

RETELLING OF THE MAHABHARATA FROM SUBALTERN PERSPECTIVE IN SELECT CONTEMPORARY FICTION



Thesis
Submitted to the
UNIVERSITY OF KOTA

In the Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the
Award of the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In
ENGLISH
Under the
Faculty of Arts

Submitted by
Aayushi Sangharshee
Registration No.: RS/930/22

Under the Supervision of
Dr. Jatinder Kaur Kohli
Professor
Department of English
Government Arts College, Kota

UNIVERSITY OF KOTA
KOTA (RAJASTHAN)-324005
INDIA
December, 2025

शोध निदेशालय कोटा विश्वविद्यालय

एम.बी.एस. मार्ग, कोटा (राजस्थान)-३२४००५
फोननम्बर : ०७४४-२४७१०३७



Directorate of Research *University of Kota*

MBS Marg, KOTA (Rajasthan)-324005
Phone No.: 0744-2471037

CERTIFICATE

I feel great pleasure in certifying that the Ph.D. thesis entitled “**RETELLING OF THE MAHABHARATA FROM SUBALTERN PERSPECTIVE IN SELECT CONTEMPORARY FICTION**” submitted by **Miss. Aayushi Sangharshee** to the University of Kota in the partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy is based on the research work carried out under my guidance.

She has completed the following requirements as per UGC Regulations and research ordinance of the University:

- (a) Satisfactory Completion of the Ph.D. Course Work.
- (b) Submission of Half Yearly/ Yearly Progress Reports.
- (c) Fulfilment of residential requirement of the Research Centre (Minimum 200 Days).
- (d) Presentation of research work before the Departmental Committee.
- (e) Publication of at least one research paper in the referred research journal of national / international repute.
- (f) Two paper presentations in the Conferences/Seminars.

I recommend the submission of the Ph.D. thesis and certify that it is fit to be evaluated by the examiners.

Date:
Place: Kota

Prof. Jatinder Kaur Kohli
Research Supervisor



DECLARATION

I, **Aayushi Sangharshee**, hereby certify that the research work presented in my Ph.D. thesis entitled **“RETELLING OF THE MAHABHARATA FROM SUBALTERN PERSPECTIVE IN SELECT CONTEMPORARY FICTION”** which is carried out by me under the supervision of **Prof. Jatinder Kaur Kohli** and submitted in the partial fulfilment of the requirement for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the University of Kota, represents my ideas in my own words and where others' ideas or words have been included in this thesis, I have adequately cited and referenced the original sources.

The work presented in this thesis has not been submitted elsewhere for the award of any degree or diploma from any other institution or university in India or abroad. I declare that I have adhered to all the principles of academic honesty and integrity and have not misrepresented or fabricated or falsified any idea / data / fact / source in my submission.

I understand that any violation of the above will cause for disciplinary action by the University and can also evoke penal action from the sources which have thus not been properly cited or from whom proper permission has not been taken when needed.

Date:

Place: Kota

Aayushi Sangharshee

Research Scholar

This is to certify that the above statement made by **Miss. Aayushi Sangharshee (RS/930/22)** is correct to the best of my knowledge.

Date:

Place: Kota

Prof. Jatinder Kaur Kohli

Research Supervisor



Anti-Plagiarism Certificate

It is certified that the Ph.D. thesis entitled **“RETELLING OF THE MAHABHARATA FROM SUBALTERN PERSPECTIVE IN SELECT CONTEMPORARY FICTION”** submitted by **Miss. Aayushi Sangharshee** has been examined with the anti-plagiarism tool.

We undertake that:

- The thesis has significant new work/knowledge as compared already published or are under consideration to be published elsewhere. No sentence, equation, diagram, table, paragraph or section has been copied verbatim from previous work unless it is placed under quotation mark and duly referenced.
- The work presented is original and own work of the author i.e. there is no plagiarism. No ideas, processes, results or words of others have been presented as the author's own work.
- There is no fabrication of data or results which have been compiled and analysed.
- There is no falsification by manipulating research materials, equipment or processes, or changing or omitting data or results such that the research is not accurately represented in the research record.
- The thesis has been checked by using original **(Drillbit)** tool/software and found within the limits as per UGC plagiarism policy and instructions issued from time to time.

Report is also enclosed along with this Ph.D. thesis.

Date:

Place: Kota

Aayushi Sangharshee

Research Scholar

Date:

Place: Kota

Prof. Jatinder Kaur Kohli

Research Supervisor

Plagiarism Certificate



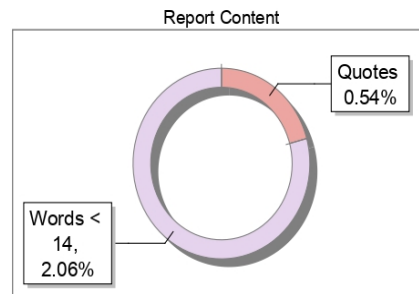
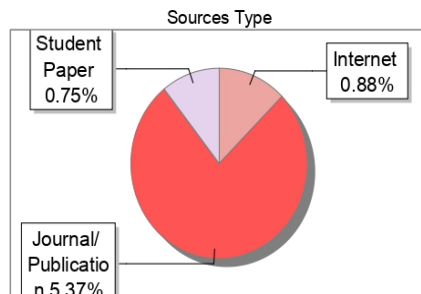
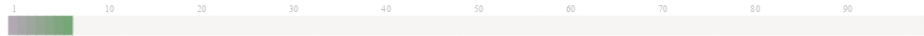
The Report is Generated by DrillBit Plagiarism Detection Software

Submission Information

Author Name	Aayushi Sangharshee
Title	RETELLING OF THE MAHABHARATA FROM SUBALTERN PERSPECTIVE IN SELECT CONTEMPORARY FICTION
Paper/Submission ID	4936080
Submitted by	drannakaushik@uok.ac.in
Submission Date	2025-12-15 14:44:03
Total Pages, Total Words	115, 49935
Document type	Thesis

Result Information

Similarity **7 %**



Exclude Information

Quotes	Excluded	Language	English
References/Bibliography	Excluded	Student Papers	Yes
Source: Excluded < 14 Words	Excluded	Journals & publishers	Yes
Excluded Source	0 %	Internet or Web	Yes
Excluded Phrases	Excluded	Institution Repository	Yes

Database Selection

A Unique QR Code use to View/Download/Share Pdf File





DrillBit Similarity Report

7

SIMILARITY %

61

MATCHED SOURCES

A

GRADE

A-Satisfactory (0-10%)

B-Upgrade (11-40%)

C-Poor (41-60%)

D-Unacceptable (61-100%)

LOCATION	MATCHED DOMAIN	%	SOURCE TYPE
1	Foucault and Derrida The Question of Empowering and Disempowering the Author by Antoni-2009	<1	Publication
2	Thesis Submitted to Shodhganga Repository	<1	Publication
3	Thesis Submitted to Shodhganga Repository	<1	Publication
4	Thesis Submitted to Shodhganga, shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in	<1	Publication
5	Submitted to University of Kashmir, Srinagar on 2023-11-07 11-47	<1	Student Paper
6	Thesis Submitted to Shodhganga Repository	<1	Publication
7	Thesis Submitted to Shodhganga Repository	<1	Publication
8	20.198.91.38080	<1	Publication
9	dochero.tips	<1	Internet Data
10	Thesis Submitted to Shodhganga Repository	<1	Publication
11	Submitted to Lalit Narayan Mithila University, Darbhanga on 2024-05-22 18-46	<1	Student Paper
12	Thesis Submitted to Shodhganga Repository	<1	Publication
13	Thesis Submitted to Shodhganga Repository	<1	Publication

A WORD OF GRATITUDE

Foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to a brilliant mind, without which this thesis would have only been a dream, **Prof. Jatinder Kaur Kohli** Professor and Head, Department of English, Govt. Arts College Kota (Raj.).

I consider myself to be extremely lucky having worked under such a perfect and tremendous mentor for me. I am indebted for her constant assistance, encouragement, guidance, tremendous support and opportunities she provided me throughout my doctoral studies. Her important suggestions and advice are priceless for me. Her guidance helped me in all the time of research and writing of this thesis.

Further, I express much more than a mere sense of gratitude. Thanks to her, for valuable time, co-operation and generosity which set this work possible as it is till the end. Her support has been the most profitable experience for me.

Aayushi Sangharshee
Research Scholar

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

It gives me immense pleasure to present to you my Thesis, the completion of which, was made possible with the support and guidance of a whole collective of various individuals and institutions. My foremost thanks goes to my all-reverent Research Supervisor, **Prof. Jatinder Kaur Kohli**, Professor at **Government Arts College, Kota**. My research journey would have been impossible without her utmost support, guidance and constant encouragement. It was through her help that I could smoothly navigate my way through the complexities of the Research work. I am also thankful to the University of Kota and its English Department, which provided me a resourceful and intellectual academic environment conducive for carrying out the Research work.

I extend my sincere gratitude to all the authors whose works helped me in the development of my Thesis. As my Thesis focused on bringing out the sub-altern perspective in the Mahabharata, the works of the select contemporary authors proved to be great foundational and insightful texts for the purpose of my Thesis.

Last, but not the least, I would like to acknowledge the unwavering love and support that my family- my parents, my in-laws, my husband and my little daughter- gave to me that helped me truly withstand all the hardships and moments of self-doubt. Without their moral and emotional support, my Research journey would not have been possible. I would especially like to mention, my daughter, Suhavi Bhalla, who was born while my research work was still going on and has been my biggest motivation and pillar of strength.

I also stay indebted to all my friends and well-wishers who have supported me with their words of encouragement and thoughtful presence. I would also like to thank all the other people who have remained unacknowledged but have helped me in some way or the other.

Aayushi Sangharshee
(Research Scholar)

ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of the Indian civilisation, that Mahabharata came into existence, the text has retained a central place in the Indian canonical literature. Revered as a sacred text of the Hindus, the stories, the philosophies, and traditions contained in the text have become so embedded in the common consciousness of the people that they see it as foundational treatise of whatever constitutes Indian culture today. Since then, the characters and stories of the Mahabharata have served as household names in the Indian homes for generations and generations. But as times change and ideologies of the society evolve, over the huge time gap of centuries, certain aspects of the Mahabharata need to be revisited, revised or even retold as per the changing needs of the society.

My Thesis, titled, “Retellings of the Mahabharata from Sub-Altern perspective in Select Contemporary Fiction” is an attempt in the same direction. Influenced by the modern theories of Sub-alternity and Post-colonialism, as many Indian English Writers sought to revisit the ancient mythological text and bring out the hidden, sidelined or overlooked narratives of the text, my Thesis seeks to analyse their works in an attempt to figure a more clearer and inclusive picture of the text. By bringing out the stories of select sub-altern characters of the Mahabharata, my Thesis seeks to showcase that history and mythology are not just about the narrative of the victorious, but have hidden under the lens, many minor and often-overlooked narratives.

The Thesis is a culmination of a long journey of introspection and analysis, of the contemporary literature on Mahabharata, resulting from a fascination for mythological texts and tales. Moreover, the fact that many Indian English writers were increasingly working on bringing out the lesser-known aspects of the tale, a cohesive analysis and exegesis of the resultant literature was deemed necessary. Through this Thesis, I hope to contribute my significant bit in giving a voice to the various sub-altern characters of the Mahabharata, whose stories have majorly stayed dormant under the exuberance of the dominant male-Kshatriya perspective of ancient times. The Thesis also is an attempt to contribute to the field of contemporary literature and studies concerning mythological and cultural aspects of the society. **With heartfelt gratitude.**

CONTENTS

S. No.	Particular	Page No.
	• Certificate	i
	• Candidate's Declaration	ii
	• Anti- Plagiarism Certificate	iii-v
	• A Word of Gratitude	vi
	• Acknowledgment	vii
	• Abstract	viii
	• Contents	ix
Chapter 1	Introduction	1-24
Chapter 2	Articulating Selves	25-50
Chapter 3	Retellings As A Mirror To Changing Ideologies	51-72
Chapter 4	Narrative Techniques	73-101
Chapter 5	Conclusion	102-116
	Summary	117-125
	Bibliography	126-139
	Published Research Papers	
	Certificate of Seminar/ Conference	

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

If anyone is to study the origins of any civilisation, one of the major reservoirs of ancient knowledge would definitely be the Epics. The Epics are no doubt grand literary masterpieces, but more importantly, they serve as a reflection or a mirror to the various social cultures and ideologies of the past. The Epics are never to be seen as just mythological or religious scriptures, as they are much more than that. They serve as a link to decipher the intricacies of origin of our civilisation. They also function as a foundational treatise of the ancient philosophical system; the ideologies and the morals that gave birth to our culture. **In a sense, Epics should be seen as more than just narratives, they emerge as ideological blueprints that help us trace the intellectual, spiritual, and political origins of a civilisation. They are not simply artifacts of historical interest, but living texts that continue to influence the way people perceive ideas of power, morality, duty, and identity.**

In India too, the epics, namely the Ramayana and the Mahabharata hold transcendental importance. They are considered as foundational texts of Indian culture and value system. The Mahabharata, especially, is considered an all-inclusive text; which serves as encyclopaedia of solutions to all kinds of problems concerning human existence. Perhaps it is because the text of the Mahabharata is so huge and contains philosophical discussions on almost all aspects of human life. The text is abound with religious ideologies as much as it is about the political, social and familial aspects of human life. The ideological and cultural richness of the Mahabharata makes it a sacrosanct text, potent enough to inspire reflection and dialogue, inviting scholars to grapple with fundamental questions that remain as relevant today as they were a millennia ago.

The text of the Mahabharata is attributed to the sage, Ved Vyas, who conceived the idea of compiling the story of the Mahabharata and made Lord Ganesha his scribe. The Mahabharata majorly centres around the enmity between the two brother clans, the Pandavas and the Kauravas and events which eventually led to the war of Kurukshetra, also infamously known as the Mahabharata war. Since the Mahabharata is so well imbedded in the common conscience of the people, everyone in India has either read or heard at least the basic storyline of the Mahabharata. Generations and

generations have passed and we have all grown up following Ved Vyas' the Mahabharata as the absolute 'true' account of the events that happened at the beginning of the civilisation. But while deciphering the 'truth' of the events of the Mahabharata, we should be mindful of the fact that Epics come into existence from the prolonged process of the oral story-telling practise of the people of ancient times. At the beginning of the civilisation, when 'writing' was not yet invented and oral-storytelling was the only way of passing stories from one generation to another, the process naturally led to a lot of modifications in the story of the Mahabharata at multiple levels, and what finally got formed were the 'myths'; which were an amalgamation of half-reality half-fantasy. It was these 'myths' that got compiled in written form to form the Epic, which posterity has followed for centuries.

Since the beginning of our civilisation, the only account of the Mahabharata War available is the one attributed to the sage Ved Vyasa, which came to be seen as the only 'original', 'authentic' and 'true' account of the events of the Mahabharata. As a result, we have all grown up imagining the events and the characters of the Mahabharata only in the way Ved Vyas has portrayed it. This dictum has somehow led us towards developing a certain prejudice towards the 'heroes' of the Mahabharata, considering the Pandavas as the good ones, as opposed to the Kauravas, especially Duryodhana and Shakuni who are seen in a more dark light. Also, given the fact that Lord Krishna supported and guided the Pandavas and helped them emerge victorious, we are conditioned to consider the Pandavas to be somehow superior, meritorious and followers of the right conduct.

But with the advent of rhetoric and reason, and increasing interest in revisiting the canon of Indian mythological literature, there emerged a new trend in contemporary scholarship of the 21st century in India. Many Indian writers, who sought to revisit and revive mythological texts, tended to analyse the age-old story from different perspectives, other than that of the author's. They questioned the dominant ideology and proposed alternate ways of seeing the text. The modern day scholars sought to bring into light the individuality of characters who were, in some way the recipients of grave injustice at the hands of other characters as well as the author. Such characters are called the 'subaltern characters', whose identities are somehow marginalised in the dominant narratives and whose perspectives do not form the major perspectives, but play major roles in shaping the narrative of the text. **This shift towards retellings is not merely a literary choice but also a socio-political act, an**

attempt to decentralise narrative authority and democratise myth. By empowering silenced or marginalised characters to narrate their versions of the story, the contemporary authors seek to open up the space for inclusion and social justice.

The ‘Subaltern’ is a modern day concept that emerged by the end of the 20th century, as a subset of Post-Colonial literary criticism. The Subaltern theory seeks to explore the experiences and perspectives of the people who are outside of dominant power structures or are often silenced or subsided. As my Thesis focuses on retelling the story of the Mahabharata from the perspectives of subaltern characters, it is important to first understand what subaltern is, what is its significance, its implications etc. The term ‘subaltern’ was coined by the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci by the end of 20th century and it is studied under the garb of Post-colonial theory. What constitutes subalternity for Gramsci was defined in a collection of essays that he wrote while he was imprisoned by the Italian fascist regime in 1926. The collection of essays were clubbed under the title, *Prison Notebooks* and they form a foundational treatise in the field of Subaltern Studies. For him, subalternity is essentially an experience of marginality, confronted by those who are away from the centres of power. The proponents of Subaltern theory strive to highlight the narratorial voices of such people, understand the complexity of their identity, and to give agency to them. The Italian Marxist had initially coined the term to refer to those working class population like peasants and workers in Soviet Union who were subject to the hegemony of the landlords and the ruling classes. Gramsci believed that the history of the marginalised classes or the subaltern, is as complex as that of the ruling classes or the hegemons. The only difference is that the history of ruling classes is what people study as the ‘official history’ and neglect the history of the marginalised classes.¹ Gramsci also believed that the history of the subaltern classes is ‘necessarily fragmented and episodic’ as different subaltern classes are marginalised at different degrees, and are always subject to the whims and fancies of the ruling classes.² The theory of subalternity seeks to rectify this bias by subverting the narrative and studying history from the perspectives of the subaltern. It seeks to give voice to the voiceless and let their narratives be known. **When applied to literary texts, especially to epics like the Mahabharata, subaltern theory functions as a hermeneutic lens to uncover the ideological undercurrents and power structures that determine whose story gets to be told and whose gets to be omitted.**

It challenges us to revisit popular narratives and analyse for what they explicitly say, and also what they silence or subdue.

It is noteworthy to mention that a group of scholars of South Asia came together in the late 1970s and 1980s and formed a collective known as 'The Subaltern Studies Group' (SSG). The scholars that formed the Collective had common inclination towards Post-Colonialist and Post-Imperialist theories. The group was founded by the South Asian historian, Ranajit Guha and included scholars like Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, Dipesh Chakravarty and Partha Chatterjee. As Gramsci had focused on voicing the subaltern in Europe, the Subaltern Studies Group focused on finding the subaltern within South Asia and empowering them through their narratives. The group collectively published a number of scholarly articles and research papers on different aspects of the Subaltern in South Asia, and especially India. The collective was driven by a common dissatisfaction with colonial historiography and elite nationalist narratives, both of which they felt had systematically erased or undervalued the role of the masses in shaping history. They aimed to revise and reclaim historical narratives, this time giving voice to the marginalized groups and providing alternative epistemologies rooted in the lived experiences of those traditionally silenced.

The major thrust area of the Subaltern Studies Group was to explore the experiences of marginality of the social groups that were excluded in the history of Indian freedom struggle. As the freedom struggle was the result of a collective and mass mobilisation of the people, it undoubtedly should acknowledge the contribution of all the social groups and classes, irrespective of their social status. According to Ranajit Guha, the peasants, who comprised a major chunk of Indian population who fought against the British, were often ignored in dominant historical narratives that glorified the Indian freedom struggle. The various peasant movements that rose in different parts of India and contributed enormously in resisting the British rule in India, were not given their due importance in the historical narratives documenting the Indian National Movement. Only the elite social groups, the educated middle class Indians, the various social reformers and the revolutionaries etc were glorified in the historical narratives. Guha emphasises on giving agency to the peasant narratives and acknowledging their contribution to the freedom struggle of India. He seeks to challenge the traditional view that often see the peasants as no more than victims or sufferers. Guha, through his theories, attempts to give power to the peasants, and

bring into light the everyday acts of protest and resistance by the subalterns against the oppressive power structures. The Subaltern Studies approach encouraged the study of mythologies, folklore, and local traditions, challenging the monopoly of official records and written archives. In this way, it resonated with the fundamental objectives of retelling mythological texts like the Mahabharata, where alternative voices must be uncovered through creative and critical means.

Amongst the members of the Subaltern Studies Group, Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak goes a step further by proposing a fundamental yet controversial question, “Can the Subaltern Speak ?” in her famous essay titled after the question itself.³ The groundbreaking essay makes the members of the Subaltern Studies Group as well as the readers question the concept altogether. It leaves them pondering whether it is really possible for the subaltern to be alternatively represented in the contemporary retellings. Spivak, in her essay suggests that given the extent and the multitude of ways by which the subaltern groups are repressed, it is nearly impossible to recover their voices and to give agency to their narratives. In the context of Indian freedom struggle, the various subaltern groups, like workers, peasants and especially women were so deeply oppressed during the colonial rule, that it seems that no alternative narrative can adequately and justly voice them. She puts under interrogation any effort that is made to make the subaltern speak in the contemporary retellings. It is so because such an attempt can infact re-inscribe the structures of dominance that silenced them in the first place because even well-meaning scholarly interventions are not free from the power dynamics of representation. For illustration, Spivak brings into forefront the issue of women and question the members of the Subaltern Studies Group itself of how they only attempt to give voice to the male-dominated subaltern groups. She seeks to reflect upon the theories of the Subaltern Group itself and point out that they themselves unknowingly defy their own principles. As far as women are concerned, they too form a part of subaltern category, and the members of the Subaltern Studies Group seem to casually focus only on the male-dominated subaltern groups. She accuses the SSG of privileging male subaltern subjects over female subaltern subjects who were infact doubly repressed by colonial rule as well as patriarchy. **Spivak's critique adds a crucial gendered dimension to the discourse of subalternity, reminding scholars that any simplistic attempt to retrieve subaltern agency must contend with intersecting structures of oppression.** Through her essay, Spivak highlights that the more a subaltern is repressed, the more

difficult or nearly impossible it becomes for a person to voice them even in an alternative setting. She challenges the assumption made by the intellectuals and the post-colonial scholars that the narratorial voice of the subaltern can be recovered. Her essay has therefore become an important text not just in post-colonial theory, but also in feminist theory and historiography, offering an indispensable lens for interpreting any subaltern literature.

As discussed above, the concept of the subaltern and the various conflicting theories regarding the subaltern are a product of recent times. It was by the end of the twentieth century, that the term 'subaltern' came into existence, majorly when the study of Post-Colonialism came into existence. As the different countries of the British Commonwealth had started attaining independence from the imperialist rule, it led to the emergence of a new form of literature which focused on the narratives of the natives of these countries, the repressed classes, or so called 'the subaltern classes'. In India too, it was during the period of the Independence struggle, that a number of intellectuals and social thinkers sought to revive the ancient Indian history and culture with a motive to arouse nationalist feelings among the masses. It was during this period that a number of books and newspaper articles came up which sought to glorify ancient India's literature, culture, history and traditions. Various scholars chose to translate the Indian Epics into different vernacular languages, so that the Indian value system and culture could penetrate the society again and unite the people against the colonists.

As my Thesis focuses on contemporary retellings of the Mahabharata from subaltern perspective, it is important to understand how all of these factors mentioned above, contributed to this new trend of literature among the contemporary Indian English scholars. To sum up the points: the advent of Indian Independence; the consequent opening up of the Indian society; the influence of global ideas such as that of the 'subaltern' and the beginning of theory of Post Colonialism, all contributed to this new wave of literature among the contemporary writers in India, who sought to revisit, revise and retell stories from Indian mythology from a new perspective, the perspective of the subaltern. The retellings thus became a powerful tool for giving space to historically marginalised voices and for problematising the very notion of 'truth' in myth.

For my Thesis, I had taken up the works of select contemporary Indian English writers, namely, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anand Neelakantan, Kavita Kane and

Madhavi Mahadevan. All of these authors come from different corners of India and have written novels that attempt to put forward the perspective of the different subaltern characters of the Mahabharata. As there can be different facets of a story, there can also be different perspectives from which a story can be viewed, depending upon who is narrating it. Since time immemorial, Indians have considered Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata as a classic, a timeless masterpiece which seen as majorly focusing on the story of the heroes, their glory and valour, in the backdrop of philosophical theories of Indian culture. It is important to remember that other than the dominant narrative of the heroes, there can be many more smaller narratives of other characters, which tend to get side-lined or silenced under the dominant discourse. Owing to the beliefs and ideologies of the people of ancient times, the narratives of various characters of the story, such as those belonging to lower caste or women, did get drifted to the margins, in some way or the other. In order to voice out the smaller yet important narratives of the select subaltern characters, various Indian English authors of contemporary times, have attempted to revisit the original text in order to revive and resituate their stories. These retellings hold major significance as they provide a contemporary lens to explore the timeless themes, moral dilemmas and complex characters of the age-old epic. These retellings also help to foster a deeper and an all-inclusive understanding of the Mahabharata while at the same time preserving its cultural richness.

To begin with, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Palace of Illusions*, is a novel first published in 2008 and is specially acclaimed for its take on the ancient story of Mahabharata through a feminist perspective. It has as its central character, the Queen of Hastinapur, the very learned, beautiful, and free-spirited wife of the Pandavas: Draupadi.

The story in the novel is narrated by Draupadi and it traces her life from her birth itself; her relationship with her father and brother; her marriage to the Pandavas and then the events that finally led to the war of the Mahabharata. The novel portrays the character of Panchali as fierce, bold, extremely learned and independent spirited. The novel elaborates on the struggles that Draupadi had to face in her life and how she used her education as a tool to empower herself against the world. Divakaruni explains in the beginning of the novel the circumstances in which Draupadi was born. She calls her the 'offspring of Vengeance, or the Unexpected One' as she was accidentally born out of the fire ceremony that King Drupad had performed in order to

get a son who would avail his revenge from Drona.⁴ Though the fire ceremony had begotten a son too but the unexpected arrival of the daughter, Draupadi, had left everyone shocked. Divakaruni gives immense power and agency to Draupadi by choice of words and explanation of the events. She does not show Draupadi as a ‘victim’ of circumstances, but a ‘victor’ of circumstances. It is important to remember that though the events of the novel are taken from Ved Vyas’ Mahabharata, but since the narratorial voice has changed, the author uses fiction to mould the way things are presented to the readers. As the novel is narrated from Draupadi’s point of view, she explains the events as Draupadi would have seen it if she were given the power in history. When Divakaruni explains the events of the birth of Draupadi, she says that certain sacramental voices emerged from the fire which 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”.⁵ In these lines, Divakaruni designates Draupadi as someone who would ‘change the course of history’ as she rightly did in Ved Vyas’ Mahabharata too, but unlike in the Epic, Divakaruni upturned the negative connotations associated with it.⁶

Since the novel traces Draupadi’s life, right from birth itself, the readers strongly sense the multitude of difficulties that besiege Draupadi and how she uses the resources at her disposal to become a stronger individual. For instance, the novel highlights the hardships that she had to go through even to get basic education along with her brother. The novel showcases how difficult it was for women to get educated as it was believed to lead to disastrous consequences. Draupadi’s education became possible only because of her constant insistence and ‘hunger’ to know about things, and with Krishna’s help that King Drupad had to allow her wishes.

The ‘Author’s Note’, which serves as a Prologue to the novel provides a very informative insight into the contents of the novel, and the reasons why the author chose to write the novel from Draupadi’s perspective. The author begins by telling that since childhood she had always been fascinated by the world of epics, the complex interweaving of myth together with religion, beliefs, science and philosophy that created the multitude of stories it contained. Referring to the context of Mahabharata, she says that the epic story of the rivalry between the Kauravas and the Pandavas culminating into the Great War of the Mahabharata, had no doubt been very illuminating and educating, but the one question that always stuck her was the question of women. Divakaruni specifies that amidst the portrayal of the stories of the

heroes in the epic; with all their valour, vitality and glory; she regrets that the women who also contributed majorly to the events of the epic, did not get similar representation and importance. She says, “somehow all these women remained shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions described only when they affected the lives of the male heroes”.⁷ In an attempt to bring into light the women’s perspective in the novel, Divakaruni chooses to revive and re-narrate the story from the perspective of the most important woman character in the epic, Draupadi. The ‘Author’s Note’ provides an apt justification for the novel to present an alternative retelling of the epic from the feminine perspective.

Based on same principles as on Divakaruni’s novel, stands the famous novel by Anand Neelakantan, *Ajaya: The Epic of The Kaurava Clan* which attempts to take up the perspective of the Kauravas’ especially Duryodhana’s, to retell the story of the Mahabharata. It is important to note that the title of the novel is extremely significant as it is used as a foil to ‘Jaya’ which is another name for the Mahabharata. If Ved Vyasa’s the Mahabharata or ‘Jaya’ tells the story from Pandavas’ perspective and glorifies them, then Neelakantan chooses the title ‘Ajaya’, to retell the story from the Kauravas’ perspective and glorify them instead. Another point to be put into consideration is that the word ‘Ajaya’ in Hindi means ‘the one who is difficult to conquer’ and since the novel talks about the Kauravas, Neelakantan very efficiently gives immense power and agency to the Kauravas by describing them as very strong and undefeatable.⁸

Through the novel, Neelakantan seeks to analyse different characters and events of the Mahabharata as the Kauravas would have seen it. The events of the novel span right from the time Princess Gandhari along with her little brother Shakuni were brought to Hastinapur; to decades later, till the end of the war of Mahabharata which led to the mass murder of the Kaurava brothers and the impending doom. Neelakantan elaborates on the multitude of difficulties and grave injustice that the Kauravas, especially Duryodhana experienced, throughout their lives. Beginning from the time the Kuru brothers were children and were getting education from Guru Drona, we are told about the prejudices that Duryodhana used to face since then. In the early chapters of the novel, Drona is seen as treating Arjuna as his favourite student and even addressing him as ‘the next King’.⁹ On the other hand, Duryodhana is often seen as being insulted and blamed in front of the class. Moreover, Arjuna is lauded for being the best archer. But through the anecdotes of Ashwatthama and Karna, that

parse the text, we realise that Arjun was not really the best archer as non-Kshatriyas like Ashwatthama, Karna or even Eklavya were never allowed to compete with him because of their caste.

Moreover, throughout the novel, Neelakantan addresses Duryodhana as 'Suyodhana' and Dushasana as 'Sushasana', thereby removing the prefix 'Dur' which essentially had negative connotations attached to it. He seeks to humanise the characters traditionally seen as antagonists. Other than the Kauravas, Neelakantan also talks about the struggles of other characters like Gandhari, Karna, Ashwatthama, Eklavya etc in the novel. He says in the 'Author's Note' to the Novel, "It is the narrative of Others- the defeated, insulted, trampled upon- who fought without expecting divine intervention and believed in the justice of their cause."¹⁰ The novel seeks to take away the divinity and exuberance associated with the Pandavas and make them as human as possible. As history and mythology only sing about the victorious, Neelakantan's novel seek to bring forth the stories of the defeated in the war, the Kauravas. As the 'Author's Note' to the novel clarifies, "Duryodhana never believed his Pandava cousins to be of divine origin; and to modern minds, their outlandish claim now sounds chillingly similar to present day political propaganda used to fool a gullible public".¹¹ The novel seeks to ask the modern day readers to contemplate on the lives of the Kauravas and the other subaltern characters, who were somehow trampled upon by the larger-than-life image of the Pandavas.

To quote from an interview with Anand Neelakantan, where he comments upon his choice of using Duryodhana's perspective to retell the story, he says, "History shows that the side that gets vanquished always gets painted in black.

What I did was to shine the light from a different angle so that the shadows and lights

interchanged or got mixed to shades of grey".¹² In the same interview, he also puts forward his views on the superficial dichotomy of good and evil, dharma and adharma. He says, "I have always been fascinated by the so called evil characters. I do not believe in absolute good or evil".¹³

Another novel to take into consideration while dealing with the subaltern perspective in the Mahabharata is Kavita Kane's novel titled *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*. First published in 2013, the novel delves into the life story of the Princess of Pukeya, Uruvi, who happens to become Karna's wife. While taking into consideration Uruvi's narrative, Kavita Kane manages to reflect and comment upon the life and struggles of

Karna as well. The central event that happens in the novel is Uruvi's swayamvara to Karna which takes place upon breaking of all caste rules and codes of Kshatriya dharma. The narrative tells us that during the ancient times, the concept of 'pratiloma' or marrying to a man of lower caste was totally prohibited by the shastras. But Uruvi, the Princess of Pukeya, dares to upturn all caste structures and even go against her family to marry the man she desperately loved: Karna, the sutaputra. In the novel, we see that in the grand swayamwara arranged by Uruvi's father, she outrightly choses Karna as her husband and rejects all the other Kshatriya Princes, even Arjuna. Uruvi's swayamvara to Karna also acts as a foil to Draupadi's swayamvara, which happens much before the former. Draupadi, at her swayamvara, had outrightly insulted Karna by publicly proclaiming him to be disqualified to participate in her swayamvara on the grounds of being a suta-putra. The words of humiliation by Draupadi had struck a deep cord in Karna's heart as he felt deeply dejected and dishonoured. After rejecting Karna, Draupadi had chosen the eldest of the Pandava brothers, Arjuna, as her husband. As a result, years later, when Karna was to attend the swayamvara of another Kshatriya Princess, Uruvi, he least expected that the Princess would choose him over all others. Uruvi's marriage to Karna was symbolic of the rejection of caste rules and the victory of merit over caste.

As the novel is majorly a critique of the caste system, it is abound with various instances where Kavita Kane exposes the undue restrictions that the rules of the caste posed upon people with merit. As Karna had grown up as being the charioteer's son, he had many a times felt the brunt of being treated as 'the suta-putra'. Though immensely meritorious, kind, helpful, and a very loyal friend, his caste status had always become a barrier for him to achieve acknowledgment and respect. For instance, the narrative describes Karna as the best archer in the whole of Aryavarta, even better than Arjuna, but he never gets to display his talent to the public. At the grand competition of skills organised at Hastinapur, all the Pandavas, Kauravas as well as Karna participate, but the moment Karna is about to overpower Arjuna, he is declared disqualified and publicly humiliated for even daring to compete with a Kshatriya Prince. He is driven out of the competition just because of his low birth, without which he would have defeated all of the Kuru Princes. The incident turns out to be very significant in the novel, as it not only highlights the grave injustice that Karna faced for no mistake of his, and it was also the moment when the valour of Karna caught the eyes of Uruvi, who would fall deeply in love with Karna. The

incident also motivates Duryodhana to proclaim him the King of Anga and thereby earn his loyalty and friendship for life.

What is also significant in the novel is the elaborate use of imagery of the sun to describe the character of Karna. The constant reference to the sun also highlights the divine origin of Karna as the son of the Sun God. Karna It also seeks to illustrate the exuberance and vibrancy of the character of Karna, who got a little overshadowed by the dominance of the caste system. The narrative tells us that the golden armour and the golden earrings that Karna wore all the time were gifted to him by the Sun God himself at the time of his birth. They were indeed an indispensable part of his body and had provided him magical invincibility. At various instances in the novel, when Karna achieves something or proves his valour, the sun is shown as shining bright in the sky. On the other hand, at instances where Karna is let down or humiliated because of his caste, the sun is shown as setting down the horizon.

Alongside critiquing the rigid caste system, the novel also the gender-based injustices of ancient Indian society, by drawing parallels between Karna's caste-based marginalization and Uruvi's gender-based struggles. In this sense, Kane interweaves **caste and gender** as intersecting axes of subalternity. The novel portrays the character of Uruvi as a bold, assertive, and emotionally intelligent woman who dares to question the gendered structures of her times. Through Uruvi's perspective, Kane reinterprets the male-centric narrative of the epic, thereby offering a counter-discursive to portrayal of women within mythic traditions. The feminist thrust of the novel is evident from the outset in the way Uruvi resists the expectations of her royal birth. She defies patriarchal norms by choosing to marry the man of her dreams, Karna, a man stigmatized by his low birth and social ostracization, over the more socially accepted Pandava princes. The act of autonomous choice marks her as a subject of agency, not merely a passive object in the politics of matrimony. The fact that Kane also uses her character to comment upon other important social constructs such as that of dharma, loyalty, and honour also makes her a significant character. While Karna embodies the tragic hero caught between gratitude and fate, Uruvi offers a more grounded, ethical voice, unafraid to challenge even Karna's decisions when they contradict her sense of justice. In doing so, Kane effectively re-centres the moral compass of the epic in a female protagonist who critiques the glorification of masculine valour at the cost of compassion and reason. The novel often describes

Uruvi as a healer to Karna, in terms of his physical wounds as well as his emotional wounds.

The novel also talks about the difficulties she had to face in her marriage to Karna. Uruvi not only negotiates the external hostilities of the court and society but also manages the emotional dissonance within her marriage. Her struggle to reconcile her love for Karna with his silence during Draupadi's public humiliation becomes a poignant site of feminist reflection. Unlike traditional epic heroines who are often defined by their stoic suffering or sacrificial virtues, Uruvi articulates her anger, grief, and disappointment, thus disrupting the normative emotional template ascribed to women in classical literature. In reimagining Uruvi's story, Kane implicitly critiques the *Mahabharata's* treatment of women as peripheral figures and uses fiction as a space to restore their narrative agency. The novel qualifies as a feminist novel not simply because it tells a woman's story, but also because it interrogates systemic patriarchal and casteist structures. It reclaims female subjectivity, and reorients the moral narrative of the *Mahabharata* through a woman's lived experience. Kane's text exemplifies how contemporary retellings can function as vehicles of **gendered resistance**, foregrounding silenced voices and re-inscribing myth with a subversive potential.

