blind. Panchaali is suddenly filled with thoughts about women's dharma, wifely duties and the institution of marriage: "I wondered if there were days when she [Gandhari] regretted her decision to opt for wifely virtue instead of the power she could have had as the blind king's guide and adviser [had she chosen not to blindfold herself]" (Divakaruni 76). Thinking of the unhappy marriages of Gandhari and Kunti, she thought to herself, "Perhaps strong women tended to have unhappy marriages" (Divakaruni 76). The idea troubled her because she was well aware of her destiny of changing the course of history.

Even before her *svayamvara*, Panchaali is immersed in deep thoughts about the dharma of a wife and the suffering that a marriage entails for a woman.[94] No matter how unappealing the prospect of a *svayamvara*, marriage or a wedded life for a woman might be, or how demanding the laws of conduct and expectations from a wife may be, Draupadi has to proceed towards her destiny. In *Yajnaseni*, Dhrishtadyumna introduces Yajnaseni to the assembled suitors by saying that "the central tenet of her existence is the establishment of truth on earth and the protection of dharma," in addition to giving elaborate descriptions of her beauty, intellect and learning (Ray 40). As noted earlier, Yajnaseni is not afraid of paying the price for the establishment of truth and dharma, nor is Panchaali going to leave any stone unturned in changing the course of history. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Panchaali notes that she knew that some bards would immortalize the swayamvar, and some of them would claim that the seeds of the war were sown during it.

In both the novels, one can notice a remarkably common twist in the plot of the original epic: it is not Draupadi, but her brother Dhrishtadyumna who refuses to allow Karna a chance to pierce the target and compete for winning her because of his lowly birth. In Divakaruni's novel, Karna retorts by drawing his sword, and Panchaali "stepped between her brother and Karna," asked of Karna his father's name, thus humiliating him and

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[94] A detailed discussion on the concepts of *stri-dharma* and a woman's *svadharma*, and the terms *pativrata* and *sahadharmini* used for a woman will be taken up towards the end of this chapter.

refusing to marry him if he could not answer her question. She does this in order to save the life of her brother, who could not have withstood the attack of Karna otherwise. Divakaruni is quick to clarify: "Later, some would commend me for being brave enough . . . Others would declare me arrogant. Caste-obsessed. . . . Still others would admire me for being true to dharma, whatever that means. But I did it only because I couldn't bear to see my brother die" (Divakaruni 96). Divakaruni, one has to admit, gives a credible reason for the objection of Panchaali to marrying Karna in this scene.

However, Divakaruni also weaves into her narrative both the plight of Karna at this juncture, and how this would determine the future of Panchaali (in tune with the prophecy of Vyasa). She writes: "In the face of that question, Karna was silenced. Defeated, head bowed in shame, he left the marriage hall. But he never forgot the humiliation of that moment in full sight of all the kings of Bharat. And when the time came for him to repay the haughty princess of Panchaal, he did so a hundredfold" (Divakaruni 95). Although Divakaruni can be credited with a refreshing take on Panchaali-Karna relationship, she sticks to the general belief that the behaviour of Karna towards Panchaali in the assembly hall in Hastinapur has a direct bearing on what transpired in Panchala on the occasion of her *svayamvara.*

A number of scholars have interpreted this episode in the epic as indicative of the characters of Draupadi and Karna. Defending Draupadi, and rejecting claims of her "perceived arrogance . . . largely based on the one episode of her dismissive rejection of Karna in the *svayamvara* scene," Basu asks: "Was it not a natural enough reaction expected from an exceptionally endowed princess in wishing to choose a social equal as her life partner?" (Basu 97). However, Badrinath does find her guilty of changing the rules of the game (here, *svayamvara*): "Draupadi . . . had changed the rules of the game, and had reneged on the promise announced publicly; that *whoever* would pierce the target first would gain her. . . . From what her father and her brother had announced, she had no *choice*; from the very start it was no *svayam-vara* at all" (*Question of Truth* 176, italics in original). The entire debate ceases to hold ground, however, in the light of the fact that according to the critical edition of the epic, "Karna didn't even attempt to win Draupadi in the swayamvara" (Karve 94). In all likelihood, the novelists retain the popular scene in their novels for two reasons: to heighten the dramatic effect of the *svayamvara*, and to use this incident as the bedrock of their heroine's empathy for Karna and guilt at having humiliated him, or having been the cause of the same.

Just when the heroine begins to feel dejected at the thought of not witnessing any more contestants and hence not getting married at all, Arjuna, in the guise of a Brahmin youth, seeks the permission of the assembly and successfully pierces the target. Yajnaseni is not sure if she should wed "another" man.[95] When she whispers her anxiety to her brother, he replies: "Not for Arjun but for the preservation of dharma has your birth taken place. The father's dharma is the daughter's dharma. King Drupad has desired to make Aryavart's finest warrior his son-in-law. . . . Without delay, honour your father's vow and discharge the duty of a daughter" (Ray 46). Reluctantly, she tells herself, "To honour Father's vow if my dharma as a woman was harmed, let that be so. . . . Even if my dharma was destroyed, my father's dharma must be preserved" (Ray 46). One can notice how her dharma is being chafed against the patriarchal order, and more particularly, the dharma of her father. Suffice it to say that amidst all the high talk of dharma, there is no consideration for a woman's feelings and desires, or her priorities and preferences.

There occurs a massive outrage in the hall against a Brahmin winning a kshatriya lady amidst all the other kshatriya suitors. When the kings are engaged in a fight, Divakaruni's Panchaali quickly slips a garland around the neck of the man who won the contest. It is on the intervention of Krishna that the mayhem is brought to a stop, by his announcement that Draupadi has been 'won according to *dharma*.' Hiltebeitel makes a very interesting observation about the same. He writes: "He is, of course, correct, and his authority, in this instance, goes unchallenged . . . however, Krishna sanctions only the first stage in Draupadī's marriage; it only concerns Draupadī and Arjuna. The crucial test of dharma is the 'adharmic' situation instigated by Śiva: the polyandric marriage" (Hiltebeitel, *Krishna* 83).[96]

The wife of the Brahmin youth quickly dons the role of an ideal wife, and adapting herself to her husband's dharma, decides to follow him on foot to his forest abode, an unknown destiny. Yajnaseni, recounting those times, writes in her letter to Krishna, "I did not know then that my role would keep changing every moment; that I would have to carry out terrible duties amid an everchanging scenario" (Ray 49). The disguised Arjun comes across as a "cold and indifferent husband" in Divakaruni's novel. Panchaali follows him

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[95] Since Arjuna is disguised, and Yajnaseni has already accepted him as the husband even before the *svayamvara.*

[96] The topic of Draupadi's polyandrous marriage will be taken up at length immediately in the next section.

bare-footed, her feet bleeding, determined and dedicated to be a good wife, reconciling to her fate.

Amidst the tasking journey through the forest, trying hard to reassure herself, Draupadi also succeeds in making a few memories which are going to sustain her through her arduous life. In both the novels, while travelling to the hermitage through the forest, Draupadi and Arjun spend a few moments of togetherness, getting to know each other, falling in love, and make some promises and dreams of their future together. This, however, is going to be the only memorable time they will ever spend together. Arjun, still in his disguise, wonders at the wisdom of Yajnaseni, "I believed that for women to know the scriptures meant learning them by rote like parrots. But now it appears that you have not memorised the scriptures but internalised them. You are not only knowledgeable but full of wisdom too" (Ray 52). Multani notes that "Panchaali vainly imagines the palace of her dreams that her husband would make for her" in Divakaruni's novel (222). She tries to find comfort by thinking: "Perhaps he would build me the palace I dreamed of, a place where I finally belonged. . . . I would turn my face to the future and carve it into the shape I wanted. I would satisfy myself with duty. If I was lucky, love would come" (Divakaruni 104).

Draupadi's Polyandry: Whose Moral Dilemma?

Perhaps everyone who has heard about Draupadi is also aware of the fact that she had five husbands. [97] The story of how she was married to five brothers at the command of Kunti is also well-nigh popular.[98] There is a significant silence in Vyasa's epic about the reaction of Draupadi to such a proposal. Jagannathan rightly suggests that such silences are "exploited by the novelists in their depiction of the character of Draupadi" (94).[99]

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[97] Even Microsoft word highlights "husbands" as a grammatical mistake.

[98] Hiltebeitel draws attention to the fact that Kunti is not altogether unaware of the *svayamavara* and its outcome. "Kuntī is recalling Vyāsa's prediction that her five sons will marry Draupadī. While she is preoccupied with such uncertainties, Arjuna and Bhīma arrive and . . . [announce Draupadī's arrival by using the word 'alms'] . . . The announcement of Draupadī as 'alms' suggests either that Arjuna and Bhīma are complicit or have a chancy sense of humor . . . Kuntī has Draupadī on her mind as well as food" (*Dharma* 491). This may lend support to Panchaali's estimation of Kunti's role in *The Palace of Illusions* in pronouncing the command which is going to land her in a great moral dilemma.

[99] Jagannathan foregrounds this opinion in her study of Ray's *Yajnaseni*. But it is equally true of Divakaruni, as will be elaborated upon later.

Ray discusses the issue at length in her novel. Jagannathan maintains that Yajnaseni emerges as "the archetypal victim, a much wronged woman" (92). The beginning of her suffering can be traced back to her polyandrous marriage to the Pandava brothers. The predicament of having to marry five men baffled her: "My mind rebelled. Did I have no say? Then what was the meaning of *svayamvar*? . . . Why should I accept the other brothers as husbands? Would that not destroy my dharma? . . . Why should I silently bear such an insult?" (Ray 56)

Kuntī knows the Law, and that is what concerns her now (Hiltebeitel, *Dharma* 492). To drive home the moral dilemma that Kunti finds herself (and possibly also Draupadi) in, Vyasa as well the novelists project Kunti now regretting the given command:

> Oh Lord! What a dilemma! . . . If my word is not obeyed then I shall have spoken an untruth . . . By not obeying your mother's command all of you will violate dharma. And if, following the command, all of you marry Draupadi then that is an insult to her, an undying limitless shame. What shall we do now so that while my word is not proven false and dharma is safeguarded, Draupadi's honour us not tarnished. (Ray 56)

Yajnaseni had considered only Arjuna to be her husband (even before the *svayamvara*, as already noted). Yajnaseni admits that disgust for the elder brother was welling up in her heart when she saw "the secret flame of lust" in his eyes (Ray 56). She is furious on finding Arjuna 'unheroic' in not rebelling on hearing that his bride was to be turned into "an object of enjoyment for his elder and younger brothers" (Jagannathan 93). Arjuna speaks only to drive home the point that his dharma lay in obeying his mother's and elder brother's command: "Destroying dharma, violating the commands of my mother and elder brother, . . . will not really be happiness . . . [and] pure contentment to my mind. Therefore, *we shall all enjoy the princess equally*. *She will be the wife, according to dharma, of us all*." (Ray 57, italics mine). The dharma of the mother's word suddenly taking on the shade of the brothers' lust cannot be missed in Ray's description of Arjuna's intervention in the grave matter. It is not surprising that he is not bothered about the dharma of the woman whom he has just won in the contest and to whom he had been making tall promises a little while ago. Also noteworthy is how a woman and her sexuality are reduced to the status of playthings in the hands of male sexual desire, and how the foregoing discourse on dharma becomes worthless and subservient to the will of the Dharma-incarnate Yudhishthira and

his brothers. Clearly, this dharma that Arjuna is referring to cannot be in consonance with the 'dharma' that Krishna referred to in the *svayamvara*-hall.

Yajnaseni flares up at the suggestion, but can only vent out her anger within herself, possibly because she could not believe what was happening to her, or because she knew, in her heart of hearts, that her destiny was somehow tied to these men and this family and that there was no tuning away. She can only tell this about Arjuna, to herself: "I wished I could turn into a searing flame of the sacrificial fire and destroy the world . . . If my husband were to turn unto a fistful of ashes I would not be sorry. He, who with undisturbed heart, could hand over his wife to another man for fear of his own dharma being destroyed, . . . could never be a proper husband for any woman of discrimination" (Ray 57).

Yajnaseni is deeply disturbed about her very name becoming tainted for all of posterity. She ponders: "For all future time Draupadi would remain condemned in the history of the world as a woman of despicable and stained character . . . in the Kaliyuga people would call fallen women having many men 'Draupadis of this era', making me the butt of scorn. What would they understand of the situation in which Panchali became the wife of five men?" (Ray 59-60).[100]

Yajnaseni's lament points to the failure of all the three authorities that determine the correct dharma in a situation of crisis: the Vedas, the scriptures and the conduct of wise men. There has never been any such precedent in her knowledge, nor in Kunti's.[101] Following the well-accepted hierarchy of the authorities on dharma then, the ball is completely in Yajnaseni's court now. In the epic, "nobody asked Draupadi what *her* thoughts and feelings were on this subject" (Badrinath, *Question of Truth* 182). Even though Kunti asks Yajnaseni in Ray's novel what her opinion was, one can discern that

[100] In the afterword to her novel, Ray narrates what triggered her to rewrite the story of Draupadi. She was deeply pained by the story of a woman named Krishnaa, the younger sister of a lady known to Ray. When she left her debauched and drunkard husband for her father's house, and eventually married another man in Germany, people who were once sympathetic to her started criticizing her second marriage, in such words as, "Well! When her very name is Krishnaa, she could be happy only after taking a second husband. *Arre*! The Krishnaa of the Mahabharata took five husbands, and still not being satisfied, was attracted to Karna and Krishna…" (Ray 401). Moreover, she wanted to set things right for the people who, "without having read the *Mahabharata*, on the basis of hearsay we sully our own culture" (Ray 401).

[101] Yudhishthira cites two examples to Drupada later, but these cases seem more like aberrations than examples to be followed.

given her circumstances, she is not really left with a choice. Kunti asks Draupadi: "I have heard that princess Krishna is wise, intelligent, learned in scriptures. In this situation of perilous distress let her resolve the dilemma herself. We cannot forcibly impose our wishes on her" (Ray 58). Yajnaseni deliberates: "Was it the integrity of my womanhood that was of greater moment to me or the mother's word, the protection of my husband's and his brothers' dharma? To sacrifice myself for safeguarding the dharma of others — was that my duty or was it my duty to choose one husband for the sake of my self-respect and happiness? This I could not make out!" (Ray 60) There's the rub—Yajnaseni is expected to subordinate her own dharma, her own will, her love and her dreams of future, for her mother-in-law's command to prevail—the pronouncement is to be met with strict adherence, in which lay the dharma of Kunti and it seems, everyone else at the moment.

Yajnaseni remembers Krishna in this unprecedented situation of moral dilemma, any solution of which is not going to be amenable for her. Krishna makes a miraculous appearance, only to echo the stance of Yudhishthira, albeit differently: "Whoever has seen Krishnaa once — how can he rest without getting her? There is a chance of fratricidal strife breaking out in future among these five Pandavs . . . for preserving the dharma of everyone and to establish dharma on earth . . . for maintaining unity among the five Pandavs Yudhishthir has thought of making Krishnaa the wife of all of them" (Ray 61-62).

Though Krishna holds a reverential position in the epic as well as the novel, only seems to legitimize the attraction that Yajnaseni holds for Yudhishthir and his brothers by making the purpose behind Yajnaseni's polyandry dharmic, coalescing with a grand humanitarian agenda of establishing dharma on earth, which, ironically enough, the men will achieve by partaking of the common female body.

It was a "desperate dilemma" for Yajnaseni; her "endurance, wisdom, intelligence, discrimination and chastity — a summons to test them to the ultimate limit" was standing before her, awaiting her answer (Ray 62). She analyzes her situation as one in which she is expected to cooperate in the establishment of dharma by the men folk by sacrificing her own sense of right and wrong, dharmic and adharmic, at the altar of the patriarchal society with its rigid norms, and this, she holds to be far worse than the predicament of Sita of the *Ramayana*:

> For preserving unity among the five Pandavs I would have to become the wife of them all. The five Pandavs would establish dharma on earth. If they

> were not one it would be dharma that would be vanquished. Therefore, my role was clear. . . . Chaste Sita did not have to face such a situation then. . . . Despite not getting Sita as their wife, Lakshman, Bharat, Shatrughana had remained loyal brothers of Ram. Why would the five Pandav brothers not remain loyal to one another without me? (Ray 62)

While in the epic, the story of Sita is narrated to Draupadi during her exile so that she may establish an identity with her and can bear the pain of the exile and suffering better, Ray clearly marks the dissimilarity between the heroine of the *Ramayana* and the eponymous heroine of her novel. Yajnaseni declares: "I was not patient, all-suffering like Sita. If necessary, I could rebel, I could even take revenge" (Ray 62).

Yet, she is expected to arrive at a solution, and preferably one that does not contradict Krishna's. She resolves: "I should sacrifice myself! I, Yajnaseni, born of the sacrificial altar for the preservation of dharma! If, impelled by greed for this mortal body, heroes like the Pandavs had bound themselves by a vow to their mother, then in their dharma-*yajna* let this body become an oblation!" (Ray 63). In the same breath, she redefines the concept of *sati*, vis-à-vis the idea of the body:

> In reality, what as this body? . . . For I was not that body. My hands, feet, limbs were not Krishnaa. No part of my body was Krishnaa. So let everyone be happy getting this body. . . . This body . . . after offering it to five husbands, would I be able to remain a *sati?* What was the definition of *sati?* I knew that remaining faithful to one's husband was chastity. So I would have to remain faithful to five husbands. (Ray 63)

One can see Yajnaseni's fear and anxiety at having to fulfil the corporeal dharma of a wife, in addition to the moral, spiritual and religious dharma, five times over (though at this stage, she has not even begun to think about how she is going to accomplish the Herculean task), and, how she abdicates her own body considering it to be the root of all trouble, to be able to find a way out of this complex quandary.[102] The task was indeed bound to be a

[102] Victims of sexual abuse and rape have reported similar tendencies after the acts of sexual violence have been committed on them. Several studies have shown how victims cease to recognize their bodies as such, and go through various stages of post-traumatic stress to be able to finally reclaim their bodies. A recent case was that of the molestation of a girl at Stanford, who read out a long, open letter about "the severe impact" the assault had on her during the court trial, which garnered a lot of media attention (Baker). Yajnaseni,

daunting one, as she realizes that "[f]rom that day till the last instant of my life I would have to appear in five roles. I would have to prepare my mind and this body made up of five elements according to the characters and inclinations of my five husbands." (Ray 63-64). Yajnaseni often repeats to herself: "If the need should arise, I too, accepting more than one husband can show that despite having more than one husband a woman can be trustworthy, obedient and chaste" (Ray 98).

Panchaali's entry into the meagre hut in the forest marks her initiation into womanhood and a ghastly realization that the mother of these five men has asked them to share whatever they have got. How can she be the wife of five men? But Kunti's order cannot be revoked. Multani remarks, "Not only are Panchaali's romantic illusions of love and marriage dashed to ground but her reverence for Kunti, the great noble queen is also shattered" (222-23). Divakaruni's ire is directed more at Kunti than towards Arjun or Yudhishthir, because she somehow feels Kunti gives the command knowing well what she is saying, or who stands before her. Bhattacharya also insists that "If Draupadi [in the epic] had hoped to find her missing mother in her mother-in-law, she is tragically deceived as Kunti thrusts her into a polyandrous marriage that exposes her to salacious gossip which reaches a horrendous climax in Karna calling her a public woman" (*Panch-Kanya* 94).[103] Divakaruni seems to be proceeding on a similar reading of Kunti's character in this episode, and its repercussions on the life of her daughter-in-law.

Panchaali is flabbergasted, as if turned into a stone: "I stared at her, my brain trying to take in what she had said. Was she joking when she said they must all marry me? No, her face made that clear. I wanted to shout, Five husbands? Are you mad? I wanted to say, I'm already married to Arjun! But Vyasa's prophecy recoiled upon me, robbing me of my protests" (Divakaruni 108). Moreover, her pride is deeply hurt: "I recognized, too, the thinly veiled insult in Kunti's words. *This woman, as though I were a nameless servant.* It angered me, but it also hurt. . . . Now I saw how naïve I'd been. A woman like her would

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bracing herself to lead a life constantly shared between five men, also feels completely torn and victimized, though she is ready to bear it in the name of dharma.

[103] One of the explanations offered in some analyses of Kunti's command to share the prize of 'Draupadi' is fear that the new daughter in law would adversely judge the mother in law for her relations with many gods to beget children. Having five men as husbands, Draupadi would have sexual relations with as many men as Kunti, her mother in law, and it would thus put them both on an equal footing (Singh, "Identity and Agency" 326).

never tolerate anyone who might lure her sons away" (Divakaruni 108, italics mine). Panchaali, a princess till a few hours ago, now married to a man she is trying to fall in love with, bearing all the pain and thorns of walking bare-foot in the forest, secretly dreaming of having an illustrious palace some day, feels cheated and humiliated at the hands of Kunti.

However, Arjun in Divakaruni's novel speaks up, "Mother, how can you ask us to do this? It's contrary to dharma" (108-09). Instead of answering her son, Kunti is rather dismissive, and says that the matter could be discussed the next day, as if it was just another trouble the solution to which could be postponed. But Panchaali is in for a shock when she expects Arjun to stand up for her and tell his mother that both of them were already wedded in the hall, committed to each other, and that she had no right to destroy the arrangement, but Arjun maintains a stoic silence. Panchaali is extremely disappointed: "I was uncomfortable, miserable, disillusioned—and most of all, angry with Arjun. I'd expected him to be my champion" (Divakaruni 109). Panchaali realizes her troubles have, in fact, just started. Kunti tests her culinary skills the next day, asking her to cook for all of them with meagre resources, and Panchaali is saved by the skills taught to her by the sorceress. It dawns upon her that Kunti was trying to put her through a test akin to the test that her husband was put to. This gives way to a relationship of "mutual distrust" between her and Kunti (Divakaruni 115). Even Ray makes Yajnaseni suspicious of Kunti's intentions: "Suddenly it seemed Mother had knowingly, deliberately placed me in this predicament. Even though she had sons through different gods at her husband's interest . . . In case the mother was shamed before her daughter-in-law and looked small, she had deliberately compelled the daughter-in-law to accept five husbands" (Ray 66).

Bandlamudi rightly points out that "many epic heroes are married to numerous women and yet their polygamous situation is taken for granted as the norm," but hell breaks loose for Draupadi because she is to be married to five brothers (147). Badrinath analyzes this episode thus: "Because a woman marrying five men, . . . was unacceptable, even scandalous; there began the torturous search for an argument that would credibly justify that act. . . . To obey a mother's order was a perfect justification . . . *it was no 'command' at all*, but something which Kunti, . . . had unwittingly said, and later herself acknowledged, was conveniently ignored" (*Question of Truth* 181-82, italics mine). This is a significant analysis, and the works of several scholars lend support to this thesis.s

For instance, Rajendra Prasad also makes a piquent observation in this context. He maintains that Yudhiṣṭhira, in spite of Kunti's admission, "does not realize that words uttered, or any other order given, without knowing the nature of the relevant facts lose their prescriptive force, that *ignorance of the relevant facts* takes away all the moral strength or obligational power which the issuance of an order or prescription may have for the person or persons by whom the order is to be obeyed" (Conceptual-Analytic 261).

The matter is then taken to King Drupad, because his sanction in this matter is essential. The epic records no reaction from Draupadi on this matter, but her father expresses his immense shock when the matter is brought to his notice. In the novel *Yajnaseni*, too, Drupad rejects the proposal of the five marriages of his daughter, "There is precedence for the marriage of many women with one man. But if one woman marries many men it will destroy the dharma of the woman. If my daughter concludes such a marriage the world will mock her. Her dharma will be destroyed…!" (Ray 67)

Several scholars have commented upon the reaction of Drupad. Mukherjee suggests that "Draupadi's marriage was being opposed on religious, customary and ethical grounds. Drupada wondered how could Yudhishthira suggest that which was both against the Vedas and the people, a practice which was surely not in accordance with *dharma*" (23). "At some point," notes Matila, "Yudhiṣṭhira countered Drupada by saying that polyandry must be a *dharma*, because he himself thought it was right, and he never thought an *adharma* to be right (xi, Introduction). Kavita Sharma makes another observation. She draws attention to Yudhishthira's explanation that "it was difficult to decide what was *dharma* and what *adharma.* It was very subtle and its real implications lay beyond them. Here they simply had to follow the path trodden by their ancestors. Besides their mother also desired this" ("Eyes of Women" 110-11).[104]

In Ray's *Yajnaseni*, Yudhishthir accords supremacy to the dharma of following their mother's command, "Man's greatest dharma is obeying the commands of his elders. . . . Mother is our all-powerful governor. Obeying her command if all five of us marry Krishnaa it will only be following dharma for us" (Ray 67). In Divakaruni's novel, Yudhishthira replies to Drupad thus: "Admittedly, this is an unusual arrangement. But how

[104] Badrinath suggests that this argument about the subtlety of dharma "began being misused to justify the unjustifiable, an intellectual alibi that came in handy in a difficult moral situation" (*Question of Truth* 185). Of course, the other instance where it is famously repeated is in the Sabha, by Bhishma, to cover up his inability in answering her question.

can it be heinous to obey one's mother? . . . Haven't our scriptures declared, The father is equal to heaven, but the mother is greater? . . . If we can't agree . . . that Panchaali should marry all five of us, then we brothers must take our leave, returning your daughter to your care" (117). There was no greater disgrace for a woman than a betrothed woman being sent back to her father's house without the hope of the suitors ever returning. Panchaali "stared at him in outraged shock," Drupad "stiffened," and Dhri's "hand fisted around the hilt of his sword," records Divakaruni (117).

Divakaruni uses very strong words to sketch out the conversation between Yudhishthira and Drupad, thereby pointing to how a woman is 'transacted' between men in a patriarchal society. Yudhisthir says to Drupad, "The choice is yours . . . An honorable life for the princess as a daughter-in-law of Hastinapur—or a death you force upon her" (Divakaruni 118). To this, Drupad cannot hold back his shock and utter dismay: "Honorable! . . . Perhaps in Hastinapur such behavior's considered honorable, but here in Kampilya men will call Draupadi a whore! And if I should hand her over to the five of you, what will they call me? Perhaps death is a better alternative" (Divakaruni 118)[105]

Panchaali, who is present when this exchange is taking place, seems completely taken aback: "But I was distressed by the coldness with which my father and my potential husband discussed my options, thinking only of how these acts would benefit—or harm—them" (Divakaruni 118). Even though she does not intervene to apprise them of her sentiments and reaction, she is evidently traumatised by her treatment as a mere commodity, and the selfishness she can smell in the motives of both the man she is familiar with (her father), and the men she will be spending the rest of her life with (the Pandava brothers, either as the wife of one, or all of them).

Rajendra Prasad's observation about maintaining the morality of a person's dignity comes in handy to illustrate the plight of Panchaali, her shock at the complete disregard of her morality and dignity, and inattention towards her identity both as a woman as well as a human being. Prasad explains:

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[105] According to Jani, "the Pāṇḍava family followed the primitive custom of polyandry which was looked down upon by the Kauravas and Pāñcālas. This indicates that there was a conflict between the moral codes followed by the Pāṇḍavas, on the one hand and the Kauravas and Pāñcālas, on the other" (73).

> But there is the other moral principle that no indignity be done to any individual or to any individual's personhood. This principle requires that Draupadī be married only to Arjuna as per the principle of the *svayamvara* form of marriage, and not to anyone else, let alone being married to five individuals . . . And, to get Draupadī married to all of them is to do indignity to her *personhood*, it may even be said to be immoral because it amounts to treating her, a person, as a property or thing, to commodify her, by considering her to be a sharable thing even if doing that is to fulfil the mother's wish. . . . The great knower of all *dharma* (morality) though he is said to be, he [Yudhiṣṭhira] does not seem to recognize the sanctity of the moral principle of honouring the dignity of the personhood of a woman, or the immorality involved in treating Draupadī as a commodity. (Conceptual-Analytic 261)

Prasad's analysis of the moral codes involved in thrusting the decision of multiple marriages on Draupadi drives home the fact that Draupadi suffers a double blow, and what makes her situation even more pitiable is that such treatment is being meted out to a woman, who was supposed to be highly revered in the then society.

Hiltebeitel proposes that "much as the *Mahābhārata* poet Vyāsa wants us to understand that Draupadī lives her life as a woman, her power and the troubles she and others experience around that power can be said to relate to divine mysteries that work through her human body arising from the fact that she is the incarnation of the goddess Śrī, 'Prosperity'" (*Dharma* 482). The epic was bound to offer a better justification for the polyandric marriage of Draupadi. Prasad opines that "to fill in the logical gap between the reason and the decision, or to give a (seemingly) incontrovertible reason, an appeal is made to mythology" (Conceptual-Analytic 262). That is why one can witness Yudhishthira in the epic "cheerfully and triumphantly citing two examples from some obscure *purana* as justification: 'A girl called Jatila, . . . had married seven sages'; and 'Vakshi, daughter of sage Kundu, had married ten Pracheta-s who were brothers'" (Badrinath, *Question of Truth* 187).

The discussion has still not taken any conclusive turn when Vyasa enters. After seeking the opinions of the people present in the assembly before he speaks (he does not ask Draupadi's opinion at all). Later, he adjudicates that he found nothing wrong with such a

marriage; also adding that "in bygone days it was an accepted custom, though not meant for all. Since the practice was known earlier, and had now received the approval of no less wise and virtuous a person than Yudhisthira, it was certainly not against *dharma*" (Mukherjee 24). To authenticate his views, and to appease an unsatisfied father, he narrates two mythological accounts of Draupadi's past births: one in which she was goddess Lakshmi, and the Pandavas were Indra in the previous birth; and the second account in which Draupadi in her past birth was the daughter of a hermit, who performed a severe penance to please Shiva, and when he appeared, asked for a husband five time, and her boon was granted. Vyasa also bestows "divine vision upon Drupada so that he can perceive how Indra was punished five times for his arrogance and how he was cursed by Siva to be born as five Pandavas, and his wife Laksmi as Draupadi" (Mukherjee 24). Mukherjee notes that Drupada, in the end, "resigned himself to the god's will who had himself violated human laws by ordaining more than one husband for Draupadi. Against fate, he declared, human beings were indeed powerless!" (25)

In Ray's novel, at the beginning of her letter to Krishna, Yajnaseni complains: "The cause of my having five husbands [Vyasa] has attributed to some boon by Shiva. But I am no goddess and no knower of past births" (Ray 4). Vyasa's arrival and his attestation to the marriage is equally significant, because he also provides Yajnaseni with the much-needed hope in this hour of crisis by announcing that "even if it is the five Pandavs who will establish dharma in Aryavart, Krishnaa's noble role will be recorded in sacred letters in the annals of time. The life of Krishnaa, who was born of sacrificial altar is exceptional and incomparable" (Ray 68). Though this statement may also turn out to be disappointing for a feminist, as after all, it will be the men who will establish dharma, with their woman only acting as an appendage.

Vyasa in Divakaruni's novel does not come himself, but sends a prompt verdict when the matter is brought to his notice. Panchaali reproduces Vyasa's verdict:

> I was to be married to all five brothers. My father was not to distress himself about how this would affect his reputation. This never-before-seen marital arrangement would make him more famous than a heap of battle victories. . . . To keep me chaste and foster harmony in the Pandava household, Vyasa designed a special code of marital conduct for us. I would be wife to each brother for a year at a time, from oldest to youngest, consecutively. . . .

> Each time I went to a new brother, I'd be a virgin again. (Divakaruni 119-20)

Divakaruni bypasses the role of Narada altogether and assigns a dual responsibility to the absent Vyasa, of permitting her polyandrous marriage as well as announcing the arrangement to avoid any conflict between the brothers. Panchaali feels angry and helpless at the same:

> Though Dhai Ma tried to console me by saying that finally I had the freedom men had had for centuries, my situation was very different from that of a man with several wives. Unlike him, *I had no choice as to whom I slept with, and when*. Like a communal drinking cup, *I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not*.
>
> Nor was I particularly delighted by the virginity boon, which seemed designed more for my husbands' benefit than mine. That seemed to be the nature of boons given to women—they were handed to us like presents we hadn't quite wanted. (Divakaruni 120, italics mine)

Clearly, Panchaali does not see the settlement as empowering her—if anything, it has reduced her to the position of a toy, a plaything which will change hands according to set time and duration. Moreover, she thinks the virginity boon was meant to please the men and not her. She mulls over the situation and tells herself: "If the sage had cared to inquire, I'd have requested the gift of forgetting, so that when I went to each brother I'd be free of the memory of the previous one. And along with that, I'd have requested that Arjun be my first husband. He was the only one of the Pandavas I felt I could have fallen in love with" (Divakaruni 120). Of course, her desired boon of forgetting, had it been granted, would not have made much of a difference to her life, except that she would not have to wage constant mental battles within herself, every moment, every single day of her life.

Many scholars have attempted to understand Draupadi's polyandry not as a reality, but in symbolic terms. While Sukthankar believes that Draupadī "stands for the ideal embodiment and representation of the unconditional unity of the [Pāṇḍava] family," Miller interprets it as a "part of a vast cosmic drama . . . [wherein] Draupadī, [whose sexual power invites violence,] . . . through her varied relationships with her five husbands,

integrates conflicting aspects of their composite character and helps them restore order in the age of cosmic destruction" (Sukthankar 21; Miller, "India's Great Epic" 126-27).

Doniger offers an explanation of the same by locating the *Mahabharata's* open-minded attitude towards polyandrous women in the historical context of the times:

> The text took shape during a cosmopolitan era that encouraged the loosening of constraints on women in both court and village. The king used women archers for his bodyguards in the palace . . . Women served as spies. Female ascetics moved around freely. Prostitutes paid taxes. The state provided supervised work, such as spinning yarn, for upper-caste women who had become impoverished, widowed, or deserted, and for aging prostitutes. If a slave woman gave birth to her master's child, both she and the child were immediately released from slavery. Thus women were major players during this period, and the *Mahabharata* may reflect this greater autonomy. (*Hinduism* 133)

Gurcharan Das, while suggesting that polyandry was not widely practiced, interprets it as "the epic throwing a challenge to the audience's paradigm of patriarchy" (Das 44).