To quote from an interview of Kavita Kane, where she talks about why and how she chose to write about Karna and his wife, she says:

The two characters whom I was quite besotted about were Bhishma and Karna - both were tragic - strong yet so vulnerable. And of course, so righteous. It was their moral dilemmas that I found so appealing and I used to often wonder with what moral grace Karna faced his wife after he returned home from the disgraceful 'vastraharan' incident in which he played a dubious role. How did his wife react to his moral downfall? I checked up and couldn't get any satisfying answers and decided I could well develop this into an entire story. And that was how the book was born.¹⁴

The next novel, *the Kaunteyas* by Madhavi Mahadevan, highlights the perspective of another subaltern character from the Mahabharata: Kunti. First published in 2016, the novel describes the life and struggles of Kunti, and thereby throw light upon the events of the Mahabharata through her perspective. The novel can majorly be seen as a feminist novel as it puts into focus a woman's perspective, as opposed to the dominant male perspective in most of the mythological texts. It focuses not on story

of the heroes of the Mahabharata, their glory and strength; but it rather focuses on the story of the woman who gave birth to the heroes of the Mahabharata. The Prologue talks about the difference between men's stories and women's stories, and hence familiarise the readers to what might be the contents of the novel, which is primarily a woman's story. The Prologue says that women's stories are majorly, "about things perishable: flesh, blood, feelings, tears. Suffering".¹⁵ As opposed to women's stories, men's stories majorly talk about "fields of blood, wondrous weapons, subtle strategies, bold tactics, courage...".¹⁶ Through the given distinction, Mahadevan makes it clear how her novel would be different from Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata, which can be seen as majorly focusing upon the rivalry between the Pandavas and the Kauravas culminating into the final battle of the Mahabharata. Mahadevan's novel provides an alternative angle to analyse the events of the Mahabharata, focusing upon women's life in general and Kunti's life in particular.

The timeline of the novel span three different phases of Kunti's life: her life in the Palace of Kuntibhoja; followed by her life with her husband Pandu; and finally her life after Pandu's death and the struggles for inheritance for her sons. The most significant events of the novel comprise the section where Kunti gets to acquire the knowledge of the Vashikaran Mantra by the sage Durvasa. The knowledge of the Vashikaran Mantra, which helps evoke any God of choice by Kunti, helps her give birth to the designated 'heroes' of the Mahabharata: the Pandavas as well as Karna. The first use of the mantra by Kunti happens accidentally when she casually muses over the words of the mantra while adoring the brilliance of the Sun-God. The Sun-God unexpectedly appears in front of Kunti and offers to give her the blessing or 'prasad' of an offspring together. As the sage Durvasa had earlier warned Kunti that the chanter of the mantra is bound to accept the 'prasad' of the deity evoked, Kunti is left with no choice but to accept the 'prasad' offered by the Sun-God and give to her first son, Karna, while still a maiden. As she gives birth to her first son while still unmarried, she decides to abandon him and hide the facts from the world. The second use of the mantra happen years later and in full conscience after her marriage with Pandu. The narrative elaborates upon the circumstances that lead Kunti to use the mantra in her favour. After her marriage with Pandu, when Kunti along with Madri get to know about Pandu's inability to give produce sons in effect to the curse of Rishi Kindama, she is left with the sole responsibility and pressure to give a heir to the throne of Hastinapur. That is when Kunti decides to make use of the power of the

Vashikaran mantra and evoke the Gods to bless herself and Madri with heirs. As opposed to Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata which focuses mainly on the narrative of Pandavas and Kauravas and their rivalry leading to the war of the Mahabharata; Mahadevan's novel chooses as its focal point the narrative of Kunti and the struggles she faced to give birth and provide a better life for her sons. Mahadevan's novel does not describe Kunti as a conventional sacrificial mother but an empowered woman who makes her own choices in life and significantly contribute to the events of history.

Through the eyes of Kunti, the novel also comments upon the treatment meted out to women in ancient times. At various instances in the novel, we are told about the immense importance the society placed on marriage and fertility of a woman. At the beginning of the novel, when the Rajmata chooses to send Kunti to serve the angry sage Durvasa, she justifies her choice by saying that it would make Kunti more marriageable as it would increase her value. Then in Part 2 of the novel, when Kunti gets married to Pandu, the Rajmata of Hastinapur, Satyawati, calls upon Kunti and Madri to educate them about the importance to produce heirs for the kingdom. She illustrates them about past instances where women of the Palace were made to, either willingly or unwillingly, produce heirs for the Kuru empire. We are also told about the tradition that the King would marry as many wives as are needed for him to beget a son. As the novel talks about the importance of fertility for women, it also elaborates upon the case of Pandu and how he turned out to be incapable to produce children. As Satyawati exerts pressure on the wives of Pandu: Kunti and Madri, to prepare themselves to produce children, it was essentially Pandu who could not provide them with heirs for the kingdom. The narrative tells us that it was Kunti and Madri individually, who fall back on their own resources and manage to procure sons for the kingdom, by making use of the Vashikaran mantra. As Kunti was blessed by the Sage Durvasa with the knowledge of the Vashikaran mantra, she uses it herself and also helps Madri to procure children and manage to continue the Kuru lineage.

As all the above mentioned select contemporary retellings of the Mahabharata essentially seek to bring forth the subaltern perspective to the tale, it is important to analyse the cultural and ideological underpinnings associated with it. As the category of subaltern comes under the garb of Post-Colonial literature, it exposes the feelings, experiences, and ideals of the entities traditionally suppressed. It seeks to provide a fuller and more comprehensive picture of the narratives of history and culture. As for

the select novels of contemporary retellings in my Thesis, they all seek to bring forth different facets of subalternity in the Mahabharata. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *the Palace of Illusions* retells the story from perspective of the most important female character of the Mahabharata: Draupadi. Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya: the Epic of the Kaurava Clan*, retells the story from the perspective of the defeaters in the war of the Mahabharata, who were conventionally considered as antagonists to the tale. Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: the Outcast's Queen* presents to the readers not only the story of the low-caste Karna, but also his wife, Uruvi, who could be seen as doubly repressed, for being a woman and marrying into a low caste. The final novel, Mahadevi Mahadevan's *the Kaunteyas*, seeks to put forth the perspective of the woman who gave birth to the heroes of the Mahabharata. All these novels highlight the immense emancipatory potential that post-colonial literature in general and subaltern in particular provide.

Moreover, as these novels are revisionist and revivalist in nature and seek to provide an alternate lens to view the original text; there is undoubtedly an element of fiction involved in making of these novels. As all of these novels seek to voice out the select subaltern characters, who were somehow silenced or marginalised in Ved Vyasa's text, they do involve the author's imagination and creativity, and thus be categorised as fictional novels. But it is important to remember that fiction does not mean that the original gets disrupted. The genre of fiction just provides the author the means to use his/her creative imagination and authorial liberty to recreate the narrative from alternative perspective. Anand Neelakantan, in the 'Author's Note' to his novel, outrightly says that his work is 'a work of fiction'.¹⁷ To quote the views of Neelakantan on fiction, creative liberty and originality, he says in an interview, "Ajaya, epic of the Kaurava clan is Mahabharata told from the perspective of the vanquished. It is a retelling of an age old epic in a different way, where the shades of white, black and grey blur".¹⁸ In the same interview he also says, "Retelling of a 3000 year old story cannot be done without research, but imagination and logical derivation also plays a major part in such retellings".¹⁹ He clarifies that the basic structure of the story remains the same, and the retelling only results from a lot of meticulous research of the information available. With no undue infringements to the series of events and the actions of characters, only what changes is the point of the view from which the story is told. To put that in place, the genre of fiction is used so that the select subaltern characters get to voice out their opinion as they would have, if they were

given a chance. Their conversations, comments and analysis of other characters and event get a new light and empowerment through the trope of fiction. To quote from another interview, Neelakantan says, “It is a creative process and fiction is not an essay, so the thoughts I express are those of what the character could have thought or what I think he or she would have thought in that particular instance of the story. Nothing more, nothing less.”²⁰

Other authors like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Madhavi Mahadevan too clarify in the introduction to their novels that they would use the genre of fiction as they seek to bring out the narratives of their select subaltern characters. To similarly quote from one of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s interview, where she clarifies her take on the genre of fiction, she says, “I am just amplifying it for my story. I didn't make up anything”.²¹ Talking about the character of Draupadi from her book *The Palace of Illusions* and Sita from her another novel, which retells the story of Sita from *Ramayana*, she says, “With Draupadi and Sita, all the conversations they were not allowed in the original, I imagine that would be the kind of thing they would say, this is how they would behave”.²² Elsewhere, in another interview she also says, “writing has been for me both magical and empowering”.²³ She expresses her concern for the ill-treatment of women in the epics, as she says, “I often felt that in our epics and puranas, women were relegated to the edges of the canvas”.²⁴ And, “This has led to misogyny and victim-shaming, with women being instructed to be docile and to put up with mistreatment and abandonment. This patriarchal interpretation of women’s roles troubled me and led me to reimagine the *Ramayan* and the *Mahabharat* with Sita and Draupadi being the narrators of their tales”.²⁵ For instance, the Prologue to Madhavi Mahadevan’s novel, *the Kaunteyas*, clarifies that the present novel would be a ‘woman’s story’ as opposed to the conventional and dominant ‘man’s story’ in most of the mythological texts.²⁶ The various contemporary retellings of the *Mahabharata* seek to provide differing perspectives to the mythic and cultural past of India that were considered as ideal touchstones for the people since centuries. Basically, the genre of ‘revisionist myth making’, which does involve fiction, attempts to appropriate traditional texts in accordance to the changing cultural contexts and ideologies of the people over time. The main purpose of revisionist myth making is to mirror the cultural change in society as well as propose new and alternate perspectives to analyse traditional mythological texts. It also seeks to analyse and challenge the cultural practices prevalent in the ancient times when the myths got created in the first

place. For example, if we consider Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *the Palace of Illusions*, we see that it not only provides a feminist retelling of the epic, but also exposes the various cultural beliefs and practices of the people of ancient times which made it an essentially male-dominated society. The novel exposes the struggles that its central female character, Draupadi had to go through in her life and the choices that she made to appropriate her given resources.

While talking about 'original' and 'revised' versions of a text, the work of the Post-Structuralist Michael Foucault's work is worth considering. In a very influential essay titled *Truth and Power*, which was published in the year 1977, Foucault discusses what determines 'truth' in the world. In the context of analysing the contemporary retellings of Mahabharata in comparison to the ancient Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata, it is important to ask ourselves these questions: which of the versions tell the 'true' story of the Mahabharata ?; Does a story change if the perspective from which it is told is changed?; Does literature even give a 'true' account of events or is it always manipulated by who, when and how it is narrated ? The arguments in Foucault's essay are very crucial to understanding issues as he discusses what determines 'true' account of events. As Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata is the first documented account of the oral-storytelling that persisted in ancient Indian society, it happened to be considered as the only source of knowledge that we had about the events of the Mahabharata. Moreover, as it constitutes an ancient literary epic of the subcontinent, the significance of Mahabharata for the Indian public is huge. The text is considered as a foundation of Indian literary culture, tradition, society and value systems. By introducing retellings of the epic from alternative perspectives, these contemporary Indian English writers seem to question or modify the 'truth' of the events of the Mahabharata.

Michael Foucault in his famous essay discusses 'truth' as a function of power relations of the society. He does not view 'truth' as an objective reality free of human influence, but as a product of power relations of the society which are constructed through various social and political processes. To quote, he says, "Truth is not by nature free-nor error servile-but that its production is thoroughly imbued with relations of power".²⁷ It means that whatever comes to the public as 'truth' is constituted and influenced by the power structures of the society that shape our perceptions. According to him, power is something all pervading and has a major role to play in determining what comes out as 'truth' in the society. The 'truth' then

becomes a part of the common knowledge of people and gets regarded as generally acceptable. While talking about the relationship of power with truth and knowledge, Foucault says that all three form a vicious cycle as truth which comes out to the public, influenced by the power relations of the society, constitutes general knowledge of the people, which in turn go on to strengthen the pervading power relations of the society. In short, power relations influence knowledge of the people regarding what is truth, which in turn strengthens the existing power relations. This interplay of knowledge and power determines what is considered as 'truth' in a society.

When we talk about mythology and literature, the Epics form an important source of knowledge about the foundation of any culture and society. The myths come into existence after a long tradition of oral-storytelling by the people of ancient times. Whatever beliefs and practices pervades the myths become a part of the common conscience of the people and are influenced by the power relations of the society at that time. Literature, by documenting these myths, makes the dominant beliefs and practices of the people, permanent and ever available for posterity. Since the Epics were formed upon organising and documenting these myths into a concrete form, they became the only available version of the knowledge of the beliefs and practices of ancient times. Literature becomes a powerful medium to enforce knowledge of the events and hence constitute what is considered 'truth' in society. Whether the events that were documented in Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata were to what extent really true or fictitious, is unknown. In spite of that, the text by Ved Vyasa is considered extremely sacrosanct and always served as a foundational treatise of Indian culture and tradition. Foucault in his essay theorises the same when he lays down the importance of discourse and literature in enforcing 'truth' in a society. He says that knowledge permeated in a society through institutions of language and discourse. And this knowledge that becomes documented in literature, becomes what is generally accepted as 'truth' in a society. And especially when we talk about Epics of ancient times, whatever gets documented in language becomes the only true account of events of the time.

The various retellings of the Epic by the select Indian English writers seek to question the very 'truth' in these Epics by presenting the story from alternative perspectives. They seek to change the perspective from which the story is told and bring into light many hidden narratives of characters previously side-lined or subdued. As my Thesis

takes into account the story of various subaltern characters of the Mahabharata, they seek to question the 'truth' of the hegemonic narrative of Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata. By making these subaltern characters the protagonists of their novels, they seek to reimagine 'truth' from their perspective. As Foucault says that 'truth' is influenced by the prevailing power structures of the time, these select contemporary writers attempt to decode the dominant power structures of that time and make the story more comprehensive and all-encompassing. Moreover, all these contemporary retellings are set in the 21st century, they too are influenced by the power relations of the time. As the Subaltern gets recognition on global scale in the 21st century, more and more narratives focus on bringing out the hidden stories of the subaltern to the forefront. By voicing out the narratives of Karna, Draupadi, Kunti and Duryodhana, the select contemporary Indian English writers seek to do justice to these characters who were subaltern in Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata in some way or the other.

Professor Dwijen Sharma in his essay *The Politics of Retelling Myths* provides an informative insight into the nature of myths, the process of myth making and the ideological and cultural functioning of the myths. He also describes the cultural impact that modern retellings of the myths have on society. He begins with a description of the myths in a very crude form, by addressing myths as narratives that human beings construct to understand natural phenomenon, simplify our relationship with nature and infuse certain ideas and values into our cultural system. The myths that form at the beginning of any civilisation, become infused with religious significance and are often considered as a foundation for the religion and culture of that particular continent. Indian mythology, for instance, comprises of all the myths that were incorporated in the Epics and other scriptures of ancient times. The two ancient Epics, the Ramayana and Mahabharata of India, are majorly seen as embodying the essence of whatever comprises Indian culture and value system today. Given the immense power of mythology in shaping and influencing mindsets of the people, they are definitely worth considering when studying about the nature of the society. Professor Dwijen Sharma in his essay, addresses these very issues when he elaborates on the features of the myths and the extent of influencing power that they wield in any society. For his study, he takes into account classical Indian mythology as well as the contemporary retellings that have been refashioned by the Indian English writers. He says that myths at any point of time are symbols of diverse phenomenon of the world as well as our mindsets. They reflect as much as they

influence beliefs, ideas and practices of the people. He says that the fight between the Pandavas and Kauravas; the disrobing of Draupadi; the humiliation of Karna for his caste; the aid and advice of Krishna to Arjuna are all symbolic of certain attitudes of people, the cultural practices of the time as well as the dominant ideologies. The mythologies of any time mirror the ideologies of the people of that time and are symbolic of their attitudes, beliefs and culture. In the same way, the retellings of the Epics by modern Indian English writers mirror the ideologies of contemporary times. The new-age thoughts of feminism and subalternity find a place in the contemporary retellings just as traditional thoughts of caste system and patriarchy found a place in the literature of ancient times. In the essay, he also talks about how certain myths go on to achieve a timeless character by becoming a part and parcel of the lives of the people of a particular culture. The various retellings of the Epics attempt to contemplate the continuity by trying to question the assumptions behind the myths. Professor Sharma quotes Roland Barthes as he says that every retelling is an act of ideological investment which tries to critically analyse the long-running myths of society. And with the advent of Post-structuralist thought at the global level, the various contemporary writers seek to explore the multiple interpretations that a text can propose.

A paper titled, *(Re)examining Marginalized Characters: Caste and Gender in Select Retellings of the Mahabharata in Recent Indian English fiction* by Tanvi Mohile, critically examines the ways in which contemporary retellings of the *Mahabharata* engage with issues of caste and gender through the perspectives of marginalized characters. Drawing upon contemporary theories of caste, gender, and myth, it investigates how these narratives reflect evolving socio-political sensibilities and interrogate dominant ideological structures. Particular attention is given to the rearticulation of voices such as those of Karna, Draupadi, and other subaltern figures, whose reinterpretation in recent literary texts serves as a powerful site of resistance and revision. She takes into account two contemporary novels: one, Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya: the Epic of the Kaurava Clan* and two, Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: the Outcast's Queen* to examine the binaries of caste and gender throughout the ages. The work analyses how the issues of caste and gender evolved over the years in the Indian society, by supplementing references from both: Ved Vyasa's *Mahabharata* as well as the select contemporary novels. The study presents a persuasive case for viewing contemporary Indian English reinterpretations of the *Mahabharata* as acts of

revisionism. She also talks about how the contemporary retellings revise the ancient epic and cater to the needs of the modern audiences of 21st century.

The various contemporary retellings do serve to bring out the subalternity in the select characters of the Mahabharata and seek a justification from the people for the treatment meted out to them. They also seek to make the people read between the lines of the dominant tale of the Mahabharata and uncover various other smaller narratives that indeed played a major part in the course of the events. The readers also get to experience history as being composite of multiple narratives and not just one single dominant narrative.

Notes and References

1. Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. Edited by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, London 1999. p.17.
2. *ibid.*, p. 206.
3. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” n C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. University of Illinois Press. 1988. p. 1.
4. Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Palace of Illusions*. Picador India. New Delhi. 2019. p. 1.
5. *ibid.*, p. 4.
6. *ibid.*, p. 4.
7. *ibid.*, Author’s Note, p. xv.
8. Neelakantan, Anand. *Ajaya: Epic of the Kaurava Clan*. Platinum Press. Mumbai. 2018. p. Author’s Note, 11.
9. *ibid.*, p. 33.
10. *ibid.*, p. 11.
11. *ibid.*, p. 11.
12. Neelakantan, Anand. “Interview with Anand Neelakantan | Author.” Interview by Lavanya. www.booksoarus.com, 3 February 2014.
<https://www.booksoarus.com/author-interview-anand-neelakantan/>. Interview.
13. *ibid.*, 2014.
14. Kane, Kavita. “Author Interview- Kavita Kane (Karna’s Wife: The Outcast’s Queen).” www.thereaddicts.blogspot.com, 4 October 2013.
<https://thereaddicts.blogspot.com/2013/10/author-interview-karnas-wife-outcasts.html>. Interview.
15. Mahadevan, Madhavi S. *The Kaunteyas: Queen Kunti’s Mahabharata*. Speaking Tiger Books. New Delhi. 2022. p. 2.
16. *ibid.*, p. 1.
17. Neelakantan (n. 8), Author’s Note, p. 14.
18. Anand Neelakantan. “NAW Interview with Anand Neelakantan.” *New Asian Writing*, 2014 (approx.), *New Asian Writing*, edited by New Asian Writing,

published online, www.new-asian-writing.com/naw-interview-with-anand-neelakantan/. Accessed [27 Aug 2024].

19. *ibid.*
20. “Author Interview: Anand Neelakantan, author of ‘Ajaya’ and ‘Asura’.” *Sruti’s Blogspot*, 11 March. 2014.
21. Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. Interview by Mansi Shah. *ELLE At JLF: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni On Writing About Female Characters That Are Flawed And Real. Elle*, 19 Jan. 2023.
22. *ibid.*
23. Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. Interview by Maggie Paul. *The Frozen Sea within Us: An Interview with Chitra Divakaruni. The Institute of Humanities Research*, 27 Sept. 2023.
24. *ibid.*
25. *ibid.*
26. Mahadevan (n. 15), Prologue, p. 2.
27. Foucault, Michael. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. Edited by Colin Gordon. Pantheon Books, 1980. p. 133.

CHAPTER 2

ARTICULATING SELVES

CHAPTER 2

ARTICULATING SELVES

As my Thesis takes into account Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata on one hand, and the select contemporary retellings of it from subaltern perspective on the other hand, it is very well evident the two groups of texts vary vastly in terms of time period and their setting. Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata was written around 3rd century BCE, at the beginning of Indian civilisation; whereas the modern retellings of it are set in the contemporary society of 21st century, which are generations and generations apart. The socio-political ethos, cultural consciousness, and literary preoccupations of these two eras differ drastically, creating a complex framework within which these narratives operate. While considering and comparing these texts which are set in such different time periods, with different settings, and told/ retold from alternative perspectives, it is worth considering the role the production (the author) and the reception (the reader) play in interpreting the text. This gap of centuries not only alters the narrative tone but also transforms the expectations and interpretive strategies of both the writer and the reader.

While considering the role of the author and the reader in the interpretation of any text, we need to ask ourselves these questions: Do all texts have a certain 'intended' meaning to decipher, or are they left at the disposal of the reader to interpret it however he/she wants ? Does the author's narratorial voice influence the mind of the reader in a certain direction ? Is it important to know the biography of the author and the socio-political setting in which he/ she is writing, before reading a text ? Does the text speak for itself or is it the author's persona which moulds the narrative in a desired way by using certain adjectival phrases ? When a story is retold, how does it change its form ? In every retelling, is it the author who ascribes it a new form , or is it just the change in perspective? All the questions constitute the debate on the notion of authorship in the fields of literary theory and literary criticism. **This debate becomes particularly significant in the context of mythological retellings, where the canonical version is so deeply embedded in the cultural psyche that any deviation or reinterpretation inevitably calls attention to the narrator's agency. Furthermore, the interplay between the dominant voice of the ancient text and the resistant voice of the subaltern retelling invites a reassessment of who is allowed to 'speak' and whose stories are silenced.**

As for my Thesis, the select four contemporary retellings of the Mahabharata necessarily retell the same story as in Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata: the events and the characters are the same, but what has changed is the perspective and thus the way in which the story is been retold. The authors of the select novels agree that their work is a work of fiction, as Anand Neelakantan clearly states in the 'Author's Note' to his novel, *Ajaya: Epic of the Kaurava Clan*, that "this is a work of fiction, in the best Indian tradition of Vada-Prathivada".¹ In a work of fiction, when a story is retold from the perspective of a different character, the narration of the story changes in such a way as to highlight the select character's point of view of the story. **This shift is not merely a change in voice but a deliberate act of reclaiming narrative space by those who have been historically marginalised or misrepresented.** In literary theory and criticism, the relation that the author, the reader and the text share with each other, have a major impact in determining the 'meaning' of the text. So, while dealing with as many as four versions of modern retellings of an age-old story, it is important to explore the extent to which the author's narratorial voice plays a role determining the 'meaning' of the text. **In subaltern retellings especially, the author's voice often becomes an instrument of resistance, challenging hegemonic portrayals and creating room for the voices that were either muted or demonised in the original epic.**

In the earliest of literature, the literary texts such as the manuscripts could exist as anonymous entities and the scientific texts on the other hand, needed the name of the author to be associated with them in order to relate with the discoveries. For the religious and mythological texts too, the text itself was sacrosanct and much more powerful than the name of the author, if any, ascribed to it. **This anonymity granted the text a kind of universality, allowing it to transcend individual identity and situate itself within the collective cultural or spiritual consciousness of a community. In such a context, authority stemmed not from the personal experience or interpretation of an author, but from the communal acceptance and ritual repetition of the text.** The trend reversed in the 17th and the 18th century, when the concept of the 'name of the author' came into existence in the Western world, when authors like Shakespeare took to stage. It was then that the literary texts started to be evaluated on the basis of the name of the author and the scientific texts might or might not necessarily require an author's name as the theory became more important. In the Western literary theory, then emerged the idea of the 'author-

function', when various theorists started evaluating the role of the author in a text. The idea of the immortality of the author also came into existence as 'the name of the author' started getting significance. It was during that time that the works of authors like Shakespeare came into circulation, and through their texts, the authors aspired to gain immortality. It literally meant that Shakespeare as an author, became to be considered, not equal to, but much higher than, Shakespeare as a person, who would die but through his works, his 'name' would remain. **Thus, the literary marketplace transformed the act of writing into a means of legacy-building, where the 'signature' of the author ensured a certain form of cultural permanence. The shift marks a critical moment in literary history where authorship became not only a mode of creative control but also a site of ideological influence.**

The trend continued until the late 1960s when the works of a few French critics created an upheaval in the field of literary theory concerning authorship and its relationship with the text. The works of two major critics, Roland Barthes and Michael Foucault, together formed the basis of majority of the debates concerning the notions of authorship. Their works upturned the erstwhile idea of the sacrosanct author, the God-like figure who essentially formed the centre of any literary text. In fact, to everyone's surprise, Roland Barthes in the late 1960s had proclaimed the author to be 'dead' and as having no role in the process of interpretation of a text. In the famous essay by Barthes, titled *The Death of the Author*, published in 1967, he proclaimed that as soon as any text comes into existence, the authority of the author dies in determining the meaning of the text. According to him, any work of literature functions as a self-contained entity, and the intentions of the author should not be sought after to determine the meaning of the text. He says in the text, "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author".² He uses the metaphor of 'death' of the author to symbolise the detachment of the authority of the author as soon as a text comes into existence. He says that we, as authors, tend to always seek explanation for any work in the author as a person, but the reality is that the author as a person has no role or 'dies' when the text comes into existence. It is the work which speaks for itself and the onus of understanding the meaning of a text lies solely in the reader. He says, "it is language which speaks, not the author".³ He reduces the position of the author-figure to a mere 'scriptor' and says that it is the reader who comes to occupy the most important position in interpreting the text. He says that author as a person performs only till the time the text comes into existence. To quote

from his essay, he says, “The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book”.⁴ He also says, as the author-figure dies when the text comes into existence, “the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing”.⁵ **This radical repositioning challenges the traditional hierarchy where the author is seen as the origin and the reader as the passive recipient. Instead, Barthes’ theory democratizes the act of interpretation, placing meaning in the dynamic interaction between reader and text rather than in the fixed authority of the writer. For contemporary retellings, especially those with subaltern frameworks, this theory offers an empowering lens: it allows reinterpretation to occur freely, unconstrained by the need to remain loyal to the authorial intentions of the canonical source.**

Read together with Roland Barthes’ influential essay is yet another influential piece of literature, that is, Michael Foucault’s lecture titled, *What is An Author ?*. Foucault had delivered the above mentioned lecture two years after the publication of Barthes’ essay and is often seen as a response to it. Just like Barthes, Foucault’s lecture also discusses the role of author in a text, but what he introduces in his lecture is the idea of the ‘author-function’.⁶ As Barthes had previously discounted off the authority of the author in a text, Foucault revises the notion by saying that instead of the author as proper name, what remains in the text is the ‘author-function’. In other words, the author works as a function of language itself in the text. He says that as the author as a person is cancelled out to exist in the text, it is the author’s thoughts, his methodology or so called ‘the author-function’ that pervades all the texts of that particular author. He begins by quoting Beckett, “what matter who’s speaking”.⁷ He says that the question encompasses one of the most fundamental principles of modernity: the indifference to the author’s name. The given principle not only frees the text from the manipulating subject but also diverts our attention to the finished product. According to him, the name of the author serves only as a means of identification to the author-function that permeates all texts of the author. He says that to study a work of contemporary writing is to “cancel out the signs of his [author’s] particular individuality”.⁸ Foucault clarifies that the premise that the author as a person does not exist, does create a lot of problems of identification of works. But instead of author as person, what characterises the texts is the ‘functionality’ associated with his name.

The author-function exists that helps in grouping, identifying and describing the features of the various texts of a particular author. **Thus, Foucault refocuses attention on the structures of discourse rather than the psychology or biography of the writer. In the context of retellings, this means that even if the author is ideologically distanced from the Vyasa tradition, the function he or she performs remains deeply embedded within the intertextual systems of language and power. This framework is especially useful in understanding subaltern narratives, where the author-function may serve as a disjunctive force against dominant discourses.**

As Post-structuralists question the reliance on particular centres of power and believe in challenging the various interpretive structures, we can see Roland Barthes and Michael Foucault as manifesting the same. As both Barthes and Foucault discount the position of the author as an immanent figure, by either making him die or reducing him to a mere author-function, both in a way invert the ancient Greek philosophy of the immortality of the author through his writing. This inversion marks a radical departure from classical humanism, which had long celebrated the author as a sovereign individual whose vision shaped the world through language. As Foucault quotes in his essay, “This conception of a spoken or written narrative as a protection against death has been transformed by our culture. Writing is now linked to sacrifice and to the sacrifice of life itself”.⁹ Elsewhere, he also says, “Where a work had the duty of creating immortality, now it attains the right to kill, to become the murderer of the author”.¹⁰ **Such a statement reinforces the post-structuralist commitment to dismantling centralized meaning and questioning authorial intent.** As per the principles of Barthes and Foucault, or so to say the Post-Structuralists, the study of author and his intentions in a work of literature can only be studied in terms of his ‘absence’. It is in this absence that multiplicities of meaning emerge, rendering the text a site of intertextuality rather than a vehicle of singular authority. Both Barthes and Foucault are categorised as proponents of Post-structuralism as they critique the authority of the author as being the centre of language as a structure. Post-Structuralism, as a literary and philosophical movement, emerged in France in the 1960s and 1970s and it essentially discusses the instability of language, the role of power relations and the absence of fixed meanings. Post-structuralists seek to examine language as a complex, dynamic structure with no fixed centres of power attributed to it. The theorists like Roland Barthes and Michael Foucault put forward

the post-structuralist view by examining the relations between the author, the reader and the text and by seeking to decentralise all power structures. We see how post-structuralists are **more in the operations of discourse and how language constructs meaning, identity, and social relations. This approach becomes particularly relevant when dealing with texts that carry cultural or religious authority, such as the Mahabharata. In this context, the ‘death of the author’ is not merely a theoretical gesture, but a political one- it enables the reclaiming and rearticulation of dominant narratives by marginalised voices.**

While taking into account all the above arguments of the various trends in history that led to diverse views among the literary critics, is the central question of what or who determines the ‘meaning’ in the text: is it the author, the reader, or the text itself ? Also, is there only one ‘correct’ interpretation of a text or can a text be polyvalent in its interpretation ? And, most importantly, as concerns my Thesis, what happens when a story is retold by a different author, thereby changing the tone and the explanation of events ? In that situation, the case does become even more complicated, as many new proponents arise to give meaning to the text. While concerning an original version along with a retold version, as the subjectivities change, it becomes even more difficult to analyse what or who determines the meaning of the text. **This multiplicity is at the heart of post-structuralist hermeneutics, which posits that no text can be fully grasped or exhausted by a single interpretive lens. In the context of retellings, especially from subaltern perspectives, each narrative act becomes a form of resistance, a counter-discursive gesture that not only reinterprets the original but also questions the ideological assumptions embedded within it.**

Thus, retellings become political texts- negotiating memory, identity, and power, not merely aesthetic reconfigurations.

In the case of retellings of a story, we can say that both the author and the reader jointly contribute to create ‘meaning’ of the text, as the ‘original’ text of the erstwhile author, is always available for comparison, for change of tone and personal explanations added. The role played by the authorial voice in a text becomes more acute, when, in a story that is retold, the perspective of the character from which it is told, also changes. When a well-known story is retold by a different author using the perspective of an alternate character of the story, the narration of events inevitably changes. This shift in focalisation leads to a radical reworking of narrative ethics,

where once-silenced voices are foregrounded and dominant ideologies are interrogated. Does that mean that with the change in narration of events, the author seeks to influence the mind of the reader in a certain direction and to create an ‘implied’ meaning ? **If that is so, then should we not see retellings are mere neutral acts but deliberate narrative interventions that reshape readerly expectations and reframe moral hierarchies?**

If that is the case, then the author of the retelling assumes the dual role of both disruptor and creator—subverting canonical authority while simultaneously offering an alternate epistemological framework.

The four texts that form a part of my Thesis, are essentially retellings of the Mahabharata from the perspective of different subaltern characters in the story. As these retellings highlight the life and story of a select subaltern character, from whose perspective the story is retold, the author describes the events in the way the select character would have seen it. The age-old and ever-sacrosanct tale of Ved Vyasa’s Mahabharata narrate the events from the Pandavas’ perspective, who even won the eponymous War at the end. The story, as told in Ved Vyasa’s Mahabharata is deeply imbedded in the common conscience of the people, that for centuries, we are conditioned to assume the Pandavas to be the heroes of the story. The narrative of Ved Vyasa’s Mahabharata valorise the strength of the Pandavas, sing of their good conduct, and portray them as being the rightful heirs to the throne of Hastinapur. Even the nightly Gods, like Lord Krishna, help them to win the eventual War of the Mahabharata. **Such mythic elevation of the Pandavas has unknowingly marginalized the perspectives of other characters, like those who were either neglected, made villains or stripped of narrative agency.**

When we consider the select contemporary retellings of the Mahabharata from the subaltern perspective, there appears to be a vast difference in the way the events are portrayed. The difference is not about the magnanimity of the text of the Mahabharata, but there lies a difference in the way the author portrays the events in the select retellings. **The select retellings from subaltern perspective seek to revise the said narrative injustice, not only by offering alternate angles of interpretation , but also by putting into question the very issues of heroism, dharma, and moral absolutism.** As these contemporary retellings focus on the perspective of the subaltern characters, the characters who were somehow marginalised in the prevalent narrative, it certainly works as a foil to ‘original’

narrative. In voicing the stories of the characters whose narratives were marginalised or silenced in Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata, the authors of these contemporary retellings definitely play a major role in proposing a 'new' meaning of the text. The role of the authorial voice in the text, clubbed with the contemporary ideologies that influence both the author and the reader, together work to create 'meaning' of the text.

To begin with, let us consider Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *the Palace of Illusions*, and analyse how it is made to be similar or different from the ancient classic Mahabharata of Ved Vyasa. We know that as both the texts in comparison are set centuries apart, they do seek to cater to different sets of audiences and are influenced by different ideologies of the time. The reason that a modern writer may choose to retell and revise an ancient tale, might be either to modify the dominant interpretation of the ancient text as per the needs of the time, or to propose an alternate view of interpreting the text. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *the Palace of Illusions* is a modern retelling which is set for the 21st century audience. There is no denying the fact that the authorial voice in the select contemporary novel is inevitably different from that in Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata. The narrator in Divakaruni's novel is the central female character of Mahabharata: Draupadi, and the entire events of the novel revolve around her. As the dominant historical narratives are majorly male-dominated and sing of the glory of the heroes and their victories, Divakaruni seeks to present the story from the female perspective, and focus on the feminine aspect to the events of the Mahabharata. As Divakaruni mentions in the preface of the novel, "I will recreate the story of the Mahabharata. But in my Mahabharata, I will place a woman in the forefront of the action".¹¹ As an alternative view to the male-dominated narrative of Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata, Divakaruni seeks to read between the lines of the text and bring out into the forefront the narrative of the most important female character, Draupadi. She not only tells the story of Draupadi but also gives an explanation to the events of the Mahabharata through the perspective of Draupadi herself. As Divakaruni also mentions in the Preface, "She [Draupadi] will narrate the entire story, coloring it with her joys and doubts, her struggles and triumphs,... timeless way in which she understands her world and her place in it".¹² This deliberate re-centring of Draupadi transforms her from a mythic figure to a fully realized narrative subject. It also marks a profound shift in power dynamics, where the previously marginalised voice is now positioned as the epistemic centre of the narrative. In doing so, Divakaruni's novel participates in what Gayatri Spivak would call 'the strategic

essentialism' of the subaltern: Draupadi is not only represented, she speaks, challenges, and rewrites her history from within.¹³

Talking about the narratorial style, we see that the words and the phrases used to describe the character of Draupadi, are way too powerful and affirmative. For example, the phrases that are used to introduce Draupadi to the readers are: 'the creator of history', 'the Spring of Vengeance' and 'a celebrated beauty'.¹⁴ Moreover, the narrative also describes how Krishna called her by the female version of his own name, "Krishnaa... or the one whose attraction can't be resisted".¹⁵ We can see that the choice of words that the narrator uses can play a major role in creating 'meaning' to the text. In the novel, Draupadi is portrayed as being the fearless, well-educated, ever-beautiful Princess of the kingdom of Panchal. The narrative begins with the birth of Draupadi along with her brother, Drishtadyumna, at the magnanimous Palace of King Drupad. Both Draupadi and Drishtadyumna were born after the completion of the sacred fire ceremony that King Drupad had performed to beget a son only. As the birth of a girl was totally expected by the crowd, her arrival was greeted with utmost dismay and confusion. As opposed to that, the birth of Drishtadyumna was rejoiced as he would avenge the enemy of King Drupad: Drona. In the face of the harsh circumstances that Draupadi had to face, there occurred a prophesy, "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".¹⁶ It is true that the text brings into focus all the difficulties and the injustices that Draupadi had to face in her life, but what turns out to be the highlight of the narrative, is that how she plays a major role in moulding her destiny and even "changing the course of history". This moment is not just symbolic of a divine prophecy—it functions as a narrative counterpoint to the classical fatalism of the Vyasa Mahabharata. Draupadi is no longer merely a tool of fate or a pawn in divine will; she becomes an agent capable of rewriting destiny, re-anchoring the myth in lived feminine experience. The statement "change the course of history" is emblematic of a subaltern rewriting of a text, transforming victimhood into agency, and silence into voice.¹⁷ As opposed to the dominant misogynist assumption that holds Draupadi responsible for causing the war of the Mahabharata, Divakaruni's novel offers a feminist tinge to the dominant viewpoint by saying that Draupadi was the one who indeed changed the course of history. Divakaruni's choice of words in the novel seek to remove the negative connotations attached to the actions and

conduct of Draupadi, and indeed make her the agent of change in the course of history. She is portrayed as an independent woman who makes her own choices and fights for her rights in a largely patriarchal society. This re-characterisation is a critical act of recuperation, as it not only challenges the canonical representation of characters but also shows how narrative framing can shape cultural consciousness. By doing so, Divakaruni performs an act of textual activism, where mythology becomes a space for feminist reimagination and emancipation. The narrative highlights her struggles against patriarchy, right from childhood when she had to fight with her father to even get basic education that only her brother was entitled to. The narrative tells us that she always had the ‘hunger’ for knowledge, and the desire to occupy a significant place in the world. After a lot of entreaties, it was only at the request of Krishna that King Drupad had allowed her to get education along with her brother. We see that the text brings out the narrative of Draupadi, by showcasing her struggles with patriarchy, and by highlighting her bold, rebellious spirit which enabled her to beat the odds of her destiny. It was through her learning that Draupadi could dare to question and resist, when needed, not just the men around her, but the very laws that justified their authority. Divakaruni shows how education can become an empowering tool, a metaphor for reclaiming epistemic space.