Draupadi's silence on the issue of her multiple marriages in the epic still does not have conclusive answers, nor do the retellings attempt to provide them to us. Ira Mukhoty wonders "whether Draupadi's reaction [in the epic] was later redacted by vigilant authors or whether as a young bride Draupadi was . . . unable to voice her misgivings, we will never really know" (Mukhoty 13). Bhattacharya also points out that Draupadi's silent consent to her polyandry is significant because "immediately before this she astonished everyone by publicly refusing to accept Karna as a suitor despite Drupada's announcement that anyone passing the test would win her hand" (*Panch-Kanya* 81). In fact, even later, one can find "Draupadi is an active participant in all the deliberations of the Pandavas" (Sharma, *Dicing* xlix). It comes as a relief that "never again . . . will Draupadi remain mute and submissive [after her fate of polyandry has been sealed] . . . She will argue, chastise and rebuke, she will implore and demand, and she will rage, passionately and eloquently, against the injustice done to her and her husbands" (Mukhoty 13). Kavita Sharma offers two possible explanations for Drauapdi's 'understanding' silence in the epic: "she may have been familiar with the custom of polyandry and may not have had serious

reservations about it . . . [or] she herself may have been Drupada's daughter from a woman other than his wife or alternately a product of a levirate relationship" (*Dicing* xxxvii).

However, every cloud has a silver lining, and in this case, it is brought to light by Hiltebeitel. He optimistically looks towards the other end of the spectrum:

> The *Mahābhārata* keeps Draupadī quiet on the *dharma* of her polyandry, but folklores and modern fictions give her plenty of complaints . . . [the audience/readers can see how] the questionable *dharma* of her marriage implies her complicity in its outcome no less than her mother-in-law's, her husbands', the author's, and Kṛṣṇa's . . . One can only imagine what she was thinking (*Dharma* 495)

Ray's and Divakaruni's retellings of the episode do take us through the mental agony that she might have suffered, the tumult that might have arisen in her heart, the muted protest that her mind might have raged, while also recreating the situation in which her silence might have been justified, or her objections might have gone unheeded.

Love, Sexuality and Motherhood

The *Mahabharata* seldom discusses such issues as love and sexuality, especially in the context of its female characters. While the epic frequently sheds light on the motherhood of female characters like Satyavati, Kunti, Gandhari, Shakuntala, and Subhadra, to name a few, it rarely zooms in on Drauapdi as a mother. However, all these subjects provide fodder for the creative writers and artists who re-narrate the epic afresh. This is true of both Ray and Divakaruni.

Both the novelists under discussion do not mince words in giving voice to the resentment of Draupadi at being thrown into polyandry, not of her own volition. Draupadi has been won by Arjuna, lawfully (according to the prevailing law of the time), and she should rightfully be asked to marry only him. Though the novelists do not imagine their heroine speaking out against the grave injustice, nor do they alter her story so as to place her in a monogamous marriage, they devote a significant space to the trials and tribulations that their heroine has to face as a result of the multiple marriages. Both Ray and Divakaruni also provide her with the opportunity to imagine the exploration of love elsewhere, be it spiritual love for Krishna in *Yajnaseni*, or a longing for Karna who

Panchaali longs to be with, in *The Palace of Illusions.*[106] Though neither of them can achieve the alternative they desire, at least not tangibly, the novelists do give their heroine the freedom to become one with Krishna (in *Yajnaseni*) and Karna (in *The Palace of Illusions*) spiritually, once they are dying or have acquired a formless state, in a world beyond the material world which dreads according such agency to women. Having said that, one must reiterate what Karve reminds us about Draupadi in the epic: "The Draupadi of the Mahabharata stormed and raged, but to the last moment she remained a faithful wife" (Karve 95). One must bear in mind that it is as much true of the retellings under discussion as it is of the heroine in the epic.

Consider, for example, the repeated tests that Yajnaseni has to take on the five consecutive nights of her marriage with each Pandava starting with the eldest: On their first night with Yudhishthir, Yajnaseni is "torn asunder" and feels "grossly insulted" when he proposes on behalf of his other brothers (except Arjun) to maintain a platonic relationship with her, so that the dharma of the mother's command as well as the "womanhood" of Draupadi, both stand honoured. However, Yajnaseni cannot take everything lying down, not after all she has been through. She rejects his proposal, firmly replying, "Let the world call me unchaste but why should I remain untrue and disloyal to my husbands and spend my entire life feeling guilty?" (Ray 70). She unabashedly claims her right to her body and her sexuality, and does not give authority to Yudhishthir to thrust such crucial decisions onto her, on behalf of everyone else. Of course she presents it as an argument in defence of the rights of the other husbands on her, but she has made her point nonetheless.

For that night, however, she chooses to abstain from any sort of a consummation with the eldest Pandava, because she has to retain her virginity for the other husbands—she is supposed to be a *kanya* (virgin) at the time of her marriage with all the other four according to the scriptures. She sits wondering how she is going to be able to divide the limited hours of the night between the five husbands, and satisfy all of them equally.[107] Mukherjee notes that the conjugal life of Draupadi "was strictly regimented, requiring

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[106] The ingenious relationship between Karna and Draupadi can form the subject of another debate altogether.

[107] One must remember that the arrangement of rotation between the five husbands has not been made up to this point in Ray's novel.

tremendous self-control. All her sentiments and emotions needed a great deal of adjustment when she changed her life-style with each husband accordingly. And yet something more was demanded of her: Draupadi was expected to love all her husbands equally" (27). What Mukherjee suggest about the mythological heroine is demonstrated practically by Ray's *Yajnaseni*.

Yajnaseni's bundle of problems send a shiver down one's spine as she contemplates, "Even if I devoted three hours of a night to one husband, that would mean one husband's night going fruitless. Then *how was I to divide the night or divide myself*?" (Ray 91). Practical concerns that might have arisen in Yajnaseni's mind, which Vyasa's epic chooses to gloss over. The second husband, Bhim, turns out to be a male chauvinist. This is what he says to his wife on their first night, "But there is no need for my wife to be learned. What is the use of women being learned? Let them be lovely — enough!" (Ray 76). Yajnaseni is scared out of her wits," "What a terrible test! Yudhishthir wanted a learned lady who would discriminate between dharma and adharma; . . . Bhim's inclination was in a different direction" (Ray 76-77). How many adjustments will she have to make, and how will she live up to the ideals of a chaste wife for all! She muses, sitting by Bhim's side, throughout the night:

> "*The dilemma lies stretching endlessly,*
> *The night somehow always ends.*" (Ray 77)

The night with Arjun was particularly painful for Yajnaseni, because in reponse to her already pining heart, he declares, in a choked voice, "My supreme moments of happiness with you have gone by. The time that I have been able to have you solely to myself, . . . The rest of life that remains in our hands is solely for the sake of preserving dharma, preserving civilization, for the welfare of the world" (Ray 80). He squarely puts the blame on her for the situation they are in. She tries to pour her heart out to him, complaining, "You have won me. You could have said, 'No one else has a right to Krishnaa! Why did you leave everything to me?'" (Ray 81). To this, Arjun replies that he did what his dharma as a son and as a younger brother dictated, and could not have gone against his dharma. However, he does not forget to remark, "But what reply you would give was wholly within your grasp" (Ray 81). Yajnaseni, cannot help but get choked in "anger, hurt, self-esteem, and mortification" (Ray 81).

Nakul feels envious of Yajnaseni's beauty, thinking she surpasses him in her attractiveness. Sahadev, on his first night with Yajnaseni, clarifies, "My principle is to remain content with whatever comes my way. But it is the duty of the wife to understand her husband's mind. If you keep performing your duties properly, I will never have to speak my mind about anything" (Ray 88). One can imagine what an everyday, eternal quagmire Yajnaseni's life has become for her!

Krishna is probably aware of the ramifications of such a situation. It is reflected in his thoughtful gesture of gifting a special ring set with a blue sapphire and a companion named Maya (meaning, illusion) to Krishnaa along with many other gifts on the occasion of her wedding—the ring is one that Krishna had been wearing for a long time himself, and has the power to resolve many dilemmas when one gazes in it with concentration. Maya, on the other hand, has been a long time companion of Krishna and as he himself describes, "is as much the cause of grief as the remover of grief. Several tasks of mine are achieved through her" (Ray 89). These gifts also point out his visionary nature – he knows Krishnaa will be lonely amidst a huge family, and would need constant advice and guidance from a female companion to whom she can turn for solutions, and also that she is bound to face many problems and dilemmas in her life, in which both the ring and/or Maya can furnish a solution for Yajnaseni. Or is it that both these gifts are illusory, and these are meant to keep up the spirit of Yajnaseni.[108]

Ray also tackles the issue of Yajnaseni's renewed virginity and the solution towards the division of Yajnaseni's time between her many husbands. Narad is in conversation with Krishna when she overhears them, and is furious when she gets to know that she has become a butt of joke for the *devas* (gods) owing to her polyandry. Her mind revolts vehemently against the patriarchal mores of the society and the many divisions an strictures the society creates and advances for the women to follow:

> I felt I was breaking down under the onslaught of grief, shame and anxiety. The very next moment within the new bride Krishnaa, Yajnaseni, . . . rose in revolt. She stood up in revolt against the law of the abode of the gods, according to which, one man might accept as many women as he wished, but if one woman married more than one husband she would be branded a sinner. Who had laid

[108] While these gifts prove to be useful for Yajnaseni on some occasions, the novel does not mention them at various other crucial junctures, leaving the readers wondering as to the nature of the gifts.

> down this law? It must be some male god! Otherwise how could there be such a distinction of virtue and sin between male and female?
>
> All the rituals and rules that had been created in society built around the distinction between rich poor, high-low, brahmin-chandal, male-female, and such others, the profound inequities that had been set up based upon consideration of virtue and sin—against all of these, a life-long war would have to be waged.
>
> Actually the acceptance of five husbands was a challenge to the entire race of women. As though it were a golden opportunity for proving that even after marrying many men together, the pristine purity of a woman's character could remain unsullied. (Ray 92-93)

She wonders about the definitions of the idea of heroism. She deliberates, "What heroism is there in a man clinging on to values in circumstances where he has no alternative but to cling to them? True heroism lies in remaining steadfast in one's values in adverse circumstances" (Ray 93). She is highlighting heroism that lies in the phenomenon of Hobson's choice here, suggesting that true heroism has nothing to do with gender differences. He is also, in her particular context, inverting the usual association of heroism with masculinity and suggesting her claim to the title of a hero in bravely facing the dilemma she is in.

Yajnaseni is making a case for herself as well as for all of womankind. She also outrightly denounces patriarchy's obsession with a woman's chastity and the hype around virginity. Continuing her lament, she writes, "I would get angry, 'Chaste woman! Unchaste woman! In the same way why don't the scriptures speak of chaste men and unchaste men? Are men's heart made of gold that sin cannot tarnish them? Have the scriptures prescribed lists of sins only for women?" (Ray 94). She identifies herself with Satyavati, Amba and also with Sita from the *Ramayana*: "The supremely wise mother Satyavati, had to suffer the scorn and mockery of society sometimes because of past. But Parashar? He was respected by all. . . . faultless Amba was rejected by the narrow-minded king Shalva. What was her offence?" (Ray 94-95). She also finds strength in the lives of Ambika and Ambalika who were "virtually forced to beget sons by other men" and Kunti, "bowing to her husband's commands, gave birth to sons by various gods," and incurred a lot of insult as a result (Ray 97). Contemplating over all these cases, she thinks "if the standards of virtue and sin had been identical for women and men, the female race would

not have been oppressed by social tyranny" (Ray 97). One must remember, however, that none of the women mentioned above except Draupadi had to take multiple husbands simultaneously. Hiltebeitel correctly points out that "in Draupadī's case, her polyandry makes her status as a "lawful wife" uniquely problematic" (*Dharma* 481).

Yajnaseni seems to be engaged in a mission: she wants to persuade humanity into revisiting its hitherto accepted definitions of chastity and fidelity in relation to women. Making a compelling departure, Ray replaces Narad, a male authority on chastity in the epic (at least in the role he plays in narrating the story of Sunda and Upsunda, and advising the Pandavas to maintain harmony in their marital life by taking turns to be with Draupadi, each for a year) with Maya, a female character, imparting the much needed advice to Yajnaseni regarding the management of her marital life with five husbands. Maya advices her: "Sakhi, playing the role of the wife of many husbands at one time is extremely painful and shameful. Therefore, adopt the role of being the wife of each Pandav by turn for a year at a time. A woman is mother, wife and sister. Discharge the duties of a mother and a sister all the time with all the Pandavs. But as a wife, stay with each Pandav a year at a time" (Ray 102). Narad, however, makes one more stipulation, that while Yajnaseni was living with one Pandava as his wife, if another brother should disturb their privacy, then he should live a celibate life for twelve years in exile (Ray 102). Yajnaseni feels relieved at both the suggestions, which were unanimously accepted by all of them. However, Yajnaseni still regrets that she would have to wait for two years for her union with Arjun, the love of her life. Chaitanya suggests, "Arjuna definitely was Draupadi's favourite. Was that because she had felt the fascination of Krishna, but safely assimilated him into her image of Arjuna," a current we definitely find running through Ray's novel (*Literary Study* 148).[109]

Karve unabashedly takes Draupadi's side in asking, "If she had loved Arjuna most, was there anything astonishing about that?" (Karve 103). Bhattacharya brings out Draupadi's suffering when he writes, "Draupadi never enjoys possession of her first love. . . before Arjuna's turn came to be with Draupadi, he chose exile. Her anguish at losing him to Ulupi, Chitrangada and Subhadra in succession (*Panch-Kanya* 80). This jealousy of her

[109] Several retellings of the *Mahabharata* also project Draupadi realizing very late in her life that Bhima had loved her more than any of the other brothers. Bhatta Narayana develops this theme in his play *Venisamhara*, Iravati Karve makes this imaginative departure in her study, M. T. Vasudevan Nair renders this understanding in his *Randamoozam* (The Second Turn).

co-wives, which is of course, born out of love for thwarted love for Arjuna, is reproduced both by Ray and Divakaruni. In Ray's novel, Yajnaseni wishes to accompany Arjun to the forest, like Sita did in the *Ramayana*, executing the dharma of a wife. But Phalguni refuses, reminding her that it at that time, she was "Yudhishthir's partner in dharma" (Ray 166-67). Yajnaseni admits to hardening herself up on realizing that Arjun's had deliberately violated the conditions of their marriage and entered Yudhishthir's room because he wanted to punish Krishnaa by going far away from her. He also bombards her with instructions regarding how to conduct herself with his family members in his absence. However, she is deeply hurt when she notices that he was worried about everyone but her: "If a woman was learned or wise did no one think of her? Was there no affection, sympathy, for her in anyone? Was she stone, a lifeless piece of sculpture?" (Ray 170)

To add to her angst of separation, Ray makes another innovation by projecting Bhim manipulating the one year of absence of Arjun by requesting Yajnaseni to spend an extra year with him, his argument being: "if five persons are responsible by turn to take charge of any valuable *thing*, and if after a particular time the designated person does not turn up, then that precious gem remains with the earlier *holder*" (Ray 171, italics mine). Needless to say, one can notice her reduction to the status of a 'thing,' her husbands being her 'holders' or possessors. However, Yajnaseni exerts her choice: she wanted to remain celibate, a *brahmacharini* during that one year, in conjunction with the vow of celibacy that Arjun was also observing in the forest for twelve years. Of course, for the other years with her other husbands, she would have to adhere to her role of a devoted wife. But the irony hits her on her face when she realizes that Arjun has observed his vow of celibacy only with respect to her, Yajnaseni, and went on to marry other princesses during the twelve-year term, as mentioned above.

Yajnaseni's companion Maya, who can also partly be read as her alter-ego, tries to console her during her year of separation from Arjuna. She whispers into her ears words that would sound blasphemous for a misogynist:

> Maharani! For whom is this life of celibacy? This stern asceticism, unadorned life and eager expectation through sleepless nights? For heartless Phalguni?[110] By this time he has already savoured the pleasure of conjugal

[110] Another name of Arjun.

> life with as many as three virgins. He has forgotten you. . . . You are beautiful, learned, desirable. This life is for enjoyment, happiness and joy. . . . Forget him. You have four husbands. Enjoy life with them. . . . Enjoy life, maharani! (Ray 177)

Inspite of the well-meaning advice from Maya, Yajnaseni cannot completely flout the norms of her conduct as a chaste wife, nor disregard her dharma as the wife of her husbands. Her repeated attempts to establish her unadulterated chastity time and again are sometimes frustating, "Most of the world's women would be called unchaste, if not physically then atleast mentally. Even while giving their bodies, secretly they fantasized, enjoying sweet pleasure in bed with some other men. But no such thing happened within me. While being with Yudhishthir I never desired Bhim" (Ray 206).

In Divakaruni's novel too, one does not find Panchaali sharing very amicable relations with Arjun. At the very outset, after Drupad's sanction to the multiple marriages of his daughter, Panchaali notices that Arjun seemed distracted and angry at the verdict: "His eyes were angry—as though I were the one who had chosen to marry his brothers, and thus betrayed him! . . . My heart sank as I saw that he'd made me the target of the frustrated rage that he couldn't express toward his brothers or his mother" (Divakaruni 121-22)

Later, Panchaali, who thinks that she wielded considerable control over her husbands, confesses that she didn't win all her battles: "My husbands took other wives . . . How naïve I'd been to think I could have prevented it! Sometimes there were political reasons, but mostly it was male desire. . . . My tantrums became almost as famous as Yudhisthir's righteousness, and over the years not a few songs were composed about Panchaali's jealousy" (Divakaruni 151). Panchaali thus realizes the futility of the claims she made in front of Dhai Ma as a young girl, attributing her husbands' marriages to other women to their insatiable desire for women. However, she quickly clarifies: "In truth, I wasn't nearly as upset as I made out to be. I was a practical woman. I knew I couldn't expect my husbands to remain celibate while they waited for their turn as my spouse. I knew also that I was special to them in a way that none . . . could ever be" (Divakaruni 151). Divakaruni pulls the mythological heroine out the emotional frailties she is usually associated with, and paints a realistic picture of her. That said, even humans are susceptible to hurt, and Panchaali too admits that she was truly disturbed only once, when Arjun married Subhadra, because she could notice mutual love reflected in their eyes for each other –

"the drunken love in her eyes—a look that was reflected on Arjun's face. He'd never looked at me that way, and never would" (Divakaruni 152). Her hurt is probably fuelled by the regret that she has never experienced, nor will ever be fortunate enough in future to feel such love for herself in Arjun. However, during the killing of Sisupal, fearing that Krishna might have been dead, Panchaali discovers a hitherto unknown realization: Krishna mattered to her more than her husbands or anyone or anything else. This was accompanied by a realization of his divine qualities in the very same moment. She feels a strange, 'inexplicable' love for him, which is going to act as her spiritual, guiding force in her life bereft of love and fulfilment ahead.

However, Draupadi's conjugal life with five husbands draws insinuations from all and sundry. In Ray's novel, Karna repeatedly makes barbed comments to Yajnaseni: "Royal bride Krishnaa . . . is the ideal of womanhood in Aryavart . . . In Dvapar even marriage is taking place with the elder brother-in-law" (Ray 128). On another occasion, he even refuses to eat the food served by her on one occasion, because in his worldview, "it is the dharma of a woman to have only one husband. . . . But at one time to share the beds of five husbands is not sanctioned anywhere. . . . Such a woman, despite being married, is considered a public woman" (Ray 133). Duhshasan also mocks her by saying that in trying to satisfy every husband's desires, she could not satisfy a single one, and hence she was left uncared for by her husbands to drown in the water.[111] He insults her further by saying that she could become Karna's queen even after rejecting him in the *svayamvar* if she wanted to, adding "Karna is *Ma* Kunti's dharma-son. So, you should make him your husband, there is no adharma in it" (Ray 182-83).

In Divakaruni's novel, Panchaali notes on her stepping into the Hastinapura palace after her wedding: "The whole of Bharat was abuzz with the story of my marriage to five brothers whose filial piety was such that they preferred to share a wife rather than break their mother's word" (Divakaruni 125-26). Later, during her last year of exile when, disguised as Sairandhri, Panchaali goes to Queen Sudeshna seeking a job as her hairdresser (she tells the queen that she had been the hairdresser of the famous Draupadi before this), Sudeshna asks her, "Now tell me something I've been dying to know: How did Draupadi

[111] This incident is a narrative innovation of Ray. Yajnaseni, immersed in thoughts of Arjun when he is in the self-imposed exile, is swept off by a current in the river. Karna comes to her rescue on this occasion.

manage to control five husbands? I can barely handle Virat, and he's old! What kind of sleeping arrangements did they have?" (Divakaruni 226).

One can easily make out that Draupadi's life arouses curiosity and invites barbed comments from all and sundry, owing to the fact of her multiple marriages, which boils down to an understanding of her 'hyper-sexuality.' Sharma identifies the problem as being one of "the idea of chastity and virtue" being "conjoined with the subordination and regulation of the sexuality of women by men" (*Dicing* xxxii). It gets compounded when the woman concerned also has a voice, as already evidenced in the foregoing discussion. The problem, however, is related to the ideology and politics of the male-dominated society. Sharma is of the view that "independent women are branded as unchaste because their unbridled sexuality can so easily destroy the carefully constructed power structure" (*Dicing* liii). In fact, there is a popular folkloric story of Duryodhan's wife Bhanumati sarcastically asking Draupadi about her five husbands and how she manages them. Bhattacharya explains that "Draupadi swiftly responds that among her in-laws the number of husbands has always been rather excessive. . . Kunti, . . . Ambika and Ambalika . . . and . . . Satyavati . . . [While they had] momentary encounters, Draupadi has to live out her entire life parcelled out among five men within the sacrament of marriage" (*Panch-Kanya* 68). Mukhoty submits that "though this anecdote reflects Draupadi's quick wit and confidence, her polyandrous marriage to five brothers is something she will repeatedly face humiliation for" (Mukhoty 12).

In this context, Doniger offers an illuminating explanation of the sexuality of Draupadi in the epic, and what the text seeks to offer/dismantle:

> Draupadi's hyper-sexuality may simply have validated an ideal that was understood to be out of reach for ordinary women—imagined precisely in order to be disqualified as a viable option. . . . The persistent polyandry in the lineage of the heroines is therefore a remarkably positive fantasy of female equality, . . . a major resistance to patriarchy, and the polyandrous *Mahabharata* women are a feminist's dream (or a sexist's nightmare): smart, aggressive, steadfast, eloquent, tough as nails, and resilient (Doniger, *Hinduism* 133)

This takes us back to the suggestion made by Brodbeck and Black referred to earlier, that these narratives are, after all, not really indicators of the state of women or reality in the

times, but may be taken as reflections on what is to be done and what is to be avoided, in short, aesthetic tales with didactic messages. The society, according to Sharma, operates on the formula of a duality: it sees "women's sexuality . . . as a potentially . . . destructive force in front of which the mightiest of men are rendered helpless," while simultaneously believing in the fact that "it can be put to great use once it is subordinated and regulated by men" (*Dicing* xxxii). It was as much true in the times of the epic, as it is today. Sharma concludes that "within the patriarchal framework women acquire chastity not necessarily through fidelity to one man but by allowing their sexuality to be regulated by men whether as wives or daughters." (Sharma, *Dicing* xxxiv). However, recent feminist negotiations of the conundrum seem to resort to a different strategy altogether. The feminist angst against the aforementioned paradox is being vented out either in the forms of retellings of ancient stories from a woman's perspective, or through refreshing creative takes on a woman's rights to her sexuality.[112]

Another topic integral to this discussion is that of motherhood. As much as one would have liked not to bring up this topic along with the discussion on female sexuality and desire, one cannot sidestep the significant intervention that the two novelists under discussion make in treating the topic of motherhood in relation to Draupadi in their novels, albeit briefly. Draupadi is seldom discussed as a mother in studies on the epic. Bhattacharya briefs: "Draupadi's five sons are . . . not even nurtured by her. She sends them to Panchal and follows her husbands into exile . . . Indeed, scholars, . . . have questioned the very fact of her maternity since, unlike the other Pandava progeny – Ghatotkacha, Abhimanyu, Babhruvahana – the five sons are . . . [mere] names and might have been interpolated" (*Panch-Kanya* 94).

However, the novelists give a satisfactory sketch of their heroine as a mother. Jagannathan notes that Ray resorts to some deviation from the epic of Vyasa — "in Vyasa's epic, the image of Draupadi as a wife dominates her image as a mother. But in Ray's novel, Draupadi as a mother is projected with some emphasis" (101). There are several other instances of Yajnaseni feeling maternal and missing her sons while in exile, breastfeeding a tribal infant who has lost his mother, seeing dreams of her sons becoming the princes at the end of a war and leading a happy familial life etc. Divakaruni has no

[112] One is reminded of numerous cinematic takes on the same in India in recent times, *Margarita with a Straw* (2014), *Parched* (2016) and *Lipstick under my Burka* (2017), all of which invited attacks from the censor board and segments of orthodox men.

qualms about her heroine executing the dharma of a wife more than that of a mother. She narrates the plight of her Panchaali: "I gave birth to my five sons, one from each husband . . . I loved the boys dearly, but I wasn't particularly maternal. Or perhaps my energies were used up in being a wife five times over, and a queen besides. Fortunately, Dhai Ma, . . . was more than happy to take them off my hands" (Divakaruni 148). Divakaruni has her heroine realistically present the impossible task of being both an ideal wife and an ideal mother at the same time, that too, 'five times over' in either case.

Draupadi: *Pativrata* or *Sahadharmini*?

The duties of a chaste wife, generally referred to by the epithet *pativratā*, are set forth repeatedly in the *Mahābhārata*. Explaining the origin of the term *pativrata*, Shah writes, "In Vedic texts a wife derives her chief identity from being a *patnī*, i.e. a mistress who was the wife of the master of the house. The other common epithet for her is *jāyā* or the wedded wife who gives birth to children. On the other hand, the most pervasive conception of a wife in the epics. . . is that of *pativratā*" (101). Shah further explains the role the epics played in expounding the concept: "*Pativratādharma/pativratya* became the only duty enjoined upon the wife, and the epics were the vehicles for the popularization of this *dharma*. The hermeneutic devices employed by the epic redactors for this purpose were *pativratā mahātmya ākhyāna* and the *saṁvāda* such as Draupadī Satyabhāmā" (101). Shah also notes that "a *pativratā* wife was required to be of service not just to her husband, but also his entire household, which included his parents as also other wives" (104). In essence, the word *pativrata* comes to stand for ideal womanhood.

Jayal has explained the transition of the image of a wife from "*sahadharmiṇī* or one who is the true friend and confidante of her husband and who reserves for herself the right to independent judgement," to *pativratā* or "one who is but a mere devotee of that exalted, all-wise and all-powerful god called *pati*" (qtd. in Shah 102). Jayal explains that *sahadharmiṇīs* is used for "the wives who were friends and guides of their husbands" (103).

The case of Draupadi is an interesting one—although she is referred to as "a *sati, sadhvi* and *pativrata* woman; all the epithets standing specifically for conjugal faithfulness," with Kunti blessing her as one, and "her role as a *pativratā*" becoming the most valorized for the wife," it is difficult to accept her simply as a devoted wife

(Mukherjee 32; Shah 101). Mukherjee draws attention to the fact that even from "the Kaurava side, Dhrtarastra, Drona, Samjaya and others admired her as a pious, truthful and learned woman. Vidura praised her as a woman adept in *dharma* and *artha* and compared her with the goddess Sri. Dhrtarastra complimented her with the appellation of *sati* . . . Even Karna, . . . could not but admire her as a wife" (Mukherjee 32).

Draupadi is "fearless and wise . . . with a mind of her . . . introduced by Yudhiṣṭhira as both *paṇditā* and *pativratā*" (Shah 102). But Mukhoty is right in pointing out that Draupadi is "paradoxically quite unlike the classic Hindu model for the perfect dharmic wife, the pativrata" (13). One can find her "veering constantly off the path of ideal pativrata," and is therefore "not an easily contained example of womanhood" (Mukhoty 18). She speaks out, like Sita, "after [her] . . . identity as *dharmapatnī* has been brutally violated" (Hiltebeitel, *Dharma* 498).[113] This is clearly illustrated in the examples cited from the retellings discussed above. Even in times where Yajnaseni or Panchaali does not speak up, one can see them engaged in interior monologues, waging an intellectual war and solving a moral dilemma inside their heads. In that sense, Draupadi in the epic, and Yajnaseni and Panchaali in the contemporary retellings of Draupadi's *Mahabharata*, shift the paradigm of a woman's dharma of loyalty, chastity and subservience, back to a more egalitarian ethic of the *sahadharmini.*

Dharma and Gender: *Stridharma* and Women's *Svadharma*

Stridharma is, broadly speaking, the cumulative dharma of a woman, mostly as a loyal wife. Vora draws attention to the development that "the new code of sex-ethics prescribed faithfulness and service to one's husband as the only duty of a wife. The *Mahābhārata* declares, 'There is no sacrificial activity for a woman, . . . Her only *dharma* is to serve her husband. She can attain heaven by following that *dharma.*'" (115) Hiltebeitel explains that Brahmanical norms for women are set forth broadly through the concept of *strīdharma,* 'Law(s) for women' or 'women's *dharma*'" (*Dharma* 338). *Manu* encapsulates *strīdharma* in a famous adage which has become a feminist's nightmare:

> Even in their own homes, a female—whether she is a child, a young woman, or an old lady—should never carry out any task independently (*na svātantryeṇa*). As a child, she must remain under her father's control; as a

[113] This will be discussed at length in the next chapter.

> young woman, under her husband's; and when her husband is dead, under her sons'. She must never seek to live independently (*na bhajet strī svatantratām*). She must never want to separate herself from her father, husband, or sons; for by separating herself from them, a woman brings disgrace on both families. . . . (qtd. in Hiltebeitel, *Dharma* 338)

Āpastamba Dharmasūtra , however, like the *Mahābhārata*, allows that "one may learn *dharma* from women and Śūdras" while *Gautama Dharmasūtra*, "seems to have made the strictures even tighter than Manu*:* "A wife (*strī*) cannot act independently in matters related to the Law (*asvatantrā dharme*). She should never go against her husband and keep her speech, eyes, and actions under strict control" (Hiltebeitel, *Dharma* 339). However, recent studies have brought out that these texts do indirectly attribute mental agency to women, and explicitly ascribe economical and sexual agency to them (Hiltebeitel, *Dharma* 339).[114]

Observance of dharma, especially by a woman, is difficult for men and women alike. But according to Kapoor, "it is harder for woman . . . Woman's life or role is seen as a *tapa* - a rigorous life, – though it is no doubt dedicated to a worthy cause – here the welfare of the family. This emanates partly from her being the mother and partly from the social structure at the time" ("Hindu Women" 47). But that does not deter them from sticking to the code of dharma, or finding solutions to situations of moral dilemmas. McGrath goes a step ahead to suggest that they are "more connected with how the world of right dharma functions on earth. They have a privileged relationship with dharma, which is not always accessible to men; a relationship which is . . . more mundane and immediate . . . this concerns speech and its projected morality . . . Women . . . often declaim upon the subject of dharma" (McGrath, *Strī* 155). It turns out then, that women not only know *stridharma* well enough, but even dharma in the broader sense of the term.

Brodbeck and Black are of the opinion that "gender is not an essence, nor does it constitute a stable identity. Rather, gendered identities are tenuous and provisional, and can never be demonstrated once and for all; they exist, as Butler emphasizes, only insofar as they are performed and re-performed" (13). This brings one to the emphasis of gender as performance, as well as a re-performance, a concept that underpins the discussion of

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[114] See Jamison; Olivelle (2005).

dharma and gender in retellings of the epic vis-à-vis the epic. It can also be applied to the repetition of the codes of conduct and rights, legality and attributes of men and women, i.e., dharma in all its meanings, in fact, the idea that dharma receives its semantic impetus because of performance and repetition.

Much of the debate around dharma in the epic is centred on the conflict between the individual facing a choice between an individual duty (*svadharma*) and a general duty (*sadharanadharma*). But as has been discussed in the preceding chapter, these lofty ideas have generally been enunciated with men in mind. One is thus left in a lurch about how the term may be interpreted in relation to women. Is the *svadharma* of a woman the same as that of a man? Or is it the same? How can one understand the concept in relation to *stridharma* (the dharma of a woman)? In fact, it would be prudent to suggest at this juncture that in a lot of cases, though, as has been depicted in the discussions above, dharma is also largely contingent upon the individual concerned, and can change with change in situations and individuals concerned. As Brodbeck and Black explain, "gendered identities might be unstable, subtly and constantly changing, but this does not mean that individuals can completely control their gender. Any given culture has a set of expectations and rewards, reinscribed through institutions, social practices and political structures, for how men and women should speak, act and internalize their identities" (13). In the present discussion, the characters find themselves in dilemmas when they are expected to follow the 'tradition' of dharma, when in a number of cases, there may be no precedent or the example might not be applicable to the context at hand.

However, to begin with, there is always a semblance of set codes and values that an individual is supposed to adhere to in relation to his dharmic action. The image of Draupadi in the epic is of "a pious, dutiful, learned, proud and truthful woman; a woman of fame, integrity, veracity and indomitable courage; a woman who truly followed the *dharma* of the *ksatriya-s*," opines Mukherjee (33). What Mukherjee seems to be referring to is Draupadi's *svadharma* as a woman, owing to her fierce nature and courage which are accordance with her status as a *kshatriyani.* It is clearly detectable though, in her exhorting her husbands to wage a war to avenge her insult and to claim their rightful share of the kingdom after her humiliation in the *sabha*.

Manusamhita speaks of female *svadharma* only once in the context of levirate, and permits women to procreate according to their *svadharma* if the husband is sick or dying

(Hiltebeitel, *Dharma* 496). Hiltebeitel draws attention to several meanings of *svadharma*: "In Sītā's case, [*svadharma*] enables her to negotiate and even change Rāma's mind. Draupadī uses [*svadharma*] to maneuver and play for time [in the *sabha* when she is subjected to humiliation] . . . the Rākṣasī Hiḍimbā tells Kuntī that she is abandoning her friends, kin, and *svadharma* to marry Kuntī's son Bhīma . . . Sītā, Draupadī, and Hiḍimbā . . . relat[e] their usages of women's *svadharma* to marriage" (*Dharma* 497). Hiltebeitel is perhaps right in pointing out that "there seems to be a considerable gap between what men prescribe as women's *svadharma* and what women can make of it as a law of their own" (*Dharma* 498).

Black has conducted an extensive research on how "the *Mahābhārata*, although sometimes indirectly, deals with the complex logic of how female characters can follow the *dharma* of women, yet at the same time speak articulately about dharma in the company of men" (72). He makes several references to the conversation between Draupadi and Satyabhama when the latter comes to meet her during the Pandavas' exile, and the conversations between Yudhishthira and Draupadi during the exile, to illustrate the same. Satyabhama is interested in knowing from Draupadi the reason why her husbands obey her.

Brodbeck and Black suggest that "the ideal of the *pativratā* is perhaps best articulated by Draupadī, as she instructs Satyabhāmā in how to be a successful wife: 'My Law rests on my husband, as, I think, it eternally does with women. He is the God, he is the path, nothing else'" (17). Draupadī gives an extensive discourse upon the duties of a wife, but Laurie Patton's analysis of the Draupadī-Satyabhāmā dialogue leads her to suggest that one should not read into this "the stereotypical meaning of always towing the husband's line; rather, being a *pativratā* was a two-way street – Draupadī's dutiful obedience begets obedience from her husband" (Shah 109). Patton also makes the observation that "Draupadī's speech lends support to Butler's idea of gender as performative: when Satyabhāmā asks about instruments to make husbands obedient, Draupadī answers by narrating of a series of acts" (*Conduct Yourself* 104). In fact, on a closer examination, one will realize that the two women "are not just concerned with wifely behaviour per se, but the question of control and deceit – indeed, one might say, agency itself" (Patton, *Conduct Yourself* 100-01).

Both Divakaruni and Ray include the dialogue between Satyabhama and Draupadi in their respective novels. One wonders why the conversation of Yajnaseni/Panchaali with Satyabhama is made up of "exaggerations, half-truths, and brazen lies" (Rajan, *Three Epic Women* 104). However, when one pits this against the men in the epic, who "never cease to exaggerate their prowess at every opportunity," it becomes an important departure from the point of view of a woman making such "overstatements" (Rajan, *Three Epic Women* 104). Also, not all of them are lies or overstatements. Some of the statements made by Draupadi are corroborated by facts elsewhere in the epic. But it is significant the heroine resorts to exaggerations, even if for the sake of keeping the truth of her relationships with her husband to herself. In that sense, she displays the grit of a strong woman who can handle her life on her own, as well as fits into the image of an ideal wife, at least in principle.

Both Yajnaseni and Panchaali seem much more realistic to contemporary readers owing to the fact that they neither conform to the "*archetypal* Indian image of woman is a blend of power and mercy, of *śakti* and *kṛpa*," nor completely to the "*stereotyped* image is woman as a vehicle of orthodoxy, or as sheer subservience," to borrow two terms from Anuradha Banerjee (Padia, *Feminism* 10). They emerge as a blend of the two, an in-between, who is both merciful and rebellious as the situation demands. However, the foregoing discussion only restricts itself to the trajectory of Draupadi's journey in the novel from her girlhood to her marriages, and the various issues and concerns in between, especially the problems related to dharma, and how these young women solve them, or deal with them, either on their own, or through help from some other companion or friend, mostly women, but also some men, who are vested with ascetic and spiritual powers. In so doing, the chapter also highlighted how the dharma of women in the retellings, especially that of Draupadi, undergoes a redefinition in the retellings vis-à-vis the epic, thus broadening the horizon of dharma in relation to gender, through an interpretation, mostly of silences, but also of the interior monologues of the female characters, as well as their behaviour, speech acts, verbal discourses. One would like to end on a note of hope, that the retellings from Draupadi's perspective in future will attempt to take this ever shifting paradigm of dharma and gender ahead in newer and more innovative ways, giving the readers food for thought, reaching the hitherto unknown recesses of the heroine's psyche, illuminating through their imaginative departures, what a young, clueless woman would

have felt and how she must have dealt with complex moral and ethical problems in her own times.

The next chapter will be a foray into Draupadi's difficult journey as a wife and as a woman, dealing with repeated assaults and humiliation, treading through the years of exile, a firmly exhorting her husbands to war, the carnage of the great Bhārata war and its aftermath, and her final journey with her husbands. Needless to mention, all these topics will be undertaken as comparative studies between the epic and the novels by Ray and Divakaruni, portions of which were discussed in this chapter. The following chapter will allow a full-fledged discussion of dharma in the context of gender, as the problems faced on account of morality and ethic by the heroine and the men around her, are indeed knotty, and will lend themselves to deliberative arguments and discussions.

CHAPTER 3

DHARMA AND GENDER-II

Demystifying Games, the War and the Final Journey: The Adharmic Violation of Draupadi and her Reclamation of Dharma

> Was I part of Yudhishthir's movable or immovable property, male and female slaves, horses and elephants? Being a woman did I not have right even over myself, my own soul? If they had rights over this body of mine, did it mean they could do as they wished with me? (Ray 235)[115]

> *I'm a queen. Daughter of Drupad, sister of Dhristadyumna. Mistress of the greatest palace on earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins, or summoned to court like a dancing girl.* (Divakaruni 190)[116]

The predicament of a wife, that too, the wife of five husbands, can well be discerned in this outburst of Draupadi. Both Ray and Divakaruni place this plight and the resultant outburst of their heroine at the heart of their novels. In trying to salvage the women characters from the hubris of a largely male discourse on dharma and propriety, both the writers paint an empathetic and empowering picture of their heroine. This chapter investigates such efforts alongside the dharma of women in the epic, and the dharma of men when sitting in a court of dharma (here, meaning law/justice) towards women in distress, and expose the possibilities of a feminist discourse on dharma that the novels are oriented towards. However, by no means is this merely a feminist plea. By analyzing the role that men play in the dicing scene and afterwards, including the period of exile and the final journey to heaven, the present study seeks to create a discourse on dharma and gender.

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[115] All references to Ray can be traced to *Yajnaseni*, unless indicated otherwise.

[116] All references to Divakaruni, unless otherwise indicated, are from the novel, *The Palace of Illusions.*

An Array of Illusions: The New Palace, the Sacrifice and the Game

The Pandavas along with Draupadi move to their new palace formed by clearing the forest of Khandava, given to them by Dhritarashtra.[117] Earlier, Panchaali had confessed to Bheesma that she did not like the palace in Hastinapur, and the grandfather had promised to bring up the matter with the king. Needless to say, Panchaali considers the division of the kingdom as a pat on her back. The palace at Khandav is constructed by Maya, the divine architect. He made a beautiful palace with his divine tricks, and Draupadi and her husbands spend a brief, happy period in their newly constructed palace and kingdom, Indraprastha. The title of Divakaruni's novel derives from this palace, Maya Mahal, translated literally as 'The Palace of Illusions'.[118] It is the palace of Panchaali's dreams, the one she has been wanting since her childhood, and feels elated at having the palace accommodating all that she ever wanted, as also being the one to name it as such.[119]

Panchaali in the novel is soaked in the happiness of her life, considering it to be her priced possession. When later, Panchaali asks Arjun the animals in the Khandav forest were killed, Krishna replies in his stead: "How else could you have settled here? Built your kingdom? Gained all that fame? *Changed the direction of history's wheel? Someone has to pay a price for that. You of all people should know this, Krishnaa*" (Divakaruni 144, italics mine). Krishna's answer is laced with a forboding. This also ties up with Vyasa's predictions for Panchaali. However, it says nothing about Panchaali being the cause of the war, as has been said umpteen number of times for Draupadi. Krishna's statement reminds Panchaali and the readers that she is the one, in fact, who will be at great loss, at the receiving end of a great disaster, war or carnage.

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[117] The foundation of the palace itself is based on violence. To build the palace, Arjun and Krishna set fire to the Khandav forest, killing the inhabitants of the forest, mostly animals and birds. This act of violence is also probably what they pay for in the carnage of the war. One must remember that the *Mahabharata* prescribes non-violence and compassion not only for human being but all living beings.

[118] The term could alternatively have been translated as the Palace by Maya, or Maya's Palace, but the literal translation of the 'Maya' as 'Illusions' has deep reverberations in the novel.

[119] Before the building up of the palace, only Bheem asks Panchaali what all she wanted in her palace. This makes her realize that he is the one who loved her more than the others, describing this new-found knowledge as "oddly painful," because she wanted to see such love in Arjun (Divakaruni 144). She cannot She cannot reconcile herself between her desire for Karna, her agony at the cold behaviour of Arjun, and the latest realization about Bheem's love for her.

The palace's architect, Maya, also gives a warning to Arjun to live in the palace, enjoy, but refrain from inviting anyone to come and see the palace. Panchaali and her husbands wanted to show it off, but Krishna also seconds Maya's opinion: "Everyone who sees this palace will want it for himself. Envy is dangerous" (Divakaruni 147).[120] From this point, the novelist traces the efflorescence of Panchaali, the passage of time (almost a decade) during which Panchaali fives birth to her five sons, and the tranquillity she finally finds here: "Some of its serenity seeped into me, some wisdom, so that I learned to be happy with my lot in the world . . . I saw my husbands, too, differently. They were a unit together . . . a hand that would protect me if the need arose" (Divakaruni 148). Such seemingly simplistic statements indicate that she is also guilty of getting coerced into the logic of patriarchy. To the readers, this may also serve as a foreboding of the fact that the very hand may not be able to protect her, and as we will see, it will not. It seems Panchaali has also forgotten the advices given to her by Shikhandi and her Dhai Ma. But destiny has a rude reminder awaiting her, which will come with the bonus of a realization, that she has to be her own protector, as well as, ironically, also of her husbands and their kingdom.[121]

There are some pleasant departures from the epic too, which Divakaruni brilliantly projects in her novel. She shows Panchaali becoming dealing with matters of governance, and her husband Yudhisthir seeking her advice "when a tricky judgment had to be delivered" (Divakaruni 148). While this is music to the ears of a feminist, does this also indicate that Yudhisthir was not an able administrator? If this conjecture is to be true, one wonders why he does not consult her before the wagers he made in the sabha! Panchaali is also happy that she weilds more control in her palace here than she did in Hastinapur in the presence of Kunti, who chose to stay behind in Hastinapur.

However, all good things come at a price. So did the palace! Iravati Karve suggests that "Mayasabha was not only ill-omened; it was even more insubstantial than the city in which it was built. Born in violence, its dazzling demonic splendor turned out to be a fleeting dream" (Karve 120). The root of the trouble lay in Yudhishthira's decision to organize a *rajasuya* sacrifice. This meant sending invitations to all the other kings and kingdoms, the Kauravs and Hastinapur included. Ray's heroine, Yajnaseni, was not in favour of inviting

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[120] By Duryodhana's own admission, it was his envy for the palace, the riches and the growing prosperity of the Pandavas that incited him to invite them for the rigged game of dice and usurp their kingdom from them.

[121] This is just a pre-emption of the dicing scene and the humiliation that befalls Draupadi.

the Kauravs and their allies, like Karna and Jayadrath, "The wise never display their wealth to the wicked and the jealousy-prone. . . . There was no doubt that the inaugural celebrations of Indraprastha's assembly-hall would deeply grieve the Kauravs" (Ray 115). Yajnaseni also mentions Yudhishthir's dilemma about the organization of the *rajasuya*, as he is, by nature, a peace-loving person. But then, showing hesitation towards the organization of the *rajasuya* was against *kshatriya* dharma, while the successful conduct of the *rajasuya* would establish "fraternity, dharma and unity" in the country (Ray 218). Yudhishthir follows the command of his *svadharma*, as he will do several times in the narrative.

Even Divakaruni's Panchaali is sceptical about the idea of the Rajasuya sacrifice, prompted by Narad's information that their ancestors were found in Yama's court (the Hindu hell) and not in Indra's luxurious abode (heaven). She raises a pertinent query: "Even if there were lokas, what proof was there that the dead could be promoted from one to the next based on what we did here on earth?" (Divakaruni 157). But she is also secretly excited about their decision of inviting everyone for the sacrifice, "I, too, wanted Duryodhan to stare openmouthed at what they'd made of the wilderness. I, too, wanted him to be dazzled by all their treasures—including myself, their crown possession" (Divakaruni 159). Again, one is completely in agreement with Panchaali's intentions, but one cannot miss her reduction of herself to the 'crown possession' of her husbands. Probably this amounts to over-reading, so let us leave it here.

Pratibha Ray also delves into the male psyche of Yudhishthir, who does not change his decision s on female advice once he has made up his mind, "whether it was right or wrong" (Ray 115). The Kauravs stay back after the sacrifice is over, and Yudhishthir delights in playing games after games of dice with Durodhan. Yajnaseni is worried about Yudhishthir 'defeating' Duryodhan at dice. Yudhishthir had previously confessed about his weakness for dice to her on their wedding night, "I can restrain myself in every sphere except dicing" (Ray 72-73). She says to Arjun, "I do not know why, this dice business scares me. Whatever be the addiction, it is dangerous. . . . Duryodhan many not perhaps forget all his life the shame and insult of defeat at Yudhishthir's hands. I do not know what means of revenge he may seek secretly" (Ray 136). Although the epic does not once mention dicing as Yudhishthira's weakness, scholars and creative writers have tended to read it in this grain. Perhaps rightly so, otherwise why would a man of high integrity and moral values not know where to stop while playing a game which was forbidden for the

kings in ancient times—and he has just become the emperor after the conclusion of the *rajasuya* sacrifice.[122]

Divakaruni also dedicates significant time to develop the opinion of her readers on the character of Yudhisthir. Panchaali initial impression of him:

> Kind, courteous, and well-read, . . . he was easy to get along with, . . . lacking in humor. (Only later would I discover other facets: his stubbornness, his obsession with truth, his insistent moralizing, his implacable goodness.) . . . Slowly I realized that he had in his head a compendium of ideas . . . about what constituted ladylike sexual behavior, and . . . what didn't. I could see that I'd have to dedicate significant energy to reeducating him. (Divakaruni 122)

Even Dhai Ma, who had accompanied Panchaali to Hastinapur, dislikes him, warning her that he "labors under the delusion that all the world loves him" (Divakaruni 130). Panchaali tried to console herself in his being a good man "*Righteousness come to earth*, they called him" (Divakaruni 139, italics mine). It remains to be seen if all that he did was actually right, dharmic, in accordance with law and rules of moral conduct. Sahadev drops in the suggestion to Panchaali that playing dice was Yudhisthir's one weakness (Divakaruni 144). "Yudhisthir loved the games," reports Panchaali (Divakaruni 171). Like Ray, Divakaruni also sticks to the idea of the weakness of dice being the king's flaw, because otherwise, it hardly seems plausible that he would eventually go on to do what he did in the assembly hall at Hastinapur.

In Divakaruni's novel, Duryodhan is shown to be envious of the new palace 'of Panchaali'—she lives under the illusion that she owns the palace completely. He stays back after the completion of the sacrifice, roams around taking minute notes, because, as Panchaali thinks, he wants to build himself a similar palace (Divakaruni 168). Panchaali dislikes this from the core of her heart: "We'd poured our hearts into designing this palace. It was an embodiment of our most intimate desires, our secret wishes. It was *us*. Every time I saw Duryodhan measuring a doorway . . . or pointing at a floating stairwell . . . I felt violated" (Divakaruni 169, italics in original). One cannot miss the uncanny foreboding

[122] A detailed discussion on Yudhishthira's reasons for not refusing Duryodhana's invitation and challenge will follow in the coming sections.

inherent in Panchaali's suggestion of the feeling of 'violation.' Violated she will stand, in another palace, very soon!

The immediate trigger for Duryodhan's invitation to Yudhishthir for the game of dice, in most accounts, is the revenge he sought for Draupadi's laughter at his fall in the newly-built palace full of illusions. There is no mention of the same in the critical edition of the epic. Basing his argument on the critical edition, Basu asserts that "Draupadi was nowhere in the picture, nor was she, as queen, supposed to be a spectator to that scene" (97). Panchaali in Divakaruni' novel, writes that seeing Duryodhan fall, "My attendants burst into peals of laughter. I should have stopped them, but I couldn't help smiling myself, . . . Encouraged by my smile, one of the younger women cried out . . . 'It seems the blind king's son is also blind!' I reprimanded her sharply, but the harm was done" (Divakaruni 172-73). Both Duryodhan and Karna stare at her when they hear this, mistaking it to be Panchaali who laughed and made the comment. It is because of this that Duryodhan's ire is directed at Panchaali, as Divakaruni reports. Panchaali realizes that had she acted differently, she could have "minimized the damage" (Divakaruni 173). But that could not be, because fate had ordained the suffering and the ignominy for her.

(A)Dharma in a Fated Invitation

After leaving for Hastinapur, Duryodhan sends an invitation to Yudhishthir for a game of dice. In Ray's novel, Yajnaseni feels something ominous about the invite and tries to persuade Yudhishthir not to go when Vidura arrives with Duryodhan's invitation of dice. But Yudhishthir replies, "Despite knowing for sure that he will be defeated, the kshatriya does not turn back" (Ray 230). It seems he is conflating two different things altogether: the 'prohibited' game of dice, and the 'sanctioned' duty of a kshatriya to go to war. Yajnaseni reminds him "war and dicing are not the same," but to no avail (Ray 230). Immediately later, he attributes the other reasons for not refusing the invitation to his inability to refuse or turn down a challenge, fate and determinism. In retrospect, Yajnaseni can only lament: "If he had listened to my plea that day! The greatest disaster of my life could have been averted!" (Ray 231).

On receiving and accepting the invitation for the game of dice from Hastinapur, Kunti tells Yudhisthir: "You're making a mistake . . . At least leave Draupadi behind—it's

neither right nor prudent that she goes with you" (Divakaruni 178).[123] But in a statement that confirms Panchaali's belief that she has started to wield more control on her husbands, Yudhisthir replies, "Oh, Mother! . . . You're always imagining the worst. Panchaali will be just fine. In fact, she'll make sure that the rest of us don't do anything imprudent" (Divakaruni 178). This also indicates Yudhisthir's reliance on the prudence of Panchaali and her knowledge about dharma. But as one will witness, she will not be given a chance to exhibit her skills in the manner that Yudhisthir or the readers might have desired. Multani maintains that "this trip marks Draupadi's initiation into the next important stage of her life" (Multani 223).

In Ray's novel, however, Yajnaseni travels to Hastinapur with her husbands and Kunti. She was menstruating, and hence impure, which is the reason why she stayed in a private mansion in Hastinapur. According to the then mores of the society, she was even prohibited to see her husband's face during her cycle, so much so that "to see even the shadow of another man was sinful" (Ray 232). In a highly ironical scene, Ray, at this juncture, mentions how Yajnaseni's "thick, curly, long tresses" were a major attraction of her beauty. She also adds that because she was menstruating, she was prohibited from dressing her hair or getting dressed up in her fineries. In fact, she was clad in "a single garment, even wearing undergarments was prohibited," as Ray reports (232).[124] She is with her friend, Maya, and in reply to a jest by her, Yajnaseni says, and one cannot miss the premonition here, that even on ordinary days, "for the lustful glance of another man to touch even the tip of a married woman's hair is an insult. That is why the need of a veil and tying up the hair. Displaying one's beauty is the dharma of a courtesan, not of a wife" (Ray 232-33). One can notice how much women were revered in general in the ancient times, as even a courtesan was supposed to stick to her dharma, and was not considered to

[123] The significance of Kunti addressing Panchaali as Draupadi cannot be missed here, as it was a name Panchaali developed a dislike for, insisting, even as a young lady, that everyone address her as Panchaali, and not Draupadi.

[124] The description 'about not being in undergarments' probably draws from the festival of Rajaparva in Orissa, when a menstruating young girl is clad in a single, white saree, and a celebration is held to mark the onset of puberty for her. However, even the epic describes Draupadi's state as one of defilement, and the prohibition to have her hair tied up, or wear anything more than a single garment, well in place during the times.

be on the fringes of the society. It also subtly reminds the readers that Yajnaseni knows her dharma to be distinguished, and knows it well.

In Divakaruni's novel, one gets a warning about the nature of Duryodhan before the game proper begins: "Duryodhan was the one who wielded power . . . [and] was impatient with the cautious advice of the elders. Seeing this, the elders protected their own dignity and withdrew into silence. Each day they were more like ornate figureheads on a ship that had changed its course without their consent and was sailing into dangerous waters" (Divakaruni 181). The general ambience of Hastinpur, even in the palace, was not very conducive to women. It was a conservative city, and "although there was a covered women's section in court, [women] were only allowed there by invitation" (Divakaruni 181). Ray also describes the city as one where women were not made a part of the decision-making of men, unlike in Indraprastha. Panchaali's reputation as a woman who does not subscribe to the strict, subversive codes of patriarchy, precedes her in Hastinapur. Bhanumati, Duryodhan's wife, strikes a good rapport with her, and eventually tells her, "You're so kind . . . Not cruel-tongued like they warned me" (Divakaruni 181).

A Prohibited Game, Adharma 'Dharma' and Draupadi[125]

The game of dice played in the *sabha* (assembly hall) of Hastinapur has been etched in the popular memory of the Indian cultural scenario. Games have been played in India since ancient times, and a precursor to the game of dice was the *chausar*, which finds a mention in the Rigveda, and was played even between Shiva and Parvati in mythological accounts. The game, per se, was never maligned until it was projected as a debauched one in the *Mahabharata.* Pratibha Ray chooses to evade a description of the game of dice and only reports it, probably because it is too loathsome to describe, or possibly because the narrative is from Yajnaseni's vantage point, and she was clearly not a witness to the proceedings of the game. However, she is worried about the outcome of the game, when a messenger arrives with the news that "King Duryodhan's command is: Queen Yajnaseni should appear in the assembly hall" (Ray 234).[126] Yajnaseni's face flamed with anger. She

[125] My usage of Dharma here has a dual purpose: it refers to the general debate on moral and ethical codes, which has been an ongoing discussion, as well as to 'Dharmaraj' Yudhishthira and how he makes a travesty of dharma.

[126] It is to be noted here that the messenger still addresses her as "Queen Yajnaseni."

commands him, "Go Pratikami! Go and ask my husband whether first he staked himself and lost or me? Till I get a reply to this I will not move from here" (Ray 234). True to the epic, Yajnaseni of Ray questions the propriety of the act, the dharma, of Yudhishthir, "Does even the most immoral uncivilized gambler ever stake his wife? Has anyone ever done such a detestable act in the history of the world?," she ponders as she is waiting for the messenger to return with a reply (Ray 234). Yajnaseni confesses in her letter to Krishna, "I would have wept but my whole body was trembling with anger and excitement, which dried up all tears" (Ray 235).

When Pratikami comes back with the command that she has been asked by Duryodhan to go to the assembly hall and ask her question there, she sends him back with the same question, with the additional instruction that it is now to be put up to the elders in the hall. At this juncture, Yajnaseni recalls the scene of her *svayamwar*, where she had "with great pride . . . rejected Karna, had garlanded . . . Arjun" (Ray 235). She enrages over and laments the turn of events whereby "clad in a single garment, menstruating, like a helpless, unfortunate woman would appear in public in the assembly-hall" (Ray 235). She wonders if her husbands will be able to stand her drudgery, more worried about how she will "above all, having borne this insult, . . . go on living?" (Ray 235). For Yajnaseni, the most humiliating and agonizing moment in her life definitely was this; when she was staked like a chattel and lost by her husband in the game of dice. She protests against this objectification of herself: "Full of anguish and anger I was thinking: . . . Was I part of Yudhishthir's movable or immovable property, male and female slaves, horses and elephants? Being a woman did I not have right even over myself, my own soul? If they had rights over this body of mine, did it mean they could do as they wished with me? (Ray 235).[127] Jagannathan rightly suggests that "Yajnaseni's fury against the denial of basic rights to her as a human being strongly echoes Beauvoir's insistence that a woman be defined as a human being in quest of values" (90). Yajnaseni's musing drives home her firm belief, though projected as a satirical attack on the patriarchal society, that women, and for that matter, even men, do not come with price-tags. Yudhishthir has clearly missed the point in his game, which he "plays with ritual obsessiveness" (Miller, "India's Great Epic" 127). To add to her woes, Nitambini arrives with a secret message from Yudhishthir,

[127] These lines are too heartrending not to be quoted in detail here, especially because they give a glimpse of the min of the author, Ray, and how she was immensely moved and affected while penning down the episode as well as the novel, coming as she does, from a background of formal training in human psychology (Ray "Personal Interview").

that she should go to the assembly hall in the very condition that she is in—menstruating, clad in the single garment. He presumed that seeing her thus, the elder-in-laws would "take care to protect your honour" (Ray 236). Both Yudhishthir and Yajnaseni's expectations will stand crushed, as one will see.

Divakaruni, however, reports the game briefly, and a full-fledged description of how it unfurled, is provided by Dhai Ma follows. It is reported by Panchaali thus:

> Sakuni had taken Duryodhan's place as Yudhisthir's opponent. . . . Time after time he won until my husband—deaf to the entreaties of his brothers—lost his jewels, his weapons, and all his personal wealth. Then, goaded by Duryodhan, gripped by stubbornness, and *intoxicated by the game, he began to wager things he had no right to jeopardize*. And forfeited them all. (Divakaruni 189, italics mine)

One readily notices two facts Panchaali is trying to draw our attention to: one, she is certain that Yudhishthir was not in control of himself, as if drunk on the game, when he started wagering after losing all his movable and immovable wealth; and two, she does not mince words in proclaiming that he had no right to jeopardize certain things, by which she means the four Pandava brothers other than the eldest, and herself. What she thinks of Yudhisthir wagering himself is not very clearly expressed, but even that act, on the scale of dharma, is unacceptable: they are *persons*, no *things*. The already prohibited game for kings certainly does not permit such unthinkable wagers.[128]

In *The Place of Illusions*, Dhai Ma rushes in along with Duryodhan's servant to Panchaali who has come with Duryodhan's command:

> He licked his lips nervously and bowed. "Forgive me, your highness. I must carry out my task. Prince Duryodhan invites you to the sabha."[129]
>
> "To the hall?" I asked, incredulous. "But women never go there! And why would he and not my husbands send for me?"

[128] One can find a parallel in the story of Nala and Damyanti, narrated to Yudhishthir and Draupadi during their exile. Nala loses all his wealth and kingdom to his younger brother in a game of dice, but he stops short of wagering himself or his wife, Damayanti.

[129] Notice how the servant reframes the 'order' of Duryodhan into an 'invitation' before Panchaali.

> "Because he lost it all gambling," she said through slurred tears. "Yudhisthir. First the money in the state coffers, then the palace—"
>
> "My palace?" I interrupted, furious. "He had no right!"[130]
>
> . . . . . .
>
> But that fiend Shakuni said, "Why, as an elder brother you can wager the other Pandavas,"
>
> . . . . . .
>
> "He did. And lost them. . . Duryodhan said, I'll wager everything I've won from you in one final game, against Draupadi."
>
> My head was ringing. "No!" I said.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> My mouth went dry. Denials collided with each other inside me. (Divakaruni 190)

Panchaali cannot believe the fate that has befallen her. She is plunged in anger and deep anguish. She launches into a long discourse, musing:

> *I'm a queen. Daughter of Drupad, sister of Dhristadyumna. Mistress of the greatest palace on earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins, or summoned to court like a dancing girl.*
>
> But then I remembered what I'd read long ago in a book, never imagining that quaint law could ever have any power over me.
>
> *The wife is the property of the husband, no less so than a cow or a slave.*[131]
>
> . . . . . .
>
> My head reeled, but I steadied myself. I tried to remember other words from the Nyaya Shastra. *If perchance a man lost himself, he no longer had any jurisdiction over his wife.* (Divakaruni 190)

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[130] Panchaali's inquiry about her palace will be trivialized by the facts that will be revealed to her immediately after this.

[131] From the *Manusmriti.*

> "Go back to the court," I ordered, "and ask the elders this: Is it not true that once Yudhisthir was Duryodhan's property, he had no right to wager me?" (Divakaruni 189-91, italics in original)[132]

She is in for a shock when she hears the sequence of the events from Dhai Ma. In the lines above, one cannot miss a couple of innovations made by Divakaruni. To begin with, when she learns about the fact that even she has been lost to Duryodhan, she refers to herself as a daughter, sister and as a mistress of a palace. It is remarkable that she does not identify herself as being 'owned' by her husbands, least of all by Yudhishthira. She even refuses to be equated to 'a bag of coins,' meaning she refuses to be counted as Yudhishthira's property, nor like 'a dancing girl,' implying she does not want to be 'exhibited' in a court which does not allow the entry of women, least of all in the condition she is in.[133] In making the latter comparison, she might not necessarily be read as degrading 'dancing girls,' but referring to the lustful eyes of men she was sure to encounter in the assembly hall at Hastinapur.

Divakaruni deserves all the praise for bringing in references from two ancient Indian law books here, also referring to her reading of these books: *Manusmriti* and *Nyaya Shastra*. While the first reference condemns the status of women, the second salvages her in this difficult moment. In fact, Panchaali deserves praise for maintaining such poise amidst these testing times. The moment she recalls that the *Nyaya Shahstra* ordains: "If perchance a man lost himself, he no longer had any jurisdiction over his wife," she sends the messenger back with a question which seems to be echoing down to this day in the Indian society without any conclusive answer.[134] Divakaruni's framing of her question differently from the way the epic or Ray does it is also pathbreaking. Although Panchaali is sending the messenger back with a question, it doesn't really appear that she is waiting in anticipation of a reply which will determine her status as having been 'lost' by her

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[132] I wish to be excused again for reproducing such a long excerpt from the text, but again, these lines are too poignant not to be reproduced.

[133] This was not the case in Indraprastha, though.

[134] I draw this from Matilal's phenomenal essay "Moral Dilemmas: Insights from Indian Epics," a thesis which Gurcharan Das and many other scholars lend support to, that Draupadi's question was left hanging in the *sabha* (Matilal 1989), even at the end of the *Mahabharata* (Das 2010) and does so, I believe, even today.

husbands or 'won' by Duryodhan. A closer examination of the message she sends for the elders through the messenger would clarify the point one is trying to make. She is asking of the elders, through the messenger, "Is it not true that once Yudhisthir was Duryodhan's property, he had no right to wager me?" (Divakaruni 191). Panchaali is hammering home the servility of Yudhisthir to Duryodhan, which she is convinced of. The only objection (and not a query, one would believe) she has to the situation at hand is that she wants to know the dharmic code or law whereby she continues to remain Yudhisthir's despite his servitude.

Panchaali hopes that her knowledge of the scriptures and the elders familiarity and practice of law will save her face: "It was good that I was no unlettered girl, ignorant of the law. The elders would know the rule I referred to. They would put an end to Duryodhan's effrontery. Bheeshma in particular. . . . In thinking this, I was mistaken. In what happened next, *the laws of men would not save me*" (Divakaruni 191, italics mine). Suffice it to say, the elders, with full knowledge of the laws that their ancestors had made, fail Panchaali.[135]

Whither Dharma? Druapadi, Humiliation and Violence

Pratibha Ray projects Yajnaseni shaking with anger and heaving deep sighs after the news of her being 'lost' to Duryodhan is brought to her. Yajnaseni recalls in her letter to Krishna: "like a tongue of flame my eyes and every pore of my body were burning" (Ray 236). The dark phase of her humiliation and insult had only begun. Duhshasan came in laughing a ruthless laugh, and says shamelessly to Yajnaseni, "Come, lovely one, now you have become our property. Your *self-respect, chastity, modesty, hestitation-keep them to yourself*. Forget the five husbands. Accept Duryodhan and his ninety-nine brothers as your lords. You will see that such a catastrophe will never occur" (Ray 236, italics mine). Clearly, Duhshasan considers Yajnaseni to be a woman who is 'available' not only because she has five husbands, but because all her husbands have been won by the Kauravs, and also because she has been won by Duryodhan. He stoops so low as to declare that she should now oblige Duryodhan's ninety-nine brothers, also pointing that once she

[135]This will be discussed further in the following section.

accepts the Kauravs as her lord, they will be careful enough not to let such a fate befall her.[136]

Yajnaseni runs towards the women's quarters of the Kauravs, but finds all the doors to be shut. Just then, Duhshasan catches hold of her thick curly hair and pulls them hard. She recounts:

> *As the wild buffalo drags some broken creeper along, similarly Duhshasan dragged me to the assembly hall.* With great difficulty *I tried to cover my breasts with my single garment.* The end of it had slipped off my head. *Face, neck, arms were all bare. The hair was already in disarray.* Out of kindness, they had covered my bare back from the sight of spectators. Like a creeper trembling in a storm, *I was shivering with fear and shame. . . .* Even after dragging me into the assembly hall, Duhshasan was pulling at my hair, *as though I were a lifeless statue devoid of reaction, sorrow, emotion, excitement.* (Ray 236-37, my italics)

Duhshasan seems to be treating Yajnaseni like an animal in fact, worse than one. One can read in the description above how vulnerable and physically exposed she feels—every part of her body except her torso and legs are bare, her breasts are almost exposed and she is trying hard to cover them up, her hair barely hiding her naked back—in an assembly hall full of men. This is not a respectable condition, by any standards whatsoever, for a woman to walk into a place where she is surrounded only by men, spending every moment in the fear that she her 'almost' naked body must be providing voyeuristic pleasure to the men around. More so ever, this is an assembly where the king, her father-in-law, her husbands' grandfather, her husbands' teachers, her brother-in-law, ministers, Vidur, Karna and Shakuni are seated, besides of course, her husbands and Duryodhan. She is the only woman, half-naked, in the hall full of men of all age groups. Bailey writes: "Draupadī's molestation disturbs and grieves her because of the actual physical pain involved in being

[136] He has already made a similar remark in the novel, that Yajnaseni should take Karna as her husband, in an innovative episode that Ray introduces in the novel where she is drowning in a river and Karna saves her, and Duhshasana, who is also present there, comments that she should take Karna, the *dharmaputra* of Kunti, as her sixth husband, and that Karna will take better care of her than her husbands, who do not seem caring enough.

beaten, because of the shame it causes her, and most crucially, because it points to an ascendancy of *adharma* over *dharma.* ("Suffering" 43)

Yajnaseni mockingly directs scornful glances towards her "heroes," her champions, her five kshatriya husbands, sitting silently "like offenders." She is extremely shocked to see that they are "sitting silent and helpless when their wife was being insulted right before their eyes" (Ray 237). When she enters the hall, she repeats her questions in front of the assembled men, but does not receive an answer. She interprets the silence of the men there as their shock at a "woman dar[ing] to demand an explanation of her elders with . . . firmness" (Ray 238). Shakuni, clearly a representative of the patriarchal society, even denies the privilege of learning to Draupadi in particular and largely also, women, reflecting poorly not only on himself, but the male-dominated society of his times:

> The greatest offence a woman commits is to try to be learned. It is because she became wise and scholarly that her condition is thus! If she had grovelled at our feet and begged, perhaps she might have escaped such a gross insult. Just as knowledge and power enhance a man's attraction, similarly ignorance and helplessness increase the charm of a woman. However, Draupadi, strengthened by pride in her learning and wisdom, is like a burning tongue of flame. Can anyone have pity on her? (238).