The most climactic scene of the novel turns out to be the one when the Pandavas stake Draupadi at Duryodhana’s urging in the Game of Dice. The scene marks the moment of ‘hamartia’ or ‘the tragic flaw’ which sets into motion a lot of events that finally hail up to the Great War of Mahabharata. As the Pandavas keep on losing all of their possessions, big or small, at the Game of Dice which was strategically planned by Duryodhana and his maternal uncle Shakuni, Duryodhana urges the Pandavas to even bet on themselves and even Draupadi. The Pandavas do feel repulsed at first, at the outrageous proposal, but in pace with Kingly dharma, they give in to his entreaties for the worst. The dice that were used in the Game were magically crafted long back to always make Shakuni win. Duryodhana took advantage of the resource by luring the Pandavas to the Game of Dice and making them lose everything to him, even Draupadi. One by one, as the Pandavas, headed by the Dharmraj Yudhistira, lose all of their possessions, they end up staking themselves at the game. The turn of events happen when Duryodhana challenges them to stake their last remaining possession as well, i.e. their wife, Draupadi. Utterly angered at Duryodhana’s demeanour, the Pandava brothers reach out to rebel, but were left aidless by the rules of the game. To

everyone's horror, Draupadi was dragged by her hair from her women's quarters to the assembly hall of Hastinapur, and was made a public spectacle. As Duryodhana's brother, Dushshasana attempt to disrobe Draupadi of her saree, she cries out for help to her five lawful husbands. To her utmost disappointment, all five of her husbands turn a helpless eye towards her as they sink in shame. All the events that happen at the assembly hall of Hastinapur turn out to be an eye-opener for Draupadi when she realises that that even after having five husbands, she could not look up to any of them for help. The dishonourly conduct of a woman, a queen, in a fully-crowded assembly hall topped up with the meek silence of her husbands at the spectacle, who gambled her away in the first place, leaves Draupadi petrified. Draupadi's sorrow and disappointment becomes evident when she says, "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".¹⁸ As a haven of last resort, she looks back to her education and tries to remember what the laws say in the given scenario. As Draupadi was learned, she was well equipped with the knowledge of the shastras as well as the smritis. She tries to remember the law from Nyaya Shastra, which said that the wife should be seen as the property of the husband, just like other material possessions. Immediately after that, she is also remembers of the second half of the law which said, "If perchance a man lost himself, he no longer had any jurisdiction over his wife".¹⁹ It is this very law that Draupadi quotes in the court of Hastinapur in her defence, and outrightly asks her husbands whether it was she whom they lost first or themselves. The moment forms the epicentre of the novel's feminist ethos, with Draupadi's voice grounded in logic, law, and moral clarity, as it exposes the hypocrisy of dharma and shatters the illusion of heroic masculinity. Through her defiance, the assembly transforms into not just a setting of humiliation, but also a space where patriarchal values are tried and found guilty. Divakaruni, through the narrative, not only exposes the phallo-centric nature of the laws of society, but also emphasises on the need for empowerment of women. It was only because of her education, that Draupadi could question the conduct of her husbands and all others present there at the assembly hall of Hastinapur.

Through all the above listed instances, we see that the narrative plays a major role in creating 'meaning' of the text. The choice of words, the mood and tone of the narrative, all together seek to mould the way the readers would see the text. By choosing to present the story of the Mahabharata from the perspective of a woman

character, Divakaruni's text certainly seeks to offer an alternative interpretation to the essentially male-centric text of Ved Vyasa. It is this narrative reorientation that allows *The Palace of Illusions* to function both as a literary work as well as a feminist intervention. In doing so, it foregrounds the politics of storytelling itself, asking not just whose stories are told, but who gets to tell them, and how. Divakaruni's novel can be seen a feminist text of the 21st century, which seeks to bring forward the point of view of the central female character of Mahabharata, Draupadi, and to highlight how her life was severely affected by the male 'heroes' of the Mahabharata.

The next novel in consideration is Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya: the Epic of the Kaurava Clan*, which takes into account the perspective of the Kauravas, or the group that lost in the War of the Mahabharata. First published in the year 2018, Neelakantan's novel seek to present the flip side of the coin of the mythological tale of the Mahabharata by presenting it from the perspective of the 'antagonists' of Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata. He seeks to voice out the narrative of the Kauravas in general and Duryodhana in particular, and expose to the world the struggles and injustices they faced throughout their lives. Neelakantan portrays the characters in his novel to be as human as possible, with all their strengths and flaws and providing justification for the choices they made in life. While defending the case of the Kauravas, Neelakantan says in his 'Author's Note' to the novel, "If our Lord Duryodhana was an evil man, why did great men like Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, and the entire army of Krishna, fight the war on his side".²⁰ The rhetorical question, rather than merely exonerating Duryodhana, invites the reader to interrogate the dominant moral frameworks that underlie traditional readings of the epic.

Neelakantan's attempt to present the story of the Mahabharata from the diametrically opposite perspective than that in Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata, is hinted in the title of the book itself. As Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata is alternatively known as 'Jaya', Neelakantan names the title of his novel as 'Ajaya'. The significance of the title is two-fold: as it not only works as a foil or anti-thesis to Ved Vyasa's 'Jaya', but also presents the characters of the novel as being 'ajaya' or 'undefeatable'. Neelakantan makes his motive clear in the 'Author's Note' to the novel, when he says, "One of the meanings of Duryodhana is 'one who is difficult to conquer', in other words, Ajaya".²¹ **This renaming thus becomes a powerful act of reclaiming narrative agency for the defeated, casting them not as moral failures, but as complex figures resisting hegemonic structures.** Being a 21st century novelist, influenced by

the global ideas of Post-colonialism and Subalternity, and having great interest in mythology, Neelakantan chose to bring forth the marginalised narrative of the Kauravas of the Great Epic of Mahabharata. **In the novel, the events unfold chronologically, beginning with the abduction of Gandhari by Bhishma from her homeland of Gandhara, and spanning the entire lives of the Kauravas, culminating in the climactic battle of Kurukshetra. By tracing the origins and growth of Duryodhana and his brothers, Neelakantan humanizes their journey and critiques the structures that led to their vilification.**

Talking about the authorial voice in a text, it certainly has a major role to play in Neelakantan's novel, as it is told from a perspective that is diametrically opposite to the perspective used in Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata. The choice of words; the narratorial description of various events and characters do attempt to create a certain 'meaning' in the text. For instance, the characters who were considered the 'heroes' in Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata, namely the Pandavas, are described in the novel as 'tormenters'. For instance, the narrative timeline begins when the Pandava and Kaurava brothers were still in their childhood and used to attend classes at Guru Dronacharya. While describing the scenario at Drona's ashram, Bhima is portrayed as being a big bully and Arjuna is portrayed as being the 'blue-eyed boy', the favourite student of Dronacharya. The narrative tells us that the Kaurava brothers, especially Duryodhana, was often chided by Guru Dronacharya even for the slightest mistake. To quote from the novel about Drona's treatment of Duryodhana, it says, "He [Drona] knew it would hurt the most – comparing his skills and intelligence to the Pandavas'; and belittling him whenever he could. He wanted to crush the boy's rebellious spirit and mellow him so he would fit into society".²² Other than the Pandavas and the Kauravas, the narrative also tells us about the situation with many other characters, in regard with their relationship with Guru Dronacharya and the education at his ashram. As the Pandavas, especially Arjuna, was always praised for being the best archer in the whole of Aryavarta, the narrative tells us about many other characters like Eklavya and Karna, who were infact even more able than him. It was only their caste status that became a barrier for them to get due recognition and receive education from Guru Dronacharya. In ancient times, only Kshatriya Princes were entitled to get education at the ashrams. Karna, being a suta-putra and Eklavya, being a forest-boy, were restrained from getting education at Guru Dronacharya's ashram. In drawing attention to such caste-based discrimination, Neelakantan's narrative offers a sharp

critique of the Brahmanical patriarchy embedded in ancient pedagogical institutions. Guru Dronacharya's favoring of Arjuna and simultaneous rejection of Karna, a suta-putra and Eklavya, a tribal boy is presented not as incidental but as emblematic of larger structural inequalities. The narrative of the novel seeks to expose the undue privilege that the Pandavas got since their childhood in Hastinapur. By proclaiming Arjuna to be the best archer, Guru Dronacharya discounts for many other skillful archers who were restrained opportunity to get educated under him. Moreover, Neelakantan's novel, while talking about Karna and Eklavya, includes their stories as well in the novel. The thrust of the novel is to bring forth the narrative of the subaltern characters of the Mahabharata, majorly emphasising on the Kauravas, but also including within it the stories of other marginalised characters as well. To quote Neelakantan, he says about the novel, "It is the narrative of the Others- the defeated, insulted, trampled upon- who fought without expecting divine intervention".²³ Similarly for Duryodhana, Neelakantan says that he fought without receiving divine intervention unlike his Pandava brothers, who were aided majorly by Krishna and many other deities as well. Significantly, Neelakantan's *novel* is not only a revisionist tale of the Kauravas but also an attempt to amplify the voices of various subaltern characters who have historically been silenced or overshadowed. Whether it is Karna, Eklavya, Shakuni, or even Ashwatthama, each of the select figure is given a narrative space and psychological depth. To make the case more relatable to modern day audience of 21st century, Neelakantan says, "Duryodhana never believed his Pandava brothers to be of divine origin; and to modern minds, their outlandish claim now sounds chillingly similar to present-day political propaganda used to fool a gullible public".²⁴ The comment not only enhances the novel's contemporary relevance but also encourages the reader to adopt a critical stance towards all narratives, mythological or otherwise.

Throughout the novel, there are many instances where Neelakantan seeks to speak for the character of Duryodhana and clean his image of all the negative connotations attached to him. To begin with, the narrative addresses the Kaurava brothers as Suyodhana and Sushashana, thereby removing the derogatory suffix 'Dur' from the names. Duryodhana's character comes into positive light when Neelakantan highlights the various qualities that the Crown Prince of Hastinapur possessed, and the way he makes way through the hardships even though unaided by divine agency. The most cherished virtue in Duryodhana turns out to be his utter generosity towards

his friend Karna when he was being outrightly insulted in public grounds of Hastinapur. Karna had taken part in the Skills competition at Hastinapur, where only Kshatriya Princes were allowed to take part. When Karna was on the verge of outdoing all the Kshatriya Princes, even Arjuna, then he was immediately stopped and declared disqualified on the grounds of his caste status. At that moment of intense public humiliation, Duryodhana came up and supported him single-handedly. He immediately proclaimed him to be the King of Anga, thereby upgrading his status from a suta-putra to a Kshatriya. This moment marks a very important point in the novel, by highlighting how the character of Duryodhana was not as villainous as he is thought to be in common conscience, infact he is portrayed as a very generous and humble character who values talent and loyalty over birth and social rank. It makes a powerful critique of what constitutes traditional notions of heroism. The narrative lists many more such positive deeds that Duryodhana did in his lifetime, that make him worthy of praise and recognition. For instance, at the beginning of the novel, when Eklavya, the Nishada boy, along with his companion, Jara, are described as an outsider, it is only Duryodhana who is seen as helping them with food and sympathising with them on the petty condition of their tribe. Neelakantan, very well lists in the 'Author's Note' to his novel, "Duryodhana's personality comes alive when he makes Karna the King of Anga,.... His treatment of Eklavya, his refusal to fight for Subhadra; his courage in taking on the Pandavas; and his unwavering faith in his friends; all make him hero material rather than a despicable villain".²⁵ These small but impactful actions don't just make Duryodhana relatable, they also cast him as someone who stands up for the underprivileged. Neelakantan brings out the not-so-discussed traits of the character of Duryodhana that make turn out to be a not-so-villionous character as traditionally imagined.

Another very important aspect of the novel, while discussing the role of authorial voice in the text, is its stark critique of the laws of 'dharma' and the caste system for creating disparity in the society. Talking about dharma, the novel lists three characters, who were extremely meritorious, but were never able to get due recognition because of their caste. The first among them is Karna, who was often humiliated for being the suta-putra, the charioteer's son. In spite of being a very skilful warrior and an excellent archer, he was often restrained from showcasing his talent among the Kshatriyas. He was even rejected by Draupadi at her swayamvara, only for being a suta-putra, and not a Kshatriya. The other two characters that the novel

mentions are Vidura and Eklavya, who were again born of low caste and were often restrained due opportunities. Vidura was the brother of Dhritrashtra and Pandu, the two competitors for the crown of Hastinapur, but since Vidura was the illegitimate son of the King, he could never compete for the throne. As he was born of the union of the King with a Shudra woman, Vidura often faced humiliation for his caste status. The third character who faced similar discrimination because of his caste was Eklavya, the Nishada boy. As Eklavya belonged to the Nishada caste, which was way lower in the caste hierarchy, he could never dare to approach Guru Dronacharya and appeal for getting educated as an archer, which was his only dream. The narrative is full of various instances where it exposes the perils of the caste system and the extent to which it was prevalent in the society. At one point of time in the narrative, when Vidura expresses concern for his children, he says, “Our boys are good students but will they have jobs when they grow up ? All the positions are reserved for Brahmins. I am afraid for their future”.²⁶ While discussing the issue with his wife, he also laments, “Ultimately everything boils down to caste in this society”.²⁷ We can see that the narratorial voice serves as a eye-opener for the readers to analyse and critique the laws of the caste system as prevalent in ancient India. Also, it can be said that Neelakantan’s novel works at different levels, to not only focus on the story of the Kauravas, the injustices that they faced; but also include within the narrative, various other issues pestering the society at that time, for instance the restrictiveness of the caste system.

Overall, viewing the novel in totality, we see that Kaurava brothers emerge to be the ‘heroes’ of Neelakantan’s *Ajaya* as the Pandavas were the ‘heroes’ of the *Jaya*, or as the Mahabharata is alternatively called. Neelakantan, through his novel, seeks to give voice to the ‘defeated’ in the Mahabharata, and thereby present to the readers an alternate angle of interpretation. In this case, the author’s presence in the novel seems to be very profound and to be directing the ‘meaning’ of the text in a certain direction. It should also be noted that Neelakantan rightfully mentions in the ‘Author’s Note’ to the text, that he uses elements of fiction in order to bring out the story of the vanquished and marginalised Kauravas.

The next novel, Kavita Kane’s *Karna’s Wife: The Outcast’s Queen*, can also be seen in the same light to evaluate the role that authorial presence plays in a text.

Written from the perspective of Karna’s wife, Uruvi, Kavita Kane beautifully presents to the readers the story of not only Uruvi, but Karna as well. As the novel focuses on

the narrative of the outcast couple, it can be seen as a stark commentary on the perils of caste system in India. Even the title of the novel brings into focus the aspect of caste that predominated their relationship in society. Uruvi is addressed as a 'queen' no doubt, but of the 'outcast', Karna's, whom she chooses to marry. The proposition pops up a lot of questions to the readers: the original status of Uruvi; the reasons for her marriage to an outcast; and the implications of their marriage thereafter. In this regard, the novel does more than just narrate a forbidden love story; it becomes a site where deeply entrenched socio-religious constructs such as caste and gender are challenged through the lens of personal choice and emotional defiance. Kane's authorial presence is subtly woven into the emotional undertones of Uruvi's narrative, inviting readers to question the stringent structures of caste that have long gone unquestioned in traditional narratives.

In the ancient Indian society, when caste system was so predominant, marriage was a major event that could lead to dynamism in the caste status of the woman. In those times, a girl was supposed to marry either in the same caste or a caste higher to hers. The law was even stricter for Kshatriya Princesses who could, by no chance marry below their caste. As the narrative tells us, the Shastras prohibited the practise of 'pratiloma' or marrying in a lower caste. It was only 'anuloma' or the practise of marrying to a man of higher caste, that was permitted to Kshatriya women. Then how did Uruvi manage to marry the man of a lower caste, the Suta-putra Karna ? Uruvi's decision to choose Karna as her husband at her swayamvara, was definitely a blasphemy in the society. Uruvi had to fight a long battle with her parents as well as the society to accept her decision to let her marry the man of her dreams. As the novel describes the hardships that Uruvi faced in her attempt to convince her parents for her decision, we are told that she even had to go through house-arrest to prove her steadfastness. As the narrative describes the scene where her parents lock her in a room, it says, "the doors of Uruvi's room remained as firmly locked as her resolution to marry Karna".²⁸ The sternness of Uruvi's decision seem to have dual implications: first, her portrayal as an independent woman who is capable of deciding what is best for her; and second, her rejection of the caste system as being a very restrictive and imposing factor on **individuals. Her resistance is not loud or revolutionary in the conventional sense, but it is persistent and personal, which makes it all the more powerful. By choosing Karna over all the other Princes, Uruvi does not just let go of an opportunity to marry a man of high social status, but also rejects an**

entire social framework that privileges lineage over virtue, and hierarchy over humanity. Through her bold choices, Uruvi becomes a vehicle through which the author interrogates the socio-cultural blind spots of ancient Indian society.

Moreover, through the description of Uruvi's immense love for Karna, Kane uplifts the character of Karna as being much more than just a low-born. Uruvi sees Karna as the most handsome man in the whole of Aryavarta; a very skilful warrior and a very generous soul. Uruvi is also seen as being mesmerised by the radiance of Karna's gold armour, which she compares to the glitter of the morning sun. Through various instances, the novel also brings into light many more positive qualities in Karna. For instance, Karna is shown as being a very loyal friend to Duryodhana all his life. Even in the final battle of Mahabharata, Karna remains a constant pillar of support to Duryodhana. Karna is also shown as being an ever-giving, sacrificial king who never restrains from giving alms to the poor. He had also taken the vow to fulfil the wishes of anyone who approaches him after his morning prayers to the sun. Such portrayals are not merely incidental; they reflect the deliberate narrative choice of the author to re-centre Karna as a man of nobility, not in terms of bloodline, but in conduct and compassion. It is as if Kane is rewriting the moral compass of the epic by suggesting that true heroism lies not in being born into privilege, but in constantly rising above social rejection with dignity and generosity.

Talking about the presence of the author's voice in the text, it can definitely be felt as seeking to offer a critical angle of interpretation to the story of the Mahabharata. By presenting the story from the perspective of Uruvi and Karna, the narrative brings out into light the various injustices that the couple faced throughout their lives; and seeks to ask for an apt justification for the treatment meted out to them. In the novel, Karna is often seen as reminiscing at the ill-treatment meted out to him at Draupadi's swayamvara which had a deep impact on his psyche. Draupadi's swayamvara, which happened much earlier than Uruvi's swayamvara, can be seen as a contrast to the latter. At the public gathering of the swayamvara of Draupadi, the Kshatriya Princess had humiliated Karna for his caste status and declared him disqualified for competing for her hand. In front of the Pandavas, Kauravas as well as all the other Princes of Aryavarta, Karna was proclaimed a 'suta-putra' and hence declared ineligible for marrying a Kshatriya Princess. Even though more skillful than any of the Kuru brothers, Karna was made a recipient of sheer public indignity just because of his caste as a charioteer's son. As Karna muses about the incident years later, he feels the

pain still wringing in his heart, as he says, “All my life I have endured taunts, insults and humiliation for being a suta-putra but coming from a woman, a princess at her own swayamvara, was the most damning”.²⁹ The incident had renegaded Karna to mode of self-derogation and loss of self-accusation for daring to aspire high. I have never thought that any Kshatriya Princess would ever choose to marry him, until it was Uruvi who did the most unexpected and helped heal Karna of his past wounds. At her swayamvara, Princess Uruvi chooses Karna as her husband and that too in front of all the Pandavas, including Arjuna. If Draupadi had chosen Arjuna over Karna, Uruvi did the reverse by rejecting Arjuna for Karna, the sutaputra. As Princess Uruvi, in the novel says, “He was Karna, the King of Anga, the King, with a crown of thorns, the king was a sutaputra”.³⁰ Uruvi would very well understand the worth of Karna as a human being, much larger than his mere caste status. Her love for Karna and acknowledgement of the injustices that happened to him, becomes evident as she describes him to her father as “not the wrong man, the *wronged* man”.³¹ In this way, the novel offers a significant authorial intervention that subtly critiques not just the caste system, but also the grand narrative of the epic itself. By allowing Uruvi to reclaim Karna’s dignity, Kane also enables the reader to participate in that act of reclamation. The emotional centre of the novel rests not in grand battles or divine interventions, but in moments of quiet rebellion, of choosing love over lineage, and justice over societal approval.

The next novel in consideration is Madhavi Mahadevan’s *The Kaunteyas*, which was first published in the year 2016 and seeks to voice out the story of another subaltern character of the Mahabharata, ie. Kunti. Kunti, the foster child of King Kuntibhoj, the mother of the Pandavas and Karna, had played undeniably a major role in shaping the course of history. Though the narrative of Ved Vyasa’s Mahabharata focuses mainly on the story of Pandavas and Kauravas, their rivalry with each other and the final war of the Mahabharata; the story of other characters like Kunti become a little overshadowed or silenced. Also, being a woman in a male-dominated narrative, the voice of Kunti does not get its true recognition in terms of grandeur and importance. Madhavi Mahadevan, the 21st century Indian English writer, seeks to rectify the mistake by attempting to revisit and retell the narrative in turn from a woman’s point of view. She chooses the character of Kunti as the protagonist for her novel, and attempts to retell the story of the Mahabharata from her point of view, focusing on all the struggles she faced and sacrifices she made in her life. She tags her novel *The*

Kaunteyas as ‘Queen Kunti’s Mahabharata’, as it brings into light her story and her perception of the major characters and events of the Mahabharata. The time span of the novel covers all the major events of the Mahabharata, beginning from the childhood of Kunti herself; her marriage to Pandu; the circumstances that led to the birth of her sons; their struggle for inheritance; till the final war of the Mahabharata. In doing so, Mahadevan attempts to reclaim a narrative space for Kunti that was otherwise somewhat restricted to her in Ved Vyasa’s Mahabharata. The novel reads like a tapestry woven with the strands of loss, resilience, agency, and inner turmoil, a story not just of a mother of great heroes, but of a woman who negotiated with fate in her own right.

The central event in the narrative of Queen Kunti is the moment when she was blessed by the sage Durvasa with the knowledge of the ‘vashikaran’ mantra, which led to the birth of Karna and the Pandavas in different circumstances. The narrative tells us that as a child when she served the tempestuous sage Durvasa for one year, she was offered a boon by him in return. The sage had predicted for Kunti that she would be the mother of heroes, which left Kunti a little disappointed as she saw it as the most common blessing that a sage can give to a woman. The narrative voice plays a major role here as Kunti is seen as wanting to be more than just a mother-figure. She is seen as being assertive in a patriarchal world where women are seen only in relation to their sons or husband. Even in Ved Vyasa’s Mahabharata Kunti is portrayed as a sacrificial mother who endures pain all through her life for her the betterment of her sons and husband. Madhavi Mahadevan adds life to her character by adding various other features to her personality, in terms of her desires, her flaws, her responsibilities and much more. **In the process, Mahadevan does not idealise Kunti as an unblemished figure of selfless motherhood, but rather presents her as a woman of contradictions: strong yet vulnerable, wise yet flawed.** The authorial voice of the novel describes Kunti not only as a passive recipient of events, but as an agent of causation of the events. It was because of the service she gave to the sage Durvasa that she could earn the blessing of the ‘vashikaran’ mantra and use it in her favour in future. Though her first born was conceived by the accidental use of the mantra, the rest of her sons were born only when she decided to use the mantra again. This shift from accident to intention is important as it marks a gradual transition in Kunti’s character from a curious adolescent to a strategic mother, a mother who learns to navigate the limited agency she is afforded.

The novel traces the life of Kunti since her childhood, and highlights that her life had not been an easy or luxurious one. As she grew up as the foster child of King Kuntibhoja, she had to often faced humiliation from her elders in his Kingdom, for being an outsider in the family. She was the one who was chosen to take the risk of serving the high-tempered Sage Durvasa in their Kingdom. And then, the untimely use of Sage Durvasa's boon by her, had led to the birth of Karna, her illegitimate child. The birth and abandonment of her first child, Karna, had been the biggest regret in her life. The novel seeks to critique the system of patriarchy, which would humiliate the woman for bearing a child before marriage. After going through the circumstances that led to the birth of her first born, Kunti was very cautious of not using the mantra by accident. It was only years later, after her marriage, that she felt the need to consciously use it again, after considering Pandu's incapability to produce children. It was by the second time use of the mantra by Kunti and her co-wife Madri, that they could summon the God of their choice and give birth to the five Pandava brothers, who would play major role in the Mahabharata. The moment reconfigures the idea of motherhood, not as a passive biological role but as an active, moral and political choice. As the novel highlights the various choices that Kunti made for her family, all through her life, it proposes that even though history sings only the praises of 'men' or the 'heroes', it is also the women who contribute tremendously in creating and shaping history. As Ved Vyasa's the Mahabharata is majorly seen as a tale of rivalry between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, that culminated into the Great War, it no doubt focuses on the narratives of the 'men' as being central to the Plot. But Madhavi Mahadevan's novel, which is a contemporary retelling of the Mahabharata, focuses on the narrative of the mother of the 'heroes', Kunti, whose actions indeed put into motion the events that eventually led to the Great War. The very title, *The Kaunteyas*, serves to invert the patriarchal marker of lineage, drawing attention not to the fathers of the Pandavas, but to their mother. This linguistic shift, subtle as it may seem, becomes a powerful assertion of matrilineal identity and feminine agency.

Upon analysing all the four select novels, we come back to the question whether a text has only one 'intended' meaning or many meanings to be deciphered by the readers; and the role that authorial voice plays in the text. Another question to be considered is whether an author of a retelling, can change the connotations attached to a character or event as in the original narrative ? Is it only in the genre of 'fiction' that the author has 'liberty' to modify the narrative in desired direction ? As we compare

Ved Vyasa's the Mahabharata on one hand, with the select contemporary retellings of it from the perspective of subaltern characters, the interpretation of these groups of texts seem to widely differ. In this case, it becomes extremely important to simplify the nuances of authorship and its relation to 'meaning' in a text.

HJB Combrink, in his essay, *Multiple Meaning and/or Multiple Interpretations of a Text* seeks to clarify a few issues related to the conflict on notions of authorship and 'meaning' in a text. To understand the case of multiple interpretations of a literary text, Combrink takes up the example of multiple interpretations of a law. He says that the reason a law goes through multiple interpretations and amendments through the course of time, is because the meaning of the words in the law changes with time. The dynamic nature of the society as well as the changing context of jurisprudence necessitates and justifies the various changes and amendments made in the interpretations of the law. Combrink says that the same principle applies to a literary text which accommodates multiple interpretations with the course of time. What Combrink proposes is that any text which is subject to multiple interpretations, is influenced by: one, the social-political context in which both the author and the reader is situated; and two, the dynamic nature of the society. Thus, the text becomes a dialogic space, a site where the ideologies of both the author and the reader intersect, overlap, and sometimes even clash. We can conclude that the socio-political context of the author, as well as the changed socio-political context of a new reader who is also influenced by the changing ideologies of the time, together contribute in creating 'meaning' or interpretation of the text. In the case of retellings of a text, any author who chooses to reinterpret and retell a text in a different way, has been a reader of the 'original' text at some point. The fact that he/ she interprets differently other than the normative analysis, implies the activeness of the reader as well as the changed socio-political scenario in which he/ she is placed. Retellings, therefore, become vehicles of resistance, a means of re-voicing silenced characters, and a form of dialogue with canonical texts. It is also true that the genre of fiction, provides to the author enough space to exercise his/ her artistic creativity.

While discussing the author's intentions in the text and his contribution to the creation of meaning, a very crucial concept that needs to be understood is, the contemporary concept of 'Intentional Fallacy', formulated by the two New Critics, William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley. Wimsatt and Beardsley, in 1946, had authored the famous essay titled, *The Intentional Fallacy*, that formed a foundational text for the

school of thought called New Criticism. In the essay, they argue that “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desired as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art”.³⁴ Wimsatt and Beardsley argue that the need of the historical and biographical background of the author should be cancelled out, as the words of the text itself are sufficient to determine the ‘meaning’ of the text. They advocate for a ‘close reading’ of the text itself as the text is capable of existing as an autonomous entity. What they mean is that without knowing the background information of the author, the text itself has the capability to bring forth a valid interpretation or ‘meaning’ to the readers. According to them, the literary text possesses an internal coherence and unity that can be deciphered solely through a focused analysis of its language, structure, and style. Wimsatt and Beardsley suggest that the words used in the text, accompanied by the mood and tone of the narrative is sufficient enough to create ‘meaning’ of the text. If the readers seek to first analyse the biographical information of the author, it can indeed lead to a misplaced meaning or what is called, the ‘intentional fallacy’ by the reader. The work of the New Critics who advocated for the autonomy of the text, seem to complement the work of the Post-Structuralists who saw literature as a purely linguistic artefact or structure. As discussed earlier, the Post-structuralists argued for the idea of removal of the agency of the author for creating interpretation in a text. The Barthesian idea of the ‘death of the author’ came to be read together with Wimsatt and Beardsley’s idea of the autonomy of the text.

With the continuous evolving ideas of who determines the ‘meaning’ in the text, there is no common consensus on whether a text really functions as an autonomous entity or whether the narratorial voice of the author in the text influences the readers. In fact, the very notion of the ‘author’ oscillates between being a god-like creator and a mere function within the discourse, as Michel Foucault suggests in his essay *What is an Author?* The notions of authorship in a text, whether it leads to immortality of the author, or death of the author or has no effect at all, has remained a bone of contention among literary theorists ever since the earliest literature came into existence.

As the different literary thinkers raise varying questions regarding authorial voice in the text, it is also important to analyse how the Feminist Critics have taken up the issue of the ‘authority’ or ‘power’ of the authorial voice in a text. Many feminist critics seem to support the Post-Structuralist claims on the notions of authorship, as they consider the authority of the author-figure in the text as being equivalent to male

chauvinist authority. They seek to negate the authority of the author-figure as the creator of 'meaning' or the originating genius in the text. The famous literary critic, Toril Moi, in her book, *Sexual Textual Politics*, says, "For the patriarch critic, the author is the source, origin and meaning of the text. If we are to undo this patriarchal practise of authority, we must take one step further and proclaim with Roland Barthes the death of the author".³² Another feminist critic, Nancy K Miller also seem to side with the Post-Structuralist view of the death of the author, as she believes that the author figure, 'canonised, anthologised and institutionalised' has excluded from its domain, the works of women writers and minority writers. She supports Barthes in negating the figure of author from the text, and thereby the subjective agency associated with him. For most feminist critics, the towering authority of the authorial voice in the text, stands at loggerheads with their vision to cancel out patriarchal agency in creating narratives. Another feminist critic, Cheryl Walker, in her essay, *Feminist Literary Criticism and the Author*, proposes a feminist version of Barthes' statement on the notion of authorship. She says that writing is not an act of destroying every voice, but "the proliferation of possibilities of hearing".³³ What she means is that the fact that as writing leads to the possibility of multiple interpretations, or 'hearings', so there exists multiples presences in a text, and not just the author's. She clarifies that, for a feminist critic, what is objectionable is that a text there should not be a single 'intended meaning' in terms of author's subjectivity.

We saw how different group of authors have differing views on the question of the role that an author plays in creating meaning to the text. Whether it be the Post-structuralists, or the New Critics or the Feminists, all follow different approaches to interpret a given text. Whether a text functions independent of the author's subjectivity, or whether he/she manipulates the interpretation of the text remains a point of contention. They demonstrate that meaning is neither fixed nor final, but it is constantly negotiated between the text, the context, the author, and the reader. What makes the text receptive to the readers is how well it finds its way into the minds of the readers. The relationship that the trio of the author, the reader and the text share determines the success or failure of the text. There could be one interpretation of a text or multiple; one intended meaning of a text or various derivative meanings; but what remains sacred is the responsibility it enforces upon the readers unravel the mysteries of the language within.

Notes and References

1. Neelakantan, Anand. *Ajaya: Epic of the Kaurava Clan*. Platinum Press. Mumbai. 2018. p. 14.
2. Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Image-Music-Text*, translated by Stephen Heath, Fontana, 1977. p. 148.
3. *ibid.*, p. 143.
4. *ibid.*, p. 145.
5. *ibid.*, p. 145
6. Foucault, Michael. "What is an Author?", *Modernity and Its Discontents*. Ed. Nicholas Elliot and Toby Garfitt, The New Press, 1998. p. 306.
7. *ibid.*, p. 300.
8. *ibid.*, p. 301.
9. *ibid.*, p. 301.
10. *ibid.*, p. 301.
11. Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Palace of Illusions*. Picador India, New Delhi. 2019. p. Author's Note, xv.
12. *ibid.*, Author's Note, xv.
13. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Criticism, Feminism and the Institution: An Interview with Elizabeth Grosz." *m/f*. no. 10, 1984, pp.75-106.
14. Divakaruni (n. 11), p. 5,1,10.
15. Divakaruni (n. 11), p. 12.
16. Divakaruni (n.11), p. 5.
17. Divakaruni (n. 11), p. 5.
18. Divakaruni (n. 11), p. 190.
19. Divakaruni (n.11), p. 190.
20. Neelakantan (n.1), Author's Note, p. 11.
21. Neelakantan (n.1), Author's Note, p. 11.
22. Neelakantan, (n.1), p. 52.
23. Neelakantan, (n.1), Author's Note, p. 11.
24. Neelakantan, (n.1), Author's Note, p. 11.
25. Neelakantan, (n.1), Author's Note, p. 11.
26. Neelakantan, (n.1), p. 54.
27. Neelakantan, (n.1), p. 54.

28. Kane, Kavita. *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*. Rupa Publications India, New Delhi, 2013. p. 22.
29. *ibid.*, p. 43.
30. *ibid.*, p. 13.
31. *ibid.*, p. 18.
32. Moi, Toril. *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. 2nd Ed., Routledge, 2002. p. 60.
33. Walker, Cheryl. "Feminist Literary Criticism and the Author". *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1990, pp. 552-571. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.1086/4485558>. p. 568.
34. Wimsatt, W.K., and Monroe C. Beardsley. "The Intentional Fallacy." *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, University of Kentucky Press, 1954. p. 4.

CHAPTER 3

**RETELLINGS AS A MIRROR
TO CHANGING IDEOLOGIES**

CHAPTER 3

RETELLINGS AS A MIRROR TO CHANGING IDEOLOGIES

Throughout history, various authors and scholars have contested views on the role literature plays in a society: to what extent does it reflect the ideologies of the society, and how much does it also affect/ influence the prevailing ideologies in return. Right from the Classical era, starting from Plato, Aristotle, PB Shelley, there have been many thinkers who have voiced their opinion on the question of literature acting as a mirror to the ideologies of the society. From being viewed as mere mimesis of reality to being interpreted as a powerful tool of ideological subversion, literature's function has evolved in tandem with societal developments.

Before we begin the discussion on the relationship shared between literature and the societal ideologies, it is important to first understand: what is 'ideology'? Ideology can be understood as a set of ideas, beliefs and value system that comprise the collective consciousness of the people, and influence their perception of the society and culture. It forms the basis of belief systems of the various social, cultural and political setups of a society that helps in smooth functioning of a society. According to the earlier Marxist theorists, like Fredrick Angels and Karl Marx, ideology can be seen as set of belief systems formed by the bourgeois or the ruling class to reflect and perpetuate their interests among all individuals in a capitalist society. The ideology formulated by the bourgeois becomes the dominant ideology governing the whole of the society, and gets accepted unconsciously even by the members of the repressed groups or the working classes. We can see that Karl Marx and Fredrick Angels associate ideology with a negative connotation as a weapon used by the bourgeois to continue employing the exploitative practices in a capitalist society. They termed ideology as 'false consciousness' as all members of the society start following the dominant ideology and unknowingly contribute to their own exploitation leading to inequality in society. Thus, ideology is not merely a theoretical construct but a lived experience that determines the social and cultural roles individuals are expected to perform.