One can see for oneself the binaries of education, knowledge and power that he draws between men and women. He reminds one of Bhim, who had earlier told Yajnaseni that according to him, women were meant to be good homemakers and amicable to all and sundry, not requiring any learning or education. But as one will see, it is precisely her learning and erudition, her gift of verbal and argumentative skills which save her from disgrace and further violence. Unperturbed by Shakuni's comment, Yajnaseni ragingly declares: "I do not beg for anyone's pity. I demand justice. To protect the honour of women is the dharma of a king. Then does it befit the Kuru kings to insult the bride of their own clan?" (Ray 238) Yajnaseni appeals to the king as the authority of the king was well-acknowledged by all, and it was really in the power of Dhritarashtra, the king of Hastinapura, to order his son and Shakuni to abort the game at any instant and dispense

justice.[137] It is another thing that Yudhishthira was also a king in Yajnaseni's worldview (though whether he is still a king or not is an implied sub-question in Yajnaseni's 'question') and her question was first addressed to him through the messenger.

Divakaruni also enumerates the plight of Panchaali, albeit differently. She writes that although "the incident that took place at the sabha has been sung of widely," to Panachaali's sense, "it remains a blur" (Divakaruni 191). She is bewildered—almost in the same disoriented frame of mind as her husband—but she quickly regains control. She wonders what had really been done to her by Dussasan:

> Was it only a heartbeat before Dussasan came storming in, shouting that Duryodhan was my master now, and I must obey his orders? Did Dhai Ma try to run to Gandhari's apartments for help? . . . Did he grab my hair, which no man had touched except with reverent love? I begged his leave to change into suitable clothing. Jeering at what *he termed my false modesty*, he dragged me down the palace corridors, before the shocked gaze of retainers. No one dared intervene. I found myself in court, *a hundred male eyes burning through me*. (Divakaruni 191, italics mine)

Dussasan clearly has misplaced notion of morality and modesty, or so it seems. For him, and may be many other men like him, a woman with five husbands has no right whatsoever to talk about dignity and propriety. Divakaruni's description of the episode is more critical than descriptive. The author maintains economy of words even in the most precarious circumstances. Panchaali bearing the slander of male gaze is deeply disturbing in the scene. Her helplessness does not evoke the 'masculine' courage to speak up, or the kshatriya pledge from the men assembled, including her husbands and elders. She looks from Bhisma towards Karna, the two men she thought might help her, but both of them disappoint her. She narrates the impasse she was mired in:

> Gathering my disordered sari around me, I demanded help from *my husbands*. They sent me tortured glances but sat paralyzed. I could see that *in their minds they were already Duryodhan's vassals, chained by Yudhisthir's word.* . . . They felt they had no right to rescue me—or

[137] This is Vidura's firm belief too, the reason why he makes repeated appeals to the king. He does so at least thrice: once before the invitation, then after the game has begun and is taking an immoral shade, and thirdly, after Draupadi is dragged into the *sabha* and Duryodhana and his cronies are heaping repeated insults on her.

> themselves. The blind king swiveled his head from side to side, pretending confusion, when I cried out his name. *My anxiety grew, but I was still not desperate*. (Divakaruni 191, my italics)

The situation has been made grim by her husbands' acceptance of their dharma of servitude. When she does not see them reacting to save themselves from bondage, she ceases to expect any action towards her rescue from them. However worse the situation might be growing into, she claims that she did not become 'desperate,' thus reiterating that unlike her husbands, she still wielded control over her situation. While the other men might have forgotten their dharma, or might have not been in a position to comply to their respective dharmas—which, however, in the situation was singular, i.e. to save the honour of a woman deliberately being shamed before their eyes—Panchaali subtly reaffirms that she is in complete possession of her senses, and, unlike Yudhisthir, will fend for herself.

In Ray's novel, Bhisma first attempts a reply to the question being posed by Yajnaseni repeatedly in waging her battle against her abuse, by employing her gift of verbal skills and her knowledge of dharma to discourse upon the tussle between a man's dharma and a woman being subjected to adharma:

> Immaculate one! One who is dependent does not have the right to stake someone else's wealth. But *the wife is ever her husband's dependent*. Therefore, whether, after having lost himself, Yudhishthir has the right to stake you or not, is *genuinely a dilemma*s. I am unable to provide an answer. *The way of dharma is subtle*. . . . Yudhishthir's very life is dharma. He is your husband. When he is silently bearing this insufferable insult against you and Bhim, Arjun, Nakul, Sahadev are ignoring it, remaining spectators in the hall, then *what answer can I provide about dharma*?" (Ray 238, italics mine)

Several scholars have attempted to analyze Bhisma's refusal to provide a clear answer to Yajnaseni's questions, while also admitting that Bhisma was a representative of the old-world order, and by providing a certain answer to her questions, he would not risk the collapse of that dharma. Moreover, as Prasad notes, "Bhīṣma cannot be accepted to have truthfully said that he considers *dharma* to be too subtle to be used to answer Draupadī questions, because it is the same Bhīṣma who agrees to teach and teaches Yudhiṣṭhira the

principles of morality (*dharma*) from his deathbed after Yudhiṣṭhira has won the war and become the king" (*Conceptual-Analytic* 286).

Bhim, however, cannot control himself at the sight of Yajnaseni's continued shaming. Flaring up in rage, he vehemently accuses Yudhishthir, "*Nowhere in history will an instance be found of any man having staked his mistress, slave or even a prostitute to lose in a dice-game . . .* I cannot forgive the crime of making our wife Draupadi the stake. *For what offence will Draupadi suffer this insult?* I wish to burn the hands that staked Draupadi and lost. Sahadev! Arrange for fire" (Ray 239). Ray largely sticks to the words spoken in the epic to bring out the chagrin of Bhim, or the indirect answer of Bhisma. She also confesses to not having departed too much from the debates about dharma in the epic, because she considers tradition to hold such authority as not to be taken casually.[138] However, this should not be taken to imply a blind adherence to the values and codes of dharma of the ancient times. Ray, in her own idiosyncratic ways, reformulates the dharma of Yajnaseni, which is founded in her heroine resorting to informed debates rather than blindly accepting what is dished out to her.

A few other men show the moral courage to speak in Draupadi's defence, most notably Vidura, the half-brother of Dhritarashtra, and Vikarna, a Kaurava—Vidura appeals to the assembly to save the honour of Draupadi twice, and Vikarna categorically says that he thinks Draupadi had not been lost according to dharma—but their objections to Draupadi's humiliation and requests to safeguard her dignity are summarily rejected by the men present. Additionally, elderly men like Dhritarashtra, the king; and Drona and Kripa, the preceptors of the Kuru clan—not to mention Draupadi's five husbands—fail to answer the question put up by her, do not even attempt to save her dignity, and, hence, fail miserably in the test of dharma, are unsuccessful in making law prevail, make a blunder by not living up their kshatriya ideal, and all in all, fail Draupadi, a woman seeking justice in the court which is meant to dispense justice and help dharma prevail. The tragic scene is heightened in what follows, that is, the (attempted) disrobing of Draupadi by Duhsasana.[139] One must

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[138] Ray, "Personal Interview."

[139] I base my opinion about the disrobing being only 'attempted,' and never really actualised, on the studies by several scholars, notably Bhattacharya ("Was Draupadī ever sought to be Disrobed?"), and Hiletbeitel, who draw attention to the fact that never again in the epic do Draupadi or anyone else mention the disrobing, while they do refer to her humiliation, dragging by the hair, insults and calumny.

remember that it is morally indefensible because it violates the principles of intrinsic dignity of women.

The (Attempted) Disrobing: A Travesty of Dharma or Glaring Adharma?

Yajnaseni's fears of ignominy because of her polyandry (expressed at the time of her *svayamvar*) turn out to be true when Karna calls her an unchaste woman:

> Even the gods have prescribed one husband for a woman. But by accepting five husbands she has discarded her modesty, shame and womanhood. Moreover, she has profound intimacy with her husband's bosom *sakha*, Govind![140] I have heard that there is no earthly word by which that relationship can be described, that it is unearthly, heavenly. Therefore, the woman who, besides five husbands, is dear to yet another man, even to strip her naked in this assembly will not be committing any adharma, any injustice. (Ray 240)

Continuing in the same vein, Karna orders the stripping of the Pandavs and the "arrange[ments] to honour Yajnaseni appropriately" (Ray 240). Yajnaseni is stunned at the pronouncement, and immediately later, Duhshasan starts pulling at her garments. Calling to the ten directions to witness, she declaims:

> Since the beginning of time till today never has such a hellish, horrible thing happened, nor will it ever happen till the end of eternity. . . . today, in the presence of elders, in the midst of the assembly, before everyone, the hellish scene of Draupadi's indescribable outrage went on being played, yet everyone remained silent, inert! . . . here, wicked people, driven by perverted lust are insulting the bride of the Bharat dynasty and stripping her body naked in the assembly-hall! *Such a gross outrage on womanhood will never be wiped out in history*. The descendants of this country will blame the Kuru king for this. This lawless, gross injustice and tyranny of the Kuru

[140] Karna's mention of an illicit relationship between Yajnaseni and Govind (Krishna), which, ironically, he also admits, is other-worldly, is a narrative innovation of Ray. It is disheartening that Karna uses this argument to add to the promiscuous nature of Yajnaseni, because it seems he is speaking a language even he does not have conviction in.

> clan will demean the entire male sex for all time. . . . *For this insult there is no forgiveness, for this sin there is no expiation.* (Ray 241-42, my italics)

The outrage in her voice, and her ominous words, demonstrate the suffering of the lady who stands alone, forcibly being made into a spectacle for no fault of hers, as well as spell the doom of the Kauravs. In desperation, and seeing no way out, Yajnaseni calls out to her friend, Krishna, for rescue. Finally, raising up both her hands, she cries out in anguish, "Lord, I am not mine own. *This body is not mine*. Therefore, the whole responsibility of this body is yours. All is yours. Hurt, reproach, insult, shame, doubt, modesty, everything is yours. It is you who are the primal cause. *I know nothing*" (Ray 243, italic mine). This is the most forward-looking, feminist proclamation one can come across: she refuses to own her own body, so that the shame ceases to fall in her share. The body, a woman's body, which had culturally been made into a source of deep trouble, the root of numerous problems, is disowned by Ray's Yajnaseni. Simultaneously, she also thrusts all the blame on Krishna, her friend who has also acquired the status of a demi-god by this point in the narrative. The miracle seems to work for her. Along with layers of clothing appearing out of a miraculous *sudarshan chakra* in the hall that Yajnaseni can see, her own epiphany saves her: "And truly, I became free of all shame, hesitation, sorrow, reproach, pain. At every moment, regarding Krishna Vasudev as God instead of as *sakha*, I was standing free from doubt and fearless in the midst of danger. Earlier, I had never been able to be so fearless and free from doubt (Ray 243).

This climactic scene is preceded by Duryodhan's laughter in *The Palace of Illusions*, who is sure of his victory. He invites Panchaali "to come and sit in his lap" (Divakaruni 192). In the novel, it is not Karna, but Duryodhan who ordered her disrobing to Dussasan, "Remove the Pandavas' fancy clothes and jewelry. All of that belongs to us now! . . . Why should Draupadi be treated any differently? Take her clothes, too" (Divakaruni 192). Briefly encapsulating the songs of many bards in her own narrative, Divakaruni writes about how Dussasan pulled at Panchaali's sari, "exposing my [Panchaali's] nakedness to all eyes," about "how more and still more fabric appeared until he was exhausted with tugging" (Divakaruni 192-93). The heroine in her novel wonders, "Was it a miracle? I don't know. . . . The sorceress had said, When in great trouble, rest your mind on someone who loves you. I tried to call up Dhri's face. But . . . then . . . I thought of Krishna. . . . *No one can shame you, he said, if you don't allow it*" (Divakaruni 193, italics in original). The resolute Panchaali thought to herself, encouraged by what she thought Krishna whispered

into her ears: “Let them stare at my nakedness, I thought. Why should I care? They and not I should be ashamed for shattering the bounds of decency” (Divakaruni 193). However, Panchaali, and, by extension, Divakaruni, also seeks to divest the episode of Krishna’s divinity by not making any mention of the inexhaustible saris that are supplied by Krishna in most accounts of this episode, instead, pointing to the wonders the determination of a woman can work for her, in asking, “Was that not miracle enough?” (Divakaruni 193)

Vows, Curses and Boons

After such a heinous crime as above, one can only expect a scene to move towards its climactic moment, a denouement. That is precisely what the epic and the novels take us towards. In Ray’s novel, Bhim loses his control and pledges, “Tearing apart wicked Duhshasan’s chest I will drink his blood. Shattering that thigh of obscene Duryodhan I will appease the ancestors” (Ray 243-44). Bhim’s pledge finds an echo in Draupadi’s vow, “Till I wet my hair with the blood of Duhshasan’s breast, I will leave it unbound thus” (Ray 244). Divakaruni reverses the order of the vows and curses, and gives Panchaali the right to make an ominous pronouncement before she can fleetingly hear Bheem and Arjun also proclaiming oaths. [141] In fact, this reversal if order seems significant even from a feminist and legal perspective—the person who is wronged first (here, Panchaali), vents out her anger before her companions (her husbands, who were quiet at all that came to pass):

> I stepped over him [Dussasan] and spoke to the assembly in a voice like cracking ice. “All of you will die in the battle that will be spawned from this day’s work. Your mothers and wives will weep far more piteously than I’ve wept. This entire kingdom will become a charnel house. Not one Kaurava heir will be left to offer prayers for the dead. All that will remain is the shameful memory of today, what you tried to do to a defenseless woman” . . . . Behind me I heard Bheem and Arjun pronouncing oaths of revenge, . . . I could not—would not—stop my words.

[141] Sometime, a vow in the *Mahabharata* assumes the nature of a curse, like the one made by Bheem and Draupadi, because they carry within themselves the implication of a curse.

> I lifted up my long hair for all to see. My voice was calm now because *I knew that everything I said would come to pass*. "I will not comb it," I said, "until the day I bathe it in Kaurava blood." (Divakaruni 194, my italics)

Panchaali announces the portentous words with undying conviction, sans repentance. Her apocalyptic curses and vows—with Bheem and Arjun's vows inaudible in the background—give the readers a foretaste of what Panchaali's character and the novel is going to be like from here on. This is one of the reasons why, in some respects, Divakaruni's novel scores over Ray's novelistic rendering of the epic from Draupadi's perspective: it truly is a novel about Draupadi and from Draupadi's vantage point, with Divakaruni not allowing any other character, let alone a male character, take the limelight away from her heroine.

For Panchaali, the episode is a great learning experience, probably the one which teaches her the most, other than the cataclysmic war which will follow. She recounts what lessons she gained from the day:

> All this time I'd believed in my power over my husbands. . . . But now I saw that . . . there were other things they loved more. Their notions of honor, of loyalty toward each other, of reputation were more important to them than my suffering. They would avenge me later, yes, but only when they felt the circumstances would bring them heroic fame. *A woman doesn't think that way. I would have thrown myself forward to save them if it had been in my power that day. I wouldn't have cared what anyone thought.* The choice they made in the moment of my need changed something in our relationship. *I no longer depended on them so completely in the future.* (Divakaruni 194-95, my italics)

This is a profound thought indeed: women and men react differently in situations of duress, and probably, even otherwise. She can also see how shallow men's notions of dharma and honour were: they could fight for their own name and honour at the drop of a hat, they (especially her husbands in this case) could wage a ruinous war if that came with the bonus of glory, they could overlook a woman's suffering, they adhered more to notions of martial duty and socio-political expectations more than the duties they owed to their familial ties. "For men," think Panchaali, "the softer emotions are always intertwined with power and pride" (Divakaruni 195).

As has already been hinted earlier, Divakaruni uses Panchaali as a mouthpiece to bring realistic and credible perspectives to the narrative of the *Mahabharata*, especially the story of Draupadi embedded within it. Not only is Divakaruni's Panchaali genuinely unidealistic, she is also ruthlessly self-critical. Panchaali, after pointing out to the flaws of her husbands, and men in general, also turns to critically assessing womenfolk. She muses, "But was a woman's heart any purer, in the end?" (Divakaruni 195) While pondering over the same, a harsh truth about herself dawns upon her: "All this time I'd thought myself better than my father, better than all those men who inflicted harm on a thousand innocents in order to punish the one man who had wronged them. I'd thought myself above the cravings that drove him. But I, too, was tainted with them, *vengeance encoded into my blood*. (Divakaruni 195, italics mine). Immediately after pronouncing the curse, Panchaali feels she is not different from her father who, she thought, foolishly dedicated his life to avenge himself upon Drona, performed the forbidden sacrifice to beget a son, organized the svayamvara with a special test designed to get Arjun as a son-in-law and ally, and constantly pushed his son towards his death. Was she not to be held guilty of pushing an entire clan towards a lethal war?

As if to salvage the situation after evil omens portend, Dhritarashtra offers Draupadi three boons, out of which she uses only two, to demand the freedom of her eldest husband and the rest four. Dhritarashtra asks why she has not asked for her own freedom. Beeming with hurt pride and reproach, Ray's Yajnaseni says, "My husbands are courageous. My absence will not prove any obstacle to their happiness and prosperity. Had it been so then Yudhishthir would not have staked me in the dice game. . . . Therefore, I am free" (Ray 244-45). Karna makes another biting comment, "Well! What selfless devotion to husbands! . . . Perhaps she may not wish to return under the authority of the Pandavs. So she has cleverly rejected the opportunity to ask for her freedom" (Ray 245). But he fails to read the deeper meaning intended in Yajnaseni's statement – she does not ask for her freedom because she never considered herself to be lost, or her freedom compromised. She always thought she was free, also signalled by her long-drawn argument about the impossibility of her having been lost, presented to the men in the, cloaked as a question, a riddle, a dharmic and legal conundrum.

When another invitation of dice game from Duryodhan is accepted by Yudhishthir in the name of "dharma," Yajnaseni cannot restrain herself: "Husband! Despite the intolerable outrage and insult I suffered, you are not at peace? *Is this your dharma? There*

is no dharma in answering the call of injustice. This is but your pride. . . . Wife, son, brother, kingdom — crushing the peace, happiness, honour, security of all you wish to display your humility and devotion to dharma. *Is this the dharma of a king?*" (Ray 246) This marks a watershed in the relationship between Yudhishthir and Yajnaseni: this is but the beginning of the many debates the two will have on what constitutes dharma, what makes for the dharma of a king, a kshatriya, and how and when do we draw the line between dharma and pride, dharma and adharma, one's *svadharma* vs *sadharanadharama*, one's dharma towards one family as opposed to one's dharma towards a truth/principle/the society.

Needless to mention, Yudhishthir does not give in to her admonition, plays, and loses, being condemned into an exile for thirteen years with his brothers and his wife. Yajnaseni finds a contrast between Ram and Yudhishthir: "Ramchandra invited grief by running after the golden deer. But Yudhishthir ran blindly after dice — it was this that became the root of all my sorrows" (Ray 248).[142] While Ram committed the mistake of running after the illusory deer (a disguised demon) to please his wife, Yudhishthir runs after the illusory and 'prohibited' game of dice against the better judgement and warning of his wife. Yajnaseni writes, "In Yudhishthir's mind greed had no place. He was *sthitaprajna*, his wisdom was not affected by joy and sorrow. The other brothers were silent followers" (Ray 248). The path she will on with her husbands is indeed going to be challenging at every step!

Later, Krishna appears at the time of their going to exile.[143] Yajnaseni, in her outrage, describes her situation poignantly to her dear friend: "When Duhshasan began stripping me, . . . It seemed to me I had no husband, no son, no brother, no friend, no father, no well-wisher! How terrifyingly helpless I felt! . . . I do not know where Bhim and Arjun's prowess and valour disappeared. Yudhishthir's humility and devotion to dharma-is this what it was?" (Ray 249). Yajnsaseni is questioning the high ideals of masculinity and dharma. It is difficult to resist the temptation of bringing in an excerpt from Iravati Karve,

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[142] As has been mentioned in the previous chapter, while the story of Ram is narrated to Yudhishthira and Draupadi during their exile to reconcile them to their fate and inspire them to wade through the troubled times, the references to Ram and Sita's story in *Yajnaseni* perform an exactly contrary function: they serve to highlight the severe trials of Draupadi as compared to the test of Sita, and more often than not, place Ram a little above Yudhishthira in matters of moral duties and familial responsibilities.

[143] In the epic, Krishna visits them only in the forest when the period of their exile has started. Perhaps Krishna being one of the major driving forces for Yajnaseni leads Ray to pre-pone his visit.

who, perhaps best explains the situation of Draupadi in this harrowing scene, especially the complete failure of Draupadi at the hands of her husbands:

> Draupadi's troubles were human, brought on by people of this world and, particularly, by her own husbands. Her experiences are described realistically, unembellished by flowery language or poetic conventions. In almost every episode, insult is piled upon insult, constantly adding fuel to the hatred in her heart. Karve remarks, "Two words keep recurring in reference to Draupadi—'nathavati anathavat, (having husbands, but like a widow). She was the wife of the five but bereft, the daughter of a rich house but like an orphan, she had brave allies but she was alone. This was the pity of her situation (Karve 91).

Karve demystifies the mythological character, divesting all 'divine' associations from the character of Draupadi (as Sri), analyzing her in terms of her agonizing plight, excruciating pain, and unanticipated betrayal at the hands of her husbands. Both Ray and Divakaruni keep up to the demystification of the epical heroine, trying to add a touch of realism to the tragedy she is subjected to, also, all along, inviting the readers to feel with the heroine, become a *sahṛdaya*, but, at the same time, remain objective to her misery.

Dharma, Draupadi's Suffering and Her Thirst for Revenge

What follows is a tale of repeated violence on Draupadi, her insatiable thirst for revenge, her exhortation of her husbands, especially Yudhisthira for the Great War, and her misery at the mention of peace-talks instead of the war. The element that connects Draupadi's incessant suffering and the violence inflicted on her, twice again after the dicing, is her unflinching faith in the idea of revenge, punishment and retributive justice. Hughes opines that "Draupadī would find no ease for her hurt and humiliation in the isolation of the forest. . . . her heart would know no relief from the fires of anger that smouldered there until the embers were fanned into the conflagration of Kurukṣetra" (57). Both Ray and Divakaruni leave no stone unturned to paint a picture of their grieving heroine, who finds her solace during the thirteen year long wait for extracting her revenge only by exhorting her husbands towards the inevitable war and reminding herself of her woes through various ways and means, marking her metamorphosis from a loving wife to her husbands and jovial friend to Krishna to a wronged woman with an insatiable appetite for revenge.

Ray's Yajnaseni explicitly tells Krishna who has come to meet them when they are leaving for the exile that "if the Duhshasans and Duryodhans do not receive the fruits of their sins, then in future the fate of women is shrouded in the darkest gloom" (Ray 251) Ray's is very clear in according Yajnaseni with moral strength and rectitude to face her circumstances, and cling to her demand for justice. Asserting the moral strength of women, Yajnaseni says:

> Tolerance is the ornament of women. But *to bear injustice with bowed head is not the dharma of women*. If the husband adopts the wrong path and the wife remains quiet, then everyone will suffer . . . Therefore, even after the terrible outrage and the insufferable insult, I am alive . . . *Krishnaa has been reborn. The remaining days of my life I will fight against injustice, adharma, sin* . . . Though the world may call me an ogress . . . the world must know that woman who creates, is auspicious, is also the destroyer of the sinful and the wicked. It is after washing my hair in Dushasana's blood that I shall tie it up . . . Then will the world know that while woman's heart is delicate, it is not weak. (sic) (Ray 251-52)

That her belief in the idea of revenge is not completely unjustified is confirmed by Krishna's validation, "Krishnaa, *your anger and vow are just*. Those who insulted you, those who looked upon you with lustful eyes in the assembly-hall, who encouraged sin—all of them will be laid low on the battlefield . . . After your insult in the Kuru court, this earth cannot be saved from a great war" (Ray 252, my italics). Krishna, who has been projected as a knower of dharma, is understanding of Draupadi's wrath, and anticipates the war and violence that are imminent to fulfil her vow.

However, Draupadi's husbands, especially Yudhishthira, are often not convinced about the war. During their long exile, when discussions about reclaiming what was their kingdom (Hastinapura included) through a war would be held, Yudhishthir would never participate or extend his support. This would greatly irk Draupadi, and sometimes also Bhima and Arjun. Ray's Yajnaseni thinks, "He, because of whose short-sightedness . . . [we] are living in the forest . . . does not even think about any remedy for that injustice! . . . *showing forgiveness to the enemy and the sinful is not the dharma of kshatriyas*. One who displays only timidity or anger is not a proper man. *Man ought to be gentle when necessary, and angry when required*" (Ray 282, italics mine). Yudhishthir, maintain his

poise, patiently answers, “The time of the destruction of the Bharat clan has arrived. . . . both kingdom and clan are doomed to destruction. Therefore, I have taken recourse to forgiveness. *I have taken shelter in non-violence and truth.* Let us see if the Bharat clan can be saved. . . . Why think of conquering Hastinapur when we have only just begun our forest exile?” (Ray 282, my italics)

Such debates would frequently be held between Draupadi and Yudhishthira, and it would greatly pain Draupadi to see Yudhishthira taking recourse to the *sadharanadharma* of non-violence, and not his *svadharma* as a *kshatriya*, which was to fight for the right and the just, for the maintenance of dharma. Yudhishthir would calmly dismiss all such claims of Draupadi and his brothers by reiteration “*Dharma rakshati rakshitam.* That is, if you take refuge in dharma, dharma will protect you. Therefore, under no circumstances can I renounce dharma” (Ray 282-83). Yajnaseni breaks down on hearing her husbnad’s stance, “. . . this lord of dharma will abandon all four brothers and his wife too, if need be, but will not abandon dharma. *But how dharma protects, the blazing instance of that is my insult*. . . . How the Pandavs will remain alive does not ever seem to worry the lord of dharma” (Ray 283, my italics). This is not to say that Yudhishthira was not a dharmic man. The problem simply was a conflict of dharmas, between how and what Draupadi considers to constitute dharma and dharmic action in their situation, and how Yudhishthira perceives his dharma, and decides the ‘right’ course of actions for his brothers, himself and Draupadi. Yajnaseni, in the aforementioned quotation, seems to be mocking dharma—the greater principle of dharma as well as Dharmaraj Yudhishthira—by sardonically referring to the failure of dharma rather than its power to protect. She rejects precisely what Yudhisthir seems to be clinging on to, almost hopelessly, dharma. But more importantly, Draupadi has raised a moot point here: she has thrown the floor open for a discussion on the efficacy of dharma, she has dared to doubt and question the hitherto unquestioned and seemingly flawless meta-principle of dharma. She has struck at the very roots, at the very foundations of the society, showing the principles it is based on to be dubious and may be, even erroneous.

Divakaruni also projects the adversity and affliction that Panchaali lands herself in, because of the unrestrained, adharmic behaviour of her husband. Panchaali leaves her children with Subhadra, proceeding with her husbands to the forest in the very state that she is in, clad in one garment, hair dishevelled, shorn of all jewellery and bare-footed. Her agony is unfathomable when one sees her dreaming about Duryodhan proceeding towards the Palace of Illusions to take it in his possession. She dreams that as soon as Duryodhan

reached her palace, it dissolved: "only a few small piles remained on the ground: bones, hair, sand, and salt. . . . My palace refused to be occupied by anyone other than its rightful owners" (Divakaruni 198).[144] To top it all, the forest serves as a crude reminder of all that had been taken away from her, while the husbands seemed unaffected in the manner that Panchaali was. How she chose to visualize her loss and remember it sometimes sends a shiver down one's body: "As we moved through the forest, I carried a pouch of salt in honor of my lost palace. At night I let the grains run through my fingers, over skin scraped raw by rocks and branches, and welcomed the sting. It would help me not to forget" (Divakaruni 198). Panchaali is burning in revenge, and she refuses to douse the fire burning within her, also, in the process, immolating herself, slowly, but surely.

But Panchaali does not top at that. She is a proactive, rather than a passive seeker of revenge. She admits to her constant, unfailing workings: "I stitched discontent onto my features and let my hair fall, matted and wrathful, around my face. Each day as I served their meals, I reminded the Pandavas of how they'd failed me, and what I'd suffered as a result in Duryodhan's sabha. Each night I recited the taunts of the Kauravas so that they stayed fresh in their minds" (Divakaruni 199). What Mukhoty observes about Draupadi is perhaps truer of Divakaruni's Panchaali: "Repeatedly betrayed by her men's inability or reluctance to fight for her honour, Draupadi uses every weapon available to her to keep that fight alive herself (22). The narration of her dreams that follows is now even bordering on the grotesque, but Panchaali seems undeterred: "Each dawn when I arose, sweaty with restlessness, I pictured our revenge: *a fire-strewn battlefield, the air grim with vultures, the mangled bodies of the Kauravas and their allies—the way I would transform history*" (Divakaruni 199, my italics). Panchaali has finally come home to the latent meaning in the prophecy behind her birth: she was born to bring about a great war, a bloodbath, an unparalleled carnage! One can see Panchaali's transformation, one can witness her hardening up beyond belief, possibly, also beyond repair.

On one occasion, Krishna comes to the forest and saves her from the ire of Durvasa, and she feels that he wanted to give her some advice regarding the futility of a war. She

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[144] This makes sense in the world of the novel, because even in the epic, Indraprastha and Mayamahal are never heard of again after the game of dice. This might have been Divakaruni's ingenuity in metamorphosing the lack of any mention of the palace and the city after the fated game of dice into a metaphor for the rest of her novel.

mutters to herself, as if conversing with Krishna: "I know you want me to drop my hatred, Krishna . . . It's the one thing you've asked me for. But I can't. Even if I wanted to, I don't know how anymore" (Divakaruni 204). Panchaali is steadfast in the revenge she desires. On another occasion, her brother Dhri comes to meet her in the forest. He is taken aback by his sister's outburst at a seemingly inoffensive stray comment by Yudhisthir about how their life in the forest was "almost as good as living in a palace" (Divakaruni 205). She cries, "No, it isn't! . . . Nothing can make up for the palace I lost because of your folly!" (Divakaruni 205)[145] Seeing her react thus, Dhri gently asks of her, "Where's my sweet sister who used to bully me and play tricks on my tutor, who used to dream about breaking out of the bonds that shackled women, who was determined to change history?" (Divakaruni 206)[146] Panchaali is set into further thinking on hearing this. She speaks to herself, as if answering the question of Dhri in her head:

> To be happy anywhere else was a betrayal of my beautiful palace. . . . I kept my thoughts hidden in the dark cave that had opened within me. *She's dead. Half of her died the day when everyone she had loved and counted on to save her sat without protest and watched her being shamed. The other half perished with her beloved home. But never fear. The woman who has taken her place will gouge a deeper mark into history than that naïve girl ever imagined.* (Divakaruni 206, italics in original)

Unlike the lamenting Draupadi of the epic or sobbing Yajnaseni of Ray's novel, Divakaruni's Panchaali is raucous and implacable. Unlike the epic and Ray, Divakaruni's protagonist evolves from being a young and clueless girl eager to change the course of history, to a fiery woman who is becoming more and more sure of what she wants in her

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[145] This might make Panchaali sound materialistic, that she is lamenting the loss of the palace more than her episode of dishonouring in the court of Hastinapur, but one has to go back to the part of the novel where Panchaali makes memories in her palace, where she comes home to her five husbands, where she gives birth to her five children, where she takes an active part in matters of governance—to be able to fathom her loss. This might also be intentional on the part of Divakaruni to add to Draupadi's list of losses, and the impossibility of restoring almost all that she lost, including, among other things, her honour, her palace and her memories.