While discussing about Marx and Angel's definition of ideology, it is important to consider the work of another famous Marxist theorist, Louis Althusser, who revised the earlier theory by coming up with two new hypothesis on ideology. According to Althusser, "Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence".¹ This quote underscores Althusser's understanding of ideology as a set of beliefs that works to promote an 'imaginary relationship' of individuals with the 'real' world. It works as a 'delusion' as it only 'represents' and not 'reflect', the 'real conditions of existence'. According to him, all ideologies work to keep the individual blinded away from the 'real'

world. The second hypothesis he made was, “Ideology has a material existence”.² Althusser says so, because according to him, “an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices”.³ It is the various Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) like school, family, workplace etc, that impose on the individuals different set of beliefs or ideologies. These ideologies are very crucial for functioning of the various social, cultural and political setups of the society as all the individuals within these ISAs follow the same ideologies. The ideologies render the individuals as blind followers or ‘concrete subjects’ for the societal setups to keep functioning. Althusser’s theorization crucially highlights that ideology is not simply internal belief but is materially enforced through institutions that appear neutral but function as mechanisms of control.

We can conclude that the dominant ideologies in a society help establish a common consciousness among the people, making them believe in a certain kind of worldview towards different aspects of the social life. The dominant ideologies in a society impose a certain ‘correct’ order of views towards issues like politics, religion, economy, society etc. that all individuals unconsciously follow. The fact that certain ideologies become dominant ideologies, there is no doubt, the role of power politics involved. For example, in a patriarchal society, as the men become the dominant group, the various ideologies governing the society are predominantly male-oriented. For instance, if we take up the belief which says, “men are better drivers”, the presupposition essentially comes from a patriarchal mindset. It is also true that with the onset of the Feminist movement on the world stage, the feminist ideology started to overcome the patriarchal mindset of the people and fight for the rights of females. Such statements, while appearing as harmless generalisations, operate as ideological tools that reinforce structural inequalities. We can see how the power-play of various ideologies in the world shape the public consciousness in the society. Also how the ideologies are not static and are in constant conflict and negotiation with each other.

And literature plays major role in ‘reflecting’ and also ‘affecting’ the major ideologies of the society. At any point of time in history, literature works as a mirror to the dominant ideologies of the society and it can also be employed to influence or affect the ideologies of the people in a certain direction. As my Thesis takes into account the literary works of two very different time periods, so the comparison can lead to understanding how much the society has changed over time. For instance, if we take up the text of Ved Vyasa’s Mahabharata to analyse the society at that time, then we can see that societal systems like patriarchy, varna system and the caste system were very much prevalent. The ill-treatment meted out to Karna throughout his life, just because of his low-birth, undeniably indicate the prevalence of varna system in the society. Karna had always been humiliated for being a charioteer’s son, or a ‘suta-putra’, and because of which he was denied eligibility at Draupadi’s swayamvara, and was also declared disqualified in the bravery contest at

Hastinapur. Moreover, the fact that Draupadi, being a Kshatriya Princess, rejected Karna for the other Princes at her swayamvara, throws light on the ancient belief of 'pratiloma' or 'marrying to a man of lower caste' was strictly prohibited. If we take up the case of Eklavya, from Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata, we unfurl another evidence of the prevalence of caste system in the society. In spite of being a very bright and dedicated student, Eklavya was not allowed to receive education in Archery under the famous guru, Dronacharya, who used to teach only the Kshatriya Princes of the kingdom. So we see that there are ample number of evidences which show that, in the ancient Indian society, the caste rules were fairly stringent and were based on birth. These incidents serve as literary inscriptions of the dominant ideology, normalising exclusion and oppression in the name of dharma and tradition. Now, if were to decipher whether the earlier society was patriarchal or not, let us consider the story of the central female character: Draupadi. Draupadi was born in the kingdom of Panchal through a fire-yagya that was undertaken in order to beget a son. Her unexpected birth after the sacred ceremony had left everyone in the kingdom stunned. Though a son was also born, her unwanted accompaniment had made her arrival a burden for King Drupad. Then, later in her life, when she was married to five men, each was to have her for one year chance by chance, with her purity being restored every year. It also brings into light the importance the society puts on the issue of women's chastity in marriage. Also, the infamous scene of the public disrobing of Draupadi at the court of Hastinapur underscores the nature of society in ancient times. The five husbands, whom Draupadi considered as her protectors, were the ones responsible for the ill treatment meted out to her.

There is no denying the fact that literature does reflect the practises and the beliefs of the society in which it is set in. For that very reason, the literary texts are always taken into consideration by researchers and archaeologists while seeking to decipher the socio-cultural practises of a society at any given point of time. It is also true that, literature, as much as it 'reflects', it also 'affects' the ideologies of a society. Also important in this context, is the formation of 'myths' that operate to shape and mould public opinion. When certain things or phenomenon start becoming associated with particular beliefs, and become prominent in the popular consciousness of the people, they turn into 'myths'. As my Thesis takes into account stories based on 'myths', it is important to consider how certain belief systems of a society turn into 'myths', and how these myths 'reflect' and 'affect' public consciousness through literature. Moreover, anything that is mythologised is always considered sacred and is thought to become the emblems of the 'right' code of conduct. The myth, once naturalised, ceases to be questioned and begins to dictate behavioural norms, often masking the ideological agendas that created it.

The famous Post-Structuralist, Roland Barthes, in his book titled, *Mythologies*, discusses the formulation and circulation of myths in a society and also explores the association of myths

with language. The book begins with the discussion of certain examples of socio-cultural phenomenon of everyday life, and how certain things start becoming connected with particular beliefs of the people. He discusses contemporary examples of ordinary life and how they happen to become symbolic of some ideological or cultural essence. One of the examples he gives is that of, wine. He discusses how wine, particularly French wine, began to be imbibed with certain cultural significance and symbolic value. He explains how the trend/belief of drinking wine began to be seen as a sign of sophistication, refinement, artistry and essential Frenchness. The point he makes is that how certain ordinary objects are sometimes deprived of their ordinariness, and are mythologised in public opinion. All of this increased significance is imbibed by the use of language and popular media that help influence public opinion. The mythological aura that gets created around ordinary objects or trends, reflect and also help in shaping popular perceptions of the people. Barthes highlights the crucial role of mass media in the dissemination of these constructed myths, stressing that it is through repetition and circulation that a belief becomes naturalised in the public imagination. He critiques the media for serving the interests of dominant power structures by transforming historical and political constructs into unquestioned truths. Another important contribution of Roland Barthes to the study of myth creation in language is his premise that myth occurs as a 'second order system' among the signifiers and signified in language. According to Barthes, myths are a type of speech whose purpose is to communicate a concept by the means of a belief/ an idea/ a signifier. He employs Ferdinand De Saussure's definition of the signifier and signified and builds on it by saying that myth occurs when the signifier reaches a new level in hierarchy, when it gets attached to a belief system of the people. The Post-Structuralists see language as a system of signs, constituted by the signifier (the idea) and the signified (the physical object). Barthes builds on the argument by proposing that when a new additional meaning is imposed on a signifier, as it gets attached to a particular belief in a society, the signifier turns into a myth, which has added importance. In other words, a sign that originally has a neutral or descriptive meaning becomes loaded with ideological weight when contextualised within a social narrative. For example, a military uniform, which merely denotes a profession, can be transformed into a myth of honour, patriotism, or power depending on the ideological framing. Barthes explains the formation and circulation of myths on the level of language, but on the societal level, it is important to understand the power that language bestows on myth in order to penetrate public consciousness. Since time immemorial, the beliefs that were associated with myths are considered sacrosanct by the people. Myths help perpetuate into public consciousness a particular idea of society that is considered the 'correct' way of living. Barthes, in his book, also talk about the dichotomy between myth and power and its association with language. He quotes the examples of modern day myths and explains how the power groups of the society manipulate myths so as

to further their interest in the society. He says that as myths essentially perpetuate the dominant ideology formulated by the ruling class, they are not forever static in nature. What he means to say is that as myths are formulated by people in power, they can also be destroyed with time or when other ideological group comes into power. That is the reason why myths are studied in order to understand the prevailing ideologies of a society at any point of time. And literature no doubt serves as a mirror to the ideologies and the mythologies of the people in a society.

The Epics in Indian mythological literature can also be analysed in the light of the principles put forward by Roland Barthes. The Epics, namely Ramayana and Mahabharata, together form such voluminous account of Indian mythology, that they can definitely be analysed to study the ideologies of the people at that time. The Mahabharata, especially, is seen as an encyclopaedia of solutions to almost all problems concerning human society. Moreover, the values and the beliefs upheld in these epics essentially constitute the core of Indian value system since the time of their inception. As per the principles of Roland Barthes, myths can be seen as a system of signs, that naturalises a certain code of conduct as being the 'right' code of conduct. Given the enormous significance that myths in these epics hold in the cultural mindset of the people of India, it would be worthwhile to analyse the dominant ideologies that define the 'right' code of conduct in these mythologies. He says that the most important function of myth creation is to naturalise certain ideologies and effortlessly imbibe them in the conscience of the people. In the Mahabharata, the central character of Yudhistira, the eldest Pandava, is seen as the 'dharma raj' or 'the upholder of dharma'. For him, 'dharma' was the highest virtue that an ideal man should uphold. His reliance on 'dharma' or 'the policy of following the right conduct', can be seen when he unconditionally accepts his mother Kunti's command, that his wife should be shared among all the Pandava brothers. Also, when he accepts Shakuni's challenge to continue betting in the Game of Dice, he considers it as his kingly 'dharma' to not back off in the face of competition. The ideology behind the Mahabharata War can itself be seen as justifying violence and mass massacre for upholding one's 'dharma'. The derived understanding of dharma, which combines personal duty, social obligation, and divine will, becomes a myth in Barthes' terms, an ideology masked as truth, propagated through generations as a sacred norm. We can see that the ideology of 'dharma' is rendered as the 'right' code of conduct for the people to follow in their lives. Also, the divine intervention of Lord Krishna and his delivery of the philosophy of dharma, which constitute the Bhagwad Gita, hold a very significant place in the Hindu society. The Bhagwad Gita serves as a major philosophical treatise, which seeks to present to the readers the core principles of human existence in the world. Moreover, the fact that the entire text is interspersed with the involvement of divine characters and celestial weapons, it highlights the belief of the ancient Indians of the role that Gods play in shaping the course of

human lives. The text of the Mahabharata highlights the ideology that everything happens according to the divine scheme of events or the 'niyati' pre-decided by the Gods. Many instances from the text of the Mahabharata, especially from the teachings in the Bhagwad Gita, highlight another ideology or belief of the ancient Indians in the perishability of the body and the immortality of the soul.

As Roland Barthes says, all mythologies work on a 'second order system' of signifying ideas or beliefs of the people, that have reached transcendental importance; the ideologies forwarded by the mythologies in the Mahabharata also received utmost reverence by the people of India. Since time immemorial, Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata has been considered a foundational religious treatise of almost everything that comprises Indian culture today. As Barthes in his text also talks about the power that mythology exercises through language, in penetrating the minds of the people; the reverence that the mythology of the Mahabharata has received through ages, can be seen as a testament to that as well. Even today, the use of references from the Mahabharata in political speeches, cinematic adaptations, and moral discourses indicates the continued mythologisation of its characters and events in Indian consciousness, the timeless influence of its ideology proves how myths, once embedded through language and culture, gain immense symbolic power.

An important argument that Barthes makes states that all myths are context-dependent, as they do change in the course of time depending upon the changing context of human society. Moreover, as the all myths seek to naturalise certain ideologies in the mindsets of the people at any point of time, the changing context of the society with time can lead to changes in nature and character of the myths. What he means to say is that the dynamic nature of the society facilitates the need for change of ideologies, and the consequent change in myths too. As my Thesis takes into account the 21st century contemporary retellings of the Mahabharata along with the generations-old Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata, the time gap is undoubtedly huge. We know that the myths fostered by Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata, which was written at the beginning of the Indian civilisation, have been bestowed sacrosanct importance by the people of India. Yet, with the advent of modern ideologies such as feminism, anti-caste movements, and subaltern voices gaining literary expression, more and more writers of the 21st century are revising and reframing the age-old myths in modern contexts. While the core philosophical values like that of dharma, karma and niyati, remain sacred to the Hindu philosophy, a few ideologies or beliefs of the ancient people, have garnered contested views by the people of the contemporary times. With the opening up of the global markets, and the emergence of modern critical thinking at the world stage, the readers of the of 21st century happen to question certain ideologies like that of patriarchy and caste system, which were so prominent in the mythologies of the ancient times. These contemporary retellings often function as deliberate attempts to revise or even subvert the earlier narratives and offer alternative

perspectives grounded in modern ideas of social justice, equality, and human dignity. Going back to Roland Barthes' principles of changing ideologies powered by the changing context of the society, it is important to analyse the changing nature of the myths in modern society, which were initially fostered by the Epics of ancient times.

To start with Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, she seeks to focus on busting the myth of patriarchy as fostered in Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata. In choosing to retell the story of the Mahabharata from the point of view of the central female character, Draupadi, Divakaruni seeks to subvert the masculine nature of the earlier narrative. Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata is seen majorly as a tale of the heroes and wars, their victories and exploits. Divakaruni in her novel seeks to highlight the woman's perspective, by focusing on Draupadi's life struggles and achievements. The ideology fostered by the essentially male-centric narrative of Ved Vyasa is challenged by Divakaruni in her contemporary retelling of the tale. As she clarifies her premise in the 'Author's Note' to the novel, she says about the women characters of the Mahabharata, "all these women remained shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions described only when they affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers or sons".⁴ She says that as she had been an ardent reader of the mythological texts, she had always felt the need for a better representation of the women, in terms of their emotions, their struggles, their achievements as well as their downfalls. She urges the readers to listen to and modestly take in through the medium of her novel, "an alternative interpretation of these great and complex tales";⁵ that would help present a female perspective to the epics. Through this narrative strategy, Divakaruni not only foregrounds the subaltern voice of Draupadi but also contests the normalization of patriarchal values as 'natural' in the original epic. She seeks to dismantle the ideological structures that once seemed timeless and inviolable, showing how women's voices were systematically silenced or reduced to archetypes. Her novel can be seen as a critical commentary on the gendered hierarchies embedded within ancient Indian mythology. As all texts reflect the ideologies of the time they are set in, the contemporary society, in which Divakaruni and her readers are placed, also happen to be influenced by the contemporary ideology of feminism at the world stage. As the societies evolve, the ideologies change, and so do the myths. Divakaruni's contemporary retelling of the Mahabharata from the perspective of a woman character, can be seen as a testimony of the same. Throughout the novel, Draupadi is depicted as a fierce, rebellious and bold character who stands up for her rights and manages to defend herself from the various restrictions and injustices that the male-chauvinistic society puts upon her. She is described as an 'offspring of vengeance' and a strong independent woman who would become an active agent in the process of changing history. She is always seen as affirming herself of her strength as a significant individual capable of changing 'the course of history' and also as 'a

celebrated beauty' in the world of male-dominated characters.⁶ The narrative also highlights the 'special name' by which Krishna used to call her. It was the female version of his own name: Krishnaa, which meant two things, as the narrative notes, "the dark one, or the one whose attraction can't be resisted".⁷

Right from the time she was born unwanted at King Drupad's palace, the narrative highlights the various mis-treatments and prejudices that she had to go through all her life. Some of them include: her fight with her father to get education along with her brother; the famous court scene when she questions the conduct of her husbands as well as the Kauravas; and other incidents such as her struggle with the lecherous Keechak at Queen Sudeshna's palace. All the incidents highlight the plight of women in the patriarchal ancient Indian society. During the last year of their exile, when the Pandavas and Draupadi lived at Sudeshna's Palace in incognito mode, Draupadi's encounter with Keechak makes her ponder upon the condition of women in the society and her kingdom. As Keechak gazes Draupadi in an inappropriate manner, not knowing that she was the queen, Draupadi reflects, "Is this how men looked at ordinary women, then? Women they considered their inferiors? A new sympathy for my maids rose in my mind. When I become queen again, I thought, I would make sure common women were treated differently".⁸ This moment becomes significant not only in reflecting Draupadi's personal growth and empathetic evolution, but also as a moment of social critique against the structural marginalization of women. Draupadi's realization reveals how deeply embedded gender bias operated at all levels of society, from Queens of a palace to ordinary maids, and how transformative power lies in the awakening of this awareness. Divakaruni thus positions Draupadi not merely as a mythic Queen but as a woman of vision, who grows to see justice as inclusive and reformatory. What makes the narrative of Draupadi significant is the way she deals with all the difficulties in her life, making use of all the resources at her hand. Her education turns out to be her biggest asset, making her acquainted with all the intricacies of law and justice in the society. In the climactic court scene at Hastinapur, when the Pandavas stake her in the Game of Dice and Dussahasana attempts to publicly disrobe her, she uses her knowledge of the shastras to question the conduct of her husbands and thereby protect herself. She remembers the words from the Nyaya Shastra which said, "If perchance a man lost himself, he no longer had any jurisdiction over his wife".⁹ She feels grateful for the education she received in her childhood that helped her confront the effrontery of a male-dominated society. She says, "It was good that I was no unlettered girl, ignorant of the law".¹⁰ The beginning chapters of the novel highlight the struggle Draupadi had to go through to even get the education in the first place. While her brother, Dhri was provided proper education at the Palace, Draupadi being a girl was restricted entry to the classes. It was only after Krishna had insisted King Drupad to allow Draupadi to get educated with her brother, she was able to fulfil her quest for knowledge. We

see how Divakaruni exposes the patriarchal nature of the society of ancient times as portrayed in Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata. But, in her contemporary novel, she gives Draupadi enough agency to not be just a passive recipient of the events, and become the change-maker in history.

The significance of the title of the novel, *the Palace of Illusions* is also multi-fold. The Place of Illusions, where the Pandavas resided with their queen Draupadi, plays a central role in the narrative of the Mahabharata. The mythology that is weaved around the Palace of Illusions forms a major part of the ideological consciousness of the people of Indian since time immemorial. The Palace that is referred to was built in the ancient city of Indraprastha by the heavenly deity, Maya, as the residing place for Pandavas and Draupadi after being expelled from Hastinapur. It was this very Palace where Draupadi had scorned at Duryodhana when he mistook an actually pool of water to be an illusionary pool. The Palace was so dear to Draupadi that when the Pandavas lost all of their possessions in the Game of Dice, what Draupadi regretted losing the most was her Palace. As the narrative of Divakaruni's novel tells us, Draupadi considered the Palace as being a part of her identity and relished being its Queen. On their way to the forest after losing in the Game of Dice, Draupadi reflects on her condition as she thinks, "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".¹¹ Divakaruni in her novel highlights the importance that the Palace held in Draupadi's life. Her status as the Queen of the Palace of Illusions also frames her as a powerful figure and assertive figure. Even though Draupadi was way regretful upon losing her Palace, but the narrative tells us that the incident had made her even more powerful and desperate to make the Kauravas pay for her loss. To quote the novel, it says that a new Draupadi had taken her place, as "The woman who has taken her place will gauge a deeper mark into history than that naïve girl ever imagined".¹² The 'Palace of Illusions' thus becomes a metaphor not only for the grandeur and deception of royal life but also for the illusions imposed upon women- the illusion of protection, the illusion of equality, and the illusion of power that collapse in moments of male betrayal. Draupadi's journey, framed through this palace, becomes the journey of shattering illusions and constructing her own myth on her own terms.

Apart from Divakaruni's novel, the other contemporary retellings of the Mahabharata also seek to cater to the evolving ideologies of the society. Just like the emergence of feminism, the birth of the ideology of Subaltern theory in the 21st century also seem to influence the contemporary novelists and the readers of the time. To take up the novel of Anand Neelakantan's, *Ajaya: the Epic of the Kaurava Clan*, it also seeks to provide an alternate angle to the narrative of Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata. It seeks to bust the popular myth that sees history as a narrative of only the victorious. Neelakantan's novel can be seen as a classic

example of how mythologies and ideologies can be moulded to present an alternative view to the events. As in Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata, the Pandavas are portrayed as the protagonists of the story, by highlighting their strength, valour and values, whereas the Kauravas, especially Duryodhana, are portrayed as being the antagonists. Neelakantan, in his contemporary take to the story, seeks to revert the narrative by bringing the Kauravas to the forefront and choosing to re-narrate the tale from their perspective. He makes the Kauravas the protagonists of the story and justify to the readers their actions and choices in life. This ideological reorientation from the victors to the vanquished, from the glorified to the vilified, is central to Neelakantan's agenda of mythic subversion. By choosing the voice of Suyodhana, stripped of the derogative prefix 'Dur', he actively questions the constructed binaries of good versus evil, dharma versus adharma, and thereby opens a space for ethical ambiguity and ideological resistance within the retelling.

As the author mentions in the 'Author's Note', he was deeply taken in by the character of Duryodhana and considered it as his moral responsibility to bring to the readers of modern time the long-lost story of the Crown Prince of Hastinapur. He quotes the beliefs of the people of Poruvazhy, a village in Kerela, where there is the only temple dedicated to the service of "the most reviled villain of Indian mythology- Duryodhana".¹³ Neelakantan explains why the people chose to worship Duryodhana as the protector deity for the village. This anecdote acts as a counter-discursive tool in the novel that exposes the hypocrisy of caste-based exclusion and shows Duryodhana as a socially progressive character, ahead of his times. At the time when caste rules were very stringent and a Shudra coming near a higher caste person was considered a polluting act; it was Duryodhana, the Crown Prince of Hastinapur, who in his search for the Pandavas, asked a Shudra woman for water and highly thanked her for the act. What was considered a 'crime' for the Shudra woman in the then ancient society, was highly revered and appreciated by Duryodhana, who was indeed a Kshatriya Prince of the greatest empire of Aryavarta. From then on, the people of Poruvazhy started worshipping Duryodhana as the protector deity for the weak and needy in the village. By highlighting the story of the Poruvazhy village of Kerela, Neelakantan introduces to the readers of his novel, the character of Duryodhana as a very generous and kind-hearted man. It also serves as a prelude to the story of his friendship with Karna, the low-born charioteer's son in the Mahabharata. Throughout the story of the Mahabharata, Karna stands as a pillar of strength to Duryodhana, all because it was Duryodhana who initially helped him in his worst of times. Karna was often humiliated for his caste, but it was only Duryodhana who uplifted him from his low-caste status by gifting to him the kingdom of Anga and proclaiming him the King. Upon considering the two above mentioned incidents, we see Duryodhana emerge as an increasingly appreciable character in the Mahabharata, with all his generosity towards the low-caste and the needy. We see that the narrative goes beyond the simplistic good-versus-

evil dichotomy and seeks to reconstruct the character of Duryodhana as a flagbearer of meritocracy, someone who recognized talent regardless of birth, a very progressive notion in the rigid caste hierarchy of ancient India. As Neelakantan says in the 'Author's Note', he seeks to present the various characters of the Mahabharata to be as human as possible, with all their strengths and flaws, their victories and defeats. Neelakantan, in the 'Author's Note' also highlights the fact that unlike Duryodhana and the Kauravas, the Pandava brothers were often aided by divine intervention, which helped them succeed even in the final war of the Mahabharata. This deliberate contrast between human struggle and divine assistance points to a larger commentary on systemic privilege, where some get support from the Gods, in the name of 'niyati', while those without divine backing are condemned regardless of their ethical or moral integrity.

As the novel unfolds the life and struggles of Duryodhana and the other Kauravas, there emerges a sympathy in the minds of the readers, and an instinct to reconsider the story of the Mahabharata from a new angle. Moreover, as the author removes the derogatory suffix 'Dur' from the names of the Kaurava brothers, the readers see them as increasingly positive, believable, and humane characters who fought for what they considered right, but were overpowered by the divine intervention and the pre-designed laws of 'niyati'. Ever since Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata, the Pandavas were portrayed as the epitome of righteous conduct or as Yudhistira was outrightly called 'dharmraj' or 'the protector of dharma'. All of this contributes in influencing the ideological mindsets of the people. Neelakantan, by the presenting the story from the perspective of the other side, seeks to remould ideology and the popular perception of the characters of the Mahabharata. The author's revisionist portrayal serves as an invitation to re-evaluate historical narratives and question the politics of storytelling that continue to shape moral consciousness in contemporary times.

Similarly, the other novelists, Kavita Kane and Madhavi Mahadevan, in their books, *Karna's Wife: the Outcast's Queen* and *the Kaunteyas*, respectively, seek to bring out the narratives of other subaltern characters and bust the myths related to their narratives. Kavita Kane, in her novel, while talking about Uruvi, Karna's wife, seek to subvert the ancient belief that prohibited a Kshatriya Princess from marrying a man of lower caste. Her narrative also challenges the myth of patriarchy, as it seeks to give power and agency to a woman character who dares to go against the society and her family to marry the man of her dreams. As the contemporary retellings serve as reflections to the prevailing ideologies of modern times, the character of Uruvi is built strong enough to criticise the twin evils of caste system as well as patriarchy. **In doing so, Kane constructs a female protagonist who is not a passive onlooker to the epic events but an active participant with her own ideological stance.** With the rise of the contemporary theories of feminism and subaltern theory, different narratives have started to come up which focus on voicing out the voiceless and giving them a

credibility of their own. Kavita Kane's contemporary novel gives voice to not only an outcast but also the outcast's wife from the ancient story of the Mahabharata. The story begins with the description of Karna through the eyes of the Kshatriya Princess, Uruvi, who seems to be utterly mesmerised by the exuberance and vivacity of the Surya-putra Karna. Special emphasis is paid to the golden armour and earrings of Karna which made him shine out like 'a blazing sun'. He is also described as a great warrior, even greater than the Pandava brothers of Hastinapur. The only factor that restricts him from getting acknowledgement from the society is his caste status as a low-born charioteer's son. The narrative highlights that in the ancient society caste was mightier than even merit. At different times in his life, Karna had faced public humiliation just because of his caste. The worst wound was given by Draupadi at her swayamvara when she declared him disqualified for competing for her hand, just because he was not a Kshatriya. A turn of events happen when Karna is called again to the swayamvara of another Kshatriya Princess, Uruvi. Kavita Kane highlights Uruvi's swayamvara as a remedial event in Karna's life and as a contrast to Draupadi's swayamvara. The moment reinstates Karna's value as a worthy individual in an assembly court full of Princes. The narrative describes it as a very bold and daring act for a Kshatriya Princess to choose a low born as her husband over all the other Kshatriya Princes, especially in a society where the practise of 'anuloma' was strictly prohibited. The narrative tells us that according to the shastras, as preached by the brahmins, the practise of 'anuloma' refers to the practise of a woman marrying to a man of lower caste. The practise was strictly prohibited for Kshatriya women, especially the Princesses, but Uruvi dares to go against the society and take her own decision to marry Karna inspite of his caste. The incident not only highlights Uruvi as a strong, independent woman, but also uplifts the character of Karna as being more than just a definition of his caste. The words of affirmation by Uruvi to Karna at various points in their married life, also helps Karna rebuild his lost self-respect. To quote from the novel, when Karna asks Uruvi why she married him, a sutaputra, she says, "A sutaputra who was born to show valour and to achieve glory....For me, that makes you enough of a kshatriya".¹⁴ After his initial rejection by Draupadi, Karna never thought that any Kshatriya Princess would ever choose to marry him. Throughout the novel, Karna is seen as struggling for due respect and recognition in society, and Uruvi turns out to be an ideal partner for him to heal him of all his wounds. She also works as an advisor to Karna and aids him in taking various decisions of his life. Uruvi also alerts him of the costs he would potentially bear because of his friendship with Duryodhana. In a conversation with Bhishma Pitamaha regarding Karna, the Grand Regent too says to Uruvi, "a noble and generous warrior like Karna will suffer grievously because of the company he keeps".¹⁵ Moreover, at the climactic moment when Karna gives away his kavach and kundals and returns home utterly wounded, it is Uruvi who realises the gravity of act he did. This moment not only highlights her emotional intelligence but also her

role as Karna's moral compass. Through the various instances of the novel, we see how Uruvi is portrayed as a modern independent woman and an equal partner in marriage who aids and advises her husband for the betterment of their lives. Unlike in Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata, where Uruvi finds little mention, Kavita Kane makes her the protagonist of her novel and highlights the struggles of her life and through her, the struggles of Karna's life as well. The act of making a marginal female character as the narrator thus serves as a powerful strategy to question dominant gender as well as caste paradigms encoded in the epic. Kavita Kane's novel emerges not only as a feminist novel but also as a critique of the ancient caste system as well.

Another form of a woman's narrative is presented by Madhavi Mahadevan in her novel, *the Kaunteyas*, in which she seeks to give voice to the character of Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas. In her novel, she seeks to highlight the innumerable sufferings and sacrifices that the mother of the 'heroes' of the Mahabharata had to go through in her life. As most mythological and historical narratives focus mainly on the male characters, the 'heroes' who take part in wars and engage in enlarging their empires and amassing wealth, thereby engaging in violence and bloodshed; the major element of such narratives remain the display of male chauvinism and valour. Rarely is the focus shifted to feminine characteristics which include emotions, feelings, family relations and sacrifices; as the female narratives are largely ignored from the dominant narratives. As the Mahabharata comprise of a phenomenal length, it does include the stories of four generations of characters, but all the events melt down to the focus on the rivalry between the Pandava and Kaurava brothers, their struggle for the throne of Hastinapur and the final massacre at the War of the Mahabharata. As the Pandava and Kaurava brothers turn out to be the main characters of the narrative, the narrative and struggles of the female characters remain largely overshadowed. Madhavi Mahadevan in her contemporary novel, *the Kaunteyas*, seek to fill in the gaps of the saga by choosing to bring into focus the perspective of a very important female character: Kunti. Her novel seeks to retell the story of the Mahabharata as Kunti would have described it. Even in the Prologue to the novel, which serves as an insightful opening to the themes of the novel, Mahadevan elaborates on the distinction between what elements constitute men's stories and women's stories. She says that conventionally all historical and mythological narratives focus on the male-centric elements like "fields of blood, wondrous weapons, subtle strategies, bold tactics, courage, cowardice, trickery...".¹⁶ But above all, the major element that predominates men's narratives is its emphasis on honour and aggression. As opposed to men's narratives, the women's narratives, which find little mention in historical and mythological records are majorly constituted of elements like, "flesh, blood, feelings, tears, suffering".¹⁷ As honour and aggression holds the most predominant position in men's stories, endurance finds the highest place in women's stories.

Right from living her life as an adopted child, to giving away her own child as it was born when she was still unmarried, to the difficulties in getting married to Pandu and finally living her later life in the forest in exile; Kunti's life had been a difficult one. Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata portrays Kunti as a sacrificial mother, who silently endures all her pains and sees her giving away of Karna as a guilt. Madhavi Mahadevan seeks to give power to the character of Kunti, making her an empowered woman and a conscious agent of all the decisions she made in life. Madhavi Mahadevan majorly busts the myth of epics being the narrative of only the male heroes, with the women having very little role to play in it. By making a woman character the centre of her narrative, she seeks to bring to the forefront feminine attributes to the tale, rather than just anecdotes of wars and weapons, rivalries and feuds. Talking about her act of giving away of Karna, the novel portrays it a significant act that initiates a series of events that would indeed create history.

The novel also seeks to redefine the relationship Kunti shared with different characters of the story, thereby commenting upon the representation of the characters in the epic from a woman-centric point of view. It talks about Kunti's relationship with other characters of the story. As the narrative takes into account Kunti's perspective, the others characters are also portrayed as per their relationship with Kunti herself. The first character whom the readers encounter through her perspective is King Kuntibhoja, the foster father of Kunti. We are told that Kunti was given away at birth by her biological father, Shura, to his very dear friend Kuntibhoja who had been childless for years. King Kuntibhoja treated her as a blessing as it was after her arrival, the Queen begot children of her own at the Palace. Though the King had treated her with the highest regard, Kunti had always felt a deep sense of dejection for being the abandoned child of her biological father. The next character we encounter in the novel is the Sage Durvasa, who is described as being the tempestuous one who is known to give frequent curses. The epithet used for him is 'the angry sage Durvasa'. But despite of the popular perception about him, he is the one who blesses Kunti with the boon of the 'Vashikaran' mantra which would change her life. The narrative presents this episode not merely as a mystical blessing but as a pivotal moment of transformation for Kunti, which would later define the moral and emotional trajectory of her life. The power of calling upon Gods to bear children is not just a boon but also a burden that Kunti would carry with her forever.

Moving on to her married life, the narrative gives elaborate description of her relationship with characters like Pandu, Madri, Satyawati, Bhishma Pitamah etc. Her equation with Madri, Pandu's second wife, is shown to be complex—marked by initial insecurity, rivalry and finally a mature understanding forged through shared grief. **Madri's eventual self-immolation after Pandu's death also becomes a**

turning point in Kunti's life, leaving her alone to raise not only her own children but Madri's sons as well. Kunti's interactions with Bhishma Pitamah and Satyawati reveal the deeply patriarchal expectations placed upon her as a woman within the royal household. While Bhishma is often seen as the moral compass of the Kuru dynasty, through Kunti's eyes, he appears as someone bound by his vow and rigid dharma, incapable of understanding a mother's emotional dilemmas. Similarly, Satyawati's silence and withdrawal from the centre of power after the death of her sons is presented as a symbolic retreat of feminine agency from the corridors of Hastinapur. **We can see that Mahadevan's novel adds layers of complexity to the representation of each character by showing how their actions, decisions and presence impacted Kunti's personal journey.** Each relationship that Kunti forges—whether as a daughter, a wife, a co-wife, a mother or even a silent witness—shapes her sense of identity and strengthens her resolve. **Through this retelling, Mahadevan not only gives Kunti her long-overdue voice but also seeks to reframe the epic as a saga of human emotions, responsibilities, and moral dilemmas seen through the eyes of a woman enough to set the actions of the Epic in motion.**

Upon analysing how contemporary literature seeks to bust certain myths of ancient times as perpetuated in the Mahabharata, it is equally important to see how they also seek to create new myths of modern times. **These new myths are often shaped not just by historical revisionism, but by a deliberate repositioning of marginalized voices within the cultural mainstream.** The fact that the select contemporary novels got immense popularity among the readers of modern times justifies the premise that ideologies are dynamic in nature and function as per the nature of the society they are set in. The widespread reception of these retellings also reflects a change in ideological conscience of the people and an understanding of a need for inclusivity and justice. With the rise of Subaltern theory on the world stage, there occurred an upsurge in the narratives focusing on voicing out the voiceless and bringing their perspectives to the forefront. The Subaltern theory majorly emerged in the third world countries after the decline of British colonialism and imperialism. It emerged as a subset of Post-Colonial literature which sought to focus on the stories of the erstwhile subjects of British colonial rule, and bring into light the injustices they faced and the sacrifices they made. The movement was not just a literary shift but a socio-political one, rooted in the urge to reclaim indigenous voices that had long been silenced or neglected under colonial hegemony. With Subaltern theory dominating the literature of the British commonwealth countries, there was also an increased urge to look back at the mythologies and culture of the

country. That is when the stage was set for revisiting mythologies and also presenting them to the readers from a new subaltern perspective. The contemporary retellings of the ancient epics served to cater to the growing interest of the public in the earlier sub-ordinated or marginalised sections of the society. **These retellings do not merely serve as fictional recreations but function as cultural commentaries, addressing long-standing gaps in representation and ideological biases.** These contemporary retellings seek to present an alternative angle of interpretation to the age-old tales of the mythologies and thereby reflect and also somewhat influence the ideological consciousness of the people of modern times. In doing so, these works also participate in the larger project of myth-making, thereby shaping cultural ethos and values.