[146] One is sometimes tempted to think that perhaps Dhri understands Panchaali better than any of her husbands, possibly because they had similar births, shared a common destiny, understood (though Panchaali comes to know it now, after the day in the sabha when she took terrible vows and pronounced ghastly curses) the stakes involved in dedicating one's life to the accomplishment of a vengeance.

life, now understanding what the act of being instrumental in changing the course of history entails; Panchaali matures from an ignorant young woman who considers vengeance to be destructive and useless, to a well-informed woman who actively seeks revenge herself. Dhri wants her to return with him to Panchala, but she refuses, later wondering what was "the real reason" for the refusal: "Was it the fear that my husbands would learn they could live without me, . . . Or was it a different kind of fear: that if I gave myself to softer emotions, I would blunt the edge of my vengeance and fail to achieve the destruction that had become the goal of my life? (Divakaruni 207) For Panchaali then, in extracting her revenge which would lead to a horrid war was, from now on, her only dharma. She understood no other dharma now, encouraged no one else's understanding of an alternate dharma, and indulged in denigrating the dharma of peace and reconciliation. It was the war that was on her mind!

Dharma's Failure and Draupadi's Abduction: Thrice Over

Draupadi in the epic is not subjected to violence only in the *sabha* at Hastinapura. She is abducted twice after that nightmarish day in the Kuru court: first by Jayadratha, her brother-in-law (husband of the only sister of the Kauravas, Dushala) in the forest during their exile, and then by Keechaka, a general in the army of King Virata, in whose kingdom the disguised Pandavas and Draupadi spend their last year of exile as part of the terms of Duryodhana.[147] Ray describes both the incidents in fair detail. When Jayadrath assaults her, Yajnaseni insists on nothing but death penalty for him, but Yudhishthir begins to expound on the nobility that lies in forgiving. Ray's Yajnaseni flares up in fury, "Your wife being insulted does not pain you or excite you! The scriptures say that if the abductor of a woman or usurper of a kingdom should seek sanctuary, it will be unjust to let him live" (sic) (Ray 321). Jagannathan (98) draws attention to the fact that Yajnaseni calls for "some radical changes in the outlook of the society and some deterrent punishment for crimes against women." Yajnaseni, who serves as Ray's mouthpiece in the novel, replies to Yudhishthir:

[147] After Duryodhana defeated Yudhishthira in the second game of dice, the Pandavas were banished into an exile for thirteen years, where the stipulation was that they had to spend the last year incognito, with the condition being, were they discovered during that one year, the will have to repeat the term of thirteen years again.

> If the desire for another's wife were an unpardonable crime and shameful for man, then there would not be so much of sin and perversion in the world. . . . For men, women have also become something to be won like kingdom, wealth and prosperity. He whose might is greater, wins the wives of others. That Jayadrath failed was my good fortune. . . . (Ray 322)

This speech serves as a crude reminder of how having five husbands, sanctioned by dharma, her father and Krishna himself, brings infamy for Yajnaseni, while Jayadrath abducting his sister-in-law unlawfully, completely flouting the norms of conduct and dharma brings him no harm or slander. She lament about the discriminatory rules against women and differential law for men and women in the society. Jayadrath is held captive by Bhima and his head is shaven. Insulted, Jayadrath performs a harsh penance to please Shiva and after obtaining a boon from him, goes about boasting, "So, my desire shall be fulfilled. Karna will defeat Arjun and I the other four. Between the two of us we shall enjoy Draupadi. Draupadi is used to being enjoyed at once by several men, so there will be no difficulty" (Ray 323).[148] This is just another case of attaching a misplaced quality of licentiousness with Draupadi because of her polyandry, which has been illustrated with a number of examples in the foregoing discussion. In Divakaruni's novel, the abduction by Jayadrath it is mentioned in passing, and Panchaali also suggests that it had been incited by Duryodhan himself. However, the attempt ended in a failure.

The third case of Draupadi's abduction in the kingdom of Virata bears an uncanny resemblance with the opprobrium Draupadi had to undergo in the assembly hall of Hastinapura. The manner in which Draupadi is dragged to court by a general, Keechaka, by her hair, kicked and shamed; the dismissal of the scene by Yudhishthira, and the appeal to the king and his dharma that Draupadi makes—all these scenes bear a direct resemblance to the *sabha* scene in which Draupadi was implicated twelve years ago. There are a few differences too, the most significant of them being, Draupadi is no longer caught unaware – she has prior experience, and is not as helpless; she did not know how to wrest her way out there, but she definitely does now; she had to wait for thirteen long years (and is still in waiting) to see her offenders dead, while she can escalate the killing of Keechaka the very next day (through Bhima).

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[148] Bhima leaves five locks of hair on Jayadrath's head standing for the five Pandav brothers.

In Ray's novel, during the year of disguise, when Keechaka misbehaves with Yajnaseni, she confides in the disguised Yudhishthir on finding an opportunity, but he remains unmoved. Yajnaseni complains, "I had thought that by telling him my grief would end. But he remained indifferent. Before justice, dharma, tolerance, forgiveness and generosity his wife's honour, helplessness, grief, pain and insult were nothing to him" (Ray 337). Instead of protecting her, he says, "Yajnaseni! You are intelligent and learned. If a person does not protect himself, no one can save him. Carefully avoid falling victim to Keechak's lust. . . . With so many beautiful women in Virat's palace, why did Keechak's eyes fasten on you? You ought to have been careful from the beginning" (Ray 337). This reaction by Yudhishthir leaves one at a loss for words! The Dharmaraj believes women invite troubles by their own conduct! Let us leave it at that!

But Ray takes up the matter again, by projecting the court scene in Virat's kingdom, a near-replication of the assembly scene in Hastinapur: Keechak seized her by her hair, dragged her to the court, threw her down, kicked her repeatedly and showered obscene abuse on her. Yudhishthir sat there playing dice, unperturbed. "Shaking with rage and insult," Yajnaseni addresses king Virat: "The paths to justice are barred from all sides to women. . . . If a king does not protect a woman then he ought to grant her permission to commit suicide" (Ray 340). By any means, this is not a defeatist speaking – one has to carefully read between the lines to grasp the improbable solution she has proposed to Virat. In the ancient times, the king was supposed to be his people's protector and saviour, not a killer – in any case, euthanasia was neither known nor supported as a morally permissible concept. Virat does not respond since "his kingship was dependent on Keechak's strength of arms" (Ray 340). This time, Yudhishthir speaks, but only to dismiss her (and Bhim, who has just arrived in the court), fearing that they might be revealed. The disguised Yajnaseni leaves, wiping her tears and thinking: "By giving them all as my husbands, perhaps I committed a sin. What I am suffering is a punishment for that" (Ray 341). But she is not a woman who would relent so easily, and she stealthily goes to meet Bhim in the dark and incites him to kill Keechaka the very next day, failing which she will take her life. And like an obedient and loving husband, Bhim fulfils her wish.

Divakaruni also treats the matter of Panchaali's abduction in the kingdom of Virat at some length in her work. When she first encounters Keechak, he is looking at her with lustful eyes. She is visibly agitated: "My face grew hot. Not even Duryodhan had dared to look at me quite like this in his sabha, for he'd known I was a queen. Is this how men

looked at ordinary women, then? . . . A new sympathy for my maids rose in my mind. When I became queen again, I thought, I would make sure common women were treated differently" (Divakaruni 228) Panchaali seems to be making an appeal towards treating women with dignity across classes and social positioning. Panchaali is plunged into deep thought and remembers Krishna advising her before the start of their year in disguise:

> When sorrow strikes you, Krishnaa—and it will strike you harder than your husbands because your ego is more frail and more stubborn—try to keep this in mind: being a queen's maid is only a role you are playing, only for a while. . . . Sometimes, . . . it seemed that *everything I'd lived until now had been a role*. The princess who longed for acceptance, the guilty girl whose heart wouldn't listen, the wife who balanced her fivefold role precariously, the rebellious daughter-in-law, the queen who ruled in the most magical of palaces, the distracted mother, the beloved companion of Krishna, who refused to learn the lessons he offered, the woman obsessed with vengeance—*none of them were the true Panchaali*.
>
> If not, who was I? (Divakaruni 229, italics mine)

This is a terse recapitulation of Panchaali's life in the novel, also indicating how she never found fulfilment in any of her role except that of a queen, and pointing out to her multiple, indeterminate identities as a woman. It is also a brief reminder of the many roles a woman is expected to play in her life, and excel in all! Divakaruni's protagonist, the nonconformist, has no qualms about not drawing all these roles to a definitive and fruitful close—all she can look forward to now is the vengeance, though even that is not 'the true Panchaali.'[149] Divakaruni also delineates the scene of her violation by Keechak in fair detail, showcasing Panchaali's disappointment from the king who she thought would "save a helpless, abused woman, Yudhisthira's reproach with a mild advice to 'be patient and wait for her gandharva husbands,' and Panchaali holding back 'the articulation of her outrage' (Divakaruni 230). In the end, however, Panchaali goes to Bheem and threatens him with dire consequences if Keechaka is not killed. Complaining about her "humiliation

[149] Divakaruni has, in a jiffy, indicated how many shades there are to the character of Draupadi, a fact that the epic devalorizes.

in the court and . . . Yudhisthir's callous cowardice," she said, "If Keechak touches me again, I'll swallow poison" (Divakaruni 231). And she does manage to have her way.

When the king fails her, she finds her own way out. Bailey draws attention to a very important detail in his regard: "The most immediate sign that Draupadī's molestation is explicable in terms of *dharma* and *adharma* is the fact that she is always molested in the presence of a king, whose dharmic duty is to protect all those living in his kingdom" ("Suffering" 44). Moreover, Bailey draws attention towards another significant fact: "The Pāṇḍavas restrain themselves when Draupadī is in distress, . . . from Yudhiṣṭhira's perspective, is a simple one. They are held in thrall by their adherence to *dharma.* ("Suffering" 46). Thus, "Draupadī suffering" concludes Bailey, "is the result of two principal factors—the evil of *adharma* with its deleterious effect on her person, and the rigidity of dharma which temporarily prevents the overthrow of *adharma*" ("Suffering" 47).

Between the End of the Exile and the Beginning of the War

The Pandavas successfully complete their thirteen years of the stipulated exile, though not without objection from the Kauravas.[150] The Pandavas now want their kingdom back, but Duryodhana refuses them their rightful share. The Pandavas decide to go to war. However, Yudhishthir is thrown into a dilemma when Dhritarashra sends a proposal to refrain from war and abjure the conflict. A series of negotiations begin, with Yudhishthira bringing down his demand of a share of the kingdom to five villages for the five Pandava brothers. But Duryodhana is adamant. Dhritarashra even sends a word of advice that perhaps the Pandavas should continue to live an ascetic life. Surprisingly, Yudhishthira even begins to consider such a proposal seriously.

This sparks outrage from, most noticeably, Bhima, Yajnaseni and Arjun. In *Yajnaseni*, Bhima is infuriated, and says: "Begging might be a brahmin's dharma, but it will be adharma for a kshatriya. Brother! Have you forgotten the injustices of the Kauravs — the insulting of Draupadi, . . . This adharma of the Kauravs is nothing new. . . . It is unjust to

[150] Duryodhana wages a war on the kingdom of Virata when he is informed of the nature of the killing of Keecaka. He is sure it could only have been Bhima. In order to expose the Pandavas so that they spend another thirteen-year term in exile, he rushes to Virata. The kingdom is saved in the conquest by Bhima and Arjuna, but Duryodhana is elated that he has discovered the Pandavas. But it is brought to his knowledge that the period of the end of their exile coincided with the end of the war at Virata. Duryodhana cries foul, but is forced to retreat to Hastinapura, disappointed.

seize other's property or wife through battle. But *to fight for winning back what is justly ours is the glory of manhood*" (Ray 345, italics mine), One can see that the war, for Bhim, the purpose of a war is to attain 'the glory of manhood,' and not really for avenging the insult on Yajnaseni (though it might definitely act as one of the triggers). To attest to the necessity of a war, Krishna says:

> It is no longer a family quarrel. It is now a conflict between dharma and adharma, ideals and meanness, truth and falsehood, virtue and sin. Therefore, for the sake of dharma, ideals, peace and the welfare of mankind, to suffer, if necessary, bloodshed, loss of life and property is the dharma of the kshatriays. . . . It is proper for the reins of the kingdom to be placed in the hands of the righteous, the just, the good ruler. . . . If the proposal for truce is not acceptable to them, then it will be war. (Ray 346)

Krishna in the novel plays a very important role in exhorting the Pandavs to wage the battle in the name of dharma. However, even Krishna shifts the impetus behind the war to a larger-than-life, universal idea of the establishment of dharma, not to restore the 'dharma' of Yajnaseni. Divakaruni chooses to lay out finer, vivid, and innovative details of what happens once the war has been finalized, not getting into the details of the failure of the peace talks. Before the war, Panchaali critiques as well as hints at how 'unrighteous' the war, popular in public memory as a *dharmayuddha* (literally, the war meant to establish the supremacy of the right, or a righteous war) will turn out to be: "But would the war still be righteous when Arjun shot the astra at Karna? . . . The blood of Abhimanyu had soaked the earth of Kurukshetra by then, Bheeshma had been made to give away the secret of his death, and Drona had been overcome not by my brother's valor but by a lie" (Divakaruni 219). Divakaruni's novel does not operate on creating a sense of suspense about the proceedings of the narrative – the story of the war is too well-known anyways to lead to anticipation about the end result of the war. On the contrary, it works by letting out the ends, through dreams, visions, premonitions and conversations – leaving the readers with only the curiosity of how Divakaruni subjects the narrative material at hand to her analysis, and how she puts it to use.

Divakaruni, however, spends considerable effort in preparing her readers to absorb the war-reportage, which is indeed going to be monstrous and bloody. Before the war, Yudhisthir sees a terrible dream. Panchaali reports that he "had dreamed of a skull

mountain. . . . on top of the mountain was a great, glittery throne, and on it were seated the five Pandavas, goblets of victory wine in their hands. When they raised them to their lips, the drink turned to blood" (Divakaruni 239). Additionally, other people like Kunti, Arjun and Draupadi also have alarming dreams. There is no doubt, it seems, that the Pandavas will win, that Panchaali's vengeance will be effected, but there is also a looming imminence of immeasurable internecine bloodletting. In retrospect, Panchaali confesses:

> I should have tried to understand what the dreams foretold. I should have discussed them with my husbands and cautioned them accordingly. I should have urged them to step carefully on this road that would soon be strewn with death. But I didn't want to heed anything that might keep me from the revenge I'd waited for so long. When my husbands hesitantly mentioned their nightmares, I laughed.
>
> "I didn't expect such superstition from the foremost heroes of Bharat!" I taunted them. *"Of course there will be blood. Of course there will be death. As kshatriyas, isn't that what you've trained for all your lives? And are you afraid now?"* (Divakaruni 239, italics mine)

Panchaali should have stopped her husbands, she admits. But she did not, in fact, she could not, because as she admits, nothing held more significance than her revenge. In effect, she prodded them furthermore. As the war draws nearer, new realizations dawn upon Panchaali. She ceases to feel "petty resentments" for Subhadra and Hidimba, and "the animosity" she had harbored toward Kunti (Divakaruni 248). She adds, "From now on, we would be united in our anxiety, in being torn between pride and concern, in our prayers for the safety of them all" (Divakaruni 248).

Regarding the farming of the rules of the war, she wonders, "how in the heat of battle would people manage to keep these laws?" (Divakaruni 251). There is a remarkable narrative novelty introduced by Divakaruni at this juncture, when she is lost in deep thoughts about the looming war. Vyasa, "who had prophesied everything," appeared in front of her. Panchaali is aghast: "I felt a chill grip my chest. Why had he come? I didn't have the heart to listen to another dark prophecy just when we were beginning this great enterprise" (Divakaruni 252). The impatient girl of the yesteryears, who had always been eager to know about her fate and keen on changing the course of history, dreads any other

prophecy, least of all, a prophesy about the war. Were the nightmares not enough? Divakaruni would opine in the negative!

As expected, Vyasa says, "The war will work itself out the way it's meant to—the way I've set down already in my book" (Divakaruni 253). Panchaali is bemused, thinking, if that was the case, "Why should I grieve any more at it than if I were watching a play?" (Divakaruni 253) When she is in deep thought, Vyasa continues, "*I want to offer you a gift—the same that I offered to the blind king: a special vision so that you may see the most important parts of the battle from afar.*" (Divakaruni 253-54, italics mine) Panchaali is both numb and excited, "*I, a woman, to view what no woman—and few men—had ever observed!*" (Divakaruni 254, my italics) Before she can declutter her mind, Vyasa inquires, "But you—are you brave enough to watch the greatest spectacle of our times? Are you steadfast enough to tell others what really happened in Kurukshetra? Because *ultimately only the witness—and not the actors—knows the truth*" (Divakaruni 254, my italics). One can see that Divakaruni empowers her heroine in a manner unimaginable – she gifts her, through Vyasa, divine eyes to witness, and later stand testimony to the proceeding of the war, and divulge the truth to the world. Divakaruni allows her heroine an entry into what has traditionally been a male prerogative (with, may be, very few exceptions). She allows her protagonist a virtual experience of, in fact, participation in the war, though definitely not as an active agent. As an eyewitness in addition to Sanjaya (who receives the gift of divine vision instead of Dhritarashtra, who does not have the grit to see his sons and his men dying), Panchaali can lend support to, reject, or provide alternative accounts of the war, if the need be. This is certainly the acme of Divakaruni's story-telling.

For the first time, one hears Panchaali being 'afraid' to accept the benediction: ". . . my euphoria receded and I was aware of the other face of war: the violence and the pain. Observing, I would suffer them no less than the men undergoing these experiences" (Divakaruni 254). But one may raise a counter-point: who is it and how is it that one will escape this suffering anyways? Also, wish-fulfilment, and that too, one which involves a revenge, is bound to come at a price. Having journeyed with Panchaali up till this point, one can be sure that she is a woman who can pay that price, as long as it ensures that her anger is vented out in the form of her vendetta.

The resolute Panchaali says, "I accept your gift. I will watch this war and live to tell of it. It's only just, since I've helped bring it about" (Divakaruni 254). Vyasa curtly replies, "*Don't give yourself so much credit*, granddaughter-in-law! . . . *The seeds of this war were*

sown long before you were born, though perhaps you did nudge it along a bit" (Divakaruni 254, italics mine). Vyasa touches her forehead "on the spot where the third eye is supposed to lie" (Divakaruni 254-55). This is indeed a very significant intervention by the author of the novel – one will now have a woman narrator testifying to the events and the course of the war, one will (probably) hear a more emotionally connected but impartial account of the war, and most importantly, one will not feel burdened under the weight of a narrative which tends to valorize masculine glory and male rivalry and revenge. This is Divakaruni's bid to break the knowledge needs to narration leads to power circuit so reminiscent of the male literary world, as also the ancient epic itself, which might have been, more often than not, narrated by sages, bards and story-tellers who were men. Panchaali wishes to know who will emerge victorious in the war, but Vyasa askes her to be patient and wait, leaving with these words, "Is it fair to ask the playwright to give away the climax of his play? But in this case, I'm not even the playwright—merely a chronicler. It would be presumptuous of me to reveal the end before the ordained time, O granddaughter. . . . " (Divakaruni 255)

Panchaali is extremely disturbed to see that each man "was locked in his own inner world where he visualized himself as the protagonist of a glorious drama" (Divakaruni 256). The hollowness and vanity of the masculine world of wars and conquests is laid bare by Divakaruni here. No one cared to find out even Panchaali's state of mind. Panchaali imforms that only Krishna "whispered another of his cryptic statements into my ear, something about this body being like cast-off clothes, about there being no reason to grieve" (Divakaruni 256).[151]

The wait for the war to begin the next day also brings with it another heart-breaking realization for Panchaali. A woman suddenly "turned and fled, flinging up her hands" on spotting her (Divakaruni 257). This was a sign to ward off an evil-eye! Panchaali is devastated at this knowledge:

> Was this, then, how the people viewed me? . . . I'd surmised that those soldiers had chosen to join my husbands because they supported our cause.

[151] This is the central message of the *Bhagavadgita*, Chapter 2. Verse 22, which Krishna gives to Arjun, and it is reported by Arjun after the war: "As a man discards / worn-out clothes / to put on new / and different ones, /so the embodies self / discards / its worn-out bodies / to take on other new ones. (Miller, "The Bhagavad-Gita" 35)

> Now I realized that for many of them, it was merely a job, an alternative to poverty and starvation. . . . No wonder that for their wives, *I was a harbinger of ill luck*, the woman who had torn their husbands from the safety of their homes, *the witch who might, with a wave of her hand, transform them into widows*. (Divakaruni 257-58, italics mine)

This is indeed an unfortunate thing to know, but true nevertheless. With the passage of time, Panchaali has matured, suffered, and also come out of her ivory-tower. She is beginning to grasp the hazards of a war even before the war has begun. She has no choice but to live her entire life with the burden of pushing women into the gallows of widowhood, chafing against her very existence.

A narrative innovation by Ray in her novel, which brings the hitherto hidden weaknesses of all the Pandavas and Yajnaseni to the fore. In the novel, right before the war, Krishna exhorts everyone in the Pandav camp to reveal their secrets before each other, a night before the war commences, failing which he will not to join the war. Krishna insists, "This is a dharma-battle. Therefore, before the war the mind shall have to be made open, clean, pure" (Ray 366).[152] Yudhishthir confesses: "*It is to avoid war that I staked my wife at dice and was prepared to lose*. If we had not gone into exile then, the Kauravs would have tried to take Indraprasth by force. Despite having been born in the kshatriya clan, to detest war is the weakness of my character" (Ray 367). Now this is an interesting confession: making your wife into a sacrificial scape-goat to avoid going to a war, and that too, knowing one is going to lose! This is the height of morally-reprehensible behaviour, another instance of akrasia (moral weakness). Ray cannot pardon Yudhishthir for having staked his wife, his *dharmapatni*, which is possibly why she puts such words into his mouth. Moreover, the argument perfectly ties up with Yudhishthir's proverbial dislike for war in spite of being a *kshatriya*.

Bhim also makes a startling revelation: "As mine is the larger share in food, in enjoying Krishnaa too my portion should have been more" (Ray 367). In tune with his image as a glutton, Ray makes Bhim sound more in love with Yajnaseni than any of the other

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[152] This can be read as one last bid of Ray to make her characters appear human, and realistic, with flaws and secrets, rather than the idealism they are frequently associated with. It also turns into a game of 'Truth or Dare,' a game which is intended to give each person a fair chance to express themselves before their loved ones, especially since no one knows the result of the war (though this war is predestined in favour of Yajnaseni and the Pandavas)

husbands. This also anticipates Bhim's concern about and his turning around to find Draupadi falling in their final journey. However, Ray paints a shade of disappointment in the readers by making this relationship corporeal. Just when we thought we had found out the person who loved Yajnaseni the most (preferably from amongst the five husbands), one is left uncertain, expecting one of the other husbands to fit the bill.

Arjun's words, however, do not come as a surprise. He confesses, "For honouring Ma's words I combined with my brothers to marry Krishnaa jointly I feel agitated about this. I wish Krishnaa was mine alone!" (Ray 367). But there is no hint of redemption in these words. He will forever be left dissatisfied that he had to share his wife with his brothers, which also means that Arjun is not the man who loves Krishnaa from the core of his heart.[153]

And then comes Yajnaseni's turn. She is brave enough to tell her husbands and Krishna that she has not one, but many weaknesses. Also, she has no qualms in admitting them. Yajnaseni begins her long list of confessions and weaknesses:

> I have many weaknesses. For I am no goddess but a human being. . . . the first weakness of my heart is my dear friend, Madhusudan! . . . The second weakness of my heart is the same as *Ma* Kunti's weakness. . . . It is *Kunti's sons* . . . It is my failing that the sympathy of my heart cannot cross the sons of Kunti. . . . *My third weakness is the third Pandav, Arjun!* He is valiant and gentle, therefore the entire responsibility of the Pandav family falls on his shoulders. The other four share his glory. Because of this at times I get annoyed. (Ray 369, italics mine) [154]

Yajnaseni has no reservations about making these disclosures while standing at such crossroads in her life. She is addressing all the people mentioned in her confessions, and

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[153] Nakul and Sahadev also make confessions which are not crucial to the argument here.

[154] Another name for Krishna. Also, in referring to her second weakness as "Kunti's sons," she may also be meaning Kunti's sons including Karna. By this time in the novel, Kunti has confided in her daughter-in-law about the truth of Karna's birth. Additionally, one can read several references to a softer emotion in Yajnaseni regarding Karna, which is also, at times, reciprocated. But in the world of the epic and the novel, such emotions have no social or moral sanction. Hence, the relationship is pared down towards the end of the novel by making Karna refer to her as a daughter (and himself as a father-in-law, being elder to Yudhishthir). The novel, which was first written in 1984, could not have taken this relationship any further. It was destined to meet this end. However, Divakaruni's novel fills in this want, one of the reasons being that much had changed between 1984 and 2008, when the latter was published.

she does not mince words while admitting to her weaknesses. Whether it provides the others with the opportunity to unburden themselves or not is quite uncertain. But this confession is definitely cathartic for Yajnaseni. Although she does not have any more expectations from any of these men (except, perhaps, from Krishna, to some extent), she pours her heart out to them and will calmly busy herself in prayers for the well-being of all of them after this, till the end of the war.

Dharma, the War, and After

Pratibha Ray does not depict the details or proceedings of the war with a few exceptions. Yajnaseni writes in her letter to Krishna: "That eighteen-day current of the time-ocean obliterated everything. Everything was destroyed. In the ocean of great Time, a small wave, the Battle of Kurukshetra, rose and disappeared. The war was over. Pitiful defeat on one side; terrifying victory on the other! . . . victory left one thus — stripped of everything!" (Ray 371-72) This simple realization echoes what Benjamin Franklin wrote in a letter in 1783, and which went on to become a world-famous aphorism: "There never was a good war or a bad peace" (King). Writing about the dharma of a war, Yajnaseni makes a mature observation and a necessary disclaimer: "I had encouraged the Pandavs for war, but kingdom, wealth, prosperity were not my goals. To avenge the insult and punish the offenders were my only aims. I avenged the insult and the offender was also punished. But what did I get? *That in a dharma-war the offender was punished, but the innocent did not suffer — where was this written?* (Ray 372, italics mine) Ray explores her understanding of a *dharmayuddha*, or even for that matter, any *yuddha* (war), emphasizing, through the character of Yajnaseni, that there is no victor in a war, that there is defeat on both the sides!

Ray comes straight to the episode of the killing of Abhimanyu and Duhshasan. As has been mentioned earlier, Ray tries to foreground the motherly instincts in Yajnaseni. This is possibly the reason why she comes to the episode that affected her heroine the most: the gruesome, adharmic killing of Abhimanyu. She also laments Yudhishthir's sending of Abhimanyu, the son of Arjun and Subhadra, and who was also very dear to her, into the clutches of death "to fight seven chariot-heroes" all alone (Ray 372). She wonders, in sorrow and shock, "Must always Arjun or his son move into the jaws of death? What was the substance of which Yudhishthir was made? As if he had nothing called a heart! *Were virtuous people heartless?*" (Ray 372, my italics) This can provide one with food for

thought: while she admits Yudhishthir to be virtuous, she wonders how he can triumph over other emotions, like those of a husband or a father/uncle. Yajnaseni also seems to be attacking, and thereby, rejecting such virtuosity, such dharmic-ness, which hardens up a person, making her devoid of softer emotions. She tactfully rejects the likening of Yudhishthir and dharma, leaving the readers with a new moral conundrum – why can't compassion and kindness be give pre-eminence within the ambit of dharma? Why does compliance to dharma necessitate forgoing one's human self? Can there be no midway? Why can't dharma be adhered to without any dilemma, or loss, or violence?

Yajnaseni confesses that Duhshasan's blood did not bring any peace to her: "Now it seemed that drinking blood only satisfied the beast. . . . However much I might be immersed in revenge, I was a woman. How could I find peace through human blood? Rather a helplessness, disgust, detachment from life, profound remorse and sorrow overwhelmed me" (sic) (Ray 373). In a highly disturbing sequence, she makes a profoundly philosophical statement when Bhim brings 'another handful of blood to pour on her hair.' She shrieks out, "Enough, enough! Let me live. Take me to some other earth! . . . In Duhshasan's blood I can smell the blood of Abhimanyu. It seems the blood of all human beings in the world carries the same, identical smell. Do not make me an ogress…" Saying this, she faints on the battlefield (Ray 374) She also makes an implicit comparison of the earth with herself: "The earth can never be satisfied drinking blood. For she is the mother, life-giver, bringer forth of heroes!" (sic) (Ray 374)[155]

After the war is over, she writes, "No delight was left in becoming queen" (Ray 377). Then there was the additional havoc wreaked by Ashvatthama. In Ray's version, Yajnaseni pardons Ashvatthama thinking about suffering of Harita, his mother, who was her close friend. Ray seems to be investing her heroine with the quality of *kṣamā*, or forgiveness, considered to be a dharma in Indian philosophy and also described as a vital virtue in the epic. Ramanathan explains: "The epic hero Yudhiṣṭhira is described as a personification of tolerance and though sinned against he had the magnanimity to condone it. While others, especially Draupadī, want not to forgive what Duryodhana did, Yudhiṣṭhira pursues his path of patience and refuses to retaliate" (105). In investing Yajnaseni with the dharma of

[155] Draupadi, an incarnation of Sri, symbolizes prosperity as well as the nurturing earth which sustains.

forgiveness, Ray seems to be taking a portion of the halo around Yudhishthira and letting her heroine partake a portion of the glory.

The novel also launches into a brief description of widows thronging the battlefield "looking for the bodies of their husbands, fathers, sons, brothers in that hell and, finding their corpses, were shrieking, clasping them to their breasts" (Ray 382). She feels guilty and is sensitive to their pain because she is the cause of their misery, and is fortunate that her husbands are alive, and "victorious, although this victory was being observed in the cremation ground next to the flaming funeral pyres. . . . Lakhs of corpses, . . . Wherever one looked one heard only the howling and raucous cries of jackals, vultures and crows. Taering of flesh, drinking of blood, dragging of bodies were going on. Hastinapur had turned into hell" (Ray 381-82).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, as contrasted to Ray, spends considerable time over the war scene. This is because some of the most profound visions, dreams, and realizations are bestowed upon Panchaali in this episode. A night before the war is about to begin, Panchaali dreams that Krishna comes to her:

> In it, Krishna was talking to me. When he opened his mouth to speak, I could see the entire earth inside it, and the heavens with their spinning planets and fiery meteors. He said, once again, what he'd told me in the evening—only this time I understood. *Just as we cast off worn clothes and wear new ones, when the time arrives, the soul casts off the body and finds a new one to work out its karma. Therefore the wise grieve neither for the living nor the dead.* (Divakaruni 258, emphasis in original)

This is again a significant feminist intervention by the author: the teachings of the *Gita* are imparted to her before they are to Arjun, although Arjun will also be a recipient of the sermon when the war begins. Thus, it is a significant rupture in the convention of men being the usual recipients of spiritual experiences. In fact, Divakaruni clarifies her stand in introducing the scene to her novel:

> I wanted to explore how the spiritual dimension is equally available to men and women, a fact that religions do not often accept. On the mystical level of spirituality, it is always very clear that gender is not an issue. Spirituality transcends gender. At some point when her husbands are having several

> spiritual experiences and encounters with gods, Panchaali wonders, "Why is it I never meet a god? Is it because I am a woman?" (Divakaruni, "Power of Storytelling" 91)

Amidst all the chaos and the ensuing violence and disillusionment, Panchaali finds a ray of hope in Vyasa's blessing, which she hasn't tested yet: "If Vyasa had spoken the truth, I was to be a witness—*the only witness on our side, the only woman ever*—to the grand spectacle that was about to play itself out. *No matter how the war ended, my role in it was something to be proud of*" (Divakaruni 259, mu emphasis). It seems the prophecy at her birth and her eagerness to grow up and change history will also, finally, meet their realization. However, along with it there is also the realization that the nature of her vengeance has changed from the time when she was a young girl to this day: "I realized that the role I would play now had nothing to do with Panchaali's pride" (Divakaruni 260).

Moreover, in relating to Krishna's more formalized message to Arjun, which he narrates later, something strikes her: "When Arjun asked why man found himself driven to wrongdoing in spite of good intentions, Krishna replied, Because of anger and desire, our two direst enemies. How well I knew them, my longtime companions—no, my masters—and their offspring, revenge!" (Divakaruni 264)

However, the gift comes with a pinch of salt—the reality of men is laid bare before the eyes of a woman! She muses: "I realized then that the sight allowed me to penetrate the masks of men and look into their core, and I was at once elated and terrified. . . ." (Divakaruni 261) But the sights she witnesses on the battlefield are very disturbing and painful, which also reveal the wrongs innermost dispositions of the men she sees at loggerheads with each other: "Thus the war went on, the physical battle outside matching the conflicts within each warrior. . . . I saw the death throes of the innocent and the guilty, and both were equally terrible" (Divakaruni 266).

Amidst the chaos of the war and the growing alienation, Panchaali can now understand Kunti and her motivations about giving up her son, Karna, after his birth. She thinks: "A little of my anger faded. I remembered my girlhood sympathy for Karna's unknown mother. When Kunti gave birth to Karna, she'd been young and afraid, with no one to confide in. Could I have done any better in her place? She'd made Karna suffer, ... If he could forgive her—he who had been the primary victim of her fear—shouldn't I at least try?" (Divakaruni 281)

Panchaali sits on top of the hill, meditating and witnessing with the power of the divine eyes. And the juggernaut rolls: the killing of Abhimanyu by Karna, the part that Krishna played in the war, Drona being killed by her brother through the medium of a lie, Krishna inciting Arjun to kill Karna when he was caught in a disadvantageous position, Krishna's anger at Yudhishthir offering the choices for combat to Duryodhan, Bhim's justification for using foul blows after he lay Duryodhan down. The worst was not yet over. She sees in dream what Ashwtthama is about to do, and wakes up screaming and thrashing only to know that her dream had actually turned out to be true. Therein lay her message and her sorry realization: "A part of me screamed, too, . . . Why should this happen to me now, after all the other things I'd suffered already—just when I thought my troubles were finally over? But a part said, *She who sows vengeance must reap its bloody fruit*. Have you not had a hand in turning Aswatthama into the monster he is today? (Divakaruni 306, emphasis mine)

In her moment of grief, Krishna consoles her. Later, Bheem returns with the Aswatthama's fabled jewel, but it is of no use for her, now: "Once I would have felt delighted at having acquired an object so unique. I would have placed it in a position of pride in the Palace of Illusions. Today it held no more meaning than a lump of clay. Worse: each of its shiny facets seemed to hold the face of one of my loved ones in the throes of death" (Divakaruni 308). One can notice a visible change in Panchaali after the war.