As per Roland Barthes' principles mentioned in his book, *Mythologies*, apart from the story, the cover page of the book also works as a major tool to ventilate the prevailing ideologies of the society. For example, the cover page of Kavita Kane's book, *Karna's Wife: the Outcast's Queen*, shows a young beautiful girl liberated, and looking out of the balcony of her Palace, seeking to welcome the new world she has chosen for herself. And in Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya: the Epic of the Kaurava Clan*, the cover page of the novel displays the Crown Prince of Hastinapur, Duryodhana, as a fierce warrior with a mace in his hand and anger in his eyes, for all those who wronged him in one way or the other. According to Roland Barthes, all such artefacts, such as the cover page and posters, help in a major way to perpetuate current ideologies of the society. **Barthes argues that myth functions as a second-order semiological system, wherein ordinary images or texts are invested with cultural meaning that naturalizes specific worldviews. Thus, even paratextual elements like book covers become ideological battlegrounds, subtly shaping the reader's perception before the narrative even begins.**

Another important text in literary theory and criticism that explores the concept of literary influence and the changing ideologies in literature is Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*. First published in 1973, *The Anxiety of Influence*, is Bloom's most influential essay which delves into the ways in which modern literature engages with literary traditions that precede them. The work is seen as an important contribution in the field of literary criticism concerning the nature of poet's relationship with the works of his predecessors. The major proposition he makes in his book is that he says that all literary works come into existence as a response to works that precede them, in the false garb of claiming to be 'original'. He says that the influence of the earlier works of literature on the modern works cannot be evaded or denied. According to him, the claim of authors of being original, is merely employed as a shield to negate the influence of their predecessors on their work. He says that the poets experience a profound anxiety while creating any literary work of art, as they get unconsciously influenced by the works of their predecessors. The poets strive to deny the

influence, but the denial only stems from the need to build a defence mechanism for their works. Bloom states that the denial of anxiety by the writers is only a manifestation of the anxiety itself. He says that the anxiety cannot be escaped as he explains by introducing the concept of 'poetic misreading'.¹⁸ Through the concept of 'poetic misreading', Bloom suggests that the authors, in order to create something new or 'original', tend to misread or distort the works of their predecessors. **This misreading is not a conscious act of disrespect but rather a psychological strategy to assert creative independence.** The main premise of his argument is that all anxiety of influence that the authors experience, happens as they misread/misinterpret or distort interpretation of the previous works of literature. **This theoretical framework can be effectively applied to the retellings of the *Mahabharata*, where contemporary authors, while claiming to rewrite the epic from a newer perspective, inevitably engage with the canonical version, revisiting and reshaping it in a bid to forge a distinct narrative identity. Thus, modern reinterpretations of epics can be seen as outcomes of a creative struggle, with both inherited traditions and the need for an ideological reorientation in the present times.**

Bloom lists six different ways in which the authors engage with the works of their predecessor authors. He calls them 'Revisionary Ratios'.¹⁹ Harold Bloom's six revisionary ratios offer a nuanced framework for comprehending the intricate relationship between literary influence and artistic creativity. Each Ratio encapsulates a distinct aspect of the creative process, shedding light on the different ways a writer engages with his predecessors. The first among them is, Clinamen, which shows up when a writer makes a subtle deviation in the literary work of his predecessor, in a conscious effort to inject originality into his own work. Next comes, Tessera, which is similar to a mosaic artist's craft, shows up when a writer tries to piece together fragments from various literary sources in order to construct a 'new' narrative or poetic composition. The third way in which a writer engages with his predecessor's works, is, Kenosis, which mainly deals with the psychological aspect, and happens when a writer consciously tries to self-negate and detach himself from the looming shadows of his predecessor's influence. The word, kenosis, stems from the Greek word for "emptying," which underscores Bloom's suggestion that a writer must undergo a process of "emptying out" the influence of his predecessors in order to assert his creative autonomy fully. The next ratio in turn is called, Daemonization, which happens when a writer imagines his precursor as a mythic or a demonic figure and tries to break away from its hold. The writer uses it as a psychological defense mechanism, in order to intensify his own struggle for artistic autonomy and overcome the intimidating shadow of his predecessors. The fifth in number is, Askesis, involves a writer aloofing himself consciously to enhance his creativity and refine his art. Askesis demands sacrifice and dedication, as the writer endures solitude to cultivate an inner space for creative exploration and introspection. Finally, the sixth and the

last revisionary ratio is named Apophrades, which draws from the Greek concept of ‘turning away’, as it signifies the writer's ultimate liberation from the influence of the predecessors. The ratio highlights a moment of cathartic release of the writer from the burden of influence, allowing him to embrace his true unique voice. Taken together, the six revisionary ratios offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the different ways and degrees to which a writer relates with the literary tradition and grapples with the influence of his predecessors. Each ratio showcases a different facet of the creative process, ranging from the subtle deviations of Clinamen, the transformative mosaic setup of the Tessera, to the ultimate liberation of the writer under Apophrades. We can say that all these revisionary ratios, when taken together can serve as a rich tapestry for the scholars to categorise and understand the complex roles played by tradition, innovation, and individual genius in the field of literature.

If we seek to analyse the select modern retellings of the Mahabharata, using the principles outlined by Harold Bloom, it becomes evident that the various modern retellings engage with the original text in very diverse and complex ways, thereby exhibiting different types of Revisionary Ratios as outlined by Bloom. All these modern retellings, which are from different characters point of view, showcase a variety of Revisionary Ratios as they attempt to offer an alternative perspective while also maintaining a contact with its source material. To begin with, let us consider the first Revisionary Ratio, ie. Clinamen, which refers to the slight deviation or swerve of a particular text from its precursor text. As the different modern retellings present the story of the Mahabharata from a select subaltern character's point of view, they manage to offer a fresh perspective and a fresh interpretation by seeking to ventilate the experiences and emotions of the select subaltern character. The second Revisionary Ratio, Tessera, which refers to a particular narrative filling the gaps in the precursor text while also providing a counter-narrative or an antithesis, is also manifested quite evidently in all the select modern retellings of the Mahabharata. Though all the select modern retellings of the Mahabharata exhibit the revisionary ratio of Tessera, it is most prominently manifested in Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya: the Epic of the Kaurava Clan*, which can be seen as an antithesis, in many respects, to Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata. First of all the title, ‘Ajaya’ works as an antithesis to the other name of the Mahabharata, ie. ‘Jaya’. Secondly, it portrays the Kauravas, especially Duryodhana as being the protagonists or the ‘heroes’ of the story, as opposed to Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata, which portrays the Pandavas as the protagonists. Moving on to the third revisionary ratio, namely, Kenosis, which refers

to the act of emptying or revising the precursor text, is also adequately represented by the select texts as they seek to humanise the select subaltern characters, who were somehow maginalised in the original text. The narratives of select subaltern characters of Draupadi, Karna, Duryodhana and Kunti, were somehow subdued under the over-powering narrative of the valour, strength and the righteousness of the Pandavas. These characters suffered due to various social constructs, such as patriarchy, caste system, and history being portrayed majorly as a narrative of the victorious. The various modern retellings seek to revise the interpretation of the Mahabharata, thereby depicting the Revisionary Ratio of Kenosis, by depicting the characters' vulnerabilities, conflicts, and inner struggles more deeply. The fourth Revisionary Ratio, Daemonization, involves the reinterpretation of precursor figures in a text as powerful or threatening forces. Though the fourth revisionary ratio is not much evident in the modern retellings, as only seek to provide a nuanced portrayal of the select subaltern character, providing reasons for the choices they made in life and explaining the circumstances that surrounded their struggle. The fifth Revisionary Ratio, Askesis, involves the breaking of conventional forms and genres. By centering the narratives on the lives of the select subaltern characters, and exploring their point of view, the modern retellings of Mahabharata seek to challenge the dominant narrative of the epic and encourage readers to question established norms and interpretations. Apophrades, forms the final Revisionary Ratio, as outlined by Bloom, and it refers to the moment when the influence of the precursor is so thoroughly internalized and transcended that the new work almost appears to be the source of the original. **It is a state where the new author's voice becomes so powerful and resonant that it appears to "reverse" the influence, making the precursor text seem derivative of the new creation. This ratio does not imply a denial of the original, but rather a full absorption and transformation of its essence, allowing the successor to reclaim the tradition from within. In the context of the select modern retellings of the Mahabharata, the Revisionary Ratio of Apophrades becomes visible in the way these retellings have begun to reshape readers' perception of the epic itself.** For instance, in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi's voice is so assertive and emotionally complex that many contemporary readers find themselves revisiting the original Mahabharata with a renewed sensitivity to her plight and agency. **The retelling does not merely sit beside the original text but compels a reinterpretation of the source through its**

own lens. Similarly, in Neelakantan's *novel*, the bold reframing of Duryodhana as a social reformer and ethical leader causes readers to re-examine the biases inherent in the traditional portrayal of the Kauravas. This is where Apophrades fully manifests itself. The new narrative reclaims the mythic space so convincingly that the original appears haunted by the voice of its successor. In simple words, the retellings not only establish narrative autonomy but also rewrite the very memory of the Mahabharata for newer generations of readers. **Thus, the Revisionary Ratio of Apophrades offers the most empowered position for the modern author—where tradition is neither a burden nor a barrier, but a malleable inheritance to be re-visioned in accordance with contemporary sensibilities.** In this way, the six Revisionary Ratios taken together help decode the many layers of engagement that the select modern retellings of the Mahabharata undertake. **They serve not only as analytical tools for textual study but also as theoretical models for understanding the evolving relationship between literature, history, ideology, and individual voice.**

In the given context, it is important to analyse Romila Thapar's *The Past Before Us: Historical Traditions of Early North India* which is a seminal work that redefines how we understand early Indian historiography. Contrary to the colonial claim that India lacked a sense of historical consciousness, Thapar argues that early Indian texts reflected a sophisticated awareness of the past, albeit articulated in narrative forms that differ from modern Western historical models. Her study is especially significant for any critical engagement with the Mahabharata, as it opens up the text to multiple interpretive possibilities rooted in India's diverse historical traditions.

One of the central contributions of Thapar's work is her classification of three distinct strands of historical consciousness in early India: the *itihāsa-purāṇa* tradition, the Buddhist-Jaina tradition, and the bardic or oral tradition.²⁰ The *itihāsa-purāṇa* corpus, which includes texts like the *Mahabharata*, is not to be read as a literal historical record but as a dynamic form of cultural memory. Thapar emphasizes that these texts employed narrative to construct and legitimize societal norms, particularly concerning kingship, dharma, and political order. This framework allows us to read epic literature as participating in a form of historical discourse—one that is shaped by ideology, power, and representation. Crucially, Thapar interrogates the term *itihāsa* itself, highlighting its original connotation of "thus indeed it was," which implies a culturally accepted version of past events rather than an empirical recounting. This

insight is particularly valuable when approaching the Mahabharata from a subaltern perspective, as it underscores the narrative flexibility of the epic tradition. If the Mahabharata is a text that has always been open to reinterpretation, then contemporary retellings that centre marginalized voices are part of a long-standing tradition of re-narration. Thapar also brings attention to the bardic tradition, which she describes as a repository of popular, regional, and often oral histories. Unlike court-sponsored inscriptions or Brahmanical texts, these narratives emerged from non-elite spaces and sometimes preserved alternative versions of events or figures found in the canonical epics. Though these versions may not have been written down in the same manner as Sanskrit texts, they reflect the historical agency of communities that were often silenced in dominant narratives. This recognition lends credibility to the project of contemporary writers who seek to recover subaltern perspectives from within the Mahabharata.

In the context of my thesis, which focuses on select contemporary retellings of the Mahabharata from subaltern perspectives, Thapar's arguments are particularly illuminating. By asserting that history in early India was represented through multiple voices and narrative forms, she legitimizes the reinterpretation of epic texts from the standpoint of those historically excluded. Contemporary authors who foreground the voices of women, Shudras, forest dwellers, or other marginalized figures are not distorting the epic but rather participating in a historically grounded tradition of reshaping cultural memory.

Thapar's work ultimately affirms that the Mahabharata is not a static text but a dynamic one, open to continuous retelling. Her exploration of how ancient societies recorded their past offers a crucial theoretical foundation for understanding how modern subaltern authors engage with and reconstruct epic narratives. Their retellings are not anachronistic impositions but part of a broader historical continuum of reimagining the past.

Notes and References

1. Althusser, Louis. Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation. In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review. 1972. p. 109.
2. *ibid.*, p.112.
3. *ibid.*, p.112.
4. Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Palace of Illusions*. Picador India. New Delhi. 2019. p. Author's Note, xv.
5. *ibid.*, Author's Note, p. xvi.
6. *ibid.*, p. 5,10.
7. *ibid.*, p. 12.
8. *ibid.*, p. 228.
9. *ibid.*, p. 190.
10. *ibid.*, p. 191.
11. *ibid.*, p. 206.
12. *ibid.*, p. 206.
13. Neelakantan, Anand. *Ajaya: Epic of the Kaurava Clan*. Platinum Press. Mumbai. 2018. p. 10.
14. Kane, Kavita. *Karna's Wife: The Outcast Queen*. Rupa Publications India. New Delhi, 2013. p. 42.
15. *ibid.*, p. 63.
16. Mahadevan, Madhavi S. *The Kaunteyas: Queen Kunti's Mahabharata*. Speaking Tiger Books. New Delhi. 2022. p. 1.
17. *ibid.*, p. 2.
18. Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. Oxford University Press, 1973. p. 5.
19. *ibid.*, p. 14.
20. Thapar, Romila. *The Past Before Us: Historical Traditions of Early North India*. Permanent Black, 2013. p. 202.

CHAPTER 4

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES

CHAPTER 4

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES

Since the beginning of human civilisation, narrative has served as an indispensable part of our existence. As human beings are social animals, we communicate with each other, observe everyday phenomenon and retain them in our memory. How we explain our experience or recall our memory is only in the form of narrative. The fact that even to recall our memory, we need to form a narrative to explain the events of the past, and even when we encounter new experiences, we feel an instinct to work out the history of the particular entities as we approach them. Narrative can be seen as being a core element of human experience, on an individual's level and also at societal level. The mythological texts, the Epics, that were formed at the beginning of our civilisation, were also a result of the practise of oral-storytelling by the people. The myths that were formed, were a culmination of oral-stories that were so prevalent in the common conscience of the people, that they got passed on from generation to generation, until they were finally given a written form. The voluminous texts of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, can be seen as a testimony to the idea that narrative has always been a fundamental part of human experience on earth.

We also need to remember that there is a difference between narrative and narration. A narration can be of a story or any series of related events or experiences, which are conveyed either in a written or a spoken format; whereas narrative is something that makes the narration interesting, informative and appealing to the readers. There are various narrative techniques that the authors use in their narration to present their story and engage their readers in the desired direction. Narrative techniques can majorly be seen as methods or strategies used by the authors to convey what they want. Also, the narrative techniques are enhanced by the narrative elements, which can be employed in varied combinations by the authors in their texts. The various narrative techniques along with the narrative elements together help in creating the desired effect in the readers and bringing out the meaning of the text. While narrative techniques majorly comprise Plot, Setting, Perspective, Style, Theme and Character; the narrative elements which form a part of the narrative techniques, may include combinations of imagery, flashbacks, foreshadowing, tone, amplification, repetitive sentences, events in parallel, epiphany, symbolism, multi-perspectivity etc. Along

with these narrative techniques and elements, the narrative structure is also varied by the authors in order to shape the thematic explanation of the story. The narrative structure refers to the way the elements in a story are arranged, and which can be linear, non-linear, circular, parallel or interactive. All of these together impact the way a work of literature is formulated and presented to the readers.

E.M. Foster's book titled *Aspects of the Novel* is an influential work providing a descriptive account of the various aspects of the English language novel, highlighting the various narrative techniques employed by the authors in their works. The knowledge of the intricacies of a novel was first imparted by Foster in a series of lectures he gave at Trinity college, Cambridge University. The lectures were later compiled in a book form, which became one of the key texts in the field of writing and literary criticism. In his book, Foster delves into the nuances of story-telling while he discusses various aspects of fiction writing. In the Introductory Note, he presents a list of seven different aspects of a novel and he also explains the reason for choosing the word 'aspects' to describe different elements that comprise a novel. He says:

And I have chosen the title "Aspects" because it is unscientific and vague, because it leaves us the maximum of freedom, because it means both the different ways we can look at a novel and the different ways a novelist can look at his work. And the aspects selected for discussion are seven in number: The Story; People; The Plot; Fantasy; Prophecy; Pattern and Rhythm.¹

The first comes, 'Story', which Foster says forms "the backbone of a novel".² The main function of the story is to convey the narrative events to the readers chronologically, while keeping them engaged with the question, "what happens next?".³ He says that a good story should not only keep the readers interested in what would happen next, but also do value addition to the events as they unfold. In the second chapter of the book, which discusses the next aspect, 'People', he talks about the role characterisation plays in a novel. Just like the aspect of Story in the novel answers the question of what would happen next, the aspect of People in the novel, answers the question, "to whom did it happen?".⁴ Foster says that what distinguishes good characterisation, is that the people in the novel should look real, and the authors should depict the daily activities of the people with such realism, that it connects the readers to their lives. He also makes a distinction between 'flat' and 'round' characters, in which the former refers to those characters who are presented by

describing only one or two attributes, while the latter refers to those characters who have been fully developed by the authors, and are presented by describing multiple characteristic attributes. In the next section of the book, which discusses the third aspect, 'The Plot', Foster focuses on causality of the sequence of events. Unlike the Story which focuses on one event happening after the other in time sequence, the Plot focuses on how one event causes the occurrence of another. He explains it with an example as he says, " "The king died and then the queen died," is a story. "The king died and then the queen died of grief" is a plot".⁵ What becomes overpowering in a Plot, is the causality of the events, rather than just the time-sequence. The readers are supposed to join the dots and make meaning out of the events of the Plot. In the next segment of the book, which discusses the aspect of Fantasy, focuses on the introduction of magical effect in the novel. Fantasy deals with the author's imagination and how he works to captivate the readers. Foster discusses the examples of parody and adaptation to innumerate on the point. In the next section of the book, which deals with the aspect of Prophecy, Foster discusses how certain characters can seem to mean much more than themselves. For Foster, the word 'prophecy' has nothing to do with foreshadowing or the ability to know the future. He compares the novelists to a prophet or visionary, exploring how they can shed light on contemporary issues. He says that the aspect of prophecy requires the reader to possess two qualities, one is humility and second is suspension of sense of humour. The aspect of prophecy requires the reader to sense what abstractions or ideas does the character mean, other than just being doer of certain actions. The second last section of the book discusses the aspect of Pattern, in which he discusses the structure and the form of novels. In this section, Forster highlights the use of various techniques, such as foreshadowing and flashback and a few other tropes to analyse how Pattern is created in a novel. Finally, in the last section Forster elaborates on the seventh aspect: Rhythm in the novels. The aspect of Rhythm include elements such as the pace, tone, and language in a novel. He also explores the role of repetition, variation, and contrast in creating rhythmic patterns within the narrative. All in all, we can say that through his book, Foster provides a very comprehensive exploration of the various elements that make up a novel and how they function at different levels to create a lasting impact on the reader.

We saw that E.M. Foster's *Aspects of a Novel*, provides an elaborate account of the various Aspects or elements that are fundamental to a novel, and how they aid in

creating an impact on the reader. But we also need to remember that other than these structural elements, that work on macro level in the novel, there are also many different types of narrative techniques and tools, that work on micro level, to create meaning in the novel. E.M. Foster does discuss a few of the narrative techniques, but only briefly under the discussion of the Aspect of Pattern in a novel. It is important to understand that both, the structural elements as well as the narrative techniques, which are used in differing combinations, are helpful in making a text impactful, impressive and rich. H. Porter Abbott's *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, provides a very explicit and exhaustive account of the various narrative techniques that are employed in a novel. The text provides a discussion of not only the various narrative techniques, but also covers a wide range of topics including narrative forms, narrative genres, narrative function etc. The text can be seen as a very significant text in the field of narratology and criticism. The book begins with a definition of narrative, the basic tenet in the study of narratives. He says that there are two prevalent definitions of a narrative: one, that anything which describes one or more events can be called a narrative, and two, that the description of events need to have a coherence and continuity in order to be called a narrative. Abbott then elaborates on clarifying the definition of narrative, and highlights how it is similar to and different from a story. He says that it is not necessary that any work of fiction which seeks to give an account of events, be present from beginning to end in a time sequence. There are different ways in which the account of events can be described, and that is when narrative comes in. The way the sequence of events are told to the readers forms the narrative. It is similar to the distinction between Plot and Narrative that Foster described in his *Aspects of a Novel*. He had said that the chronological sequence of events is called the plot and the way the sequence of events is presented to the readers is called the narrative. Coming back to Abbott, while talking about description of events in a narrative, he categorises the events into two types: constituent and supplementary events. According to Abbott, constituent events are those that are necessary for the story to proceed, while supplementary events are those which supplement the constituent events by enhancing the thematic richness of the story. In this context, Abbott talks about what happens when adaptations or rewritings or versions of a story come up for the readers to interpret in comparison to the original. He says that in such cases, the author chooses to add certain supplementary events to modify or add to the interpretation of the story, while keeping the constituent events

intact. It leaves the structure of the story as it is while slightly altering the interpretation of the story. In the book, Abbott also elaborates on the relationship between an author and the persona of the narrative voice in the text. Extremely important in narratives, the narratorial perspective can be from 1st person perspective, or 2nd person perspective or even 3rd person perspective. The narratorial perspective plays a very important role in determining the interactivity and the proximity of the text to the reader. The interactivity quotient in a text makes the reader reflect on his viewpoints, and also interpret the text in a certain way. It also helps the readers to find out the thematic connection between different events in a work of fiction, and reach out to deductive conclusions. While talking about different ways a text is presented to the readers and how interpretations are generated, Abbott, in his book, also discusses three types of interpretive approaches: the intentional, the symptomatic, and the adaptive. In the intentional approach of interpretation, the readers assume that the text has to be interpreted according to the intended meaning of the author, that they have to decipher. In the symptomatic approach of interpretation, the readers search for symptoms or signs of author's beliefs that the author did not explicitly mention or intent, but have managed to have penetrated the text. The last comes the adaptive approach to interpretation, in which the interpretation is adaptive to the kind of reader it has received. In the adaptive approach, the reader colors the interpretation of the text as per his/ her beliefs.

There is no denying the fact that all texts vary in their narratorial style, narratorial structure, content and perspective, but what determines the success of any work is measured by how interesting, appealing and connective it is to the readers. Both E.M. Foster and Porter Abbott's works on different aspects of how a text is presented to the readers and how meaning is created, serve a significant contribution in the field of narratology and literary criticism. Both the texts offer elaborate accounts of how the author, the reader and the text interact with each other. As my Thesis takes into account four select contemporary retellings of the Mahabharata, let us analyse how the narrative of these modern retellings attempt to modify our understanding of the age-old text by Ved Vyasa. The narrative structure, the mood and tone, the narratorial voice, as well as the various narrative techniques and tools, together help achieve the desired effect in the reader. The various intricacies of the narrative, which appeal to the senses of the reader, help in creating a comprehensive understanding of the text.

Beginning with Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, we see that the central character of the narrative is Draupadi, the Panchal Princess, and how her story contributes to the larger narrative of the Mahabharata. Looking at the structural component, the plot revolves around her life experiences, the struggles she faced, and the choices she made. The novel presents a woman's point of view to tale of the Mahabharata which is majorly male-centric. As Divakaruni says in the Author's note to the novel, "I will recreate the story of the Mahabharat. But in my Mahabharat, I will place a woman in the forefront of the action. I will uncover the story that lies invisible between the lines of the men's exploits".⁶ Narrated in the first person, by Draupadi herself, the story attains credibility and accountability. The story begins with Draupadi remembering early years of her childhood in Drupad's place, and her asking her Dhai Ma to re-narrate to her the story of her birth. Among all the tales that her Dhai Ma, her caretaker, used to tell her, she found the story of her birth the most interesting and appealing. The narrative uses the trope of story in flashback, to elaborate on the events of the past. As Dhai Ma begins to narrate the story, she tells that Draupadi was an unexpected arrival at the fire ceremony held by King Drupad to beget a son. Though a son, who was named Drishtadyumna, was successfully born out of the sacred flames, who also erupted unexpectedly, at everybody's dismay, was a daughter, who was named Draupadi. Drupad had desired a son to avail his vengeance and to kill Drona. But the unexpected arrival of Draupadi along with his brother, left everyone shocked. Later in life, it made Draupadi devise powerful names for herself like, 'Off spring of Vengeance, or the Unexpected One'.⁷ As the first chapter of the novel itself uses various narrative techniques like flashbacks, story-telling, and imagery, it also uses the trope of divine intervention and prophesy. As Dhai Ma explains that when everybody was left disappointed at the birth of Draupadi, the sacred smoke of the fire ceremony rose up high with voices in it to prophesise, "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".⁸ The words of the prophesy set the stage for the events to unfold, that would eventually lead to the War of the Mahabharata.

The novel is divided into 43 chapters, all named after natural elements like, fire, milk, smoke, lotus etc, which provides an organicity to her narrative. The novel, apart from shedding light on the character of Draupadi, also provides for building up on other characters, but from Draupadi's perspective. Beginning from King Drupad, whom she

considered to be a very dominant, controlling male figure in her early life, she always sought freedom of choice when in his palace. Draupadi had always been an inquisitive child and an headstrong woman, seeking to explore the mysteries of the world. As Draupadi tells in her narrative that she hungered for education that only Dhri, his brother, had access to. Being a woman in a man's world, she felt very restricted and frustrated. She had often begged King Drupad to allow her to get education along with Dhri, but it was of no avail. It was only when Krishna had requested King Drupad, on Draupadi's behalf, to allow her to get educated as it was needed to fulfil the prophesy that was made at her birth, that he allowed it half-heartedly. As we get to know about Drupad, through Draupadi, we see that nothing mattered to him, other than his reputation in front of others. The fire ceremony that he had put all his effort into, was undertaken only to quench his vengeance against Drona, which was the most important objective in his life. An important character that Draupadi meets in her life is Karna. Draupadi had seen the portraits of the suitors who were to come to her swayamvara the next day, and the man whose portrait caught her attention the most, was the portrait of Karna. As Draupadi examined, the only ornaments that Karna was shown wearing in his portrait were a pair of gold earrings and a mysteriously patterned armour. She sensed that there was a lot of depth in his portrait that incited her interest into knowing about his life. She says, "His eyes were filled with ancient sadness. They pulled me into them... I no longer cared to see Arjun's portrait".⁹ When Karna, along with all the other suitors arrive in Drupad's palace for Draupadi's swayamvara, he proves to be as skilful or even more skilful than even the Pandavas. But the moment he was to defeat Arjun in a single combat, he was proclaimed to be a Sutaputra, a charioteer's son, and hence stood disqualified from the competition. The incident draws the readers sympathy towards Karna, who inspite of being capable enough in talent, to win Draupadi's hand in marriage, stands alone and insulted in the court because of his caste. Even in Draupadi's eyes, Karna was the best man present at her swayamvara. It was only at Dhri's insistence on Draupadi's Kshatriya dharma to protect family honour, that Draupadi had to let go of Karna and marry Arjun instead. To inform the readers of Karna's history, the author uses the narrative technique of a story in flashback, which Dhri narrates to Draupadi. The interplay of perspectives become very evident in the chapter on Draupadi's swayamvara. The themes of caste system and Kshatriya dharma also strike the readers hard and help air the grievances of the characters. The readers are told that Karna's

story reserves a special place for him in Draupadi's heart as she says, "Every painful detail of Karna's story became a hook in my flesh, binding me to him, making me wish a happier life for him".¹⁰

The two characters whom Draupadi is shown to be the closest to, are Krishna and Dhri. For any problem that Draupadi faces in her entire life, the one person who immediately and sometimes mysteriously comes to her rescue is Krishna. Right from her childhood days, when she strived hard to get education along with her brother, it was only at Krishna's insistence to King Drupad, that she was allowed to get education. Whenever she had even thought of Krishna, he would appear in front of her, or provide her with a vision that would answer all her questions. The divine presence of Krishna, with all his aura and supernatural powers, infuses the text with elements of fantasy, illusion, and also highlights the theme of the cosmic nature of things or 'niyati'. Even in climactic scene of Draupadi's disrobing in the court of Hastinapur, when even her husbands could not protect her, the only person who comes to her rescue is Krishna. At the mere thought of Krishna, Draupadi imagines herself to have transferred to a magnificent garden full of roses. The vision of the garden was bestowed upon Draupadi by Krishna, to help her escape the psychological trauma, while he helped elongate her saree to an endless roll.

The narrative is fully interspersed with various instances of divine interventions, prophecies, visions, dreams etc, The information of any event that happens in the background of the main action, is revealed to the readers through the narrative trope of visions. For instance, when Draupadi along with the Pandavas leave Hastinapur's court to spend the coming years in exile, what happens to Draupadi's Palace is revealed to us through the trope of dreams. On their way to the forest, Draupadi dreams of Duryodhana and his men arriving at her Palace in Indraprastha to take possession of it, but the Palace does not allow him to even touch it as it dismantles itself, through maya, into a pile of ashes and bones. To name another, among many instances, where events in the background are revealed to us through the narrative trope of dreams in when Arjun encounters Urvashi on Indralika mountain. In his search for astral weapons, to prepare himself for the War of the Mahabharata, Arjun goes to Indralika mountain to pray to Shiva. It is there that a celestial woman Urvashi falls in love with him and asks him to satisfy her desire. But Arjun, single-mindedly refuses her and becomes a victim of her curse. Urvashi curses Arjun to become a eunuch for

one year of his life. All of this is revealed to Draupadi in her dreams, as she waits for Arjun in the forest.

While talking about the mystical element, the novel is also interspersed with various instances of prophecies, boons, and foreshadowings. Other than the prophecy at Draupadi's birth, another important prophecy that encounters Draupadi is when she visits the sage's grove to know about her future. Being very inquisitive since childhood, the young Draupadi visits the sacred grove of sage Vyasa and seeks to ask him about her future and how she would "leave a mark on history".¹¹ The sage conjures up spirits to answer Draupadi's question, which tell her that she would marry five husbands, become the queen of queens and own a palace that she would lose later. They also tell her that she would be the cause of the greatest war of the time, and the massacre of millions, even her own children, and her brother's. Moreover, she would eventually die a lonely death and would indeed 'leave a mark on history'. The prediction by the spirits at the sage's grove leaves Draupadi stunned and mournful. The prediction of future scene in the novel arouses interest of the readers in how the events of the Mahabharata would unfold around the protagonist, and how she would play a role in affecting those events. The scene also highlights the theme of human will versus the the Great cosmic design that affects the sequence of events that happen in man's life. After predicting the future for Draupadi, the sage also gives her some advice that would help her handle well the circumstances in future. He says:

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.¹²

As the novel progresses and we move forward in time from Draupadi's childhood to her adulthood and marriage to the Pandavas, many more boons, prophecies and curses unravel. The novel tells that when the Pandavas and Draupadi spent their lives in the forest in exile, the last year of their stay was full of divine visitations. Yudhistira had once met with a yaksha, a divine being with immense powers, who challenged Yudhishtira to answer his 100 philosophical questions, and only then would he free his brothers. As Yudhistira had always been adept in philosophy and dharma, he easily won at the yaksha's challenge, freed his brothers, and was offered a boon. Yudhistira

asked the yaksha for granting him the boon of victory: victory against the six inner enemies that humans are affected to: lust, anger, envy, ignorance, greed, arrogance. The episode not only strengthens Yudhistira as a human being, but also establishes him as 'Dharmraj' or the upholder of dharma.

The second novel, Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya: the Epic of the Kaurava Clan*, also outlines the story of the Mahabharata but from an alternative perspective, the perspective of the defeated team in the War, the Kauravas. The central character of the novel is Duryodhana, or as the novel calls him: Suyodhana. The plot of the novel revolves around the life experiences and struggles of the Kaurava brothers, with special emphasis on Duryodhana, vis-à-vis the Pandavas, their Guru Drona, the elders of Hastinapur, Draupadi, and Krishna. The novel attempts to provide an anti-thesis to the centuries-old Mahabharata of Ved Vyasa, and present to the readers, the so called losers of the war, as being immensely human, believable, and their actions justifiable.

The 'Author's Note' at the beginning of the novel holds major importance, as Neelakantan explains why the character of Duryodhana is worth writing upon, and sheds light on the grave injustice that history has done to him and his brothers in the name of the divine scheme of events and dharma. He says, "here was a brutally honest Prince, brave and self-willed, willing to fight for what he believed in".¹³ At another instance, he says, "His flaws make him human and believable, unlike the protagonists, who wrap themselves in a cloak of dharma, miracles, and divinity, to justify their actions".¹⁴ We can see that Neelakantan advocates for a certain degree of respect and a just treatment for the Crown Prince of Hastinapur, who lost all of his hundred brothers in the Great War. The Pandavas in general, and Arjuna in particular, was guided mentally, spiritually and philosophically by Krishna, to overcome the War of the Mahabharata. The Kauravas, on the other side were left totally unaided by any divine intervention or guidance. Neelakantan says that Duryodhana too deserves worship, for the many virtues he had that were often overshadowed by the dominant narrative of the glory of the Pandavas. Neelakantan says, "Duryodhana's personality comes alive when he makes Karna, the King of Anga at a crucial moment in his life, when he is being humiliated because of his caste".¹⁵ He says that Duryodhana's humble treatment of his friend Karna, when he was rendered totally helpless in front of a thousand people, no doubt raises the stature of Duryodhana to being a very loyal and benevolent friend. His act of elevating a suta boy to the status of a Prince, can also be seen as a rejection of caste system and orthodox mentality. Neelakantan also highlights other

acts of Duryodhana, which make him worthy of appraisal by the people of India. He notes, “His treatment of Eklavya, his refusal to fight for Subhadra, his courage in taking on the Pandavas, and his unwavering faith in his friends; all make him heroic material rather than a despicable villain”.¹⁶ Neelakantan laments the fact that no great literature has been devoted to the praise of Duryodhana. He says that all literary accounts that provide a follow up to the Mahabharata, have been about Draupadi, Karna, Krishna or the Pandavas. He says that except for the Sanskrit play by Bhasa, named *Urubhanga*, which literally means ‘the broken thigh’ and *Gadayudha* by Ranna, there have been no literary works on the life of Duryodhana or any other Kauravas. Neelakantan justifies his act of presenting an alternate view of the Mahabharata from the side of the Kaurava brothers, with special emphasis on the Crown Prince, Duryodhana. Neelakantan says that he chose to name the book ‘Ajaya’ because ‘Ajaya’ means ‘unconquerable’. Another reason why the book is titled ‘Ajaya’ is because it seeks to provide an alternate view to from Ved Vyasa’s Mahabharata which is called ‘Jaya’. Neelakantan’s novel seeks to present the story of the Mahabharata from the point of view of the Kauravas, the side that lost the War. The author also accepts that his work is a work of fiction, and is only an attempt to better analyse the age-old epic from wider and newer angles. He says, “critical thinking is the basis of all our philosophy.... This openness to criticism is what makes the Hindu religion and its traditions unique”.¹⁶ Neelakantan emphasises on the technique of debate, discussion and critical analysis to better understand Hindu religious texts and scriptures. While talking about Duryodhana in the ‘Author’s Note’ to the novel, Neelakantan acknowledges a story of a temple, in a village in Kerala, one of a kind, which is dedicated to Duryodhana of Mahabharata. The temple named Malanda Temple in the village of Poruvazhy in Kerala, has as its presiding deity, the Crown Prince of Hastinapur: Duryodhana. The story which runs in the particular village of Kerala, have made the people revere and worship Duryodhana, since ancient times. According to the story, as Neelakantan mentions, when Duryodhana had once visited the village of Poruvazhy in his search for the Pandavas, he had felt very thirsty, and had asked a woman for water. At that time when caste laws were very strict, Duryodhana had dared to defy caste by accepting water from a Shudra woman and also addressing to her as ‘mother’. The act of humility by Duryodhana towards the low caste woman, made the people of the village of Poruvazhy construct a temple in his honour and worship him as the protector of the poor and needy. In the novel too,

Neelakantan highlights humility and loyalty as the best virtues in the Hastinapur Prince. His help to Karna, when he most needed him, can be cited as an example. Infact, the novel, in presenting the story of Duryodhana, also presents the stories of many other marginalised, like Karna, Eklavya, Shakuni, Ashwatthama, Drona etc. As the Author says, “It is the narrative of the Others- the defeated, insulted, trampled upon- who fought without expecting divine intervention; believing in the justice of their cause” (18). He also rhetorically asks that had Duryodhana been an evil man, why would have the Kuru family, including respectable men like Bhishma Pitamaha, and their teachers, Guru Drona and Kripa, would have fought from his side ?

If we look at the characterisation in the novel, it is loaded with connotative meanings. Neelakantan chooses to call Duryodhana as ‘Suyodhana’ and Dushshasana as ‘Susshasana’, thereby dropping off the derogatory prefix ‘-dur’. Moreover, to describe the actions of the Pandavas, phrases like ‘sheer hypocrisy’, ‘his tormentor’, eldest cousin’s aggression’, ‘Bhima’s brutishness’ are used. Bhima is portrayed as being the bully, since their childhood together, and Arjuna is portrayed as being unjustly pampered by Guru Drona and the other elders at Hastinapur. The readers are told that Arjuna was the blue-eyed boy for Guru Drona, whereas Duryodhana was often scolded even for a slightest mistake. Arjuna was always praised for being the best archer in the country, but the stories of Karna and Eklavya, that Neelakantan includes in the narrative, deny the affirmation. Had Karna and Eklavya been given a fair chance to prove their prowess, they would definitely beat Arjuna in archery. It was only because of the caste barrier, that both Karna and Eklavya did not receive their fair share of praise.

The narrative begins with Bhishma barging in, victorious, in the kingdom of Gandhara in West India. After conquering any kingdom, it was a regular practise to take away the women of that kingdom to their own kingdom. As Bhishma barges in the gates of the palace of Gandhara, he finds Gandhari, the princess of Gandhara, and asks her to take her away as a consort for his son, Dhritrashtra. The bold and courageous Gandhari, knowing the rules of the war, accepts the entreaty but tries to hide her little brother Shakuni, from the eyes of the Grand Regent. She was afraid that had her brother come out of his hiding place, Bhishma could have killed him, as part of war exploits. But the great Bhishma allows her to take her brother along with her, to the kingdom of Hastinapur. The narrative explains the event of Shakuni coming along with Gandhari as being ‘the gravest mistake’ of Bhishma Pitamaha. In Greek

terminology, the tragic flaw by the hero in an epic is called 'hamartia' and the reversal of situation that it causes is called 'peripeteia'. The act of Bhishma Pitamaha taking Shakuni along can be seen as 'hamartia', and the disastrous consequences that it would lead to, for Hastinapur, can be termed as 'peripeteia'.