After the war, widows start gathering at the battle field. Many women try to immolate themselves. Yudhisthir is horrified, and it is Panchaali who comes to his rescue:

> When I climbed onto the makeshift dais, my intention was only to stand beside Yudhisthir because he seemed so alone. . . . Before this, I had never addresses a crowd, . . . I told them that unlike me, who was left childless, they had a responsibility toward the sons and daughters they had left at home. Who would take care of them if the women killed themselves? . . . I'd started to address the women as a queen might her subjects, but as the words formed in my mouth, I spoke as a mother among mothers, and together we wept. (Divakaruni 312-14)

Thus, a queen is made in the most horrid of circumstances.[156] This is her first stint at public speaking, again something that was not known in those times.[157] The palace of Duryodhan no longer looks lively, the coronation is done with a heavy heart, the victory, overall, a hollow one. She admits, "On the day of the coronation, my greatest challenge was to enter the throne room again. . . . I had to use all my willpower to step into the room that had been the scene of my greatest humiliation" (Divakaruni 321-22).

However, the days after the war are not as meaningless for Panchaali as they are for the heroine of the epic. Hastinapura is fraught with a lot of problems, the atrocities affecting widows and women of all age group the most. She reminisces: "It was a terrible situation—and it saved me. . . . It was time I shook off my self-pity and did something. I resolved to form a separate court, a place where women could speak their sorrows to other women" (Divakaruni 322-23). In her endeavour, she is helped by Kunti, Gandhari, Subhadra and Uttara. The women seem to be astute administrators too:

> With the sale of their jewellery, they hire scribes to interpret the law and a queen's guard to carry out our judgments. . . . All this allowed us to set up the destitute in homes of their own and buy merchandise to start businesses for them. In time the women's market became a flourishing center of trade in the city, . . . We trained . . . tutors for young girls and young boys. . . . Hastinapur remained one of the few cities where women could go about their daily lives without harassment. (Divakaruni 324-25)

This is a woman writer's view of the world. This is how good women can be at political and administrative matters, if given a chance.

Panchaali has to bear the burden of a secret truth even after Pariksit's birth. Vyasa tells her: "Watch the boy's temper, . . . It'll get him in trouble if he isn't careful. . . . I've always known you to be stronger than your husbands" (Divakaruni 327-29). This time too, Panchaali tries, but cannot avert destiny.

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[156] In Dharmakshetra, the judgement of Chitragupta for Draupadi is: "Queen Draupadi! You will always set an example for the future generations, illustrating for them the fact that no one can benefit from a blind ambition. Your thinking, your deeds, your aspirations will live on for centuries to come. History will never forget your name" ("Draupadi")

[157] With the exception of Sulbha and Gargi, perhaps.

The Final Journey:

After thirty-six years of rule over Hastinapura, and after the death of Krishna, Draupadi proceeds on the final journey of life with her husbands. In *Yajnaseni*, she does so to "obey" her husband Yudhishthir's wish. On her way, Yajnaseni sees Maya running behind her, pulling her back "like some bond" (Ray 392). This can be interpreted as her attachment and desire pulling her back. Later, Ray explicates in the last chapter of her novel, how Maya "slipped, fell down and died long back" (Ray 395). In fact, the name of the door of the Ganga in the Himalayas is also called Mayapuri, and once people set foot there, Maya disappears.

While walking towards the gate, Yajnaseni muses in retrospect over such questions as: "What did I get in this birth? What did I lose? Why did I come? What task was accomplished through me? What ought to have been done by me?" (Ray 392) She feels her life had largely remained unfulfilled: "Why have I borne so much sorrow, grief, pain, in life? I feel that with Yudhishthir as husband any woman will have to suffer…" (Ray 393) Towards the end of the novel, the transformation of her character becomes complete: "Yajnaseni advocates peace and harmony by a strong denunciation of war, strife and disintegration. She puts forth a prayer to Krishna that whatever had happened to her should not happen to any other woman" (Jagannathan 104).

Among the five wishes she puts forth to Krishna, her fifth and final demand is truly 'liberating.' Yajnaseni goes against the normal expectation of *moksha*, *svarg*, liberation or salvation to make the completely unthinkable demand: "It is rebirth that I crave. . . . Instead of undergoing the suffering of reaching *svarg* in one's own body, the effort to turn one's own motherland into a heaven will be preferable" (Ray 397). Thus, Yajnaseni rejects liberation, which has remained a largely male desire in the Indian philosophical discourse.

Placing all her grievances on record in her letter to Krishna, Yajnaseni writes that it was very painful that none of her husbands turned back even to look when she fell at the foot of the mountain Himavant. Shattered by the indifference of Yudhishthir, Yajnaseni regrets why she had to "bear the burden of the whole world's mockery, sneers, innuendos, abuse, scorn and slander for the sake of preserving Yudhishthir's dharma (Ray 3). She is full of regret and anger: "They are gone, those people, . . . following whom throughout life these tender feet shed blood, bore pain . . . Despite someone else being the root of all causes,

they emptied the entire cup of blame on my head and went away — leaving me thus at death's door." (Ray 1-2) In the same breath, she thinks:

> What agonies did I not suffer for preserving dharma? I had thought that on the strength of my adherence to dharma and fidelity as a wife I would be able to accompany my husbands to heaven. Yet, . . . my feet slipped and I fell! Five husbands — but not one turned back even to look. Rather, Dharmaraj Yudhishthir, lord of righteousness, said to Bhim, 'Do not turn back to look! Come forward!' (Ray 2-3)

Yajnaseni, Ray's heroine, wants rebirth because she wants to repent for the faults committed by her in her present birth, of encouraging her husbands for a war for the sake of justice, seeking revenge, thereby leading to the mass slaughter of numerous innocents. She prays: "Krishna, . . . O greatest of lovers, let me be born as a lover. Let me be born again and again as . . . a lover of the world. . . . . On the way to death . . . it is the reiteration of life that is my wish" (Ray 397-98)

In Divakaruni's novel too, the moment of the great departure comes after Krishna's death. While leaving Hastinapur, Pancahali, for moment, thinks: "I wanted to live it all again—with more wisdom this time!" (Divakaruni 343) Even now, she wishes to be remembered by posterity for following her husbands on the journey: "I would rather perish on the mountain. It would be sudden and clean, an end worthy of bard-song, my last victory over the other wives: *She was the only consort that dared accompany the Pandavas on this final, fearsome adventure. When she fell, she did not weep, but only raised her hand in brave farewell*" (Divakaruni 343-44).

It is to fulfil Yudhisthir's wish "to enter heaven in human flesh" that everyone else also accompanies him (Divakaruni 244). Panchaali muses: "It was clear that we wouldn't last long enough to reach any peak, sacred or otherwise. . . . I had accepted that we would probably die on the mountain. . . . But what I resented was this: when we fell, our failure would be ascribed not to a physical limitation but a moral one" (Divakaruni 245).

When she fell and Bheem turned to get her, "Yudhisthir put a forbidding hand on his arm. He was reminding him of the law. Once on the path, you couldn't retrace your steps, no matter what happened" (Divakaruni 346). On seeing this, Panchaali recollects: "Resentment flared through me. Rules were always more important to Yudhisthir than

human pain—or human love. I knew then that he alone would reach the gate of heaven, for among us only he was capable of shedding his humanity" (Divakaruni 346). She makes a confession: "I could have scrambled up to the path somehow—but for what? To listen to another of Yudhisthir's sermons? Better to lie here, in relative peace, and gather my last thoughts" (Divakaruni 347).

When Bhim asked him what was the reason for Panchaali's fall, Yudhisthira pauses to give the reply, and in that moment, Panchaali feels he knew about her feelings for Karna. She is afraid of revelation, but suddenly, Yudhisthira utters the name of Arjun. Panchaali feels relieved: "He had spared me. He'd chosen kindness over truth and uttered, for the sake of my reputation, the second lie of his lifetime!" (Divakaruni 348)

Panchaali remembers Krishna in her last moments. She hears Krishna's voice when she is thinking about love, trying to figure out: "where was the love I'd longed for since I was a girl? Where was the person who'd accept me completely and cherish me with all my faults?" (Divakaruni 351) In her last moments, she realizes "she has just been an instrument in the scheme of things by a process of regression when she had no body and no name" (Divakaruni 357) This is a profound experience, almost the crux of Indian philosophy, which enlightens her, and not Yudhisthira, who must be on his way to heaven. Ultimately, she now drifts into a world where: "The air is full of men—but not men exactly, nor women, for their bodies are sleek and sexless and glowing . . . their faces evincing the satisfaction of actors who have successfully concluded their roles in a great drama" (Divakaruni 358).

Thus, in the two novels, the heroine's journey of dharma, steering clear of all kinds of adharma around her, is a fascinating, though painful one. The character of Draupadi in the epic also acquires an unsurpassable force at the time of and after the dicing scene. The literary innovations adopted by Ray and Divakaruni, however, add to her power and her force, as well as gives a new thrust to the debate about dharma and adharma. The time is right to proceed into a discussion on the representative of 'adharma' in the epic, Duyodhana, in the chapter that follows.

CHAPTER 4

The Dharma of Adharma: Duryodhana's Philosophy of Morality and *Rajadharma*

> *The human race is not so much black or white as grey.* (Raghunathan 1, italics in original)
>
> I was the same shade of grey as all the rest of them in the Mahabharata. So why have I been singled out as the arch villain? (Raghunathan 235)
>
> *Kingdoms aren't for giving away –*
> *No rajadharma endorses it* (Raghunathan 87, italics in original)
>
> All I care for is that I lived my life being true to myself and to the higher interests of my lineage and God-ordained role – that is, my rajadharma. (Raghunathan 18)

The aforementioned lines from V. Raghunathan's novel *Duryodhana* underpin his arguments in support of the arch-villain of the *Mahabharata.* While the first is a universal axiom, applicable as much to the Kauravas and the Pandavas, as to the other characters of the epic and other narrative literature, the latter are vindications of Duryodhana, a character who has been grossly misunderstood and singularly vilified.

Much of this stereotyping arises from the manner in which the epic has been interpreted down the ages. Perhaps the roots of such interpretation lie in the epic itself. The Ādiparva (1.1.65) describes the "angry Duryodhana" as "the great tree, Karṇa its trunk, Śakuni the branches, Duḥśāsana the plentiful blossoms and fruits, and foolish king Dhṛtarāṣṭra the root" (qtd. in Hudson, 106). The Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas symbolize the powers of the evil and the good, of the demonic and the divine respectively.[158] Sukthankar explains that a

[158] It has been related in the the *Mahābhārata* that Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Duryodhana's father, was an incarnation of Haṁsa, a son of Ariṣṭa (*ariṣṭa* literally means evil, bad luck, calamity or a portentous phenomenon foreboding misfortune). The progeny of Ariṣṭa must therefore be the harbinger of calamity, as both

symbolic interpretation of the Kauravas casts them as "the incarnations of Asuras or anti-gods. Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kaurava brothers, is considered to be Kali himself (Kalipūruṣah), the arch-fiend, evil incarnate. The inseparable associate of Kali is Dvāpara, who was born as Śakuni, the arch-gambler, the intimate adviser and helpmate of Duryodhana in evil designs" (Sukthankar 65).[159] All in all, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sons, Duryodhana and his ninety-nine brothers, together represent "lust, greed, hatred, anger, envy, pride, and vanity, and so on . . . ." (Sukthankar 105)

With this scholarly and intellectual baggage, it should not serve as a surprise if Duryodhana and his brothers (along with their father) have only been entitled to cultural disapproval and public antipathy. However, on further deliberation, one realizes that a villain and his coterie of supporters might have been a structural necessity of the epic. A. N. Bhattacharya observes that the epic *Mahābhārata* incorporates many unethical actions precisely in order to expose the many evils of *adharma* as also to warn against them (*Dharma-Adharma*). One can further argue that while going through its many layers of transformation from 'Jaya,' the story of a family feud, to the stage of the Bhārata and onwards to the *Mahābhārata*, the text might have been interpolated by the brahmins to uphold the logic of theodicy; the first step for which necessitated the creation of a character which would resonate with the darker instincts in all humans, or, for that matter, if Holtzmann's theory is to be believed, switch the places and narratives of the hero and the villain.[160] V. S. Sukthankar has also argued that "although the *Mahābhārata* story

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Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Duryodhana in the epic are shown to be. In fact, Duryodhana and the Kauravas were the race of Pulastya demons, who in turn was the grandfather of Rāvaṇa, and all the demons are said to have sprung from him. (Sukthankar 66)

[159] A symbolic interpretation of the epic, according to Sukthankar, yields useful results, in the absence of which "an internecine war among kinsfolk for a share in a paltry patrimony can hardly be said to possess any redeeming feature, whatever heroism be displayed by individual combatants participating in the war" (62). Also, All references to V. S. Sukthankar in this chapter (when quoted directly) belong to his text, *On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata*, unless otherwise indicated.

[160] Explaining the theory that the poem might have been composed in two stages (as studies by Holtzmann) which probably involved a complete switching of the moral positioning of the two camps, Basu writes: "Adolf Holtzmann first studied the seeming 'inconsistencies' in the epic and suggested that many of these are ascribable to a reversal in the projection of righteousness or otherwise of the two warring sides in the battle of Kurukshetra, by contending forces of the denominational sects of Shaivism, Buddhism and Vaishnavism over the ages. This approach, which was later called the 'inversion theory' by E. W. Hopkins, suggested that the original story had Duryodhana and the Kauravas as the righteous side, and the subsequent glorification of Krshna and the Pandavas was the work of proponents of the new divinity – Vishnu" (221-22).

allows evil to triumph over *dharma* for a period of time, the epic does so in order to show that the victory of evil is always short-lived and that *adharma* always carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction" (Hudson 4, note 3).

But there are a number of scholars who have attempted to read the life and motivations of Duryodhana and the Pandavas against the grain, or have read the motivations of both the Kauravas and the Pandavas with a fair degree of objectivity.[161] The character of Duryodhana has generated significant interest down the ages, not only amongst scholars and writers, but even among the masses, and this might not necessarily have to do with the darkness of his character. Duryodhana is also a hero in several folkloric traditions of India, most notably in several villages in Har ki Doon in the valley of Uttarkashi in the state of Uttarakhand, with Poruvazhy Peruviruthy Malanada in Kerala being the only known Duryodhana temple in South India (Vrinda and Ramanan).[162] Moreover, Duryodhana, in a

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[161] Most notably, Bimal Krishna Matilal's "The Throne: Was Duryodhana Wrong?" (in *Ethics and Epics*, where Matilal directs his argument in favour of Duryodhana's claim to the throne on the basis of the law of primogeniture and a confused genealogy of the Kurus, ultimately showing the dispute over the throne to be rendered utterly useless by the end of the war as the victors do not even relish their victory, while Duryodhana dies a glorious death fighting as a warrior); Robert P. Goldman (who attempts to highlight the glossed over immoral acts committed by the Pandavas in the epic); David Gitomer (who studies the popular renditions of the story of Duryodhana in select Sanskrit plays vis-à-vis the epic); and Gurcharan Das (who subjects Duryodhana to an objective analysis, highlighting both his tragic flaw, i.e. envy, and his steadfastness and nobility of character), among others.

[162] See also, Saklani and Negi, whose article traces the development of the cult worship of Duryodhana in Uttaranchal under various names like 'Somesu,' 'Samosa,' now Sanskritized as 'Someshwara' and 'Someshwara Mahadeva.' 'This territorial deity presides over the region like a feudal lord, protecting the people and their crops and animals' (295). Saklani and Negi explain that there are two possible versions of the origin of the cult: some believe it to be independent of the story of the *Mahabharata*, while some others believe that the worshippers of the cults of Duryodhana and Karṇa in this region are the descendants of the Kauravas or the tribes who had participated in the war. Interestingly, the new generations of the people who worship 'Duryodhana' as a local god/deity, renamed the deity as 'Someshwara' or 'Someshwara Mahadeva,' when they came to know that Duryodhana was in fact a defeated villainous character in the epic with the spread of education. I would also like to add one more point to this aside: the linking of the name of the deity with 'Mahadeva' or Shiva can have interesting parallels with the cult of 'Ravana' worship in Southern India and Sri Lanka, which is frequently associated to Lord Shiva, as Ravana was a staunch devotee of Shiva. It can also be read as a step which will divest some degree of 'villainy' from the folk deity, as there is every likelihood that Someshwara Mahadeva might come to be regarded as an incarnation of Lord Shiva himself in the long run.

number of plays written in Sanskrit, "is a legitimate sovereign who possesses *śrī*, the charismatic royal splendour" (Gitomer 225).[163]

There has been a recent spate in the novelistic renderings in English of the character of Duryodhana, Ravana and other seemingly 'negative' characters like Ashwatthama.[164] While such 'point of view' retellings from the vantage point of Karna—a character that manages to garner more empathy than the others mentioned above—have been in vogue since the last six to seven decades, with a number of retellings done in regional languages (quite a few of them now translated into English) as well as English, it is a relatively newer phenomenon to compose novels narrating the plight of the characters who have traditionally been associated with maliciousness and moral depravity, especially to cater to the youngsters who form a major share of the market for mythological retellings and historical fiction in India today.[165] Alternatively, one can also refer to these 'villains' as 'anti-heroes,' the embodiment of 'evil' or 'adharma,' which creates interesting grounds of exploration.

One increasingly feels that the *Mahabharata* does not create types but delineates individuals, with their strengths and weaknesses, their foibles and strengths. Almost every character, arguably though, at one point or the other in the epic, displays heroism in her/his position. Such cases of heroism in the epic have more to do with displaying a high moral

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[163] Some of the plays Gitomer bases his study on are Bhāsa's *Pañcarātra, Dūtavākya* and *Ūrubhaṅga* and Bhaṭṭa Nārāyaṇa's *Veṇīsaṃhāra*. Gitomer's primary thesis in the paper also establishes the tussle between Duryodhana and Krishna as "the conflict between social dharma [of Duryodhana] and the amoral, impenetrable cosmic Dharma [of Kṛṣṇa]" (Gitomer 229).

[164] Anand Neelkanthan has embarked on the journey to narrate the Sanskrit epics from the perspective of the villain, and claims he can be credited with "the invention of a new genre in Indian writing – the counter telling of mythology" (*Anand Neelkanthan*). He has published a trilogy in the last five years: *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice*, and *Ajaya: Rise of Kali*. While the first one is Ravana's narration, the latter two are, according to him, Duryodhana's *Mahabharata*. Two novels written from the point of view of Ashwatthama are Rajeev Balakrishnan's *Death Seeking Immortal* (2016) and Aditya Iyengar's *The Palace of Assasins: The Rise of Ashwatthama* (2017).

[165] Wayne Booth dedicates a chapter in his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, to lay out how writers manage to invite the sympathy of readers towards 'seemingly' negative characters. Basing his study on Austen's *Emma*, Booth begins by suggesting that "the solution to the problem of maintaining sympathy despite almost crippling faults was primarily to use the heroine [here, the negative character] herself as a kind of narrator. . ." (Booth 245)

choice or action, rather than martial strength.[166] Even the 'anti-heroes'—and one is particularly referring to Duryodhana and Ravana here—act quite dharmically in several instances in the epics. These anti-heroes are, to use Raghavendra's argument from a different but related context, "as mindful of dharma as any other character, though [their] interpretation [of what constitutes dharma and adharma] may be different" the dominant, prevailing understanding of the same. Raghavendra is perhaps right in stating that "once the villain is made immune to moral/dharmic codes, one cannot take interest in his doings, since there is no wrong that he cannot do."[167] Thus, such 'anti-heroes' are not without a staunch sense of morality, though their morality may have very different motivations and definitions. One would therefore refrain from using the term 'anti-heroes' altogether. Duryodhana (and Ravana) in the final analysis, then, are just heroes with a peculiar sense of dharma, morality and ethics.

One can also surmise that the dawning of this counter culture on the literary and artistic horizon in India against the dominant discourse on heroism and conventional morality is a welcome phenomenon. It also serves to reinforce another significant fact—heroes are culturally made, and there is an urgent need for the revision of the same and the creation of new heroes, who may very-well be the anti-heroes of the past. These 'new' heroes, through their personal narratives, help one arrive at a more human, credible, and pragmatic understanding of heroism and ethics, where no one is all dark or all white. Even characters traditionally hailed as heroes come with shades of grey.

This brings one back to where this discussion took off—V. Raghunathan's novel *Duryodhana*, which is going to be discussed in the chapter, and his primary argument in the novel. Writing about Duryodhana, Raghunathan maintains, "I fancy . . . a good case for Duryodhana being as grey a character as any of the other major heroes in the epic, and not as dark as he has been painted" (Raghunathan xi). The author firmly believes that human beings are highly complex, and every single person indulges in both right and wrong, commits actions which sometimes pass the test of dharma, and are, at other times, labelled adharmic. Citing his reason behind the composition of *Duryodhana*, Raghunathan writes in the Author's Note: "While most popular versions of the Mahabharata portray

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[166] The concept of good moral conduct and heroism had nothing to do with gender. There are many powerful female heroines in the epic, most prominently, Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari and Satyavati, to name a few.

[167] Refer to Bibliography for further details.

Duryodhana as the perpetrator of all that is wrong, it seems to me that *there is a good reason to view him as the wronged party instead.* As one who likes to side with the underdog, I thought it would be interesting to *play the advocate to Duryodhana* and see the Mahabharata from this perspective" (sic) (Raghunathan x-xi, italics mine). This is not to mean that Raghunathan goes out of his way to justify the unjustifiable and the morally reprehensible, to hammer home his point. Although there are several hints in the epic itself of the goodness and the motivations behind why Duryodhana acts the way he does, Raghunathan uses the philosophy of *rajadharma* to explicate the motives and actions of Duryodhana and his allies in the novel.

What Went Wrong?

Before beginning his narrative, Duryodhana—he is called by the name Suyodhana throughout the novel—lays bare some cases of biases and injustices that have been meted out to him by the narrators of his story, be they Vyasa (who is also his grandfather), or the later narrators, namely Shukracharya and Narada; or by the 'godhead' Krishna, who is infamous for use of deceit and trickery in getting all the invincible warriors on his side killed during the war to ensure the victory of the Pandavas.[168] The prologue of his narrative begins with a seemingly innocuous 'confession' on the part of Duryodhana: "The title of the chief villain of the Mahabharata belongs unequivocally to me" (Raghunathan 1). But the next word is directed towards dispelling the complacency that might set in with the opening line: "Why?"

This is possibly part of Raghunathan's strategy to draw the readers into his narrative, and encourage the readers to think along, and, may be also, think alike. Raghunathan continues:

> Could . . . it be that Vyasa wrote much of the epic post facto, . . . so that his narration – and therefore the words of those who told and retold the stories after him – swayed way too much towards how the victors of the climactic war at Kurukshetra waited it told? *After all, it is human nature to find everything about the . . . vanquished a vicious black. . . . the Pandavas, have*

[168] It is ironical that Raghunathan chooses to refer to his protagonist by what he considers might have been his 'original' name – Suyodhana, but title the novel Duryodhana instead. One reason for the choice might have been the marketability of the novel—people usually know Duryodhana as such; not many know that he was called Suyodhana, and posterity corrupted his name with a negative prefix.

> *forever been adorned with divine halos, and we the Kauravas with demons' souls*. (Raghunathan 1-2, my emphasis)

This is an undeniable truth everyone must have experienced in one way or the other in one's life: it is always the victor who becomes the bearer of good and vice-versa. Duryodhana enumerates some of the fundamental problems he has with some received facts about his family and ancestors, as well as the nooks and corners where his narrative might have been manipulated owing to the narrator's biases and preferences. Launching into a brief history of his genealogy, charting his family history up till the birth of his blind father and his half-brothers, he raises grave doubts about the legitimacy of the claims of his father and uncle (who were begotten through levirate with Vyasa, a *brahmin* and not a *kshatriya*). Additionally, he also accuses Vyasa of being prejudiced against his father and his grandmother—seen in his act of abandoning them—because the latter refused his advances, and then sent her chambermaid as a proxy (which indicates that Vyasa sired Vidura before Dhritarashtra in Raghunathan's version of the story), and later shut her eyes out of fear during copulation, when he approached her a second time.

But Raghunathan does not blame Vyasa for all the interpolation and denigration his story has been subjected to. Another possible reason Duryodhana cites for the animadversion of the Kauravas is the supposed improvisation, "theatricality" and "embellishment" that Shukracharya and Narada might have brought to Vyasa's original narration (Raghunathan 7). Duryodhana writes: "The damage they have done to me, or rather my reputation, making me out to be the vilest of the villains in history and mythology combined is . . . mainly posthumous" (Raghunathan 11). This partly explains the impetus behind Duryodhana's taking on the role of the narrator to set matters right.

Coming to the issue of naming, Duryodhana states that people do not name their children after him or any of the Kaurava brothers, also adding that their names were distorted to carry negative meanings. So, "Suyodhana (meaning one who is adept at wielding weapons) became Duryodhana (one who makes wrong use of weapons), and Sushasana (meaning one who rules well) became Dushasana (a bad ruler)," to give a few examples (Raghunathan 12).

Explaining the power of stories and repetitions, tales and their retellings, and the significance of how they are narrated, also using the same logic to explain how and why things might have gone wrong for the Kauravas, Raghunathan writes:

> Every positive anecdote about the Pandavas was sugar-coated and exaggerated, while comparable accounts pertaining to Kauravas suppressed . . . every little defect and mistake of the Kauravas was painted with tar and parallel accounts of Pandavas white-washed. After all, reputations, good or bad, when told and retold, get exaggerated. . . . So no wonder in due course these *carefully crafted stories acquired a reality of their own*, gaining random limbs, *making monsters of us Kauravas and angels of the Pandavas*. (Raghunathan 13, italics mine)

A little later, Duryodhana repeats the same point with a confession, "We did our share of good deeds. We committed our share of mistakes. But we were no worse, if no better, than the Pandavas. It is simply that somewhere along the long road of mythological storytelling, someone decided to paint us a dark shade and then with every coat it just got darker . . . as the stories were repeated again and again" (Raghunathan 17). Duryodhana can think of no other rhyme or reason why he and his brothers would become villains for eternity, while the Pandavas would be fortunate enough to be hailed as heroes and morally upright, especially when the truth was that the Pandavas, who were "trying to wrest a good chunk of a kingdom over which they had no right" became representatives of the good, while the Kauravas, who were "merely trying to protect what was legitimately" theirs, became evil (Raghunathan 13). This will continue to be the moot point, the pivot of Duryodhana's argument in the novel: the actions of the Kauravas were determined by their motivation to protect what they thought belonged to them by law and/or convention.

Another reason why the villainy of the Kauravas might have been added in large proportions to their goodness, by the narrators as well as the compiler, as Duryodhana puts it, is that "the Mahabharata will be a much lesser epic, far less fascinating, if it was only about pure good pitched against pure evil. . . . The truth is that the Mahabharata ought to hold its fascination because the epic is grey versus grey; not white versus black" (Raghunathan 14).

Another task that Duryodhana conducts in the prologue is to dismiss the goodness and divinity of Krishna, and that his being on the side of the Pandavas meant that they were

morally right.[169] To counter the point, Duryodhana reminds that Krishna's brother Balarama, and virtuous Karna sided with him during the war, in addition to the "hundreds of kings and princes, many of them close friends and well-wishers of the Pandavas" (Raghunathan 14). He poses a pertinent remark, "Why would they have done so if I was pure evil and if there was no case in my favour?" (Raghunathan 14). Matilal corroborates this argument. He writes about Duryodhana that "he was an outstanding diplomat. It was through his good diplomacy that a major section of the neutral kings joined him in his battle of Kurukṣetra against the Pāṇḍavas. His army . . . outnumbered the army of the Pāṇḍavas" (*Ethics and Epics* 115-16).

A major paradigm shift in the argument of Raghunathan is his foregrounding of the difficulty of being immaculate or, for that matter, even superhuman or divine in the age that they live in. In this worldview, even Krishna was not exempted from being a grey character. Raghunathan writes:

> Speaking of Krishna, in the Kaliyuga, he may be good enough to be deified . . . *Kaliyuga is the age ruled by one-quarter virtue and three-quarters sin.* But Dwaparyuga, in which we lived, was governed half by virtue and half by sin. That's why in our time, everybody – be it Krishna, Arjuna, Drona or I – was considered to be a mere mortal, and *all of us were tinted in more or less similar shades of grey*. (Raghunathan 14-15, my italics)

Krishna, in Duryodhana's judgement, was a "crafty politician," "regular enough to die a common man's death" (Raghunathan 17). He could not have been divine, nor was anyone else in the epic.[170] The only solace that Duryodhana has, when he compares his life and death to that of Krishna, or the other Pandavas in retrospect, is that he died "a brave king's death" (Raghunathan 17).[171] David Gitomer emphasizes that "Duryodhana, . . . won a

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[169] Several scholars have pointed out Duryodhana's disbelief in the divinity of Krishna as his fatal flaw. However, Das praises him for having the grit to do so, against the prevailing belief. Das writes, "There is something heroically Faustian in the way he stands up to Krishna, the God" (Das 32)

[170] This contention ties up with the arguments of several scholars of the ancient epic, who claim that the divinity of Krishna was a later development. It was ascribed on to the epic by Brahmin redactors; it gained more force with the rise of Vaishnavism and the rising of the Bhakti movement in medieval India.

[171] Mukhoty writes about the strange complexities of the *Mahabharata*: "The heroes do not die on the battlefield, in the full glory of their Kshatriya destiny. Instead there is old age, melancholy and enduring

hero's death and a hero's place in heaven" through his strict adherence to "his warrior dharma, with all its ruthlessness and treachery" (228). McGrath also lends support to the view that "despite all of his wrongdoing and follies, and, unlike any of the Pāṇḍavas, he dies a hero's death. The universe recognises his sacral kingship, which is deemed divine in origin" (*Rāja Yudhiṣṭhira* 81). Duryodhana, in his final analysis, is a contended man: "Truth be told, I died a happy man. In death, as in life, I held my head high. I never lived with one eye on the future like Arjuna . . . *Nor did I have any pangs of self-doubt* like him at any point in my life. *I was convinced of my righteousness and I found answers to my dilemmas entirely on my own*" (Raghunathan 17-18). This is an important proclamation—several scholars of dharma and morality have suggested that Duryodhana never suffered from a moral dilemma.[172] Also, unlike Arjuna, Duryodhana did not have an intimate companion to guide him through life, not even Karna or Ashwatthama. In that sense, he was both a lonely as well as a self-made man.

Moreover, Suyodhana is not really instructed in the techniques to distinguish between dharma and adharma. Never do we find any mention of Suyodhana committing any adharma (in his view) during his life. In any case, it is very difficult to separate one from the other, and act in the most righteous of ways in every situation in her/his life. As the scriptures proclaim:

> "Dharma and adharma do not go about saying 'Here we are!' Nor do the Gods, Gandharvas, or Ancestors tell us 'This is dharma,' 'This is adharma.'
>
> — *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra* (qtd. in Hudson 50)

The last point that Duryodhana makes before he begins with his main narrative is that "Yudhisthira tried to convince the world [in his account of the Mahabharata] that it is more honourable and righteous to gamble away your wife, family and kingdom than decline a gambling invite" (Raghunathan 18). Duryodhana complains that he had to partake of the blame of a 'crime' committed by Panchali's husband towards her, a major reason why he

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disappointment" (2). One wonders why heroes would be punished in this manner, for thirty-six long years, and why would 'villains' taste the fruit of a heroic death and timely release from their bodies!

[172] See Rajendra Prasad (2008, 2009), Bimal Krishna Matilal (1989, 2002) and Gurcharan Das (2010).

is censured by posterity, when the fault really was someone else's. Suyodhana develops this argument further in the last section of the novel.

The novel is divided into four parts, with the first one delving into Duryodhana's childhood before and after the sudden arrival of the Pandavas; the second one discusses the teenage of the Kauravas and the Pandavas and their growing tussle, and Duryodhana's attempts to weed them out of his life, the introduction of Karna and the insult he suffers in the competition at Hastinapura; the third section deals with the help that Duryodhana extends to save him from public disgrace, by making him the King of Anga and their friendship being sealed forever, Panchali's swayamvara and the rajasuya performed by the Pandavas; and the fourth deals with Duryodhana becoming a king on probation, the invitation he extends to the Pandavas for a dice match under the influence of Shakuni, the game, Yudhisthira's losing the game, and the arrival of Panchaali to the hall and its aftermath. The thread that runs throughout the novel and connects all the sections is Duryodhana's seriousness about his responsibility towards the throne of Hastinapura and his rajadharma—his concern about his claim to the throne, the claim being jeopardized by the machinations of Kunti and her sons, Duryodhana's efforts to foil the attempts of Kunti to make her eldest son the king, to his final plan to completely eliminate any further trouble from the Pandavas by defeating them in the game of dice.

Childhood, (Un)learning Dharma and an Unwelcome Intrusion

Suyodhana[173] begins the narrative of his happy childhood with anecdotes about the marriage of his parents, how and why his mother—he is very critical of this step taken by his mother—blindfolded herself, the story behind his birth and that of his ninety-nine brothers and one sister by the intervention of Vyasa. However, he rules out the role of any miracle in their birth, foregrounding instead, how they were born from "artificial wombs simulated by mud pots" after his mother aborted a mass of flesh and Vyasa cut it into hundred and one pieces (Raghunathan 28). It is noteworthy that he presents an alternative, realistic version of his birth. In general, his narrative does not boast of any miracles or divine interventions.