The main motive of Neelakantan's novel is to voice out the life experiences of the Kauravas, especially Duryodhana; to highlight the injustices they faced at the hands of 'niyati' or the divine scheme of events. The narrative seeks to bring out the positive side in the character of Duryodhana, his worthiness of being talked about as a humble human being and the Crown Prince of Hastinapur. Neelakantan highlights that there can be two facets in a story. As Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata valorise the heroism of the Pandavas, Neelakantan's novel, presents the other side of the story, by seeking to shed light on the heroism of the Kauravas instead. The time span that the narrative covers begins with Gandhari coming to Hastinapur to marry Dhritrashtra, the childhood of Kuru children, their marriages, the climactic scene at the court, and the final events leading to the war of the Mahabharata. The focal point of the narrative remains the perspective of Duryodhana, how the various characters of the novel treated him and his Pandava cousins, and how he they responded to the various events of the Mahabharata. The beginning of the novel that elaborates on the Kuru children's childhood, highlights how the Kaurava brothers have, since the beginning, been treated unjustly and with antagonism. We are told that Guru Drona had always favoured Arjuna and proclaimed him as the best archer in the world. Duryodhana and his brothers, on the other hand, had always been suppressed 'even at the slightest provocation'. In the novel, Guru Drona on once called Yudhishtira the 'next king' which highly annoyed Duryodhana, as he was the Crown Prince of Hastinapur. Pandu had given away the throne to Dhritrashtra, so it was his eldest son, i.e. Duryodhana, who should ideally be called the 'next king'. It is at Guru Drona's provocation that Duryodhana remembers his uncle Shakuni's words of warning against his fellow Pandava brothers.

The narrative can also be seen as exposing the perils of caste system, and how Duryodhana had let go of the caste boundaries by helping his friend, Karna, when he most needed him. As Neelakantan says in the 'Author's Note', that the novel which is mainly about Duryodhana, also includes the stories of many other marginalised as well. Out of the many aspects that can let the characters down or marginalised, the most prominent one is caste. There are three characters, which the novel mentions,

that they were highly abled, but were let down by caste alone. They are- Eklavya, Vidura and Karna. The first one, Eklavya, we are told, belonged to a low caste called the Nishadas. In the ancient times, only the Kshtriya Princes were entitled to Gurukul education, and there was no way the lower caste could ever find any entry into it. Eklavya, the Nishada boy, living in the forest, had always dreamt of learning archery from the Gurus, but could not ever dare to even approach them with a request. Guru Drona was the famed Guru of the Pandava and the Kaurava Princes exclusively. The novel tells that Guru Drona had always upheld Arjuna as being his favourite student and the best in archery, but it was only because there were many others, like Eklavya and Karna, who never got a chance to compete with him. Caste had been their greatest restriction. Being extremely passionate about archery, Eklavya had devised a way of learning the art from Guru Drona himself, but with secrecy. He would secretly observe, from the trees in the forest, Guru Drona teaching the Kuru children tricks in archery, in the day time, and then he would practise them at night when no one was around. Next comes, Karna, the abandoned son of Kunti, who was raised by a charioteer, of the Suta caste. At various points in his life, he was hailed off as being a suta-putra, and was often denied many opportunities that came his way. Unlike Eklavya, Karna had dared to approach Guru Drona, through the way of Vidura, the Prime Minister of Hastinapur, but was outrightly refused. Guru Drona had not only insulted Karna, but also Vidura along with him, who was also of a low caste, irrespective of him being the Prime Minister. Drona humiliates him by saying, “starvation is better than taking orders from a shudra”.¹⁹ He also calls Vidura ‘a usurper’ for bringing forward the plea of Karna to him. Vidura was the illegitimate son of the King, and a half-brother of Pandu and Dhritrashtra. The narrative highlights the despicable condition of Vidura, who, inspite of being very abled and the Prime Minister of Hastinapur, was supposed to be bereft of the palatial luxuries, and live a life in poverty. Coming back to Karna, we are told that it was only Duryodhana, who did not care about Karna’s caste, and proclaimed him the King of Anga, when he was openly insulted in a court full of Princes, for his caste status. We see that all the three above mentioned characters, Eklavya, Karna and Vidura, were no way less in ability, but it was only their caste that let them down. The novel can be seen as advocating for a criticism of the caste system of ancient India.

The conversation between Guru Kripa and Karna, in the novel, can be seen as an eye-opener for the structures of caste system in India. In an instance, when the dejected

Karna approaches Guru Kripa, he enlightens him about caste as the Vedas preach it. Guru Kripa was the brother-in-law of Guru Drona, but he was not very strict about caste as the latter was. Guru Kripa accepts Karna's request for being his disciple, and reveals to him the real significance of caste as the Vedas preach it. He says that as most people have not read the Vedas, they follow it only as the Brahmins preach it. He tells Karna that the Vedas only support caste by action, and never caste by birth, meaning where or to whom a person is born does not define what caste he or she belongs to. He says, "It is too easy to fool the people of our country".²⁰ While enlightening Karna about the true meaning of caste, he says, "If we go strictly by the Vedas, a Brahmin is one who has sought and found brahma,... A Kshatriya is supposed to be one who has found God in action,... A Vaishya is one who has found God in trade,... a Shudra is one who has found God in love, by serving society".²¹ He says that for a society to function properly, the Vedas uphold different categories of caste for people to perform differing roles in society efficiently. He says that all varnas are equally important. The teaching of Guru Kripa serves as a rue enlightenment for Karna which instils a new vivacity in him making him believe that he can do whatever he wants in life.

The next book, Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*, chooses as its narrator, Uruvi, the wife of Karna, and through her unfurl the complexities that underlie the life and character of the charioteer's son, the infamous suta-putra, Karna. By making Uruvi the narrator, the author not only manages to give an intimate account of the difficulties that put down Karna, but also provides a stark commentary on the perils of caste system. In the ancient times, when the caste rules were very strict, a Kshatriya Princess was allowed to marry only a Kshatriya man or even a Brahmin, who was considered higher in hierarchy. Marrying below one's caste, was totally prohibited. As the novel notes, the practise of Anuloma, or marrying a man of higher caste was acceptable, but Pratiloma, or marrying a man a man of lower caste was totally prohibited. Yet Uruvi, chose to challenge the customs and marry the man of her dreams, Karna. Uruvi was born as a Kshatriya Princess in the kingdom of Pukeya, highly pampered by his father and often envisioned by Kunti as her future daughter-in-law. But as the narrative tells, Uruvi was always enamoured by the charm of Karna, more than any of the Pandava brothers. She had always dreamt of marrying him one day, even though she knew that he was of a lower caste.

The novel is divided into 24 chapters, and begins in medias res, when Karna is all grown up, struggling in his life, and is of a marriageable age. As the narrative is conveyed through the eyes of Uruvi, Karna's wife, it begins with portrayal of Karna as a young man, extremely skilled and handsome, as Uruvi first perceives of him. The different chapters explore different facets of Karna's life, like his marriage with Uruvi, his relation with Duryodhana and Ashwatthama, his struggles with his caste status, his relation with Pandavas and Draupadi, the birth of their son Vrishakethu, the circumstances leading to the sacrifice of Karna's gold kavach, and finally the eighteen day war of the Mahabharata leading to his death as well as of the Kauravas. The major themes uncovered in the novel concern the criticism of the caste system as it attempts to highlight the various injustices that Karna had to face, for being a charioteer's son, a low-born. The fact that Uruvi, being a Kshatriya Princess, chooses to marry Karna, against the wishes of her family, and against the norms of the society, can be seen as a very daring act which seeks to subvert the set patterns of the society and challenge orthodoxy. Kavita Kane gives power to the woman character to make her own decisions in life, and even fight against the society to fulfil her dreams.

The narrative highlights the struggles of Karna and the charm he owned, by focusing it through the perspective of Uruvi. Uruvi saw in Karna, an illustrious light, similar to that of the sun; his unwavering devotion towards his friend Duryodhana, and his immense skill in the art of archery. She saw Karna as an extremely handsome and a capable man, who, if his caste is set aside, was no match even for the Pandavas. The narrative begins in the setting of Hastinapur gallery, where a competition of skills takes place among the Kuru brothers, the Pandavas on one side and the Kauravas on the other. But unexpectedly, the limelight of the competition, as well as Uruvi's attention, gets suddenly stolen by a stranger friend of Duryodhana: Karna. At the competition where only Kuru brothers, or more specifically, only Kshatriya Princes were allowed to take part, Karna dares to showcase his skills of archery. We are told, from the perspective of Uruvi, that Karna "seemed to have stolen the glory from the Kuru princes, particularly Arjuna".²² The event turns out to be significant not only because it marks the beginning of Uruvi's attention towards Karna, but also because it is at this very event that Duryodhana turns out to be the strongest pillar of support to Karna, which makes him indebted to him all his life. As Karna attempts to take part in the competition of skills at Hastinapur, and even outdo the Kuru brothers, he is immediately stopped and insulted for his caste status which makes him disqualified

from the competition. Arjuna particularly insults him by calling him an intruder, and accusing him for daring to compete with them. According to the rules of the competition, only Kshatriya warriors, and in no case a low-born, could take part in it. It is then, that Duryodhana stands by the side of his friend, and proclaims him the King of Anga, and hence a Kshatriya.

In order to comment upon the themes of caste system, Kshatriya dharma, marriage and revenge, Kavita Kane gives an elaborate description of Uruvi's swayamvara to Karna and places it in contrast to the swayamvara of Draupadi to Arjuna. Both Uruvi and Draupadi were Kshatriya Princesses, of the kingdom of Panchal and Pukeya respectively, and both hold swayamvara to choose a husband for themselves. What distinguishes their swayamvara from each other is their treatment of Karna. As the narrative tells us that Uruvi was highly enamoured by the charm of Karna, and had always dreamt of him as her future husband, she dares to go against Kshatriya dharma to marry the man of her dreams. She fights with her family and society, and even gets house arrested for a few days before her swayamvara, but does not waver from her path to marry Karna. At the day of the Swayamvara when the Princes of various kingdoms, including the Pandavas, gather, she skips all of them and puts the garland on the shoulders of Karna. Karna was earlier made the King of Anga kingdom by Duryodhana but the rules of swayamvara and the shastras did not favour Uruvi choosing a suta-putra over all the Kshatriya Princes. Her act of choosing Karna over all others, including Arjuna, can be seen as a very emboldening act which seeks to throttle the rigidities of caste system in India. After Uruvi's marriage to Karna, the narrative moves to a flashback when Draupadi in her swayamvara, had done just the opposite of Uruvi. At Draupadi's swayamvara, which happened much earlier than Uruvi's, all the Princes, including the Pandavas and Karna, had gathered for the ceremony. But Draupadi, unlike Uruvi, had rejected and insulted Karna amidst the royal audience, and had chosen Arjuna over him. If Uruvi had let go of Karna's caste status and chosen him over Arjuna, Draupadi had put down Karna because of his caste status and chosen Arjuna over Karna. The humiliation Karna had received had shattered him on the inside and had never thought that Uruvi, another Kshatriya Princess, who choose to do the opposite. The narrative tells us that Karna had asked Uruvi after their marriage, for the reason why a Kshatriya Princess would choose a suta-putra over all the Kshatriya Princes of the country. Uruvi replied that it was her immense love for him that she took the bold decision, and forego the rules of society.

She knew that she had to be brave enough to get Karna, and in the process she had to upset a lot of people- her family, Bhishma Pitamah, and even Kunti, who had always imagined her as a bride for her son Arjuna.

Other than offering a critique of the caste system, the novel can also be seen as putting forward a feminist angle to mythology for the readers to comprehend. Uruvi, the narrator-protagonist of the novel, is not just a woman, but also 'an outcast's queen'. This makes her doubly marginalised- both from the fronts of caste as well as gender. Kane, through her novel, seeks to ventilate the grievance of both a woman in a patriarchal society as well as a low-caste in a varna-dominated society. Uruvi, whose existence was nearly unnoticeable in Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata gets a strong voice in the contemporary retelling by Kavita Kane. In Kane's novel, Uruvi is portrayed as a bold, rebellious, Kshatriya Princess, who chooses to not be dictated by the customs of the society and makes her own decisions in life. The novel begins with her being portrayed as the pampered Princess of the kingdom of Pukeya, highly admired by Bhishma Pitamah and Kunti, who see her as their prospective daughter-in-law. But what is significant is that inspite of all the love and expectations that her family and society have towards her, she chooses to marry against their wishes, to the man she loved the most. In a varna-dominated society where Kshatriya Princesses were allowed to marry only to a man of their own caste, i.e. a Kshatriya or a caste higher, i.e. Brahmin, Uruvi dares to go against the law and marry a low-caste charioteer's son, Karna. Her decision, not only critiques the rigidities of the caste system, but also emancipates her as a woman. Over the course of the novel, we also see her as an equal companion and an advisor to Karna on important matters. Uruvi warns Karna of his friendship with Duryodhana, which would lead to his downfall. Aware of the fact that Karna is indebted to Duryodhana for making him the King of Anga, she tells him that the incident should not make him a slave to Duryodhana. Later in the novel, Uruvi is also seen as a healer to the sick and wounded in war. Very passionate about comforting and healing the needy, the narrative tells us that she started working day and night in various medical treatment camps for injured in war. At many points, she is advised by people to stop practising the art, as it goes against the Kshatriya spirit and dharma. Karna's brother, Shona also reminds her of her status as a warrior's wife and a Kshatriya Princess, but she remains determined to follow her passion. The character of Uruvi is presented as a kind-hearted, but an independent soul, who loves to do social work even if it goes against societal norms or Kshatriya dharma per se.

Moreover, Uruvi can also be seen as a healer of Karna, emotionally and physically. Uruvi helps build up the self-confidence in Karna, by motivating him to not give too much attention to his birth. She tells him that he was born to achieve glory and show courage, irrespective of which caste he belonged to. Also, later in the novel when Karna loses his golden armour to Lord Indra, and is bruised severely, Uruvi proves to be a true companion to him.

The narrative is also abound with many instances of illustrious imagery, especially of the sun. As Karna was the son of the Sun-God, every ray of sunshine on his body seem to illuminate and empower him. The infamous gold kavach and earrings were also gifted to him at his birth by the Sun-God himself. The gold kavach as well as the earrings were not just fancy ornaments but blessings from his father to make him invincible and undefeatable. Kavita Kane, throughout the novel, highlights the exuberance of the golden armour by using plenty of imagery of the sun. The narrative begins with a scene of Uruvi dreaming about a man in golden armour, radiating exuberance, as he walks towards her. In her dream, the man's golden armour is described as, "glittering so fiercely under the blazing sun that it was blinding".²³ At another point in the novel, the narrative says, "the sun does not need to prove its brilliance- its identity lies in its power to illuminate the world and Karna had a similar power".²⁴ At times when Karna is shown as being insulted because of his caste, the imagery of the sun comes back. For example, when Karna is let down at the competition of skills at Hastinapur ground, the sun is shown as disappearing under the horizon. The climax of the novel, as well as Karna's life, happens when he sacrifices his invaluable kavach and earrings to the God Indra, who asks for it. Karna had taken a vow that he would never refuse anyone who comes up to him with any kind of request soon after completes his afternoon prayers to the Sun. He had announced his vow to the public at the Raj Sabha in Hastinapur, as a part of the Vaishnava sacrifice for his friend, Duryodhana. The announcement of the vow had left Uruvi utterly disappointed and helpless as she could imagine the bad consequences of the event. As the novel progresses, and we reach the point when the period of exile of the Pandavas is about to be over, and Karna is told by the Sun-God in his dreams that he would meet Lord Indra that day. Uruvi interprets the dream as a warning for him to be well alert of approaching danger, as she reminds him that war is no more a far cry. It happens to be that that same day Indra, disguised as a brahmin, approaches Karna after his afternoon prayers to the Sun, and asks him for his gold kavach and earrings for his son, Arjuna.

Karna bound by his vow, rips apart the kavach and earrings from his body and gives them to Lord Indra. The move can be seen as a situation of hamartia, or the hero's biggest mistake, as explained in Greek terms, which leads to a situation of peripeteia, or a total reversal of fate. The gold kavach and earrings, which made Karna invincible and undefeatable, were given in sacrifice to help his opponent, Arjuna. The narrative highlights the horror of the event by explaining how severely Karna bled in his chest as well as his ears, as the armour was a part of his body. As Uruvi sees him, she feels horrified and extremely angry at Karna for not being careful even after receiving the Sun-God's warning beforehand. She ponders whether it was Karna's foolishness, or his unmindful generosity that led him to give away his most prized possession at the time when he needed it the most. She chides him for being so over-generous and doing what could lead to his own destruction. The event can also be seen as a manifestation of the theme of God's will versus man's actions. What Karna did on his own was supposed to be just a small element in the grand cosmic sequence of events or 'niyati'. The next novel, *The Kaunteyas* by Madhavi Mahadevan is another fascinating novel which presents the story of Queen Kunti of the Mahabharata. First published in the year 2016, the novel is a fictional masterpiece, narrated in first person perspective by Queen Kunti herself. As Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata is majorly seen as a narrative of war, bravery, victory and defeat, the contemporary version by Madhavi Mahadevan seeks to move away from the male-centric narrative and focus on the life of the woman who gave birth to the 'heroes' of the Mahabharata. By bringing out the narrative of Kunti in the forefront, the sacrificial mother figure of the heroes is provided with more lively and wide characteristics to her personality. The character of Kunti can be seen as a bold, courageous, benevolent, and an ever-enduring woman who has to go through a lot of difficulties all through her life.

The novel is divided into 3 parts, named, 'Kuntibhoja', 'Pandu' and 'The Kaunteyas'. All the 3 cover different phases of Kunti's life: Part 1 focuses on her life at Kuntibhoja's house; Part 2 talks about her life after her marriage to Pandu; and Part 3 covers her later life after the death of Pandu till the final war of the Mahabharata. Overall, the narrative covers all major events in Kunti's life, starting from her childhood at Kuntibhoja's palace as an outsider; her meeting with the Sage Durvasa who grants her 3 boons; her circumstances at the birth of Karna and his final abandonment; her marriage to Pandu and the birth of her 5 sons; her struggles for inheritance for her sons after Pandu's death; her complicated relation with Draupadi;

her discovery about her abandoned child as a sworn enemy of her sons and the circumstances leading to the Great War of the Mahabharata.

The Prologue of the novel provides a very interesting insight into the contents and themes of the novel. It starts with the distinction between what constitutes men's stories and what constitutes women's stories. It says that men's stories are mainly about wars, aggression, courage, victory and glory. It says that men's stories place the highest importance to honour. The story of Mahabharata by Ved Vyasa is also majorly a man's story, or can be seen as coloured by male perspective. Even though it contains many women characters and their stories, the way they are presented is predominantly through a male perspective. Referring to Kunti's story in Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata, the Prologue says, "The tale would be told as men saw fit".²⁵ Another very significant distinction it makes between men's stories and women's stories is that men's stories are preserved in stone, whereas women's stories survive on water. History does not pay much tribute to women's stories, which are not so much about war and glory, but about things perishable and tangible like, feelings, blood, tears. Unlike men's stories that give highest value to honour, what is most important in women's stories is, Endurance. The Prologue describes endurance as a sign of womanliness and aggression as a sign of manliness in narrative stories as well as real life. To provide an interesting twist to this distinction, and to add a critical angle of analysis, the author questions what would happen if women's stories also come to the forefront of readership. If women's stories are written on water, would these stories like water penetrate down and the hardest of rocks. If women start telling their own stories, unfiltered through any male perspective, what change in effect on readership would it lead to. The Prologue then introduces to the readers the story of Queen Kunti of the Mahabharata, through the eyes of Queen Kunti herself.

The novel is well structured and is divided into 3 Parts covering the time span of Kunti's life as well as the events of the Mahabharata. Part 1 begins with introducing Kunti as a young girl at King Kuntibhoja's Palace. We are told that the biological father of Kunti was Shura and she was pledged away to his cousin, Kuntibhoja for being childless for many years. As a result, she was loved by Kuntibhoja but was also considered as an outsider for many, including the Rajmata. As most of her time was spent in the women's quarters, she faced a lot of resistance and dejection during her childhood for being an abandoned child in the palace of King Kuntibhoja. The most significant event in Part 1 of the novel happens to be the visit of Sage Durvasa to

Kuntibhoja's palace. Durvasa was known to be a bad-tempered sage, who often gave curses whenever displeased by the people. In the ancient times, it was a regular custom that no brahmin or sage should be returned unattended from anyone's house that he visits. For the Rajmata, there was no better person than Kunti who could be appointed to serve Sage Durvasa, and hence be at the risk of getting occasional curses. According to her, serving Sage Durvasa would raise the status of Kunti, above that of an abandoned child and also above any looks, connections or richness. The Rajmata's description of her as somebody to be got rid of, and as somebody whose value needed to increase, that would make her more eligible for marriage when the time comes, offended Kunti bitterly. But being an obedient daughter, she respectfully went ahead to accept the proposal and serve the angry Sage. We are told that the arrival of Sage Durvasa would bring immense prosperity and happiness to the kingdom. And with the question of who would dare to be with him and serve him for one year, sorted, everybody in the kingdom seemed to be very relieved. But Kunti, in self-introspection thinks, "the seer's arrival had brought good fortune to the realm. What had it brought me?".²⁶ Then Kunti in speculation wonders that, if serving the Sage Durvasa would make her more marriageable, then at least after marriage, she would have a place to call home where she would not be treated as an outsider, and would bring up her own family. She also promises to herself that she would not do what her parents did to her: to give away any of her children to anybody else. She affirms to herself that she would love all her children equally and never give away any of them. The affirmation comes at a time, when her future was set to change, ironically to just the opposite. Little did she know how the circumstances of the future would make her abandon her first born child, Karna. To everybody's amazement, Kunti did serve the Sage very well for one year, and instead of getting any curse, as the Sage was infamous for, she instead received from him certain boons; boons that would change her life completely.

The motifs of boons, curses, prophecies, divine interventions, run through all narratives of mythology, whether ancient or contemporary. Madhavi Mahadevan's novel is also abound with various such instances. In Part 1 of the novel, Kunti receives the a very potent boon from the Sage Durvasa when she serves him for one year. The boon not only changes her life completely, but also serves as a major turning point that would shape the course of the events of the Mahabharata. Sage Durvasa, on being extremely pleased by Kunti, first prophesised to Kunti, "You will be the mother of

heroes”.²⁷ For Kunti, she thought of it as a standard blessing for a Kshatriya woman, which meant little to her. It was then that the Sage offers to Kunti the infamous boon, the spell of the ‘Vashikaran’ mantra. As he spelled the words of the mantra carefully into Kunti’s ears, he said, “It gives you power over the gods. When you repeat it and meditate upon the god you wish to call, he will appear before you. You, in turn, will accept the *prasad* the divine being bestows on you”.²⁸ The Vashikaran mantra was so powerful that it gave immense power to Kunti to call upon any god of her desire whenever she wanted. The most important part of the boon was the warning attached to it, which said, “Don’t use the mantra before its time”.²⁹

The first use of the mantra happens accidentally when Kunti was casually admiring the beauty of the dawn and had paid respects to the sun when the words of the mantra suddenly stuck her mind. It was a sudden impulse that she was reminded of the words of the mantra that the Sage Durvasa had recently taught her, and had started chanting it. Little had she expected that the Sun God himself would suddenly appear before her in all his glory and vitality. Sage Durvasa had told Kunti that when the God appears, then whatever *prasad* he offers, the enchanter of the mantra is bound to receive it. To Kunti’s absolute fear and astonishment, the Sun God when he appeared before her, had offered to quench Kunti’s desire and give to her a son that would become the greatest warrior of the time. At that moment Kunti’s world nearly shattered as she knew that the society would never accept a child who is born to an unwed mother. She pleaded in front of the Sun God to her maximum strength hoping if by any chance she could take back her spell. She told the Sun God that child so born would have to carry the burden of being called an illegitimate child. But given the power of the Vashikaran mantra, Kunti’s words of plea to the Sun God were of no avail, and hence it resulted in Kunti being impregnated with the Sun God’s child, Karna. In the climactic moment of the forceful conception of Karna to Kunti, various themes of the novel get highlighted. One of them is the theme of God’s divine will versus man’s actions. As the concept of ‘*niyati*’ or things being pre-destined goes on, man’s actions seem to be futile on the larger front. The cosmic design of events by the Gods turn out to be a major deciding factor of whatever happens in man’s life. The birth of Karna, even outside of Kunti’s will, was destined to happen as it was imperative for the consequent events to unfold leading to the War of the Mahabharata. Another issue that pops up in the novel at the climactic scene of the forceful abduction of Kunti is that of feminism and Kshatriya dharma. The moment when Kunti realises that she had done a grave mistake

by enchanting the words of the mantra and calling upon the Sun God, she is reminded of the codes of Kshatriya dharma that dictate a woman to pay utmost importance to her honour. She says to the Sun God, “Honour is everything to a kshatriya. A life of dishonour for your son- is that what you want?”.³⁰ Elsewhere she says, “His son was destined for greatness, but my life was doomed to ignominy.”.³¹ For a Kshatriya woman, honour was considered the greatest virtue and having a child before marriage was no less than a nightmare for the woman. It was therefore that Kunti was completely broken down when she accidentally happened to call upon the Sun God, who made her give birth to her first child, while still a maiden. There are two more instances of the use of the Vashikaran mantra by Kunti, but they happened when she consciously needed them. In Part 2 of the novel, which talks about Kunti’s life with her husband Pandu, we are told Pandu was incapable of producing children because of a curse. Both Kunti and Madri, who were co-wives of Pandu, were often insisted upon by the elders of the family to produce a heir for the kingdom. The narrative tells us that in the ancient times, the Kshatriya Kings had more than one wife, as many as were needed for them to secure a heir for the throne. Moreover, the elder brother, Dhritrashtra’s wife, Gandhari, was blessed with a boon from Lord Shiva that her womb in time would yield a hundred sons. The rajmata, Satyawati, too had often called upon Kunti and Madri and emphasised on the Kshatriya duty of continuing the legacy of the Kuru clan. Amidst all the pressure, from Gandhari, from Satyawati, and from the codes of Kshatriya dharma, the wives of Pandu were left helpless given the fact of Pandu’s incapability to produce children. It was then that Kunti was reminded of the boon that she received from the Sage Durvasa long back, which said that she would become the mother of heroes. Later in the novel, when Kunti and Pandu discuss about their situation regarding the inability to produce offsprings, Kunti tells Pandu that the boon she received by Sage Durvasa could prove to be a saviour in their case. Kunti eventually invokes the words of the Vashikaran mantra and gives birth to three sons. She also helps Madri to evoke the same and it results in the birth of two more sons. Both Kunti and Madri produce in total five sons, who later came to be known as the Pandavas. In Ved Vyasa’s Mahabharata, which is majorly about the rivalry between the Pandavas and the Kauravas and the events leading to the Great War, the narrative of Kunti, with all her struggles, becomes a little overshadowed by the dominant narrative. But in the contemporary retelling of Madhavi Mahadevan in her

novel, the Kaunteyas, the narrative of Kunti comes out in its full glory, to make the readers aware of the heroic narrative of the mother of the heroes as well.

By presenting the narrative of Kunti, Mahadevan also provides a feminist take to the age-old grand narrative of the Mahabharata. As the Prologue opens up the with the discussion of what constitutes women's stories, or women's take on men's stories, the readers are provided with an apt introduction of Kunti's retelling of the story. The title itself provides a hint to the feminist angle associated with the novel. Through the course of the novel, as the readers get to know about how the Pandavas were born from Kunti herself and not Pandu, the immediate question that pops up is why were they named after the father then ? Given the incapability of Pandu of producing offsprings, the sons that Kunti and Madri gave birth to using the Vashikaran mantra, were still called the Pandavas. The title of the novel serves two purposes in the given scenario; first, it highlights Kunti's central role in the narrative; second, it provides an alternative name to the Pandavas, by naming it after their mother, the Kaunteyas. The narrative is abound with many more instances of feminist underpinnings to the tale. In Part 1 of the novel, when the Rajmata suggests to Kuntibhoja that if they send Kunti to serve the Sage Durvasa, she says that the deed will enhance the value of Kunti and make her more marriageable. Also in the beginning of the novel, the Rajmata suppresses Kunti's inquisitiveness by saying that a girl is not supposed to ask too many questions. The narrative tells us that when Kunti serves the Sage Durvasa for one year, it was her immense courage and resilience that pleases the Sage and makes him grant the boon to her. The characterisation of Kunti as very inquisitive, courageous, dutiful and as a counsellor to her husband, infuses a lot of liveliness in the character of Kunti, who was no less than a self-sacrificing mother in Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata. In Part 2 of the novel, we see Kunti as trying to make every effort to counsel her husband to not give up on the throne to Dhritrashtra. Kunti tells Pandu that he is the rightful King of Hastinapur and should be dutiful towards it. The novel also brings forth the narratives of other women which were somehow subsided by the dominant narrative of the war in Mahabharata. The narrative tells us about the plight of the three Kashi sisters: Amba, Ambika and Ambalika, who were forcefully abducted by the Grand Regent of Hastinapur, Bhishma Pitamah. We are told that Bhishma Pitamah had barged in the swayamvara of the Kashi Princesses and forcefully threatened to wage a war if the King does not agree to give his three daughters in marriage to his brothers. In reference to Bhishma's act of abducting the

Kashi Princesses from their swayamvara, the narrative reflects upon the orthodox and male-centric practices of ancient times. It says, “The capture and abduction of a girl of marriageable age is one of the eight forms permitted by the shastras. Not just permitted but, in the olden days, even encouraged. Yes, it would have appealed to Bhishma’s strong sense of pride”.³² Ved Vyasa’s Mahabharata had upheld the character of Bhishma as very responsible and was given immense respect for having taken the vow of celibacy. But Madhavi Mahadevan’s novel seeks to criticise the way women were treated in the ancient times, in the name of dharma and honour. The novel brings up into light many smaller narratives that have been silenced or marginalised under the dominant narratives of valour and vitality of the heroes. The novel also seeks to highlight the immense importance that society places on women’s fertility. When Satyawati calls Kunti and Madri to her chamber, she educates them about their ‘responsibility’ and Kshatriya dharma to give the King a heir. Unaware of Pandu’s inability to produce children, because of Rishi Kindama’s curse, Satyawati puts the onus of producing offsprings on the women as she tries to motivate them. She tells Kunti and Madri about the stories of other women of Hastinapur, and how they were made to bear children, either with their husbands, or if not so, then with the various rishis and brahmins. Satyawati’s conversation with Kunti and Madri brings forth various facets of orthodox and male-centric mentality of the people of ancient times. It also exposes the binding restrictions that the society places on women in the name of honour, responsibility and Kshatriya dharma.

A very important motif that runs through the novel, is, the element of Guilt attached to many of the characters. Three characters who are shown as being deeply imbedded in guilt, for some or the other reason are- Kunti, Satyawati and Bhishma Pitamah. All the three characters have done something or the other wrong, intentionally or unintentionally in their past lives, that they are overwhelmed with guilt for their acts. Starting with the protagonist Kunti, the readers that the biggest guilt that Kunti endures throughout her life, is the abandonment of her first born son, Karna. As Karna was born by the blessing of the Sun-God while Kunti was still unmarried, the rules of the society as well her Kshatriya dharma would not have allowed her to bring forth and take care of the child thus born, respectfully. Kunti had accidentally used the Vashikaran mantra taught to her by the Sage Durvasa, which made her evoke the Sun-God and hence was born their first child from the union. All through her life, Kunti could not let go of the guilt she experienced, for hiding from the society the

circumstances that led to the birth of Karna. The second character who is shown as experiencing extreme guilt in the novel, is the Rajmata, Satyawati. In Part 2 of the novel, when Satyawati calls Kunti to her cottage after her marriage, she educates her about her past life and the choices she made after becoming the Queen. It is then that she tells Kunti about the story of how Bhishma Pitamah took the vow of celibacy and became Bhishma Pitamaha. She tells her that her because of an 'outrageous condition' put forward by Dashraj, her foster father, the then Crown Prince, Satyawati's son, Gangaputra had to abstain from becoming the King. Because of the extreme harshness of the vow of celibacy and the sacrifice by a Crown-King to give up the throne, Gangaputra came to be called Bhishma. Remembering the incident, years later, Satyawati mourns, "Why did I allow myself to become the instrument of such a huge injustice?".³³ The element of guilt was so deeply imbedded in Satyawati that she considered herself to be the reason for the unhappiness of Bhishma. She tells Kunti that even after forty long years since the incident happened, she could not find a good reason to justify her 'crime'. The next character in the novel who manifests guilt, in some way or the other, is Bhishma himself. As the narrative tells us that Bhishma had forcefully abducted from their swayamwara, the three Princesses of Kashi, he could not forgive himself for the act. More than that, his act of forceful abduction, also lead to the death of one of the three sisters, Amba. Satyawati tells Kunti that after the three Kashi Princesses had been brought to Hastinapur, it came to be known that one of the three sisters, Amba, had been secretly engaged to King Shaalva. As a result, she was sent with all the honour, to King Shaalva, hoping that he would accept her. But, as per the Kshatriya obligation on him, he saw Amba as another man's wife and refused to accept her. The immense public humiliation and the outright rejection by the man she loved, led her to commit suicide. The incident had a deep impact on Bhishma psyche as he saw himself responsible for the blunder created after the Princesses' abduction. In all, through the exploration of the various narrative techniques and tools employed by the authors in the select contemporary works, it is evident enough how the authors have maneuvered their way in their attempt to revise, modify or subvert canonical structures. By examining various narrative techniques such as that of Plot, Setting, Story etc. along with the employment of recurrent motifs, themes, imageries, focalisations etc., it becomes evident how a text, especially in the genre of fiction, can become a site of cultural negation and reinforcement.

Notes and References

1. Foster, E.M. *Aspects of the Novel*. Harcourt, Brace and Company. New York. 1927.
p. 43.
2. *ibid.*, p. 47.
3. *ibid.*, p. 47.
4. *ibid.*, p. 69
5. *ibid.*, p. 130.
6. Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Palace of Illusions*. Picador India. 2019. p.
Author's Note, xv.
7. *ibid.*, p. 1.
8. *ibid.*, p. 5.
9. *ibid.*, p. 69.
10. *ibid.*, p. 10.
11. *ibid.*, p. 39.
12. *ibid.*, p. 12.
13. Neelakantan, Anand. *Ajaya: Epic of the Kaurava Clan*. Platinum Press. Mumbai.
2018. p. 11.
14. *ibid.*, p. 11.
15. *ibid.*, p. 11.
16. *ibid.*, p. 11.
17. *ibid.*, p. 13.
18. *ibid.*, p. 11.
19. *ibid.*, p. 51.
20. *ibid.*, p. 57.
21. *ibid.*, p. 57.
22. Kane, Kavita. *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*. Rupa Publications India. New
Delhi. 2013. p. 3.
23. *ibid.*, p. 1.
24. *ibid.*, p. 79.
25. Mahadevan, Madhavi S. *The Kaunteyas*. Speaking Tiger Books. New Delhi, 2022.
p. Prologue, 1.
26. *ibid.*, p. 43.
27. *ibid.*, p. 55.

28. *ibid.*, p. 56.
29. *ibid.*, p. 56.
30. *ibid.*, p. 63.
31. *ibid.*, p. 64.
32. *ibid.*, p. 127.
33. *ibid.*, p. 124.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The enduring presence of the Mahabharata across centuries shows not only its magnanimity but also its immense ability to impact culture and society of all times. It is not just a function of religious reverence or cultural inheritance, but also a result of its exceptional ability to be interpreted and adapted in a number of ways. As the text of the Mahabharata accounts for the longest in the world, it is a magnanimous web of stories, philosophies, theories and myths, all juxtaposed together to form the essence of Indian culture. The various translations, versions and retellings only add to the richness and diversity of the text. Many writers across centuries have sought to revisit and revise the text, thereby adding their own meanings to the text. Whether it be the issue of caste, women, social practices etc, the text of the Mahabharata offers a plethora of sites to comment, analyse and reflect upon.

The various contemporary retellings of the Mahabharata attempt to relocate the story of the Mahabharata in the context of modern day theories and make it relevant to modern day audiences. The significance of these retellings lie in their ability to not just to revisit ancient literature but also to enliven it in accordance to the dynamic nature of the society. Apart from working as a mirror to various ideologies of the society, these literatures also provide new and alternate ways of analysing and interpreting psychologies of the people. As my Thesis takes into account the reimaginings of select characters from subaltern point of view, the characters who were somehow subaltern in the ancient tale get to occupy the front stage and provide their take on the story of the Mahabharata. In such a hypothetical situation, if Draupadi were to narrate the story, she would choose the woman's perspective to do it. Similarly, if Karna was given the opportunity to retell the story, his story would have been colored with his experiences related to the caste based injustices in society and so on. Analysing the same story but from different points of view, makes it more comprehensive, inclusive and complete in nature. Moreover, the contemporary reader who understands subalternity in the wake of new schools of thought after the British colonial era, is well able to resonate with the alternate interpretations of these texts. There is no denying the fact that as the concept of identity gains new importance in the modern era, especially after the Post-colonial times, the need to voice out the subaltern

has certainly gained new importance. The constant need to negotiate identity and create space for the earlier marginalised, so to say the subaltern, have become major areas of focus for the Post-colonial writers.