[173] Henceforth, the chapter will address Suryodhana as Suyodhana whenever deferring to the character in Raghunathan's novel. For arguments of other scholars, since all of them refer to him by the name Duryodhana, the name used in their original works will be used.

Suyodhana also narrates how he had grown up hearing rumours about his uncle Pandu, the curse upon him, and the reason why he left the palace to lead the life of a hermit. Although he was very young, he also strongly believed that his father was "*The King*" He launches into a defense of his father: "He was the elder of the two brothers and it was not his fault that he was blind. Nor had he ever refused the throne, . . . to the best of my knowledge. So how could . . . Pandu have ruled the state?" (Raghunathan 30) He has not been able to reconcile himself to the bypassing of his father in the line of kingship because of his blindness. He also heard stories, and firmly believed in them, about "Pandu being only a *regent*, and never the *king*, handling the day-to-day affairs of the state, while major state decisions like when to wage a war and against whom had always remained with his father" (Raghunathan 32). In any case, even in the epic, the genealogy of the family is highly confused, and hence the claims to the throne by either party are rendered debatable. He firmly believes—a fact he will reiterate throughout the novel—that his father had been "the only legitimate heir" and "king of Hastinapura" (Raghunathan 33). McGrath makes an interesting argument in this regard. He writes: "It is the Dhārtarāṣṭra however who have succeeded to the patriline in that they are the direct descendents of Vyāsa, the son of Satyavtī, wife of Śaṃtanu; for the Pāṇḍava sons were . . . not in fact procreated by their father Pāṇḍu, but by divine agency. Thus, in terms of patriline, it is Duryodhana who is in the direct succession, not Yudhiṣṭhira, and if that is to be the active principle of succession, then he may rightfully claim the throne" (*Rāja Yudhiṣṭhira* 50). The general implication being that he was the rightful, and as yet, undisputed successor to the throne of Hastinapura after his father.[174]

Suyodhana believes he should be the crown prince and the king, *de jure.* That he takes active interest in his state as well as his future is seen in his continual efforts to get the stories about Pandu authenticated by different people, one of them being the washerman, who would attest to his beliefs and address him as the "Crown Prince." The washerman, an old and trusted fellow serving the king, would reassure Suyodhana about his claim, while also revealing the truth about Pandu's childlessness and curse and hinting at the unfairness in denying kingship to his father because of his physical defect:

> Worry not, Crown Prince. You shall have the legitimate right. If your dear father has been dealt a cruel hand by Mother Fate, she was not particularly

[174] Das maintains that Duryodhana "does have a reasonable claim to the Hastinapura throne" (16).

> kind to . . . Pandu either. Your uncle's burden of fate was that he would never be able to have children. . . . In matters of inheritance, blindness is less of a challenge than the state of childlessness. . . . So worry not, son! Your position is secure (Raghunathan 34).

This part of the narrative of Suyodhana also traces his learning of shaastras and rajadharma with Kripacharya (as a crown prince, Suyodhana believes that he was being specifically trained to be the king of Hastinapur), and the teachings by his parents that "a king does not rule over his subjects – he serves them; a good king carries his *authority* well but a noble king carries out his *responsibility* better" (Raghunathan 36). However, alongside all these lessons, he was also musing over the applicability of several of the lessons (mostly in dharma) taught by the scriptures and rule books. He would wonder:

> *It wasn't always possible to know exactly what was fair, correct, right or wrong. Even the definitions of correct exercise of authority or discharge of responsibility didn't always seem simple to me.* For instance, I would wonder . . . Is killing a man to save your own life justifiable outside of war? Is it wrong to lie if the lie saves a worthy situation? Is it right to be truthful if the truth causes only hurt?" (Raghunathan 36-37, my italics)

Suyodhana, from the above excerpt, does not come across as a blunt, unthinking individual at all. He does not indulge in rote learning of his guru's teachings, and subjects them to criticism and practical application:

> I also found that the rules of life seemed different for individuals and states. *. . . we would constantly bounce about alternative ideas of fairness, correctness, right and wrong* during our lessons. . . . I realized very early that across classes as well as within, the scriptures were frequently inconsistent and, more often than not, *interpretations were bent, twisted and stretched to meet the convenience of the weighty or the victors, invariably at the cost of the weak and the vanquished*. . . . if you went by the book, there would always be two sets of rights and wrongs – one for the losers and the other for the winners, royals or not. So *I learnt to develop my own sense of right and wrong*, which was closer to an absolute. It troubled me that right and wrong could be defined depending on whom it was supposed to please. (Raghunathan 37-38, italics mine)

Gurcharan Das is right in pointing out that "Duryodhana sees morality as a veiled way to protect the interests of the powerful. As he sees it, what people call 'dharma' is really a clever way of advancing those interests" (14). This is why he is not left with a choice to develop his own sense of morality and ethics, dharma and adharma, and live by them. This is only the beginning of his formulation of his philosophy or *rajadharma*, which is going to determine many of his actions in the times to come. Additionally, he is also leaning about class and caste differences which plague the society:

> We were . . . learning that even though people were born high and low – which was primarily the social architecture of the time to facilitate the choice of people's vocations – a man was nothing but an aggregate of his actions. A person achieved high station only by virtue of his deeds; so it was possible for the low-born to rise by virtue of their chivalrous conduct and knowledge." (Raghunathan 40)

This knowledge Suyodhana is going to utilize to save his friend Karna from public ignominy a little later in the novel. Moreover, he will also re-educate his own gurus, Drona and Kripa, that the *varna* system was never meant to be a rigid one. It was wrongly interpreted and implemented to exploit the weak and the voiceless.

Life goes on smoothly for Suyodhana until the Pandavas arrive with their mother Kunti, unannounced. This is the beginning of a period of tensions and rivalries between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Suyodhana cannot stand Bhima, who would play numerous pranks on the Kauravas, which would hurt them and sometimes also land them in bigger troubles. When they begin to play other games, Suyodhana discovers that it was a child's play to "induce Yudhisthira to place a bet on virtually anything" (Raghunathan 60). Moreover, when the Pandavas join the gurukul of Drona, Suyodhana can notice Drona's bias for Arjuna to the exclusion of everyone else in teaching him the art of using weapons. Disappointed, and in absence of any attention from his teacher, Suyodhana shifts his focus from archery to wrestling and study of shaastras and strategies, as also fencing and riding, thus proving to be an all-rounder in comparison to the individual skills of the Pandavas. He believes he was in the gurukul to develop his "all-round abilities for managing a kingdom in the future" (Raghunathan 67). Suyodhana also exposes the hypocrisy of his teacher, Drona, in rejecting Eklavya, a tribal and segregating Karna, the son of a charioteer, when, in fact, all that they desired was Drona's tutelage.

Another complication that Suyodhana has to handle is his aunt Kunti. He realizes that she is secretly laying her net to find out details about his birth, age, skills etc.[175] He is unsuspecting at first; its only later that he begins to piece together her intentions. As expected, she brings up the issue of the eldest Kuru (the Kauravas and the Pandavas put together) should be made the crown prince according to the rules of primogeniture, and then informs them (which, according to Suyodhana had been feigned) that Yudhisthira is elder to Suyodhana. On one occasion, Suyodhana confronts his father on the matter. When he hears that his father also believes that Yudhisthira, and not his own son, should succeed him as a king, he is deeply hurt:

> I felt blinded. . . . I was known to be short tempered . . . the provocation here was the question of my future; my life; my being turned into a subject rather than a ruler; my own father putting a question mark on my moral, legal, regal, natural and ethical claim to the throne of Hastinapura. I was not only being told that I *may* no longer be the crown prince, but was being counselled to hand over the privilege to another *willingly.* (Raghunathan 81-82, italics in original)

Although hurt, Suyodhana is reproachful and raises several objections to his father's request, also admonishing him, "You may lack sight, but must you also lack foresight to realize the repercussions of your accepting Yudhisthira as the crown prince?" (Raghunathan 84) In spite of his efforts, he admits that "all this disequilibrium was most challenging on the one hand but disheartening and disturbing on the other" (Raghunathan 93). According to Matilal, Duryodhana's "fighting with, or elimination of, the Pāṇḍavas, to secure the throne for the entire kingdom (and not just one half of it) was not at all unethical. He had a firm conviction that he had a natural right to the throne. Hence it was his prime concern to make it safe and secure by the use of any means—fair or foul. *For him, it was an end that justified the means*" (*Ethics and Epics* 109-10, emphasis mine). And as one will see, Suyodhana in the novel leaves no stone unturned to achieve his

[175] Yudhiṣṭhira in the epic was older than Duryodhana only by a few minutes, so he might have had a stronger claim over the entire kingdom. But Raghunathan introduces a twist in the novel. The time and date of Yudhisthira's birth is not known by anyone else except Kunti. So Raghunathan has her manipulate the time of birth of Yudhisthira, by making him older to Suyodhana by a day, thus making the claim of her son stronger than that of Suyodhana.

desired result. In fact, all his deliberations also centre more or less on this concern throughout the novel.

At this stage, Suyodhana reasons out the nature of claims that the Pandavas can make to the throne, and a prolonged counter argument to the same in his own head. In his counter argument, he nullifies the possible claims of the Pandavas based on their father Pandu's position in the kingdom (which, according to Suyodhana, no one is certain of: he was either a regent or a king). He believes even if the first-born of Pandu in either position had any claim, it could have been sustained only when his own father "had given up the throne of his own volition," which he had not (Raghunathan 94). He firmly believes that "the rules of primogeniture should support us nevertheless, since we were the children of the king who was forced to step down because of a handicap that never actually proscribed his right to ascend the throne" (Raghunathan 94). He dismisses Yudhisthira's claim by reminding himself that since he was not a biological son of Pandu, and reasons out, how can "the offspring of kings who abdicate their throne have a claim to the throne?" (Raghunathan 94) He also believes that the son of a ruling king, and not a dead king, should ascend the throne after the ruling king's term (Raghunathan 95) Suyodhana also deplores the bypassing of his father's legitimacy and strengths as a king because of his congenital blindness, a reality over which he obviously had no control. He uses the law of primogeniture which was the supreme rule of inheritance, and did not prohibit a blind person from becoming a king, to suggest that his father had been wronged (Raghunathan 95).

Not only this, Suyodhana launches a sustained attack on Kunti's truths as well. Although the practice of *niyoga* was indeed legitimate in the times, how could one establish the veracity of her claims since she is the only one to testify to them, and in any case, whether or not she had begotten the sons on her husband's requests or out of her own accord is unclear.[176] He goes a step too further in suggesting that "no inheritance law entitles a share of paternal wealth to an offspring when that child was had by the mother of a man who was not her husband" (Raghunathan 97). Moreover, Kunti eventually brings down her request from replacing Suyodhana as a crown prince to just a share of the

[176] This argument is an untenable argument because it will raise doubts over Suyodhana's claims to the throne too, since his father was also born outside wedlock, through the very practice of levirate he is critiquing here.

kingdom, a means by which "she managed to make them look small before their contemporaries and positively villainous before posterity" (Raghunathan 100). He admits that his could understand strategy better than his elders sometimes. He was the only one who could see through the intentions and the charades of the Pandavas and Kunti. He also knew that parting with a share of the kingdom would eventually pose bigger problems in the future.

Growing Responsibility and Rajadharma

"*Royalty is a full-time job, starting rather early in life*," believes Suyodhana (Raghunathan 105). In the second section of the novel, Raghunathan sketches out the adolescent years of the Kauravas and the Pandavas, and the tussles that they have—both good and bad—and the introduction of Karna in Suyodhana's life. The root of the problem between Suyodhana and the "Kuntiputras" was that they "were probably more charming and winning in their ways than us Kauravas, who behaved with the haughtiness intrinsic to royals" in their daily conduct (Raghunathan 105).[177] However, Raghunathan depicts the rivalry between the Pandavas and the Kauravas to be strictly political.

Suyodhana narrates further that the real trouble mongers were Bhima and Arjuna, who were ambitious. Mulling over the problem, Suyodhana, in the manner of a true visionary, thinks: "if we did not address the issue speedily, a major and expensive war would become evitable. . . . I could see that even if we gave them a part of the kingdom, Bhima and Arjuna would exhort Yudhisthira to expand their kingdom to establish their suzerainty over neighbouring kingdoms – a conflagration that would also subsume and consume us" (Raghunathan 106). Suyodhana can foresee what problems can occur in future, and that is exactly how things are going to unfold later. He also knows well enough that it was clearly his responsibility "to try and prevent such an eventuality" (Raghunathan 106). Basing his argument on *rajadharma*, he is aware of his duties towards his kingdom, and that he will have to start taking his steps in that direction. He writes:

> From all that I had learnt about rajadharma at gurukul, *I understood that for a king and a royal, there was no dharma higher than rajadharma*. Being the crown prince, was it not my foremost dharma, then, to protect my kingdom

[177] Suyodhana refers to the Pandavas as Kuntiputras, as they have not been biologically produced by his uncle Pandu.

> first, given that my elders did not see the danger that I saw plainly? *Listening to one's father and elders or protecting one's kingdom? I had nothing but my instincts to guide me.*
>
> *Years later, Krishna would lecture Arjuna about one's dharma*, as the armies of the Kauravas and Kuntiputras waited. He would preach that, when forced with conflicting dharmas, the higher one prevails; and how rajadharma was the highest dharma for a royal. And thus would he exhort Arjuna to go to war with his near and dear. He would render *a might sermon to Arjuna, . . . that it was perfectly all right to kill your family and friends, teachers and well-wishers, young and old, in defence of your kingdom, which was integral to rajadharma*. (Raghunathan 107, emphasis mine)[178]

This is a remarkable argument in favour of Suyodhana's intended actions in the novel. He understands that for a royal, *rajadharma* is above any other dharma, even in case of a conflict of dharmas, it is *rajadharma* which should be adhered to. He also refers to Arjuna getting similar advice from Krishna immediately before the beginning of the war.[179] Now, one can clearly see that he is conflating two different concepts here – that of *rajadharma* and *svadharma*. He might have been guided by the fact that in their case (Suyodhana's and Arjun's), *svadharma* actually referred to their dharma as kshatriyas, which primarily entailed protection of their kingdom and their subjects by all means; as a royal, one's *rajadharma* was also in the nature of the dharma of kshatriyas, because it was a king's duty to protect and preserve his kingdom and his people. To this extent, there is a long discourse in the Shantiparva of the *Mahabharata*, when grandfather Bhisma, lying on a bed of arrows awaiting his death, counsels Yudhishthira on the nature of *rajadharma*, which is a long discourse running into two books of the epic. While one might not fully agree with the comparison being made by Suyodhana, it is also difficult to dismiss it completely.

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[178] Roy explains: "Krishna emphasized Arjuna's duty as a Kshatriya. A Kshatiya who dies fighting attains *veeraswarga* (the Heaven of the Heroes). It should be noted that even if an evil Kshatriya fights courageously, he attains heaven. After the war, . . . Yudhistira . . . was shocked to learn from God Indra that Duryodhana had attained heaven due to his courageous behaviour on the battlefield" (Roy 32)

[179] Needless to mention, Suyodhana is referring to the *Bhagavad-Gita.*

Suyodhana briefly enumerates some of the many wrongs that were committed by different people in his lifetime: how Krishna was instrumental in getting Jarasandha killed through Bhima, how "Karna would be prevailed upon Lord Indra in the garb of a Brahmin to give up his armour; and Bhishma, Drona and Karna would be killed flouting all norms of fair warfare" (Raghunathan107). All these were unjust acts, but they have been justified in the name of 'dharma' in the narratives as well as by posterity. Suyodhana also mentions the logic behind them: "Krishna's . . . justification was that 'little adharmas' were justified at the altar of the highest dharma" (Raghunathan107). The implication being, even if one's highest dharma—*rajadharma* in this case—necessitates immoral killings, they can be dismissed as minor adharmas, or rather, treated as the dharma of complying to the highest, overarching dharma. Suyodhana wishes to clarify that he knows fully well that "we indulged in our share of unfairness too, both before and during the Kurukshetra war, . . . But then, we were fighting for our rajadharma too" (Raghunathan 108). Why is it that only the Pandavas, the victors, are seen as exemplars in moral conduct? Even the Kaurava army was fighting for what they believed was their morality, their dharma, their *rajadharma*.

Moreover, Suyodhana charts out how his childhood was always tainted by a "sense of insecurity," and how he realized very early in life that it was his highest dharma to save his kingdom by paying whatever price that he had to, as his father and his council of ministers, could not see the dangers that he could visualize (Raghunathan 108). He condenses his argument to match that of Krishna in the *Bhagavad-Gita* "no price was too high to save my kingdom" (Raghunathan 108).

Suyodhana is not someone who engages in empty talk. He analyzes the little time he has and the scant resources, and hits upon the idea that "the best strategy for me was to neutralize just Bhima and / or Arjuna on the quiet," before they did any harm (Raghunathan 110). He tries to eliminate Bhima by drowning him, also because Bhima had tried to drown eight of Suyodhana's brothers, the latter an innovative anecdote introduced by Raghunathan in the novel. Suyodhana explains: "In statecraft, killing is neither unknown or unusual . . . it is considered a good bargain if by assassinating an individual you can save a kingdom or avert a war or some other calamity. . . . I was the crown prince manoeuvring to save my future kingdom. . . . she [Kunti] had launched a nuanced attack on our kingdom and it was my highest dharma to deflect it" (Raghunathan 112). He also justifies his move as his "strategy still involved the loss of only one life, unlike Krishna's

plan . . . snuffed out hundreds of thousands" (Raghunathan 113).[180] He also justifies the morality of adopting immoral measures: "As my use of stealth – or chhala . . . it had always been a weapon in statecraft . . . even if theory only spoke of saama, daama, danda and bheda. . . . For that matter, the means employed by our adversaries to kill some of us during the war were no less stealthy" (Raghunathan 113). Of course Bhima got saved, but Suyodhana did not suffer from any moral dilemma, but only fear of exposure.

There is another narrative innovation at this juncture in the novel— on the day of the execution of the plan, Suyodhana even saves the life of Bhima by preventing an attack on him by a tiger when they were out for hunting together Explaining why he saved Bhima when he has plans to get him killed the very same day, Suyodhana writes: "We were out on a hunt together. There is a dharma of hunting. And this dharma dictated that I protect Bhima from the predator the two of us had set out to hunt together" (Raghunathan 123). So, lest one may think he was obsessed only with *rajadharma*, here comes a reminder that he also stuck to the rules and codes of conduct in other walks of life.

Besides, Suyodhana is also a practical man. He explains that not coming to Bhima's rescue would have brought the ignominy of "a coward – an epithet a future king can ill afford" (Raghunathan 123). Also, he would be free of suspicion had Bhima been killed, because as it would turn out, he would have saved Bhima that morning itself. But one must remember, these practical concerns did not come to him when the predator attached Bhima – he had only acted instinctively then.

In this section of the novel, Suyodhana also engages in a long discussion of his friend, Karna. He tries to demystify the account of Karna being born with the golden earrings and armour, and according to his account, they were replaced by his father Adiratha every few months, because he would outgrow the armour soon enough. He also suggests that "it was impossible to believe that he was the son of an ordinary charioteer . . . Moreover, he also showed unusual promise in skills such as archery and was well ahead of most of us in his knowledge of virtually everything" (Raghunathan 131). He also narrates the story of how Karna is inducted in the gurukul on a royal recommendation his father brings from King Dhritarashtra, only to be scorned and ostracized. Suyodhana tries to read in this Drona's resolve to make Arjuna the best archer in the world, probably determined to live his own

[180] In the Mahabharata war, that is.

glory through him: “Perhaps he saw greater potential for his ambitions as a king-maker on the Pandavas’ side than merely as a Rajguru on the Kauravas” (Raghunathan 136). He also reminds how Karna was not the first victim of Drona’s arrogance – he briefly narrates the story of Eklavya who was turned down and later, how the thumb of his right hand was taken as gurudakshina. Karna’s humiliation results in his “periodic disappearances” from the gurukul as he is determined to be “the greatest archer ever to graduate from the gurukul; and that, without his blessings” (Ragunathan137-38). Suyodhana starts confiding in Karna about the machinations of Kunti and the Guru’s obvious plans for Arjuna. Also, Suyodhana starts training with Balarama in the art of mace-fighting (Raghunathan 147).

This section also briefly encapsulates the humiliation of Karna at the graduation-day ceremony, which, he believes, was just a charade, primarily “to present Arjuna and Bhima as ace archer and ace-man respectively before my father, his advisors and the city at large, probably to strengthen their case for a share in the kingdom” (Raghunathan 148). Suyodhana’s description center on Karna’s extraordinary performance, and his realization that if “Karna was this good, and if he was my friend, and remained so, he could well be my antidote against Arjuna” (Raghunathan 163). He also describes, in fair detail, Karna’s repeated humiliation by Kripa and Drona, Karna’s counter-arguments to them, Karna’s challenge to Arjuna, further humiliation that he faces, and finally, Karna’s coronation as the King of Ang.

Suyodhana’s Progressive Understanding of Rajadharma and its Implementation

The third section picks up speed and describes a lot of events, from drawing out the fortitude in his character, to Suyodhana’s viewing of him as a potential shield against the Pandavas; the laquer house episode, the swayamvara of Panchali; Suyodhana agreement to his elders’ demand of giving away the forested area of the kingdom, Indraprastha, to the Pandavas, only to realize it was a grave mistake he should not have committed; the rajasuya organized by the Pandavas serving as Suyodhana’s wake up call, and his realization that it is time to take a concrete step to vanquish his rivals forever, and take back Indraprastha and all the wealth of the Kuntiputras accumulated as a result of the rajasuya.

In defense of Karna, Suyodhana writes, “*A man is what he makes of himself by his karma. . .*” (Raghunathan 169, italics in original). Karna himself makes an illustrious speech, the pinnacle of which is, “To nurse ambitions of glory, . . . is neither a crime nor

undesirable in a man, young or old; nor the preserve of a special few" (Raghunathan 169). At the end of the speech, Karna invites Arjuna for an open challenge, but Drona intervenes imposing the "royals compete only among their equals" maxim as a defense in favour of Arjuna. At this, hurt and reproachful, Karna replies, "we were taught in the gurukul . . . that one's destiny and hence one's varna is determined by one's karma and not by one's janma . . . one is a Sutaputra only if one has done nothing ever to lift oneself above the fate dealt one . . . over which no man, beast or god has any control. . . . a child does not choose the womb it is born out of . . ." (Raghunathan 172-73). One can discern the pain in Karna's words here, and see how both Suyodhana and Karna believed in the applicability of what they had been taught in the gurukul: that one can transcend one's *varna* by means of her/his actions, but to their utter dismay, they have seen it getting rigid and the institution of dharma being betrayed. Karna also mentions that his repeated insults in the name of his father's profession are unbecoming of the guru, as his father was just engaged in a lowly job, not an 'adharmic one.' Karna refuses to succumb to the invectives and holds his head high.

Later, Arjuna refuses to engage in a competition with someone who is not his social equal. Suyodhana can no longer bear the ceaseless humiliation of Karna; he turns to his father, but does not receive any support. Then he jumps to his friend's rescue, "I hereby award the principality of Anga to Karna and declare him Angaraj" (Raghunathan 182). Of course, reflecting later on the matter, Suyodhana believes that "by binding Karna, who was an ideal counterbalance to the Arjuna-Bhima axis, into a closer bond of friendship," he was making him his "formal ally and strengthening Hastinapura" (Raghunathan 184). But the epic also brings out the human values in this gesture of Duryodhana. Chaitanya writes: "It was Duryodhana who gave Karna a social identity and status for which he was hungering, there is a component in Karna's ardent loyalty which must have been inspired by some personal quality of Duryodhana. He inspires the same loyalty in Aswatthama" (*Literary* 68).

There is a narrative experiment that Raghunathan introduces at this point: he has Adiratha, Karna's father, reveal to the people assembled that Karna is not his biological son but a "legitimate son" of a royal family (Raghunathan 185). However, Karna does not let this affect his affection for his parents. At the same time, Kunti says to Karna: 'Consider Arjuna your own brother, son ...' and faints (Raghunathan 187). Adiratha also requests his son to give up the challenge.

In the later part of the third section of the novel, Suyodhana elaborates upon how he is beginning to feel more and more worried about his kingdom. Suyodhana is an adult and has a court of his own. He mentions how the Pandavas would adopt various means to push their claim: either my making an appeal to Dhritarashtra, or lobbying with other senior advisors like Bhishma and Vidura, or through their friend Krishna, or even by garnering public sympathy. Suyodhana cites the real cause of his worry: "If I had one reason to lose sleep, it was this: my father was a weak man. He has the dangerous combination of a mushy heart and a malleable mind" (Raghunathan 188). Dhritarashtra in the epic is also known to have a weak and vacillating heart, though more often than not, it swings towards the demands of his own sons. Raghunathan uses this characterization of the king from the epic to suit his purpose and legitimize Suyodhana's constant worries about his kingdom being given away as a gift to the Pandavas.

Here, Suyodhana launches into a sustained delineation of his understanding of the philosophy of rajadharma, also hinting that it is about time to bring it into effect. He notes,

> *No king can run away from the possibility of war;*
> *When he is not waging one, it may be waged upon him* (Raghunathan 188)[181]

Elaborating further, Suyodhana opines, "A king had two sets of responsibilities: those towards the subjects and those towards the kingdom itself . . . duties towards the state . . . in my considered understanding of the shaastras, took precedence even over his duties to his subjects. *The duties towards the state are what vest in a king the right to rule*" (Raghunathan 189, emphasis mine). He adds further, "For a king, the right to rule is an absolute, the highest and the most sublime of rights. It is intrinsic to his sovereignty. A king is expected to strengthen his kingdom by adding territory, wealth and subjects to his state; not by subtracting them from it" (Raghunathan 189-90). He is establishing a direct connect between the duties of a king and the danger he is plunged into by the claims and

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[181] One must, however, bear in mind what Das says in this regard: "The *Mahabharata* is clearly embarrassed by Duryodhana's *matsya nyaya*, 'big-fish-eats-small-fish' view of the world, which is the Indian equivalent of the law of the jungle, a metaphor for the vicious, violent aspects of human nature. Later when Arjuna will urge Yudhishthira not to renounce the throne, he will remind him that violence is the way of the world: . . . Bhishma, their grandfather, will employ this anarchic image of disorder in the natural world in order to justify *danda*, 'retributive justice' and the rule of law and order, by a tough but just king" (15).

demands of the Kuntiputras, no matter how much they pare them down, especially when he does not consider their demands to be legitimate and rightful in the first place.

Coming to the idea of a war, Suyodhana holds the following opinion: "No king can run away from the possibility of a war. If you do not wage it, it may be waged upon you. . . . That is why a competent king ought not to be weak – in mind, muscle or means . . . *States are serious responsibilities of the kings; not inheritances, possessions or chattel to be gifted away*" (Raghunathan 190, my italics). One cannot miss the unambiguous reference to the Kuntiputras here, and his resolution to not 'gift away' the kingdom, vested in which is the responsibility of a king towards his subjects, and the divine and social liabilities associated with a king. As much as he would prefer the problem to be solved without going to a war, he is well aware that "A war kills hundreds of thousands of men and renders women widows prematurely. It makes orphans . . . maims large swaths of population. . . . [and] bankrupts kingdoms. That is why, *if an otherwise inevitable war can be averted in exchange for a few key lives, a wise king takes the opportunity*. This is strategic statecraft" (Raghunathan 190). One is readily reminded of Vidura's advice to Dhritarashtra against giving in to Duryodhana's plan of organizing the dice game: "To save the family, abandon an individual. To save the village, abandon a family; to save the country, abandon a village. To save the soul, abandon the earth" (qtd. in Das 6). Raghunathan inverts the very argument used against his protagonist in the epic to suit his purpose of defending the intentions of his hero.

Suyodhana raises a number of other points in this regard: ". . . a king is allowed acts and actions that are not allowed an ordinary man," and that ". . . a king may make, amend or annul laws. He may, exceptionally, when the very sovereignty of the state is at stake, even be a law unto himself" (Raghunathan 191). He adds, "Subterfuge is elegant strategy in statecraft. That is why a wise king goes to sleep at peace every night knowing what he committed that day was not murder but a call of duty to protect his state against reason and sedition" (Raghunathan 191-92). All this exposition is done by Suyodhana to convince himself of his plan to immolate the Kuntiputras and their mother in the house of lacquer. Contemplating upon the moral standing of his plan, he ends up comparing himself to his very enemy, Kunti. He says, "Maybe as a mother she was doing what was best for her sons – a mother's dharma. But as a king, I had to do what was best for my kingdom and my subjects" (Raghunathan 194). This drives home an example of how there are different types, layers and interpretation of the oft-contested concept of dharma. Justifying his plan

to get Kunti and her sons burnt in the house of lacquer, he muses, "If a large number of lives could be potentially saved by eliminating just six, it was an acceptable bargain . . . Killing such people on the quiet was necessary statecrafty and not treachery" (Raghunathan 195). Little does he know at this point that his plan is going to fail, and that the Pandavas are alive, living in disguise in a forest.

Raghunathan also makes his hero fall in love with the beauty of Panchali ever since he glimpsed a painting of hers and then saw her from afar on another occasion. He is also determined to make her his wife when the news of her swayamvara reaches him. He is confident despite knowing the difficulty involved in the test – he knew that he was not a great archer – and he missed the target marginally. He is utterly dejected: "A million sentiments and thoughts of life without Panchali tore through me in those few moments" (Raghunathan 206). He then requests Karna to attempt the test so that "atleast she would remain accessible – and I mean it honourably – as my friend's wife" (Raghunathan 207). Karna honours the request of his friend, is brutally rejected by Panchali on grounds of his low birth, and Suyodhana is highly upset and angered for his friend: "I was angry for Karna. . . . The man had grown closer to me than I had realized. . . . Perhaps he was not just a strategic friend I had made to serve a certain state interest after all. He was a friend who could, and did, move me to emotions like sympathy and anger" (Raghunathan 209-10). One comes across a completely new face of Suyodhana here, as someone who is capable of giving in to softer emotions of love, dejection in love and friendship.

During the swayamvara, when Suyodhana realizes that Arjun is alive and so are the other Pandavas and Kunti, he launches into a pointed criticism of Vyasa who chooses not to comment on "the far more reprehensible act of them deliberately letting an innocent mother and her five grown sons burn in their stead. . . . *What happened to the dharma to never harm those who come under your protection?* (Raghunathan 214, italics mine).[182] He

[182] Goldman writes, "Yudhiṣṭhira, having become aware of his rival Duryodhana's plot to have him, his brothers, and Kuntī burnt to death in a specially constructed firetrap, decides to destroy the treacherous minister Purocana . . . and effect their own escape. In order to cover the Pāṇḍavas' flight and prevent any pursuit and further attempts at assassination, Yudhiṣṭhira decides to lure six innocent people into the inflammable house so that their charred corpses, mistaken for those of the heroes and their mother, will lead Duryodhana to believe that his plot has been successful" (197). Goldman also notes: "Nowhere in the text of the *Mahābhārata* . . . is there a hint of any ethical or moral censure for his slaughter of innocents. . . . it is the low social and ritual status of the victims that enables the aristocratic heroes to kill them without either moral qualm or legal consequences. Much less shocking transgressions against individuals of high social and ritual status are explicitly shown in the epic to have moral and even eschatological consequences" (Goldman 198).

compares the Pandavas' act of informed killing of six innocent guests, with his own pre-meditated act of eliminating six people who are a threat for his kingdom, leaving the ball in the court of the readers, "Which is worse: the casual killing of six innocent souls who came to you for shelter, or the killing of six individuals who are threatening to divide your kingdom?" (Raghunathan 214-15). Although one might not agree with the parallel between one immoral act and the other, the prejudice of Vyasa is definitely highlighted by the comparison.

The section also describes the swayamvara of Bhanumati, where "Bhanumati was free to garland the first prince or king she found acceptable, without having to check out each and every suitor" (Raghunathan 221). Having recently lost Panchali, Suyodhana does not want to take any chance and abducts her according to the "accepted royal tradition," also calling it "one of the most sensible spontaneous decisions" he had ever taken (Raghunathan 223; 225). He also refers to Bhanumati as a "Satiratna – a jewel among devout wives," and his life a happy one because of her and the mutual love and understanding they show to each other (Raghunathan 225).

The last section of the third part describes how his father, Bhishma and Vidura want him to hand over the forested area of Khandava to the Pandavas, how he relents, but regrets his decision a little later. Although he firmly believed in the maxim: "'Never give an inch to the enemy,"' as "give a Kshatriya an inch and soon he would seek out a yard," he perhaps gave in to their request because he wanted to show off to Panchali, and wanted her to know that "their kingdom was a gift of our munificence" (Raghunathan 228-229). However, when his father appreciated his decision and told him that through this move, Hastinapura would get powerful allies, he warned his father, "Nothing but disaster will come out of this generosity. Every time I look into the eyes of the Kuntiputras, I see only ambition, not allies" (Raghunathan 229).

Suyodhana is proven to be right. Soon, he hears the news of their prosperity, people moving into their kingdom, their small and big conquests, and finally the Rajasuya. He is deeply upset. On receiving an invitation to participate in their rajasuya sacrifice, all his worst fears come true. He is convinced that "they were displaying their independence by challenging us, for a rajasuya is nothing but an open threat and an attempt at domination" (Raghunathan 232). Since his state is not very strong militarily at that point, decides to join the sacrifice rather than stage a fight (Raghunathan 232). Gurcharan Das writes:

> In [Duryodhana's] . . . geopolitical world there are only friends and foes and a ruler's neighbour is bound to be a foe. Since Yudhishthira is a neighbour who has become powerful, he is a foe. Hence, Duryodhana feels compelled to bring him down. If not, Yudhishthira might gobble his kingdom up one day. This dodgy view is sanctioned by the classic text on statecraft, Arthashastra, an indispensable primer of the kshatriya ruler. (Das 57-58)

Suyodhana gives in to the demands of the situation, but laments, "To accept another's suzerainty, to compromise the pride and honour of one's kingdom, to live under anybody's protection except one's own was a destiny worse than death for any proud king" (Raghunathan 233). And proud, he indeed was!