Modern retellings also perform a dual function, that of preservation and transformation. By revisiting the Mahabharata, these contemporary retellings do keep the cultural lineage of the sacred text alive along with revising it according to modern needs of the society. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* subvert the patriarchal renditions of the epic by depicting the story from the point of view of Draupadi. Similarly, Kavita Kane's *Uruvi: The Outcast's Queen* provides a critique of the caste system which was prevalent in the ancient times. She does so by bringing to the forefront the injustices meted out to Karna just because of his caste status and also highlighting the immense potential of Karna had he not been a victim of the said social practise. On a similar note, the remaining two select contemporary retellings also seek to question and critique ancient value system thereby proving newer alternatives of interpretation. All in all, these contemporary retellings raise critical questions about issues like- dharma, gender, caste and power; thereby contributing to the pluralistic and more inclusive understanding of the epic. They can also be seen as sites for opening up spaces for dialogue and discussion around what is considered morally right or wrong, as per the evolving nature of the society and readership.

Also, the fact that more and more contemporary writers are attempting to revise, and modify the ancient tale of the Mahabharata, is also a testimony of the premise that Mahabharata continues to serve as a living document. The modern retellings not only add new dimensions to the text, but also the inherent ideologies in it more debatable and approachable. The constant engagement of ancient ideas of society and culture with the contemporary issues of feminism, caste, postcolonial identity, subalternity and secularism, makes the text of the Mahabharata more inclusive in nature. Studying traditional and modern texts together, and drawing parallels between the two help in understanding the nature of discourse and culture. The immense ability of the Mahabharata to function as a cultural artefact as well as offer ground for newer interpretations, marks the greatness of the epic over times.

The famous poet from the Romantic era, T.S Eliot, in his book titled *Tradition and Individual Talent* talks about the constant need for poets to interpret the past in light of the present. He says that a poet only creates his work of art by building upon the work of his predecessors and not in isolation. His originality or 'talent' can only be

characterised by his integration with ‘tradition’, or the work done by the poets already dead in the past. He says that a writer must be grounded in tradition, and by ‘relation to tradition’, he does not mean that the poet meekly follows the ways of his previous generation or blindly adheres to his predecessors. By establishing a relation with tradition, the poet must realise that ‘tradition’ means “a perception not only of pastness of the past, but of its presence”.¹ He says, “The historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional”.² In simple words, a poet must write under the awareness that his work is only a build upon the existing canon of literature, which he reshapes and is shaped by simultaneously. This proposition is “what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporary”.³ To achieve the desired goal, he says that the writer must be detached, in terms of personal emotions, from his work of art, and instead build something universal and objective. He terms this process, the process of Depersonality.

In a nutshell, while talking about the author and his work of art, Eliot says that any work of the present is always affected by the pastness of the past which the author builds upon in his own creativity. He means that no work functions in isolation and is indispensably affected by the works of his predecessors, to which he contributes in his own capability. The contemporary writers who attempt to retell the story of the Mahabharata perform two functions: one, is to provide a contemporary take on the Mahabharata and make it more receptive to modern day audiences; and two, by offering newer perspectives, the contemporary author enhances the aura and readership of the ancient Epic by making it more approachable and fluid in nature. The fact that the ancient text of the Mahabharata can be interpreted in so many ways even after centuries of readership, makes us appreciate the dynamic nature of the text itself. The dynamism of the text that allows it to be modified, retold and interpreted in a variety of ways compliments the dynamism of the Indian society. Since the beginning of the Indian civilisation to the contemporary times of 21st century, the Indian society has gone through a lot of changes, in terms of its beliefs and worldviews. The study of the ancient text of the Mahabharata with the various contemporary retellings of the same can be seen as a testimony of the given premise.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions* tries to subvert the patriarchal underpinnings of Ved Vyasa’s Mahabharata. The role and status of women in society as depicted in Ved Vyasa’s Mahabharata and in the contemporary retellings differ to a

great instance. The ancient Indian society which was largely patriarchal treated women as subordinate to men, with no real voice of their own. The Indian Epics mainly focused on the heroism and valour of men; and sang of their stories of victories and defeats with little focus on the women of the society. Draupadi, though was the central female character of the Mahabharata, had to suffer a lot of injustices at the hands of the patriarchal nature of the society. Born unexpected from the fire yagna of King Drupad, which he undertook in order to beget a son, Draupadi has to face the pangs of patriarchal society since childhood. Also, being married to five husbands without her formal consent, was no less an injustice. Moreover, she was given the boon of restoration of virginity every time she moved from one husband to the other. This very well shows the importance to purity that the society places upon women. The only resource through which she empowered herself was education, through which she could question the men in the Assembly Hall at the time of her infamous scene of disrobing. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni highlights these very issues in her contemporary retelling of the Mahabharata from Draupadi's point of view. The modern audiences of the 21st century which are inadvertently influenced by the global views of Feminism are a witness to the changing status of women in society. With the tightening legislation and constitutional provisions which provide safeguards to women against undue exploitation and grant them right to equality, the society becomes more and more respectful towards women. In the present day Indian society, the Constitution provides the following safeguards to women: Article 14 and 15, which provide the fundamental right to equality and prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex alone.⁴ Article 21 which provides the fundamental right to personal liberty, also empowers the women in society.⁵ Other than these fundamental rights, various legislations were also passed over the years which help grant equal status to women in society and help fight the evil of patriarchy.

To take into account, another novel, namely Kavita Kane's *Uruvi: The Outcast's Queen*, its narrative also reflects a change in the nature of society over the centuries. As the novel vehemently critiques the injustices caused by the caste system, it definitely serves as a foil to the portrayal of caste system in Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata, especially in reference to Karna. In 21st century India, discrimination on the basis of caste has been prohibited under the Constitution; whereas in the ancient India, caste system was very prevalent in the society. Article 14 and 15 of the Indian Constitution guarantees right to equality and no prohibition of discrimination on the

basis of caste alone; as Fundamental rights.⁶ Article 17 of the Constitution prohibits Untouchability in all its forms.⁷ Various other legislations also have helped eradicate the social practise of caste system from the country. As we take into account Kavita Kane's contemporary retelling of the Mahabharata from the point of view of Karna, we realise the grave injustices that people of lower caste had to go through, irrespective of the degree of merit they possessed. In the novel, we see Karna as the best archer in the whole of Aryavarta; his skills surpassing those of Arjun as well. But inspite of his merit, he is never given due recognition and appreciation. The greatest humiliation to Karna comes when he is rejected by Draupadi at her swayamvara, only on the grounds of being a suta-putra or a low born. At the swayamvara, King Drupad, Draupadi's father, had organised a skills competition for all her suiter Princes. Where all the Princes were given a chance to take part in the competition, Karna was disqualified as soon as his status as a low-born was disclosed. Kane's novel tells us that Karna could have easily aced the competition, defeating all the other Princes the Pandavas. But the fact that he was outrightly debarred from the competition left him with no chance of fair play. The story of another character of the Mahabharata, Vidura, also serves as an example of how caste system affected people with merit. Out of the three brothers, Dhritrashtra, Vidura and Pandu, it was Vidura who was the most knowledgeable of all. But, just because of his caste status, that he was born out of a slave woman, that he had no right to fight for kingship. The only role that he was given in the court was that of an advisor. The contemporary retelling of the Mahabharata by Kavita Kane, which focuses on the question of caste, aptly questions these very issues as portrayed in Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata.

The third novel, namely *Ajaya: Epic of the Kaurava Clan* seeks to redefine the very issues of dharma and adharma; right and wrong; karma and niyati. The select contemporary retelling focuses on the lives of the Kauravas, the so-called antagonists of Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata. The title of the novel is significant enough as it functions as an anti-thesis to Jaya, the alternative name to Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata. As the 21st century contemporary society focuses on voicing out the subaltern, Neelakantan, seeks to revisit Indian mythology and labour to voice out the downtrodden or unsung characters. He chooses to portray Duryodhana as the protagonist of the novel and narrate the story from his point of view, starting right from his childhood. As Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata shows Krishna being the constant support and guide to the Pandavas, and supporting their actions and decisions as being

flagships of dharma. On the other hand, Neelakantan's novel provides an objective analysis of both Pandavas' and Kauravas' actions, highlighting how the latter functioned unaided by divine support. Neelakantan makes the Kauravas look as human as possible, thereby making the readers connect with them. The Pandavas are depicted as being recipients of undue support, be it Krishna, or Bhishma Pitamah or even Drona. The novel brings to light Duryodhana's claim to being the legitimate heir of the kingdom of Hastinapur, though everyone around him seem to unilaterally accept Arjuna as the king since childhood. The novel shows how Drona treated Arjuna as his favourite student and tried to suppress the inquisitiveness and rebellious spirit of Duryodhana. It is important to note that Neelakantan's novel, while voicing out Duryodhana's story in particular, also bring to light the stories of other subaltern characters such as Karna, Eklavya etc. As the theory of subaltern gains eminence in the 21st century world, more and more contemporary writers focus on bringing out the hidden narratives of the marginalised.

The next novel, Mahadevi Mahadevan's *The Kaunteyas* also shows a difference in ideologies of ancient India as compared to modern times of 21st century. The plot of the novel seeks to bring into account the story of another female character, namely the mother of the heroes of the Mahabharata: Kunti. While in Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata, as Kunti is largely portrayed as a dutiful mother and a Queen, her character remains confined by the patriarchal structures of her time. Overshadowed by the larger issues of dharma and lineage as per the demand of the Epic, her character remains primarily as a facilitator of dynastic continuity, and a connector the chain of actions that lead to final war of the Mahabharata. The narrative rarely focuses on Kunti as an independent individual with her own desires and dilemmas and struggles of life. In contrast, in the contemporary retelling by Mahadevan, Kunti is seen as the central consciousness of the novel, a woman who functions not as victim of destiny, but as a manipulating subject whose actions and decisions set a series of actions in motion that culminate in the final war of the Mahabharata. In Mahadevan's novel, Kunti is seen as an important character who navigates through quagmires of power, desire, guilt, and agency in a world that denies her autonomy. This contemporary narrative not only seeks to reclaim Kunti's silenced voice but also to interrogate the socio-political ideologies that historically marginalized women within epic traditions. Also, the novel foregrounds motherhood as a complex entity, powerful and sometimes oppressive when chained by patriarchal expectations. This characterisation comes in contrast to the traditional

foregrounding of motherhood as sacrificial and self-effacing in nature. The novel does not portray Kunti as a mute submissive figure sorrowed by what destiny had chosen for her. Instead, it portrays her as the conscious independent woman who takes her own informed decisions for the betterment of herself and her family. After the birth of Karna by the unintentional use of the Vashikaran mantra; she consciously makes use of the said power bestowed upon her to beget her next two children and thereby continue the Kuru lineage. Also, it is important to note how significant the title of the novel is, which focuses on the story of Kunti and her sons, as ‘the Kaunteyas’ in contrast to them being called by the name of their father, as ‘the Pandavas’.

It is significant enough how the novel can also be seen a site of ideological contestation as it resists the deterministic ethos of the epic and instead presents a modern, humanistic perspective that values individual subjectivity and questions inherited norms. Kunti’s introspective narrative serves not only to reclaim her silenced voice but also to critique the structures—familial, religious, and political—that dictated her fate. Mahadevan’s novel, *The Kaunteyas* disrupts the epic’s androcentric narrative by portraying Kunti not merely as the mother of heroes, but also as a political agent who makes informed decisions to secure power for her sons. However, Mahadevan also exposes personal costs that Kunti had to bear for it, like estrangement from Karna, the burden of guilt, and her emotional alienation. In doing so, she exposes the contradictions within the epic’s ideology of righteous action or dharma, particularly when filtered through a female experience. Thus we can say that Mahadevan’s retelling asks whether these traditional frameworks of dharma and niyati adequately account for the voices they silence.

As we study the contemporary retellings of the Mahabharata by the select authors, it is important to note that these authors have under their name many more publications which similarly attempt to voice out the experiences of the lesser known, marginalised or sidelined characters from mythological as well as historical tales. For instance, if we begin with Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, she had, after the publication of *The Palace of Illusions*, taken up the task of voicing out many more significant, strong yet marginalised women such as Sita of Ramayana and Maharani Jindan Kaur of the Sikh empire in India. Her book, *The Forest of Enchantments* is a retelling of the Ramayana from Sita’s perspective, on the same lines as *The Palace of Illusions* was from Draupadi’s perspective. And as concerns the story of Maharani Jindan Kaur, it is not a mythological retelling, but a historical-biographical novel based on the life of

Maharani Jindan Kaur, the Last Queen of Punjab and the wife of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. It documents the life of the eponymous Queen, her rise, resistance and struggle against the colonial empire of the British in India. It is evident that even her recent novels foreground her alignment towards centralising women in historical and cultural memory of people, be it through a retelling of myth or simply a documenting of the life of a historical figure. To sum up, we can say that the main onus of her novels remain the attempt to reinterpret dominant narratives through the lived experiences of women who have been marginalised within traditional discourse.

Moving on to the next author, Anand Neelakantan too in his more recent works continue to write on the same lines of thought as depicted in his *Ajaya* series. Even in his recent novels, he attempts to voice out the narratives of the so-called antagonists or ‘villians’ of the epic along with other marginalised figures. In *Vanara: The Legend of Baali, Sugreeva and Tara* Neelakantan similarly interrogates the Ramayana cycle from the vantage point of the vanaras, simultaneously reframing and retelling the story of Baali–Sugreeva–Tara triangle as a story about tribality, bondage, social exclusion of those cast out by mainstream epic narratives. Also in his famous Baahubali trilogy which comprises the books- *The Rise of Sivagami*, *Chaturanga* and *Queen of Mahishmathi*- he reimagines the grand mythic universe by tracing the origins of Mahishmathi empire from the point of view of the woman-ruler, Sivagami devi, who is depicted as a strong empowered character determined to protect and preserve the honour of her family and empire. Earlier she is portrayed as an orphan child, with all her struggles, who seeks justice for her family and then grows up to become the Rajmata of the empire and makes choices that reshape the fate of the kingdom. Read together with the *Ajaya* series, these works form a clear line of thought in which Neelakantan deliberately stages his narratives- a counter to epic narratives coupled with his desire to centralised marginalised and defamed characters. He uses fiction to amplify certain voices, reimagine the mythic narratives, and make approachable the stories of characters that traditional texts marginalize (women, tribal groups, so-called villains) thereby making subaltern subjectivity legible to modern day readers.

Next in line, if we look at the recent works of the other two select authors, the women, Kavita Kané and Madhavi Mahadevan, their works can be parallelly analysed to uncover their shared pursuit of reclaiming epic and mythological narratives from a

feminist and subaltern point of view. To begin with, Kavita Kane in her novel, *Saraswati's Gift*, talks about the goddess Saraswati as a deeply introspective and intellectually empowered figure, presenting her not merely as a divine icon but as a voice of wisdom, creativity, and inner liberation. Through Saraswati's reflections, Kane highlights themes of knowledge, self-realisation, and feminine autonomy, emphasizing how true power lies not in ritual or hierarchy but in the courage to think, question, and discover one's own truth. The narrative thus reclaims a mythological female figure from passive reverence and situates her within a more assertive, self-aware space. In her other novel, *Lanka's Princess*, she chooses to talk about a very formidable woman character from the Ramayana, the infamous Surpanakha, Ravana's sister, who allegedly attempted to lure Lord Rama away from Sita. She foregrounds Surpanakha's inner conflict as a product of prolonged neglect, emotional betrayal, and the deep-seated misogyny of the society, portraying her not as a caricatured villain but as a complex, wounded woman striving for dignity, love, and recognition. Kane's narrative reveals how Surpanakha's rage and defiance emerged from systemic marginalisation, thereby repositioning her as a subaltern figure deeply trapped under dominant patriarchal narratives.

Meanwhile, Madhavi Mahadevan in her novels *The Forgotten Wife: The Story of Hidimbi and Bheem* and *Bride of the Forest: The Untold Story of Yayati's Daughter* majorly takes into account the stories of women characters who appear only fleetingly in the canonical epics yet bear within them powerful narratives of abandonment, resistance, and survival. In *The Forgotten Wife: The Story of Hidimbi and Bheem*, Mahadevan reclaims Hidimbi from the margins of the *Mahabharata*, presenting her not merely as the rakshasi-wife of Bhima but as a woman negotiating her identity, desire, and belonging in a world that refuses to acknowledge her humanity. Likewise, in *Bride of the Forest: The Untold Story of Yayati's Daughter*, Mahadevan foregrounds the tragic life of Yayati's unnamed daughter, whose story—often reduced to a cautionary tale—becomes, in Mahadevan's retelling, a profound exploration of gendered injustice, filial duty, and the systemic silencing of women within patriarchal and royal structures. Through these works, Mahadevan not only restores narrative depth to characters eclipsed by dominant heroic arcs but also underscores the emotional, political, and cultural consequences of denying women their agency. Her novels thus align with the broader subaltern and feminist project of contemporary

retellings, offering counter-narratives that challenge epic authority and shed light on the lives of those historically pushed to the periphery of mythic memory.

A very important author who talks about myths in the context of Indian society is Devdutt Pattanaik. The famous physician and mythologist, Pattanaik “is a much sought after speaker and culture consultant, who uses mythology as a toolkit to make sense of work, life, business and entrepreneurship”.⁸ He “writes on relevance of mythology in modern times, especially in areas of management, governance and leadership. He defines mythology as cultural truths revealed through stories, symbols and rituals”.⁹ The author, in all of his works on mythology, analyses stories from the Indian epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata in order to bring out to the people of India the essence of Indian values and culture. He proposes that all stories in the mythologies have hidden meanings that need to be sought after and uncovered by the people. In order to decipher layers of meanings hidden under symbols and motifs of mythological stories and uncover the deeper cultural truths beneath them, he has written a number of books which focus on different facets of Hindu mythology and religious beliefs. In the famous book *Myth = Mithiya: Decoding Hindu Mythology*, he talks about myths as ‘windows to the soul’. What he means is that myths work as pathways to uncover truths which are needed to experience cultural and traditional ethos of our society. He says that the myths work as symbolic narratives constructed, reshaped and passed over from generations to generations. To quote from his own website, which provides a brief description of all his works, he says “Constructed over generations, Hindu myths serve as windows to the soul, and provide an understanding of the world around us”.¹⁰ The website also describes his unique style of writing by saying, “(he) retells sacred Hindu stories and decodes Hindu symbols and rituals, using a unique style of commentary, illustrations and diagrams”.¹¹ He sees these symbols and rituals, much beyond the superficial level, as cultural codes that reflect deeper philosophical and psychological meanings. He uses various tactics of interpretation, comparison, analysis, amalgamation of myth, art and lived experience to decode the layers of meaning deep embedded in Hindu thought. For example, Pattanaik explains many curious episodes like, why the Kauravas end up in heaven while the Pandavas (except Yudhishtira) go to hell or why Rama is considered a model figure inspite of his act of abandoning Sita. These analyses demonstrate his method of interpreting myth as metaphor or symbol to uncover hidden meanings in these stories. In short, *Myth = Mithya* works as an analytical treatise that

seeks to guide readers to see Hindu epics as dynamic stories that encode cultural values within them.

The book can be seen as offering an encyclopaedic exploration of Hindu mythology, not merely as a collection of religious stories but as a whole cultural belief system that reflects and influences collective perception of the people. The central argument of the book is encapsulated in the title itself, which says 'myth' is 'mithiya' which means 'partial truth' in Hindi. To explain this premise, he explains how ancient philosophers termed myth as '*mithyā*' which meant 'conditional truth' in contrast to '*sat*' or '*satya*' which means 'absolute truth' in Hindi. What he means to say is that there is nothing like total falsehood or total truth in myth. Myth is but half-truth half-fantasy in order to convey certain meanings to the people. Pattanaik contrasts myth with history, as he defines the former as "a truth that is believed," and the latter as "a truth that can be proved,". He adds the third idea, to myth and history: fantasy, which is "a truth that is nobody's truth".¹² Likewise, he provides a very comprehensive explanation of what constitutes myth in society and is the readers' role towards it. To further explain myth or mithiya, he says that since it is neither total falsehood nor total truth, it can likely be seen something **that is contextual, layered, and subjectively experienced**. It is a partial truth in contrast to a fact, which is an actual truth.

Another key argument of Pattanaik's book is that **there exist multiple truths in the world and** myth represents one of them. He divides the type of truths into two categories: some are objective truths, such as truths that are backed by scientific evidence, while others are subjective truths or truths which are based on faith or belief. He says that people expect myths to represent objective truth, but that is not the case as objective truths are only the repository of scientific facts. What myths represent are the subjective truths or truths based on belief or faith. In an article of Times of India, which quotes Pattanaik, it says, "There are many types of truth. Some objective, some subjective. Some logical, some intuitive. Some cultural, some universal. Some are based on evidence, others depending on faith. Myth is truth which is subjective, intuitive, cultural and grounded in faith".¹³ In this way, even though myths are not scientifically backed, they depict certain types of truth, conditional truths, the meanings of which needs to be deciphered by the people. Myths may not have objective empirical support but they do provide insights to the value and cultural system of the society. By recognizing myths as conditional truths

and as windows to deeper cultural knowledge, Pattanaik says we should appreciate their value without demanding any scientific proof.

Foregrounding Pattanaik's arguments to understand the nature of myths in society, and the role reader plays in uncovering hidden meanings or 'truths' behind them, is extremely significant in the field of modern mythological studies. As my Thesis focuses on contemporary retellings of the Mahabharata from the perspective of subaltern characters, we can see how Pattanaik's book can function as a foundational treatise in exploring alternate "truths" which lay dormant under the dominant narrative of Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata. As Pattanaik says that myths lie in the buffer zone of being neither total truth nor total falsehood, it can be concluded that myths are subjective in nature. It also means that myths have the potential to mutate or evolve over time as per the changing needs of the society. Myths being half-truth half-illusion can also imply that multiple 'truths' can co-exist within the epic tradition. While the dominant narrative of the mythological text becomes the 'accepted' version of 'truth' pervading the minds of the people, there can certainly be many more hidden, subsided or silenced "truths" to the same story. Pattanaik's claim to multiplicity of truths validates the premise of there being various versions of the story. The contemporary retellings of the Mahabharata from subaltern perspective also seeks to bring forward the different narratives which were somehow overlooked or subsided under the dominant narrative. The study also works to highlight the pluralism embedded in Indian mythology and religion.

Another argument that Pattanaik makes in his book is that myths work as "vehicle" for ideas. They come encoded with complex philosophical and cultural concepts in the form of symbolic narratives that need to be accessed and decoded by the general public. Rather than presenting the ideas directly, as empirical knowledge does, myths in fact translate the knowledge into stories and symbols that convey a society's values, culture, and ethical dilemmas. This revalidates the earlier argument which says that myths operate in the realm of subjective truth or 'mithiya', offering meanings concealed in half-truth half-fiction. Also, myths shape how individuals understand themselves, and their relationships with the world, parallelly legitimizing or challenging social structures such as that of caste, gender roles, and power dynamics. We can conclude by saying that myths act as a container and preserver of culture, subtly transmitting ideas across generations while also providing a dynamic framework that can evolve with shifting ideologies of the society over time.

Pattanaik's arguments regarding social structures as being culturally embedded, rather than divinely ordained, opens up the possibilities of differing interpretations capable of challenging hierarchies. The social systems of patriarchy, caste system etc. which were so prevalent in ancient times, are found to be mutable, debatable, and capable of even being subverted over the centuries. As times change and ideologies change, the various social structures and practices which were thriving in ancient times, become the subject of criticism and analysis under modern theories. We can see that myths that can be used to shape and reinforce ideologies, also have the capability of overturning the same as per the dynamic nature of the society. With the rise of modern theories of feminism, equality, post-colonialism and subalternity, the hegemonic structures of ancient narratives get revised and modified by the contemporary authors. Moreover, Pattanaik's emphasis on dharma being fluid and context-specific in nature, allows modern writers to question and critique dominant notions of right and wrong (dharma and adharma), as ordained in sacred ancient text of the *Mahabharata*. The premise gives weightage to the attempt of retelling the Mahabharata through the eyes of characters like Karna, Draupadi, Duryodhana, Kunti, Eklavya, Shikhandi etc. The various contemporary retellings which seek to decentre the Kshatriya, male, hegemonic narrative, provides an interesting angle on interrogating the principles. The various feminist, Dalit and caste based retellings provide a means to reinterpret the actions of the characters of the Mahabharata from modern perspective.

To conclude, we can say that Pattanaik's work, *Myth = Mithya* provides both a philosophical foundation and a hermeneutic framework in the light of which we can analyse how contemporary writers are attempting to reconfigure epic narratives to recover silenced voices. It also offers crucial theoretical tools which help us understand how the select retellings engage with myth to challenge dominant narratives of the past. Moreover, by emphasizing that myths are mutable and open to reinterpretation, Pattanaik's arguments provide a validation for the efforts of contemporary writers who seek to foreground subaltern voices, such as that of women, lower castes, queer identities etc, all within the epic tradition. Also, Pattanaik's preposition that mythology should be seen as a "vehicle" of ideas suggests that myths are meaning-making tools and contain symbols that convey cultural ideology. So, any interpretation or interpretation of mythology should be seen an attempt of understanding the meanings of the symbols and stories they convey. Also,

his recognition of mythology's role in both sustaining and challenging power structures directly supports contemporary literary efforts to reclaim the epic from the margins. Its interpretive pluralism aligns with the core objective of subaltern retellings: to reclaim the epic as a site of cultural negotiation rather than an immutable repository of tradition.

Coming back to the context of the modern retellings of the Mahabharata, it becomes very clear how mythology impacts and reflects the dynamism of the society, thereby being ever evolving and receptive to various interpretations. The magnanimous text of the Mahabharata, which has served readership over generations and generations, has certainly stood the test of time. The number of translations, versions, adaptations and retellings only add to the cultural richness of the text. As the Thesis focuses on different perspectives to the tale, it makes the text even more comprehensive and all-encompassing. The subaltern also gains popularity in the modern times especially as the countries recover from the brutal colonialism and imperialism. Retelling the Mahabharata from the perspectives of select subaltern characters makes the age-old tale relevant and acceptable to modern day audiences, who stand influenced by the global liberal ideas of feminism, subalternity, equality etc.

Modern retellings of the Mahabharata from subaltern perspective also validates the claim that any story in history and mythology has different facets to it, depending upon the perspective from which it is told. Moreover, as these texts majorly sing of the stories of the victorious, there certainly lay overlooked many more narratives, of characters who were somehow sidelined or were the ones defeated. Studying the Mahabharata from the perspective of these characters make us focus on the emotional side as well of the epic, rather than just focusing on heroic aspect of it. As the females, the downtrodden, the outcasts and the defeated get to present their stories and their take on the events of the Mahabharata, the text comes up as an ever-evolving, all-inclusive and a living document.

Notes and References

1. Eliot, T. S. "Tradition and Individual Talent." 1919. *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, Methuen, 1920, p. 50.
2. *ibid.*, p. 50.
3. *ibid.*, p. 50.
4. *Constitution of India*. Ministry of Law and Justice, Government of India, 1950, <https://legislative.gov.in/constitution-of-india>. Accessed 7 Aug. 2025. Art. 14 and 15.
5. *ibid.*, Art. 21.
6. *ibid.*, Art. 14 and 15.
7. *ibid.*, p. Art. 17.
8. Devdutt. Devdutt Pattanaik, <https://devdutt.com/>. Accessed 2 August 2025.
9. *ibid.* (n.8).
10. *ibid.* (n. 8).
11. *ibid.* (n.8).
12. *ibid.* (n.8).
13. Devidayal, Namita. "There's no one truth." *The Times of India*, 15 Sep 2009, timesofindia.indiatimes.com/subverse/theres-no-one-truth/articleshow/5010977.cms. Accessed 25 July 2025.

SUMMARY

SUMMARY

Since the beginning of the Indian civilisation that the Mahabharata came into being, the text has been considered a sacrosanct ancient text and a foundational treatise of what comprises Indian value and cultural system today. The grandeur of the text not only stems from its magnanimous volume, but also its vast encyclopaedic nature that makes it a timeless repository of philosophical, social and cultural wisdom. To understand it simply as a story of rivalry between the two brother clans, the Pandavas and the Kauravas, would be a misnomer. The text has, over the centuries served as a civilisational text, formulating the very foundations of Indian thought and belief system.

But as the mythology embedded in the Mahabharata got consolidated after a long history of the practise of oral-storytelling, it is important to understand that what we consider the ‘truth’ of the story of the Mahabharata stems from the ‘only’ account of the story available i.e. the Ved Vyasa’s. The knowledge that long circulated within the Indian society, and passed from one generation to other through the route of oral-storytelling, got its written form when Ved Vyasa sought to consolidate it into a single document. Additionally, since myths are considered to be based on half-truth half-fiction, it is important to decipher what determines the ‘truth’ of any mythological story, be it the story of the Mahabharata.

Keeping the said dictum in mind, many Indian English writers of the contemporary times sought to revisit and revise the story of the Mahabharata from alternative perspectives, in order to build a comprehensive and democratic view of the text. Also, as modern theory dictates that having access to only one version of the story can lead to the development of certain kinds of prejudices towards certain characters of the story as per the whims of the author, so it is important to gain a complete look, thereby analysing the story from varying perspectives. In reference to the story of the Mahabharata, we see that the Pandavas have been conventionally seen as ‘the heroes’ of the story whereas the Kauravas are considered to be the villains or antagonists. As Yudhishtira is described as Dharmraj, and Arjuna as the best archer in the whole of the Aryavarta, a lot of nuances to story stay overlooked. For instance, if we read about the story of Karna, we see that Karna and not Arjuna was the best archer of the whole of Aryavarta. It was only that his caste status didn’t allow him to openly compete with

Arjuna, that his skills remained hidden. In the same way, if we look at the case of Draupadi, the conventional interpretation of her character had been that it was because of her outspokenness that the War of the Mahabharata happened. And from the alternative point of view, if we read about the story of Draupadi, we see that the rivalry between the Kauravas and the Pandavas had started way before: from their childhood itself. Also, if we read about Draupadi's story, we get to know about the various injustices she had to face being an ambitious woman in a strict patriarchal world. Through these instances it is evident that changing the narrator or the perspective to the story, the description and analysis of the same events can change. My Thesis seeks to focus on the premise that although history and mythology narrate only the story of the victorious or the dominant, but it contains many more smaller narratives that lay hidden or overlooked under the garb of the former.

This is when the need to understand the narratives of the 'sub-altern' comes into picture. Sub-altern as a concept refers to the idea of being outside of the power structure and experiencing marginalisation at social, political or cultural level. The sub-altern often go through the experience of being denied any significant voice in the dominant discourses. As my Thesis takes into account the narratives of the select sub-altern characters of the Mahabharata, understanding the story from their point of view parallel to the dominant narrative of Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata, provides a very cohesive and comprehensive take on the tale. The various contemporary retellings that I take into account for the course of my Thesis are- Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, which focuses on Draupadi's point of view; Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya: Epic of the Kaurava Clan* takes into account the Kauravas' and especially Duryodhana's perspective; Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* tells the story of Karna and his wife Uruvi; and lastly Madhavi Mahadevan's *The Kaunteyas* which focuses on the story of Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas. The select contemporary retellings cover a spectrum of perspectives of the sub-altern. For instance, Divakaruni's novel takes into account the woman's question, hence presenting a feminist point of view. Kane's narrative focuses on the caste perspective and Neelakantan's novel takes into account the perspective of the defeated side or the so-called antagonists. Lastly, Mahadevan's novel focuses on the perspective of the mother of the 'heroes', the Pandavas, and how her choices in life played a significant role in initiating the events that happen in the course of the story.

As all of the select contemporary novels come under the genre of fiction, it is important to analyse how much the author can or cannot change the meaning of the text through his/her revised narrative. This is when the question of the role of author, reader and the text comes into being. While dealing with an ancient text along with its contemporary retellings, it becomes imperative to understand the relationship among the trio of the author, the reader and the text and to what extent do each play a role in determining the meaning of the text. The work of two Post-Structuralists becomes important in this regard. First is Roland Barthes, whose essay, titled, *The Death of the Author*, first published in the year 1967, proved to be a groundbreaking text. As opposed to the conventional view that author stands as an authority over the text to determine its meaning; he said that as soon as a text comes into being, the authority of the author dies immediately and there takes place the birth of the reader. What he means is that as soon as a text comes into being, the text should be seen as a self-contained entity and the author's intentions should not be sought after in order to determine the meaning of the text. The reader should be left free without the pressure of seeking the author's intentions in his/her attempt to understand the text. Another author, whose text wields a considerable influence in the field, is Michael Foucault who delivered a famous lecture in 1969, titled *What is an Author?* In the lecture, he asks what role 'the name of the author' plays in his texts. Unlike Barthes who claims the metaphorical 'death' of the author in the text, Foucault says that though the author as a person doesn't function in the text, but what remains in the text is the 'author-function'. He says that all works of a certain author can be grouped together as a category because it is his 'name' that 'functions' in the texts, when compared to works of other authors. He introduces the concept of 'author-function' that helps in identifying and grouping works ascribed to different authors and hence establishing a 'functionality' to the texts.

As concerns my Thesis, dealing with contemporary retellings alongside the ancient text of the Mahabharata, it is important to understand that to what extent can a change of author change the meaning of the text. And more importantly, how can a retelling change the way we see the 'original' story ? Another important question to be considered is that whether a text can have only one meaning or multiple meanings to be interpreted by the reader. The work of W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley also bears significance in this regard. Their essay, titled, *The Intentional Fallacy*, first published in the year 1946, is seen as a foundational text in the theory of New

Criticism. What Wimsatt and Beardsley argue is that in the attempt of interpreting a work according to the author's intention, the readers can sometimes make an error of judgement. He termed it 'the intentional fallacy' in which the reader pays attention to deciphering the author's intention to interpret the meaning of the work rather than evaluating the work itself. They argue that 'internal evidence' available in the text, like words, motifs, themes etc should be taken into account rather than looking for 'external evidence', that lies in searching for author's biography, his personal notes, diaries etc. What they suggest is that a text should be seen as an independent entity rather than being linked to the author's agency and intention.

As we can see that the new schools of thought, such as the Post-Structuralists, the New Critics etc, argue that the text should be seen as independent of the author and the reader should play the important role of interpreting the text based on the evidence available in the text itself. It is important to note that the newer thought contrasts sharply from the traditional notion where the author was considered as the God-like figure in all the texts. In the earlier times, the author was believed to have gained immortality through his texts. The earliest of the authors, of Indian and even Greek civilisation, have sought to fix their names in immortality through their works. The conventional notion of 'immortality' stands in total contrast to the more contemporary notion of the so-called 'death' of the author.

Whether it is the author, or the reader or the text itself that help in determining the meaning of the text remains a contested and an ever-evolving notion. But it is certain that the ideologies of the time in which a text comes into being consciously or unconsciously gets manifested in the text. There is no denying the fact that literature serves as a mirror to the society and its times. And as per the Romantic idea of literature, it is not only a 'mirror', but also a 'lamp' to the world. What it means is that literature not only reflects, but also enlightens or affects the ideologies of the world, just as a mirror and a lamp would do respectively. The idea comes from the famous text of M.H. Abrams, the Romantic writer and literary criticist, who in his book, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, which was published in 1953, sought to reflect on the dichotomy of literature and society in any civilisation. In his book, he reflects the transition of how literature came to be seen by the people: starting from neoclassical age, where literature was seen as a means of imitation only, i.e. a 'mirror', to a more evolved notion of literature being a means of enlightening the world as well, like a 'lamp'. The work serves as a foundational text

in literary criticism and helps explore the role literature plays in society. Coming back to my Thesis, as it takes into account texts with such a huge time gap, the narratives invariably showcase the change in societal ideologies over time. For instance, in Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata, caste system and patriarchy were seen as normative practices and were not looked down upon. The unfair treatment and repeated humiliation meted out to Karna all through his life were a result of the caste-based injustices in society. When we compare the caste aspect of Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata along with the modern retelling by Kavita Kane, the ideological difference between the two becomes evident. While modern society criticises the caste system, the ancient society followed it as part of their religion. Similarly, if we look at the women's question, we know that with the coming up of the idea of Feminism at the world level, modern society is much more conscious of giving equal rights to women. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* critiques the patriarchal nature of ancient society as depicted in Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata, and seeks to deliver justice, though fictionally, to the character of Draupadi of Mahabharata. Through the analysis of all the select four texts, in the backdrop of the Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata, the Thesis attempts to interrogate how much the society and readership has changed over time.

While discussing about the association of literature with the prevailing ideologies of society, the Thesis takes into account Roland Barthes' famous book on *Mythologies*, in which he discusses the nature of myths and how they help in circulating the dominant worldviews over the people. As my Thesis revolves around the story of the Mahabharata, we can analyse how the ideals enshrined in the ancient mythological text, came to achieve superintendent importance in Hindu society. The definitions of what is considered as dharma, karma, niyati, moksha etc, as elucidated in the Mahabharata, came to be seen as foundations of Hindu social and cultural system. The most important section of the Mahabharata, in terms of the philosophies and ideologies generated, is the Bhagwat Gita, which is seen as no less than ethereal voice itself. Roland Barthes says in book that the biggest function that mythology plays in a society is to naturalise certain ideologies as being the 'right' or 'moral' ones and unconsciously imbibe them in the mindsets of the people. Another very important text that discusses the role of literature and mythology but in terms of its relationship to power dynamics of the society is Michael Foucault's essay titled, *Truth and Power*. Foucault's essay, which is considered as a foundational treatise in the theory of Post-Structuralism and literary criticism, talks about how what is considered as 'truth' at

point of time, is determined by the power relations of the society. According to him, 'truth' is not fixed or universal, but is shaped by what and who governs power in the society. And literature and mythology help penetrate the dominant ideologies in the consciousness of the people.