In the last leg of his arguments in favour of his preoccupation with his rajadharma, Suyodhana gives the example of the killing of Jarasandha.[183] The point he makes is this: "To found a kingdom which was never meant to be theirs and then for its *growth*, the Kuntiputras thought the murder of Jarasandh was justified. Then why has posterity held it against me if, for the *protection* of my kingdom, I had to resort to attempting a few murders myself? . . . They were but preemptive strikes" (Raghunathan 235, italics in original). The section ends with Suyodhana's humiliation at having to accept the rajasuya invite, the events at Indraprastha, Suyodhana disliking the extravagance of the Pandavas, his fall in a pool of water, and his reaction at hearing Panchali's laughter. An important clarification Suyodhana offers is that he just found the laugh "irritating . . . One hardly nurses long grudges with pretty maidens for such things" (Raghunathan 239). Also noteworthy is no mention of extreme envy at the opulence of the Pandavas, though he does admit in the last section of the novel that all human being are susceptible to a small amount of jealousy, and he was no different: "It may not be entirely wrong to say that I was jealous of the Kuntiputras. . . . But envious or not, I would have let status quo prevail had they not gone for the rajasuya . . ." (Raghunathan 251). However, as we will see in the discussion on the next section, Raghunathan does not associate Suyodhana's extension of the

[183] Suyodhana corroborates the scholarly studies of a number of scholars who have read Krishna's role in the killing of Jarasandha as his strategic move towards the establishment of 'a new state,' with the assistance of the Pandavas. Whether or not this new state will be based on dharma, and whether or not the means employed to vanquish the people who come in the way of the agenda are moral, will, of course, need further probing.

invitation to Yudhisthira with Panchali's laughter or his extreme envy at the success and the wealth of the Pandavas in their new capital.

The Culmination of Suyodhana's Rajadharma and the Game of Dice

It is time for Suyodhana to do something momentous. Suyodhana's friends Jarasandha and Shishupala have already been killed. He calls a meeting and takes the reins of the kingdom in his control to prevent the decline of the kingdom. He has begun to contemplate along with Shakuni, Sushasana and Karna, to find a way to stop their advance towards Hastinapura. He also wants to avoid a war, and taking recourse to rajadharma, wishes to exploit the weaknesses of either of the Pandavas and defeating them, wrest Indraprastha, which was originally a part of Hastinapura, away from them, establishing the original, undivided Hastinapura.

Suyodhana wanted "to get rid of them by hook or crook, moral qualms being immaterial to his judgements" (Matilal, *Ethics and Epics* 113). After days of reflection, Shakuni, who "believed that life could be led as much and as well by the throw of dice as by reasoned choices and decisions," suggests a game of dice (Raghunathan 248). Suyodhana explicates that practice and patience had made him a master thrower and a master strategist. He also handles the criticism that Shakuni has unfortunately been blamed for the war. Defending Shakuni, Suyodhana compares him with Krishna, and says that Shakuni was not his charioteer advising him to engage in foul tricks to win the war. He proudly says, "*I always remained in charge of my destiny*. The Mahabharata war was foisted upon us by Yudhisthira and his brothers, aided ably by Krishna" (Raghunathan 249 emphasis mine). This view about Duryodhana in the epic has been testified to by a number of scholars. Matilal also testifies to the strength and determination of Duryodhana: "He had the courage of his convictions. . . . Duryodhana was exceptionally powerful and fearless" (*Ethics and Epics* 116)

Suyodhana, having already hinted at Yudhisthira's weakness for dice and board game involving chance, now calls him "a closet gambler" and "in reality a gambling addict" (Raghunathan 250). In Raghunathan's version of the epic story, Sushasana and Karna also endorse the plan made by Shakuni. Suyodhana gives another disclaimer, "Often, strategy is all about avoiding or preventing an all-out war, for it saves lives and prevents avoidable waste of economic resources" (Raghunathan 251). Moreover, the game of dice, though

prohibited for kings, was not an unreasonable game.[184] Das's statement can serve to present Duryodhana's intent in a fair light. Das writes, "If a kshatriya soldier's duty is to prevail at any cost, and if the prize is kingship, then the game of dice is not an unreasonable strategy" (16). Moreover, as Matilal explains, Suyodhana's decision to defeat his rivals in gambling was "at least a reasonable decision, for the practice was prevalent, and it was approved by the conventional law of that time" (Matilal, *Ethics and Epics* 113).[185]

Also, Suyodhana clarifies that "there was absolutely no plan to cheat Yudhisthira at play. It would be an insult to the intelligence of Yudhisthira. . . . Besides, the game was sure to be watched by many eagle-eyes . . ." (Raghunathan 252). Even in the epic, never does Yudhisthira mention that he had been cheated at the game by Shakuni. Even Bhishma raises this point when Panchali questions the fairness of the game. Moreover, Shakuni was not a cheat but simply "a master thrower of dice" (Raghunathan 253). Suyodhana informs his readers that "even with all the knowledge and practice, the master thrower can never throw exactly the result he desires all the time," it being a game of chance (Raghunathan 254). He also mentions how Shakuni has "not [been] an exhibitionist of his skill," and is the "strategist focused upon winning the war, unmindful of losing a few battles" (Raghunathan 255-56).

Enumerating Shakuni's skills, Suyodhana adds, "*The master of gambling is also a master of human psychology*. . . . He knows that people, even the seasoned gamblers, behave differently when they believe they are on a winning streak. They bet more eagerly when they are winning than when they are losing" (Raghunathan 256). If this logic is to be believed, then Shakuni's understanding of Yudhisthira's psychology, and not deceit, may

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[184] Matilal explains that reference to "gambling as a vice goes back, . . . to the time of the *Ṛg-veda*. The gambler laments about his fate, his addiction to gambling and the loss of all his worldly belongings, including his wife" (*Ethics and Epics* 114).

[185] For instance, the sub-tale in the *Mahabharata* about Nala and Damyanti, which is narrated to Yudhishthira and Draupadi during their exile. However, in the story, as Matilal explains, "Nala, the hero lost everything in gambling, but he did not stake his wife, although he was challenged to do so by his opponent. . . . Nala had the good sense to withdraw at the last moment. However, Yudhiṣṭhira went all the way. The bigger the story, the greater the blunder" (*Ethics and Epics* 115). Moreover, the introduction of the dice game might have had a structural purpose in the epic. van Buitenen in his article "On The Structure of the Sabhāparvan of the Mahābhārata,"suggests that "the Dicing was a necessary part of the design, necessary to demonstrate the Pāṇḍavas' virtue in abiding by the terms of the game, and their virtuousness in exile, and the unfitness of the Kauravas who refused to abide by the same terms and to give back the kingdom" (318).

be credited as the reason for the eventual victory of Shakuni and the loss of Yudhisthira. One cal also understand Shakuni's exhortations to Yudhisthira to make further stakes even after losing all his property, when one is told that a master gambler also knows that "emotions should never be mixed with gambling" (Raghunathan 257). In the final explanation, Suyodhana proudly announces that "Shakuni's . . . not-so-widely-known genius would be our main weapon in this strategy," also adding that following the conclusion of the rajasuya by the Kuntiputras, the timing was appropriate to invite them for "a friendly visit over chaupar as a return courtesy of hospitality" (Raghunathan 257).

Suyodhana begins with the proceedings of the dice game, with the statutory warning:

> *Addiction is dangerous;*
> *failing to resist it, even more so* (Raghunathan 258)

Immediately before the invitation is sent out to the Pandavas, Suyodhana in Raghunathan's novel takes over as the king on probation, while his father assumes the role of a chief mentor till he proved himself.[186] Hastinapura was a weak kingdom before Suyodhana took the reins of the kingdom in his hands. So, after his ascension, Suyodhana focuses on the betterment of the kingdom in various ways: he forges alliances, makes friends, and starts "mending broken fences, refreshing stale relationships, calling in old debts, bestowing favours to vitalize waning diplomatic alliances and make new ones" (Raghunathan 260). In addition to matters of statecraft, he works in a number of other areas as well. He is aware that a "successful king must also bond closely with his courtiers. . . . speedily put up new development work under way . . . [to] connect with . . . [his] people" (Raghunathan 261).[187] Suyodhana also gives "boost to trade, commerce and export, [and] ensured more

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[186] This is a welcome change from the epic, as in his position as a king, Suyodhana is not required to persuade his father to invite the Pandavas, and the long debate that follows. Also, in this version, Panchali will not appeal to Dhritarashtra as a king, as her very violator (in her understanding) happens to be the king in the novel, i.e. Suyodhana.

[187] In Divakaruni's novel, too, Panchaali sees a different face of Duryodhan she had not known, twice. Once, she hears about his generosity when she is narrated the story of the contest organized by Drona, where in "the arena . . . Some cry out Duryodhan's name, for he is dashing, brave, and generous to a fault. Even today, riding to the tournament, he threw handfuls of gold coins into the crowd until his purse was empty" (Divakaruni 80). Later, she sees for herself with her divine eyes, Duryodhan's gratitude towards his soldiers and their warm and loving response towards him, right before the beginning of the war: "He turned toward the warriors who had positioned themselves around him. 'I will not forget your loyalty,' he said to them,

humane and efficient tax collection" to utilize the same tax collected towards the betterment of his people (Raghunathan 261).[188]

The invitation for the game is sent through Vidura, who is projected as being faithful to the throne. Suyodhana is sure that the Pandavas would not refuse his invite, but Arjuna senses trouble and asks Yudhisthira to decline the invite. Even before he sent Vidura with the invite, he enumerates ten reasons why Yudhisthira would not refuse the invite (the most prominent one being his hidden weakness for the game of dice), and so it happens!

Suyodhana has not prepared a very ostentatious hall, unlike the Kuntiputras, as he believes in using public money efficiently. The game in the novel goes on for three days. In the span of first one and a half days, Shakuni deliberately continues to lose to Yudhisthira in order to arouse his interest in the game, as well as a false confidence that he will continue to win. However, by the end of the second day, Shakuni makes up for some loss by winning back a major share of what Duryodhana has lost. It is only on the third day that Shakuni begins to play aggressively, and Yudhisthira is "visibly agitated" and starts having larger quantities of sura[189] from his goblet (Raghunathan 273). Surprisingly, Yudhisthira is still confident of winning back what he has lost, but also of "depleting the Kauravs treasury again" (Raghunathan 273). Sahadeva and Bhima try to dissuade him, as "the Indraprastha treasury had been exhausted and was now overdrawn" (Raghunathan 274). But just then, Shakuni notices "the classic look of a compulsive gambler" on Yudhisthira's face, the "stage at which the gambler ceases to worry about the consequences, and wants to gamble more irrespective of whether he is up or down" (Raghunathan 274). To make matters worse, Yudhisthira is also "nearly drunk with wine" (Raghunathan 274).

Yudhisthira had lost, according to Suyodhana, the entire treasury of Indraprastha. However, under the terms of game, the dice "had to run its full course" (Raghunathan 275).Suyodhana very carefully mentions that at this stage, Yudhisthira "had the option of withdrawing from the game, but the ignominy of withdrawal would attach to him forever"

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touching one and then the other on the shoulder. They smiled back at him. I was shocked to feel love rising from them, . . . their willingness to die at his command" (261).

[188] Matilal suggests that Duryodhana "could be wicked and evil, but still he was also capable of being an ideal king when the occasion arose" (*Ethics and Epics* 111).

[189] An ancient variety of alcohol.

(Raghunathan 276). In the next stage, Yudhisthira, instead of choosing the safer option and withdrawing from the game, "overestimated his understanding of how the dice worked, and staked his entire kingdom to match the total wager on the board" (Raghunathan 277). Almost immediately later, Suyodhana informs that "Indraprastha had been lost to Hastinapura. I felt the kind of contentment and ecstasy I had not known ever before" (Raghunathan 277).

Yudhisthira now goes to Suyodhana with the dilemma that he had nothing left to stake. Just then, Shakuni intervenes, "You just declared that you have no possession that you can call your own except your brothers and wife. So by your own admission, you have not yet lost all your possession. But, of course, you may call for a premature end of the game. So we do take it that you abstain from completing the game and quit in disgrace?" (Raghunathan 278) The matter is referred to the tournament referees, and they consult the law-books to suggest that in that situation, it is Yudhisthira who should call the shots. Suyodhana just mentions that he is happy and relieved that he is not the one expected to take the decision on Yudhisthira's behalf, as anything untoward happening after this would be blamed on him by everyone present and the posterity.

It is then that Yudhisthira stakes his four brothers, himself and then Panchali "in a bid to wrest back his kingdom" (Raghunathan 278). Bhima gets up to register his objection, but Arjuna holds him back. Another interesting twist that Raghunathan introduces in the climactic moment in his novel is Yudhisthira's reply to Bhima and Arjuna, who "stated calmly that as he was the king, they were all his subjects; that a king's right over his subjects is absolute, his honour above any personal considerations of kinship" (Raghunathan 279). This reply, at least to a certain extent, takes the gravity away from the question that Panchali will put up to him later. In fact, it also casts the model, dharmic Yudhisthira in a negative light, bringing him at par with Suyodhana's notions about the absolute right of the king. However, having travelled with Suyodhana in this journey up to this point, one can guess that had Suyodhana himself been in Yudhisthira's shoes, he would not have gone this far and would definitely not have staked his folks, his brothers, or Bhanumati.

One who dishonours his wife is a dishonourable man (Raghunathan 281)

This is how Suyodhana sees Yudhisthira's staking of his wife, Panchali, towards whom Suyodhana who attracted as a young man. Even in his intoxicated state, he is aghast:

"Yudhisthira, who fancied himself dharmaraj, had gone ahead, staked and lost his very kingdom, along with his brothers, himself and *Panchali*! In some ways, the development took away from the joy of dispossessing the Kuntiputras of their kingdom" (Raghunathan 281). Considering Suyodhana's earlier interest in Panchali, this explanation does not seem all that implausible. Suyodhana thinks that this was possibly a result of "the dharmaraj" Yudhisthira "placing his vanity above his dharma" (Raghunathan 282). For by no standard, what Yudhisthira did can be hailed as an act of dharma. Raghunathan successfully brings Yudhisthira down from the ivory tower of dharma, thus reversing the binaries between the good and the bad, and between the moral and the immoral.

In his drunken stupor, Suyodhana meditates, "Bhanu was the wife; Panchali the unattained mistress. And now attainable!" (Raghunathan 286) But ultimately, he decides against it – "I would grant Panchali her freedom here, in my court, exactly the place where her husbands had wagered her away" (Raghunathan 290). Up to this point in the narrative, one can buy most of Suyodhana's arguments. But what Raghunathan narrates after this sounds improbable and inconclusive.

In Raghunathan's version, Sushasana misinterprets Suyodhana's order to get Panchali to the hall, and had only "gently pressed his hands against her shoulders, pushing her towards the direction of the assembly," when "her sari's pallu" came undone (Raghunathan 295).[190] He also pictures Suyodhana "unconsciously folding his left thigh and patting it in a drunken stupor" (Raghunathan 297). Suyodhana also cites the pace of the events and his own state of intoxication as excuses for the unfolding of the events in the manner that they did. But to be very honest, these arguments fail to convince.

Coming back to Suyodhana's narrative, in a closing statement, he complains: "The world chose to see that gesture and record it for eternity. . . . Nobody ever asked me for my take on the matter since it suited everyone to have an epic with an arch villain" (Raghunathan 297). While one can empathize with the latter part of his statement, one finds it difficult to get convinced with the former.[191] He reiterates: "There is only one

[190] Raghunathan, in an interview, clarifies that "until the vastraharan, there was no sign of Duryodhana being disrespectful to women. 'He was married to one woman.' In the book, Raghunathan has questioned whether the vastraharan . . . happened [at all]" (Datta).

[191] Having said that, one may also contend that it is probably because of the traditional narratives and visual representations of the scene that one grows up believing the role of Duryodhana and Duhshasana to be that of

truth: if Panchali was dishonoured that fateful day, it was at the hands of Yudhisthira, not mine" (Raghunathan 302) One can partially agree with him here – it is completely Yudhisthira's fault to have wagered Panchali and thus orchestrated the scene of her disgrace. Neither scholarship nor the common masses in posterity have been able to pardon Yudhisthira for that inhuman act of wagering his wife and his brothers.

The narrative ends at this argument at a great pace, with a brief comment on the Pandavas and Panchali being sent for the exile, and the failure of the peace talks with Krishna to avoid the war. Suyodhana says his refusal to agree to Krishna's demand of five villages for the five brothers has been touted as the reason for the cataclysmic war. However, he refuses to feel guilty, and denies the accusation: "They say that I could have averted the war if I had compromised my rajadharma once again" (Raghunathan 305). Matilal poses the question for us, quite succinctly: "Why did Duryodhana have to fight? For power, for the throne, for pride, for values which were so dear to him" (*Ethics and Epics* 109). Based on the novel, one would answer he fought for all of them but perhaps the basis of all of which were his principles, his philosophy of rajadharma, which he held so close to himself. So, one is back to his life, his choices, his decisions and actions being based on 'his' philosophy of rajadharma towards which he dedicated his life. He also gives a brief glimpse into his rational self: "I would never have dithered if all that the Kuntiputras wanted was a generous privy purse worthy of princes and had agreed to live quietly under my rule. Of course, given their abilities, I could have used Yudhisthira as my minister for justice, or Bhima and Arjun as my generals, ..." (Raghunathan 306). Two closing remarks that he makes are also significant. He says:

> "I have never felt the burden of Kurukshetra on my conscience. I have never regretted not giving in to the unreasonable demands of the Kuntiputras" (Raghunathan 306).

This is a statement of conviction and victory in itself. Suyodhana never faced moral dilemmas while he was alive, always sure of his motivations and actions, and he died without any weight on his conscience.[192] Is this not a clear sign of heroism and

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the villains tugging at Draupadi's sari. This scene has almost been permanently etched in public memory – folk, literary, theatrical as well as artistic.

[192] Several writers and scholars have written about the death of Duryodhana, focussing on the heroism that lay in his death. Perhaps the most popular creative take on the death of Duryodhana is the play *Urubhangam*

accomplishment? He closes his narrative on a note of contentment, when looking back at his life and the manner of his death:[193]

> ". . . to have been able to live life on my own terms; to die in combat . . . I have no regrets about what or who I was" (Raghunathan 307)[194]

In an interview, Raghunathan explains the reason for his choice of ending his novel before the war. He believes, "In the war it is seen that both sides play dirty as well as display heroism, so the presentation is fairly symmetric. So there is very little opportunity to bring Duryodhana's perspective, post the game of dice. That's why I ended the book where I did, even if the end sounds abrupt. His character has been brought out and that was the purpose of my book" (Raghunathan, "In Defence").

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by Bhāsa, which ends with the death of the hero of the play, Duryodhana, "who has earlier been vanquished in battle and humiliated. It is a powerful tragedy in modern terms, and perhaps explicable conventionally only if the hero's end is regarded as his ascent to heaven. Three other plays by Bhāsa, *Dūta Vākyam, Dūta Ghatotkacham* and *Karnabhāram*" also have Duryodhana as a major character (Haskar xix). In fact, Haskar elaborates further on the delineation of Duryodhana's character in Bhāsa:"This principal villain of the actual epic is presented in four of these plays as the *dhīroddhata* type of hero, proud and haughty, wilful and defiant, but . . . noble and self-possessed. Courage, magnanimity and piety are other qualities with which Bhasa invests Duryodhana who is also shown as a devoted son, a loving father, a good friend and a man both royal and loyal" (xix-xx). Venkatachalam suggests that in *Urubhangam*, "we have here a true Shakespearean tragedy as defined by Bradley: 'a story of exceptional calamity leading to the death of a man in high estate. . . .'" (75)

[193] Though one feels it would have been a complete novel, projecting Duryodhana in a still more favourable light, had Raghunathan included the details of the war and the manner in which the Kauravas were defeated, and especially the ways in which the four great warriors (including Karna and Duryodhana) on their side were killed by the Pandavas by resorting to trickery, lies and deceit. Bhīma's deals "an infamous 'low blow' that shatters Duryodhana's thighs. Not only does Bhīma employ a blow forbidden by the rules of combat, he compounds his breach of propriety by placing his left foot on the head of his helpless, fallen enemy" (Goldman 208). Moreover, in the war, not only Duryodhana, but even the Kauravas "behave more honourably. . . They never stoop to employ base and ignominious tricks on the battlefield against their enemies. They are manly, courageous, chivalrous and noble" (Sukthankar 13). Perhaps the only immoral act committed by the Kaurava army (against the protocol of the war) was the killing of Abhimanyu, the sixteen-year old son of Arjuna and Subhadrā, with six warriors from the Kaurava army pitted against the lone warrior Abhimanyu, who had broken into their *chakravyuha* (a special kind of battle formation) unarmed with the knowledge to come out safely.

[194] Even in Divakaruni's novel, Panchaali recollects Duryodhan's last words to Yudhisthir after the war, words which regularly echo in her ears after the victors have returned to their kingdom: "*I'm going to heaven to enjoy all its pleasures with my friends. You'll rule a kingdom peopled with widows and orphans and wake each morning to the grief of loss. Who's the real winner, then, and who the loser?*" (309, italics in original)

Moreover, as Matilal puts it, the result of the war also establishes the inverse victor-vanquished conundrum: "After the war, it was the victors who were in tears, which in a way implied that the vanquished ruler Duryodhana was ultimately the victor" (Matilal, *Ethics and Epics* 120). Das also lends support to this view: "It is rich irony that the Pandavas waged a war reluctantly in support of a dubious claim, and then employed deceit to gain a victory for which they were rightly censured" (291). One can thus claim that even if our cultures tend to make heroes out of victors, on careful consideration, one will realize that even Duryodhana stands a good chance to become one.

In the foregoing discussion, there are several characteristics of Duryodhana which come to the fore. Writing about the dharma of Duryodhana from the epic, Matilal maintains, "His *dharma* (and he also had one, to be sure) was different from that of Yudhiṣṭhira. Yudhiṣṭhira's dharma had a spiritual or moral halo around it. Duryodhan's *dharma* was as material as the hard soil" (*Ethics and Epics* 116). We have already seen the protagonist of Raghunathan's novel as a human character, having no associations with divinity of any sort. Das explains his motivations and his idea of politics and his political philosophy, his *rajadharma*, further: "Duryodhana's view of the world . . . is called 'realism' or '*realpolitik*' . . . In India, its chief advocate was Kautilya, who wrote the classic treatise *Arthashastra*. In the West, this viewpoint was made famous by Thomas Hobbes, the English philosopher, who argued that if men do not conquer when they can, they only reveal weakness and invite attack" (Das 14-15). The opinions of both Matilal and Das hold true for Suyodhana, the protagonist of Raghunathan's novel too. And as Das observes: Duryodhana's "integrity lies, . . . in his adherence to principle. One may not agree with his . . . philosophy, but he is consistent, . . ." (Das 32) The thrust of Raghunathan's argument in the novel, as one has witnessed, is primarily in terms of the disputes over the ascension of the throne and how Duryodhana develops his understanding of his *rajadharma*, and then consistently sticks to his principles and his philosophy, going over all odds to save his kingdom. And, as Gitomer puts it, he demonstrates his fidelity to his "*kṣātradharma* . . . the way of kings – protecting the earth, fair combat, loyalty to the end" (230).

One can also conclude that in engaging in retellings from the viewpoint of the 'anti-heroes,' the writers invite the readers to revisit and re-examine the traditionally popular definitions of heroism and the 'right,' thus trying to drive home the significance of not only continuously circulating our epic narratives, but also warning us of the challenges of doing so with a sense of uncritical acceptance. The exercise will be useful indeed, because

one might chance upon newer ways of understanding dharma and *adharma* and possibly, novel definitions of the both the categories, thereby leading to a more nuanced understanding of dharma and *adharma*.

CONCLUSION

Out of the many messages of the *Mahabharata*, one of the core ones is *yato dharmah tato jayah* "where there is dharma, there is victory." This is not to say that at this point of closure of the foregoing discussions, one considers one's efforts to be accomplished. The lines quoted above ought to be read with reference to the *Mahabharata* retellings, the ones discussed as well as the ones to come – as long as they further the messages of the epic, though not uncritically, in the light of the ever shifting philosophy of dharma.

An exploration of the many meanings of dharma in the light of the conventional body of texts, philosophy and knowledge, as well as locating the shifting, 'alternative' or 'new' meanings of dharma in the retellings vis-à-vis the epic, in the final analysis, testifies to both the pluralism as well as the relativism that is characteristic of the Indian concept of dharma. The retellings, perhaps more than the monumental epic, contribute towards the creation of new paradigms and continually shifting meanings of dharma. While the epic mostly hints at them, through its myriad definitions of dharma which are declared to be subtle in most cases (even when they are sometimes completely knowable), the retellings serve as mouthpieces of the creative writers in unequivocally foregrounding what is right and just, lawful and dignified, moral and ethical in seemingly complex situations. One can witness a shift in the morality of the situation, the character, and the novel as a whole—sometimes effected by altering the situation in the epic mildly, and at others, foregrounding newer, alternative ways of reading the very same circumstances and dilemmas to arrive at new/alternate meanings. In sum, the outcome is a larger shift towards the dharma of understanding, the dharma of choice and consent, the dharma of dignity and compassion, as well as the dharma of an accommodating attitude which does not demarcate the right from the wrong, and instead views dharma or reality as hazy, rather than distinct.

One of the points that has been established by the study is that the exercise does not always entail revisiting the past through the lens of the present. Many scholars have found the dharma prescribed and enacted in the stories of the epic faulty even when weighed on the parameter of the then values, ethics and moral norms. Of course, an application of the viewpoints of the present can make an understanding of the dharma of the past more

egalitarian and democratic, accommodating and meaningful. But even if it is studied as a stand-alone philosophy of the past, through the lens of the theories of the past, a reading in between the lines and an empathetic and imaginative understanding of the predicament of the characters can generate wonderful ethical codes—both for its own times as well as for the present, without any application of the tools or methodology of the present theories, or modern philosophies of morals and ethics whatsoever.

The opening chapter studied the shifting and evolving semantic world of dharma, in the light of the principles of pluralism, relativism and contextualism. In charting the long trajectory of the evolving concept of dharma from the Vedic times up till the time of the *Mahabharata*, also illuminating certain key concepts of dharma necessary for the present study, the study kept its attention focussed on the flexibility built into the very chain of the sources of dharma, in trying to find out if the principle could be applied to the study of dharma in retellings. One realized that since listening to one's voice of conscience, and applying one's own rationality to a situation of moral dilemma has been projected as the last resort for an individual, the concept of 'choice' and reason is built into the very fabric of dharma. It is not unitary, never dogmatic, and recommends rather than prescribes, though leaving the final decision in the hands of the individual or the moral agent. In fact, on deeper reflection, and as pointed out by some scholars too, the concept of *apaddharma* (dharma in abnormal times/times of distress) seems unnecessary, since in difficult times, one might not be able to go in search of a recommendation, prescription or precedent. One might, in such circumstances, not even listen to one's voice of conscience, but straightway take the most feasible action that would benefit her. Yet, the very inclusion of the concept of such an exceptional dharma in the vast body of literature on dharma shows how there is room for everyone and all situations, even for people who do not understand subtle messages embedded in the very concept of dharma. The chapter also discussed moral dilemmas in general and moral quandaries in the *Mahabharata* in particular, and realized that not all dilemmas are unsolvable. One needs to step out of one's compulsions and prejudices to arrive at a solution. The chapter also analyzed the concept of *purusharthas* (values) and the concept of larger/ultimate good, both of which establish dharma in terms of an 'ought,' and never in terms of a 'should,' concepts to cater to the individual seeking ultimate values or an ultimate social purpose of her dharma. Additionally, the chapter also analyzed some concepts related to dharma in the *Mahabharata*, pointing to the flexibility and sometimes also the inadequacy of the principle of dharma, namely the concept of a

dharmayuddha, the shifting-changing-reasoning dharma of Krishna (akin to consequentialism), Yudhishthira's dejection with and rejection of dharma, and the concept of dharma's opposite, i.e. adharma. All these concepts, in sum, drive home the point that the central, defining attribute of dharma is its shifting nature and its built-in-flexibility.

The second chapter dealt with the projection of the character of Draupadi in two retellings by two women writers. This chapter dealt with the depiction of Draupadi's life in the two novels, from her childhood through adolescence, to her *svayamvara* and polyandry. Both the novelists use their novels to imaginatively bring out such aspects of Draupadi's life which have been overlooked by the epic, namely her childhood and her growing up years, along with details about her education and sources of knowledge. There are various illuminating details one gets about Draupadi's life, which help establish and authenticate the character we meet later in the novel. Divakaruni does a brilliant task in this regard. Both the novelists give remarkable space to their heroine to express her disgust with the idea of polyandry, and although they may not speak up, the novelists take us through the bewilderment, pain and inner churnings of her mind the moment she hears Kunti make the pronouncement, and later, even after the matter is settled by a man or many men (namely Yudhishthira, Vyasa, Krishna or Drupada). The chapter also analyzed the concepts of love and sexuality in relation to Draupadi, and how the heroines do not have reservations against expressing their love, hinting at their thwarted love, the importance they accord to material relationships and so on. The chapter also discussed Draupadi's status as a *sahadharmini* rather than a *pativrata*, through the latter was the principle of devotion followed by wives towards their husbands. Draupadi demands equality, and will settle for nothing lesser than that. Hence, she emerges as a *sahadharmini*, an equal to her husbands in matters of dharma.

The third chapter dealt with the life of Draupadi from the time of the dicing match, to its consequences, to the cataclysmic war and its aftermath, and the depiction of the final journey in the aforementioned novels. The chapter analyzed the adharma that was meted out to Draupadi by her husbands, the Kauravas, and the men in the assembly hall. The heroine of these novels demands answers to her pointed questions on dharma from lawmakers in the hall meant for dispensing justice, as well justice for herself, but she is given neither. Draupadi does not acknowledge even once that she has lost her freedom. On the contrary, she wins the freedom of her husbands. She condemns the violence, humiliation and violence she meets at the hands of the Kauravas, pronouncing terrible

curses. The chapter also traced her sufferings in the exile, and how she burnt in the spirit if revenge, willingly giving up the option of leading a comfortable life at her father's home to accompany her husbands so as to constantly exhort them to seek revenge. Her miseries know no bounds, as she is subjected to violence twice again, but on both the occasions, she gets her husband Bhima to punish the culprit there and then. The novels register female anger and protest, especially in the later parts of the lives of their heroines. The novels innovate on some accounts, a primary one being Divakaruni's heroine getting the gift of divine eyes for witnessing the war and bear testimony to it. The heroine is shown to be a fierce one, who takes on the fathomless pain and agony of seeing the men fight and die, and be in the battlefield—though virtually—traditionally held to be a male arena. The heroines seem to be asking us poignant questions, primarily, why cannot there be a world of love and harmony, rather than war and bloodshed? The chapter closes with an analysis of the final journey Draupadi takes with her husbands, and gives the alternative accounts of her fall as projected in both the novels. In Ray's novel, Draupadi is rejecting *moksa* in favour of rebirth, and in Divakaruni's novel, she is shown as inhabiting a formless, genderless world. There is simultaneously, an affirmation as well as rejection of transcendence in the two novels taken together. Not only had Draupadi's dharma undergone a shift, and sometimes a change, the dharma of the men and women she is surrounded by also stands questioned and revised.

The last chapter dealt with the character of Duryodhana in V. Raghunathan's novel by the same name. In the chapter, the concept of adharma was interrogated vis-à-vis the concept of dharma, especially *rajadharma*. The chapter discusses how Duryodhana feels betrayed as a child when his cousins start laying claims to the throne of Hastinapur, which rightfully belonged to him by the law of primogeniture. The chapter reads the motivations and machinations of Duryodhana in the light of *rajadharma*, and does not find him guilty of resorting to adharma on numerous occasions. Not only does Duryodhana unlearn dharma in various ways, he also develops his own philosophy of dharma, which has been touted as adharma by posterity. His elders are ineffectual, which is why he is keen on implementing his plans to get rid of his enemies, as he believes that it is to the throne of Hastinapur that he owes his primary dharma, his primary duty. The last part of the novel and the chapter discuss his involvement in the game of dice, and discovers that most of what happened (in Duryodhana's version of the story) was pure accident and misinterpretation. He also turns the tables towards Yudhisthira in his final analysis, and

blames him for not withdrawing at the right time, and also for staking his wife, which was unthinkable for him. The chapter concluded how it is probably time we engage with more retellings from the perspective of the anti-hero, and also how heroes and anti-heroes are culturally made, which comes with the possibility of change or even reversal. On analyzing Duryodhana's actions from the vantage point of his *rajadharma* and *kshatradharma*, one thinks one can absolve him of the blame generations of people have levelled against him. The chapter also analyzed the need to look beyond the obvious, and read the anti-heroes, evil or adharmic characters with empathy and understanding.

Lastly, after the foregoing analysis, one chances upon a new understanding of dharma, especially in the context of the novels and the characters discussed: dharma is that which takes cognizance of the individual in society, and the society at large. One needs to develop a more holistic approach, in which dignity of the individual, consent, compassion, the ability to understand the other's point of view, and the ability to see beyond the obvious need to be cultivated for us to understand and implement dharma in a better fashion. Things change with time and so does dharma. It is not a fixed or frozen concept. The retellings emphasize the need to change and innovate, both the myths and the stories, but also our notions of dharma and morality. And it is going to be both welcome and praiseworthy.

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