After discussing how literature and mythology serve to reflect and affect the dominant ideologies among the people of the society, the Thesis progresses to discuss how the two sets of texts in consideration depend on each other in terms of influence. As the various contemporary retellings attempt to reimagine the story of the Mahabharata, but from newer and alternative angles, it becomes important to understand how much the select texts differ or parallel the nuances of Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata. Also, as the select texts are essentially works of fiction, it becomes important to balance literary creativity and allegiance to the basic structure of Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata. Harold Bloom's famous essay, *the Anxiety of Influence* gains certain prominence in this respect. Bloom in his essay talks about the different ways various authors engage with the literary traditions of the past. He outlines six Revisionary Ratios, which work as proportions to analyse the extent to which the select author borrows from or is influenced by the works of his predecessors. Bloom's essay becomes especially significant when dealing with works such as retellings, adaptations, critiques etc. Bloom argues that no matter how much the author may emphasise on his literary creativity, all works are to some or the other extent influenced by the literary traditions of the past. As my Thesis deals with various contemporary retellings of the Mahabharata from perspectives of select sub-altern characters, all the retellings strive for artistic creativity and newness, while at the same time keeping the basic tenets of Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata intact.

Through the course of my Thesis, as I discuss various aspects of engagement of the select contemporary retellings with Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata, there also exist an in-depth analysis of various narrative tools and techniques employed by the select contemporary authors in their works. To begin with, the Thesis discusses E.M Foster's *Aspects of the Novel*, which is an explanatory book discussing the various ways an author can structure and present his novel to the readers. Foster's book is based on a series of lectures that he gave at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1927. In his lectures, he explained the various 'aspects' that an author can employ to make his work structurally and emotionally resonant for the reader. In his book, Foster describes the various aspects of the novel, which he lists, are- **'story, people, plot,**

fantasy, prophecy, pattern, and rhythm.' According to Foster, the various combinations of these seven aspects together determine the overall narrative design of a novel and help in making the novel more structurally and emotionally resonant to the reader. But other than these structural elements at macro level, there also exist many narrative tools and techniques at a deeper level that bring out the essence of the text. For that, the Thesis takes into discussion H. Porter Abbott's *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, which discusses in detail the variety of narrative tools and techniques that can be employed by the authors. Imagery, symbolism, flashbacks, motifs, perspectives, intertextuality, mood and tone, etc, can all be considered as examples of the same.

The Thesis then proceeds to discuss all the select works in detail focusing on their narrative structure as well as the various narrative tools and techniques employed by the authors. As all the select works are from the perspective of some or the other sub-altern character, the narrative voice and the perspective becomes very important. After an in-depth analysis of all the select texts in terms of intricacies of narratology and criticism, the Thesis concludes how an author manoeuvres his way to make his text culturally resonant and emotionally appealing to the reader.

Coming back to the main premise of my Thesis; the relationship between myths, knowledge, fiction and the art of retelling; a very important text that comes into discussion in the course of my Thesis is Devdutt Pattanaik's *Myth=Mithiya: Decoding Hindu Mythology*. The very insightful text, *Myth=Mithiya* provides an in-depth analysis of the nature of Hindu mythology, foregrounding how myths function not merely as a repository of ancient stories, but as a living epistemological system that contain layered meaning of our culture and tradition. According to Pattanaik, all myths need to be carefully analysed to uncover the knowledge of culture that they contain within. One of the important arguments that Pattanaik makes is that myths, as the name signifies, is 'mithiya' or half-truth. It is the duty of readers to critically engage with these narratives and discern the layers of meaning embedded within them to know more about our culture. The book also talks about the relevance of our mythological narratives in contemporary times, viewing them as dynamic cultural texts that continue to influence our collective identity, social values, and ethical frameworks. Instead of treating mythology as a relic of the past, Pattanaik underscores its cultural value as "windows to the soul" and something that connects us to our roots.

Pattanaik's arguments in *Myth=Mithiya* become very significant when dealing with mythology of ancient as well as contemporary times. His emphasis on the nature of myths being half-truth half-fiction opens up immense possibilities of interpretation and fluidity of meaning. This especially resonates with the central idea of my Thesis which attempts to understand the Mahabharata from sub-altern perspectives. Also, Pattanaik's characterisation of myths as being embodiments of immense cultural knowledge, makes the readers more inquisitive about uncovering layers of meaning in these texts.

To conclude, the Thesis attempts to explore the text of the Mahabharata not merely as an ancient relic, but as a living document with immense interpretive possibilities. It examines how the epic, even after generations, continue to shape and reflect the evolving cultural, social, and ideological frameworks of Indian society. By putting into focus the sub-altern perspectives, the Thesis seeks to argue that history and mythology are not just about the story of the victorious, the dominant. But what lay within, often overlooked, are many more smaller narratives that did not get a chance to come in the forefront. If we, as readers, try to take into account the perspectives of many other characters, other than the dominant, we will realise how much the story changes with every changing perspective. It is the amalgamation of all the perspectives that can make the so called 'truth' of the dominant narrative more inclusive, democratic and in comprehensive in nature. The study of the my Thesis also brings into light the subjective nature of 'truth' itself and questions the very tenets of narratology in sacred texts.

Also, in the context of the stories of the sub-altern characters of the Mahabharata, the Thesis seeks to bring into forefront the stories of the various characters of the Mahabharata who were somehow sidelined or ever overshadowed by the dominant narratives. By bringing into question the issue of caste, gender, and other ideological hierarchies, the Thesis makes the ancient story of the Mahabharata more inclusive and approachable to the contemporary readers. The Sub-altern theory, which came up as a sub-set of the Post-colonial theory, in the beginning of the 21st century, has made the contemporary readers much more receptive to accepting the stories of the downtrodden, the silenced, the marginalised. Draupadi, Karna, Kunti, Duryodhana, who were recipients of great injustice at the hands of fate and social and cultural systems of the time, never got to narrate their perspective to the story of the Mahabharata. It is through the genre of fiction, coupled with an increased interest in

reviving ancient culture and under the influence of Sub-altern theory, did the select contemporary writers attempted to retell the story of the Mahabharata from their perspectives.

Also, as per the emphasis on the relationship between ideology and society, the study of the various contemporary retellings along with the ancient version of Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata, the Thesis showcases the timeless vitality of the Mahabharata along with its grandeur as being an ever important text in the Indian society.

Bibliography

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

- Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Palace of Illusions*. Picador India. New Delhi. 2019.
- Neelakantan, Anand. *Ajaya: Epic of the Kaurava Clan*. Platinum Press. Mumbai. 2018.
- Mahadevan, Madhavi S. *The Kaunteyas: Queen Kunti's Mahabharata*. Speaking Tiger Books. New Delhi. 2022.
- Kane, Kavita. *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*. Rupa Publications India, New Delhi, 2013.

Secondary Sources:

- "Author Interview: Anand Neelakantan, author of 'Ajaya' and 'Asura'." *Sruti's Blogspot*, 11 March. 2014.
- Abbott, H. Porter. *The Cambridge introduction to narrative*. Cambridge University Press, 2020.
- Agger, Ben. "Critical theory, poststructuralism, postmodernism: Their sociological relevance." *Annual review of sociology* 17.1 (1991): 105-131.
- Albrecht, Milton C. "The relationship of literature and society." *American journal of sociology* 59.5 (1954): 425-436.
- Althusser, Louis. Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation. In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review. 1972.
- Althusser, Louis. *On ideology*. Verso Books, 2020.
- Althusser, Louis. *On the reproduction of capitalism: Ideology and ideological state apparatuses*. Verso Books, 2014.
- Arnold, David, and Ranajit Guha. "Subaltern Studies." *New Subaltern Politics* (1982): 257.
- Arnold, David. "Gramsci and peasant subalternity in India." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 11.4 (1984): 155-177.
- Bala, Kanchan, and Seema Choudhary. "A Study of Silent Female Characters in Kavita Kane's Novels." (2023).
- Bannerji, Himani. "Projects of Hegemony: Towards a Critique of Subaltern Studies' 'Resolution of the Women's Question.'" *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 35,

- no. 11, 2000, pp. 902–20. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4409022>. Accessed 4 Aug. 2025.
- Barman, Pragati. "Revisiting Myths: Draupadi as the New Woman in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*." *IUP Journal of English Studies* 18.3 (2023).
- Barthes, Roland. "The death of the author." *Readings in the Theory of Religion*. Routledge, 2016. 141-145.
- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Image-Music-Text*, translated by Stephen Heath, Fontana, 1977.
- Bavchandbhai, Patel Gaurang. "An Analysis of Retelling Folklores Through the Contemporary Interpretations in Modern Fictions." *SMART MOVES JOURNAL IJELLH* (2022): 47-54.
- Behera, Gourhari. "Re (Visioning) Draupadi: Resistant Interpretation in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*." *Labyrinth: An International Refereed Journal of Postmodern Studies* 5.3 (2014).
- Berman, Art. *From the new criticism to deconstruction: the reception of structuralism and post-structuralism*. University of Illinois Press, 1988.
- Beverly, John. *Subalternity and representation: Arguments in cultural theory*. Duke University Press, 1999.
- Bhattacharjee, Anirban, and Dhrubajyoti Sarkar, eds. *Contemporaneity of the Mahabharata Narrative: Epic of the Moment*. Taylor & Francis, 2024.
- Bhattacharjee, Anirban, and Dhrubajyoti Sarkar. "CONTEMPORANEITY OF THE MAHABHARATA NARRATIVE."
- Bhavani, K., and AA Jayashree Prabhakar. "Retelling Indian Mythology Through The Novels Of Devdutt Pattnaik." *Turkish Journal of Computer and Mathematics Education* 12.11 (2021): 3872-3876.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. Oxford University Press, 1973.
- Bloom, Harold. *The anxiety of influence: A theory of poetry*. Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Brooks, Cleanth. "The new criticism." *The Sewanee Review* 87.4 (1979): 592-607.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "A small history of subaltern studies." *A companion to postcolonial studies* (2000): 467-85.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "Subaltern studies and postcolonial historiography." *Nepantla: views from South* 1.1 (2000): 9-32.

- Chandra, Uday. "Rethinking subaltern resistance." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 45.4 (2015): 563-573.
- CHATTERJEE, PARTHA. "After Subaltern Studies." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 47, no. 35, 2012, pp. 44-49. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41720086>. Accessed 4 Aug. 2025.
- Chaturvedi, Vinayak, ed. *Mapping subaltern studies and the postcolonial*. Verso, 2000.
- Chayanika, Roy. "Reversing the Gaze: Subversion and Re-Interpretation of Mythical Stereotypes in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*." *The Creative Launcher* 6.2 (2021): 113-118.
- Combrink, HJ Bernard. "Multiple meaning and/or multiple interpretation of a text." *Neotestamentica* 18.1 (1984): 26-37.
- Das, Veena. "Subaltern as perspective." *Postcolonlsm*. Routledge, 2023. 1478-1490.
- Daschauthuri, Mohar. "Re-writing the Myth of Draupadi in Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* and Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*." *Athens Journal of Philology* 7.3 (2020): 171-188.
- Davis, Todd, and Kenneth Womack. *Formalist criticism and reader-response theory*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018.
- Devi, M. Sarada, and Shakila Bhanu Shaik. "An Examination of Subverted Hegemonic Paradigms in the Novels of Kavita Kané." *Language in India* 25.6 (2025).
- Devi, Rachena, and Shubha Vats. "The Palace of Illusions: A Feminist Reimagining of the Mahabharata in Contemporary Literature." *South Asian Res J Art Lang Lit* 7.3 (2025): 75-79.
- Dhakar, Sabitri. "Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*: Challenging a Patriarchal Domain." *KMC Research Journal* 1.1 (2017): 9-17.
- Dirghangi, Aditi, and Seemita Mohanty. "Characters on the periphery: A feminist perspective on Mahabharata and Ramayana." *Mainstreaming the Marginalised*. Routledge India, 2021. 173-188.
- Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. Interview by Maggie Paul. *The Frozen Sea within Us: An Interview with Chitra Divakaruni*. The Institute of Humanities Research, 27 Sept. 2023.

- Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. Interview by Mansi Shah. *ELLE At JLF: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni On Writing About Female Characters That Are Flawed And Real*. *Elle*, 19 Jan. 2023.
- Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Forest of Enchantments*. HarperCollins Publishers India, 2019.
- Dore, Isaak. "Foucault on power." *UMKC L. Rev.* 78 (2009): 737.
- Dube, Saurabh. "Peasant insurgency and peasant consciousness." *Economic and political weekly* (1985): 445-448.
- Eliot, Thomas Stearns. "Tradition and the Individual Talent (1920)." *Selected Prose of TS Eliot* (2012): 37-44.
- Eliot, Thomas Stearns. "Tradition and the individual talent." *Perspecta* 19 (1982): 36-42.
- Foster, E.M. *Aspects of the Novel*. Harcourt, Brace and Company. New York. 1927.
- Foucault, Michael. "What is an Author?," *Modernity and Its Discontents*. Ed. Nicholas Elliot and Toby Garfitt, The New Press, 1998.
- Foucault, Michel. "Truth and power." (2001).
- Foucault, Michel. "What is an Author?." *Reading architectural history*. Routledge, 2003. 71-81.
- Gauswami, Mr Sarjugiri Bharatgiri. "Echoes of the Silenced: Feminist Re-Storyings of Indian Ancient Epics." *Vidhyayana-An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal-ISSN 2454-8596* 10.6 (2025).
- Gerow, Edwin, and Bhāsa. "Bhāsa's Ūrubhaṅga and Indian Poetics." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* (1985): 405-412.
- Ghosh, Tanusree. "Mahabharata Today: Tradition and Modernity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife*." *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* 43.3 (2020): 115-119.
- Gitomer, David. "King Duryodhana: the Mahābhārata discourse of sinning and virtue in epic and drama." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* (1992): 222-232.
- Gitomer, David. "King Duryodhana: The Mahābhārata Discourse of Sinning and Virtue in Epic and Drama." *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 112, no. 2, 1992, pp. 222–32. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/603702>. Accessed 4 Aug. 2025.

- Gokila, M., and R. Rejina. "DRAUPADI'S QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS." *MULTIDISCIPLINARY*: 42.
- Gomez, John. *An Analysis of Roland Barthes's Mythologies*. Macat Library, 2017.
- Goswami, Sribas. "Michel Foucault: Structures of truth and power." *European Journal of Philosophical Research* 1 (2014): 8-20.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. Edited by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, London 1999.
- Green, Marcus E. "Race, class, and religion: Gramsci's conception of subalternity." *The political philosophies of Antonio Gramsci and BR Ambedkar*. Routledge, 2013. 116-128.
- Guha, Ranajit, ed. *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History*. Vol. 6. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Harker, W. John. "Literary communication: The author, the reader, the text." *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 22.2 (1988): 5-14.
- Hartman, Douglas K. "Intertextuality and reading: The text, the reader, the author, and the context." *Linguistics and education* 4 (1992): 295-311.
- Hauser, Walter. "Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India. By Ranajit Guha. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983. xi, 361 pp. Rs. 140." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 45.1 (1985): 174-177.
- Hiltebeitel, Alf. "KṚṢṆA AND THE MAHĀBHĀRATA (A Bibliographical Essay)." *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, vol. 60, no. 1/4, 1979, pp. 65–107. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41692297>. Accessed 4 Aug. 2025.
- HILTEBEITEL, ALF. "NOT WITHOUT SUBTALES: TELLING LAWS AND TRUTHS IN THE SANSKRIT EPICS." *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2005, pp. 455–511. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23497170>. Accessed 4 Aug. 2025.
- Hoggart, Richard. "Literature and society." *The American Scholar* (1966): 277-289.
- Huppertz, Daniel J. "Roland barthes, mythologies." *Design and Culture* 3.1 (2011): 85-100.
- Iser, Wolfgang. "Interaction between text and reader." *Readers and reading*. Routledge, 2014. 20-31.
- Jain, Garima. "Retelling the Indian Myths: A Postcolonial Peep into Chitra Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions."

- Jancovich, Mark. *The cultural politics of the New Criticism*. Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Jhamb, Kirti. "Gender Sensitization for Sustainability with Special Reference to the Selected Works of Kavita Kane."
- JOHN, ANCY ELEZABATH. "RE-VISIONING MYTHOLOGY: AN ANALYSIS OF WORKS BY KAVITA KANE." *One Day State Level Seminar on "Current Scenario and Future Perspective of Digital Language and Literature*. SK Research Group of Companies, 2024.
- Joshi, P. C., and V. K. Srivastava. "Culture, Mythology, and Religion." *Social Psychiatry: Principles & Clinical Perspectives* (2018): 130.
- Kahlon, Maneeta. "Re-telling the Narrative of Mahabharata in Contemporary Times from Gender Perspective." *Scholar Critic—An International Journal of Language, Literature and Culture Studies* 2.3 (2015): 50-56.
- KAMBAR, DR JAYASHREE C. "MYTHOLOGY AND HISTORY IN INDIAN CONTEXT."
- Kane, Kavita. "Author Interview- Kavita Kane (Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen)." www.thereaddicts.blogspot.com, 4 October 2013. <https://thereaddicts.blogspot.com/2013/10/author-interview-karnas-wife-outcasts.html>. Interview.
- Kane, Kavita. *Lanka's Princess*. Rupa Publications, 2016.
- Kane, Kavita. *Saraswati's Gift*. Rupa Publications, 2020.
- Kanjilal, Sucheta. "From Excluded to Exceptional: Caste in Contemporary Mahābhāratas." *Many Mahābhāratas*, edited by NELL SHAPIRO HAWLEY and SOHINI SARAH PILLAI, State University of New York Press, 2021, pp. 343–60. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.18253235.23>. Accessed 4 Aug. 2025.
- Kansal, Sushil. "Deciphering the Layers of Myth: Devdutt Pattanaik's Interpretative Approach to Mythology as a Bridge Between Ancient Wisdom and Contemporary Thought." *International Journal of Scientific Research in Humanities and Social Sciences* 2.2 (2025): 188-197.
- Kapoor, Kajal. "Karna (the unsung hero of Mahabharata: the voice of the subaltern)." *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Culture* 2.4 (2016): 15-25.
- KAPOOR, PRANJAL, JAYATEE BHATTACHARYA, and SUSHILA VIJAYKUMAR. "SILENCE OF KUNTI: AN INQUISITIVE ANALYSIS OF

- MADHAVI. S. MAHADEVAN'S THE KAUNTEYA AND B. R CHOPRA'S MAHABHARATA." *Ad Alta: Journal of Interdisciplinary Research* 14.2 (2024).
- Kaushik, Abha Shukla. "Rewriting Strategies in Postcolonial Literature." *Bharatiya Manyaprad*: 69.
- Kennedy, George Alexander, ed. *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Volume 7, Modernism and the New Criticism*. Vol. 7. Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Kumar, P. Pratap. "Centrality of Draupadī in the Mahābhārata Narrative." *Indian Literature*, vol. 60, no. 4 (294), 2016, pp. 165–78. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44479551>. Accessed 4 Aug. 2025.
- Kumar, Priyanka PS. "The fascinating world of retellings: Retellings of the Indian epics." *Research Journal of English Language and Literature* 4.2 (2016): 793-797.
- Kumari, TV Kushma. "Depiction of Caste in the Contemporary Retelling of the Mahabharata." *Journal of Literature & Aesthetics* 300 (1800): 151.
- Kuri, Sadananda. "CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS: A CRITIQUE." *LITERARY ENDEAVOUR*: 47.
- Lal, Vinay. "Subaltern studies and its critics: Debates over Indian history." (2001): 135-148.
- Larson, Gerald James. "Myth as history and history as myth: The Instructive Case of India." *Routledge handbook of contemporary India*. Routledge, 2015. 313-328.
- Leak, Andrew N. *Barthes: mythologies*. Grant and Cutler, 1994.
- Liguori, Guido. "Conceptions of subalternity in Gramsci." *Antonio gramsci*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015. 118-133.
- Luthra, Rashmi. "Clearing Sacred Ground: Women-Centered Interpretations of the Indian Epics." *Feminist Formations*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2014, pp. 135–61. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43860745>. Accessed 4 Aug. 2025.
- Maggio, J. "'Can the Subaltern Be Heard?': Political Theory, Translation, Representation, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak." *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2007, pp. 419–43. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40645229>. Accessed 4 Aug. 2025.
- Mahadevan, Madhavi. *Bride of the Forest: The Untold Story of Sita*. Penguin Random House India, 2017.
- Mahadevan, Madhavi. *The Forgotten Wife: The Story of Hidimbi and Bheem*. Speaking Tiger Books, 2023.

- Maheswary, Uma. "Reimagining Women's Freedom and Rights: A Study of Draupadi's Portrayal in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*." *Creative Saplings* 3.4 (2024): 15-33.
- Majumdar, Rochona. "Subaltern studies as a history of social movements in India." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 38.1 (2015): 50-68.
- MALIK, ZENITH. "UNVEILING PANCHALI: A FEMINIST RETELLING OF THE MAHABHARATA."
- Marimuthu, M., and N. Kavidha. "Subversion of Myths: Deconstructing Power Structures and Stereotypical Perceptions in Select Works of Kavita Kane." *LITERARY VOICE*: 175.
- Martin, Graham. "From New Criticism to Structuralism." *A Handbook to Literary Research* (1998): 85-116.
- Matilal, Bimal K., G. R. Taneja, and Vinod Sena. "The Throne: Was Duryodhana Wrong?." *Literature East and West: Essays Presented to RK Dasgupta*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1995.
- Meena, Meena Dr. "Exploring the Role of Mythology in Contemporary Literature: A Descriptive Study." *Scholar'Digest: Journal of Arts & Humanities* 1.1 (2025): 22-31.
- Miall, David S. "Reader-Response Theory." *A companion to literary theory* (2018): 114-125.
- Mishra, Suchi Smita. *Women Identity and Self-Assertion: A Study of Two Contemporary Retellings of Mahabharata*. Diss. 2015.
- Modonesi, Massimo. "Subalternity and Beyond." *Rethinking Marxism* 37.2 (2025): 186-197.
- Mohile Tanvi. (RE)EXAMINING MARGINALIZED CHARACTERS: CASTE AND GENDER IN SELECT RETELLINGS OF THE MAHABHARATA IN RECENT INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION. www.academia.edu. 2015.
- Moi, Toril. *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. 2nd Ed., Routledge, 2002.
- Moramollu, Gülrah. "Ideology and literature." *Humanities and social sciences Review* 6.1 (2016): 455-460.
- Naskar, Dipanwita. "Examining selected epic women characters in the contemporary revisionist retellings of the Ramayana and Mahabharata." (2024).

- Naskar, Dipanwita. "Examining selected epic women characters in the contemporary revisionist retellings of the Ramayana and Mahabharata." (2024).
- Navarro Tejero, Antonia. "Telling (her) story: An overview of subaltern studies." *Feminismo/s. N. 4* (dic. 2004); pp. 85-96 (2004).
- Nayak, Sona, and Prajna Paramita Panigrahi. "The Feminine and the Subaltern: Revisiting Mythology and Rethinking Women Identities." *rjelal. com/11.4* 23: 10-14.
- Neelakantan, Anand. "Interview with Anand Neelakantan | Author." Interview by Lavanya. www.booksoarus.com, 3 February 2014. <https://www.booksoarus.com/author-interview-anand-neelakantan/>. Interview.
- Neelakantan, Anand. "Interview with Anand Neelakantan | Author." Interview by Lavanya. www.booksoarus.com, 3 February 2014. <https://www.booksoarus.com/author-interview-anand-neelakantan/>. Interview.
- Neelakantan, Anand. "NAW Interview with Anand Neelakantan." *New Asian Writing*, 2014 (approx.), *New Asian Writing*, edited by New Asian Writing, published online, www.new-asian-writing.com/naw-interview-with-anand-neelakantan/. Accessed [27 Aug 2024].
- Neelakantan, Anand. *Chaturanga (Baahubali: Before the Beginning - Book 2)*. Westland, 2020.
- Neelakantan, Anand. *Queen of Mahishmathi (Báhubali: Before the Beginning - Book 3)*. Westland, 2023.
- Neelakantan, Anand. *The Rise of Sivagami: Baahubali Before the Beginning Book 1*. Westland, 2017.
- Neelakantan, Anand. *Vanara: The Legend of Baali, Sugreeva and Tara*. Penguin Random House India, 2018.
- Olsson, Michael R. "Michel Foucault: discourse, power/knowledge, and the battle for truth." *Leckie, Gloria J* (2010): 63-74.
- Panda, Madhulika. "Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions: Mythology Reconstructed." *IUP Journal of English Studies* 14.3 (2019): 51-56.
- Parinitha, B., and A. Lourdusamy. "The Evolution of the Female from Suppression to Supremacy in the Select Novels of Postmodern Retellings of the Epic-A Review of Literature." *International Journal of Management, Technology and Social Sciences (IJMTS)* 7.1 (2022): 163-183.

- Parinitha, B., and A. Lourdusamy. "The Evolution of the Female from Suppression to Supremacy in the Select Novels of Postmodern Retellings of the Epic-A Review of Literature." *International Journal of Management, Technology and Social Sciences (IJMTS)* 7.1 (2022): 163-183.
- Parvathy, B. M., and P. G. Student. "Feminist Revisionist Mythology and the Lost Voices—A Subversive Analysis of Select Literary Texts."
- Pattanaik, Devdutt. *Indian mythology: Tales, symbols, and rituals from the heart of the subcontinent*. Inner Traditions/Bear & Co, 2003.
- Pattanaik, Devdutt. *Myth*. Penguin Books India, 2008.
- Perry, Seamus. "The mirror and the lamp." *Essays in Criticism* 54.3 (2004): 260-282.
- Peters, Michael, and Kenneth Wain. "Postmodernism/Post-structuralism." *The Blackwell guide to the philosophy of education* (2003): 57-72.
- Pillai, Anila Aravindakshan, and Urvashi Kaushal. "Duryodhana,'the leader': traced beyond'the known'." *International Journal of Indian Culture and Business Management* 27.3 (2022): 317-335.
- Piu, Piermarco. "The journey of subalternity in Gayatri Spivak's work: Its sociological relevance." *The Sociological Review* 71.6 (2023): 1258-1276.
- Prakash, Gyan. "Postcolonial criticism and History: subaltern studies." *The Oxford History of Historical Writing* 5 (2011): 74-92.
- Prakash, Gyan. "Subaltern studies as postcolonial criticism." *The American historical review* 99.5 (1994): 1475-1490.
- Priya, D. R. "Women Characters in Kavita Kane's Karna's Wife: An Outcaste Queen: A Feminist Perspective." *Research Review: Referred and Peer Review. International Journal* 7 (2020): 60-63.
- Raadhai, S., and N. Geethanjali. "Kavita Kane's Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen—Unveiling the Untold Perspective in Indian Mythology." *Literature & Aesthetics* 34.2 (2024): 128-137.
- Raghav, Ragini, and Sharmila Saxena. "DRAUPADI: FEMALE ROLE-MODEL IN „THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS“ BY CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI."
- Rajesh, G., and E. Satyanarayana. "Legends Reborn: Contemporary Perspectives on Indian Mythology in English Fiction." *CHAITANYA (DEEMED TO BE UNIVERSITY)* (2025): 63.
- RASIAH, DHARINI, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. "Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni." *Words Matter: Conversations with Asian American Writers*, edited by King-Kok

- Cheung, University of Hawai'i Press, 2000, pp. 140–53. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wqrqj.11>. Accessed 4 Aug. 2025.
- Ray, Raka, and Smitha Radhakrishnan. "The subaltern, the postcolonial, and cultural sociology." *Handbook of cultural sociology* (2010): 350-340.
- Rebecca, S. Christina. "POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVE ON REWRITING THE MYTH MAHABHARATA: THE DEVIATING DEPICTION OF DURYODHANA IN ANAND NEELAKANTAN'S *ROLL OF THE DICE*." *Literary Endeavour* (2019): 215.
- Rodríguez, Ileana. "IS THERE A NEED FOR SUBALTERN STUDIES?" *Dispositio*, vol. 25, no. 52, 2005, pp. 43–62. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41491786>. Accessed 4 Aug. 2025.
- Roosa, John. "When the subaltern took the postcolonial turn." *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 17.2 (2006): 130-147.
- Roy, Abhay Kumar. "A Vantage View of the Centre: Exploring Marginality in Kavita Kané's *Karna's Wife*."
- Samuel, Irene. "Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Feminist Persona of Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions*." *Teaching and Learning Language and Literature in the Digital Era: Opportunities and Challenges*.
- Sankareswari, S. "MAGICAL REALISM, MYTH, CULTURE: A THEMATIC STUDY OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE PALACE OF ILLUSION*." *LITERARY ENDEAVOUR*: 454.
- Satyamurti, Carole. *Mahabharata: A modern retelling*. WW Norton & Company, 2015.
- Shah, Insha Qayoom. "Reconsidering Dharma in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*." *Teresian Journal of English Studies* 14.3 (2022): 60-70.
- Shailja, Ms Shiwangi, and Manoj Kumar. "A Revisionist Study Of Indian Epic With Special Reference To *The Palace Of Illusions* By Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni." *International Journal of Environmental Sciences* 11.4s (2025): 223-227.
- Sharma, Deepti, and Priya Raghav. "Vyāsa and the Mahābhārata: Authorship, Interpretation, and the Multilayered Narrative." *Anafora: Časopis za znanost o književnosti* 10.2 (2023): 357-370.
- Sharma, Dwijen. "The Politics of Retelling Myths." *Editors Speak* (2023): 59.

- Sharma, Rohit. "The Art of Rewriting Indian Epics." *Indian Literature* 60.2 (292) (2016): 147-158.
- Sharma, Rohit. "The Art of Rewriting Indian Epics." *Indian Literature*, vol. 60, no. 2 (292), 2016, pp. 147–58. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44478971>. Accessed 4 Aug. 2025.
- Sharma, Rohit. "The Art of Rewriting Indian Epics." *Indian Literature*, vol. 60, no. 2 (292), 2016, pp. 147–58. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44478971>. Accessed 4 Aug. 2025.
- Siddique, Naghmana, et al. "Shadows of colonialism on nationalism: a subaltern perspective." *International Journal of Disaster Recovery and Business Continuity* 2.2 (2020): 219-226.
- Singh, Vikram. "Modern Retelling of Indian Myths: A Study of Rehashing Mythology through Popular Fictions." *IMPACT: International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Literature* 5.10 (2017).
- Singh, Vikram. "Modern Retelling of Indian Myths: A Study of Rehashing Mythology through Popular Fictions." *IMPACT: International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Literature* 5.10 (2017).
- Singh, Vikram. "Reclaiming Female Identity: Feminist Retellings of the Hindu Epics." *The Criterion: An International Journal in English* 8.2 (2017): 2017.
- Sinha, Shalini R. "Resurgence of Myths and Legends in Contemporary Literature of Indian English in an Emergent India." *Ruminations: The Andean Journal of Literature* 2 (2012): 130-138.
- Smith, Kylie. "Gramsci at the margins: subjectivity and subalternity in a theory of hegemony." *International Gramsci Journal* 1.2 (2010).
- Spirovska, Elena. "Reader-response theory and approach: Application, values and significance for students in literature courses." *Seeu Review* 14.1 (2019): 20-35.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the subaltern speak?." *Imperialism*. Routledge, 2023. 171-219.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Subaltern studies: Deconstructing historiography." *In other worlds*. Routledge, 2012. 270-304.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" n C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. University of Illinois Press. 1988.

- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Criticism, Feminism and the Institution: An Interview with Elizabeth Grosz." *m/f*. no. 10, 1984.
- Sreeja, G. *Traversing the boundaries: redefining subaltern Identities in modern renditions of The Mahabharatha*. Diss. PG Department of English and Research Centre, Sree Kerala Varma College, Thrissur, 2023.
- Sreeja, G. *Traversing the boundaries: redefining subaltern Identities in modern renditions of The Mahabharatha*. Diss. PG Department of English and Research Centre, Sree Kerala Varma College, Thrissur, 2023.
- Srinivas Dr, Sarakanam, and R. Bakayaraj Dr. "Socio-Psychological Problems of the Protagonist in Kavita Kane's Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen. An Analytical Study." *La Palabra* 43 (2022): 155-169.
- Stevens, Ingrid. "Postmodernism, structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction and art criticism." *de arte* 31.54 (1996): 32-42.
- Stoddart, Mark CJ. "Ideology, hegemony, discourse: A critical review of theories of knowledge and power." *Social thought & research* (2007): 191-225.
- Suguna, S., and P. Malathy. "EXPLORING THE MODERN MYTHOLOGY: ANALYSING KAVITA KANE'S KARNA'S WIFE: THE OUTCAST'S QUEEN AND SITA'S SISTER." *Turkish Journal of Computer and Mathematics Education* 15.2 (2024): 134-136.
- Thapar, Romila. *The Past Before Us: Historical Traditions of Early North India*. Permanent Black, 2013.
- Thapar, Romila. *The past before us: historical traditions of early North India*. Harvard University Press, 2013.
- Thomas, Peter D. "Refiguring the subaltern." *Political Theory* 46.6 (2018): 861-884.
- Vahabzadeh, Peyman. "The conditions of subalternity: Reflections on subjectivity, experience and hegemony." *Socialist studies/Études socialistes* (2007).
- Variyar, Akhila, and Abhisarika Prajapati. "Myth and Modernity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions." *Journal of English Language and Literature* 5.1 (2018): 304-307.
- Varyani, Vartika, and Jatin Pandey. "UNDERSTANDING DURYODHANA: A MULTI-STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVE." *Globalizing Indian Thought: Insights from Indian Knowledge Systems* (2021).
- Verma, Amit. "Re-Interpretation of The Side-lined Characters in Our Mythological Literature."

- Vijayan, Vidhya. "UNVEILING THE DOUBLY MARGINALISED: A FEMINIST READING OF KAVITA KANE'S KARNA'S WIFE AND SITA'S SISTER." *Literary Endeavour* 9.4 (2018).
- Von Hendy, Andrew. "The modern construction of myth." *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory* 1.1 (2002): 2.
- Vora, Jhanvi Kunal. "A Critical Study of Feminism In “The Palace of Illusions” By Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni." *Vidhyayana-An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal-ISSN 2454-8596* 9.si1 (2023).
- Walker, Cheryl. "Feminist literary criticism and the author." *Critical Inquiry* 16.3 (1990): 551-571.
- Walker, Cheryl. "Feminist Literary Criticism and the Author". *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1990, pp. 552-571. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.1086/448558>.
- WALTER, D. MIGNOLO, and Rodríguez Ileana. "Coloniality of power and subalternity." *The Latin American subaltern studies reader* (2001): 424.
- Wimsatt, W.K., and Monroe C. Beardsley. "The Intentional Fallacy." *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, University of Kentucky Press, 1954.
- Wimsatt, William Kurtz, and Monroe Curtis Beardsley. "The intentional fallacy." *The sewanee review* 54.3 (1946): 468-488.
- Yadav, Bir Singh. "Building and Breaking Illusions in Patriarchal Universe: An Explorative Insight into Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions." *Labyrinth: An International Refereed Journal of Postmodern Studies* 4.1 (2013).

Published Research Papers

Research Papers -1

ISSN: 2455-6580 | Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access

The Creative Launcher

<https://www.thecreativelauncher.com> | Vol. 10 & Issue 4 (August, 2025)

Research Article

 <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2025.10.4.24>

The Rise of the Marginalised: Subaltern Theory and Modern Reimagining of *The Mahabharata*

Aayushi Sangharshee

Research Scholar,
Department of English,
University of Kota, Rajasthan, India
Email: aayushi.as987@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-2176-644X>

Dr. Jatinder Kaur Kohli

Supervisor
Professor, Govt. Arts College,
University of Kota, Rajasthan, India

Abstract

With the advent of the theory of Post-colonialism and Sub-alternity in the 21st century, various writers around the world sought to empower and amplify the voices of the marginalised, oppressed and often-overlooked communities. In India, after the end of the British colonial rule, many Indian English writers sought to bring up the narratives of the erstwhile suppressed subjects of the British rulers: the Indian masses. In order to arouse nationalist feelings and unify the various segregated groups in India, the writers sought to valorise the cultural richness of the Indian people. To achieve their goal, many of their writings strived to look back into the rich ancient Indian culture and revive some of its texts. As a result, the Epics also got into newer adaptations in the form of different versions, translations and retellings. With specific reference to the various retellings of *The Mahabharata*, many contemporary writers attempted to revive and retell the story of *The Mahabharata* from the perspectives of various sub-altern characters. The paper examines the development of Sub-altern theory in India and lists the various modern retellings of *The Mahabharata* which attempt to bring from the periphery to the centre, various sub-altern characters of the ancient tale.

Article History: Full Article Received on: 15th July 2025 | Peer Review Completed on: 27th August 2025 | Article Accepted on 28th August 2025 | First Published on: 31st August 2025

Copyright: © 2025 of Journal.

License: Perception Publishing, India. Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Keywords: Sub-altern theory, Myths, Retellings, Ideology, Contemporary literature

Ever since the beginning of the Indian civilisation and *The Mahabharata* came into being, the grand narrative has undoubtedly served as a vast repository of knowledge of Indian society and culture. The philosophy enshrined in the text; the ideas and beliefs embedded; and the various rituals and practices represented, have all become no less than sacred pillars of Hindu mythology in India. The story of *The Mahabharata* conventionally has never been seen merely as a story in isolation; but always much more than that. The Indians have, since its inception, seen the various episodes of *The Mahabharata*, including the moral dilemmas and conflicts, as benchmarks to define what is considered morally right and wrong. The significance of mythology lies in the fact that the ideology fostered in the various mythological texts become so deeply embedded in the mindsets of the people, that it becomes the dominant ideology ruling the society. Standing the test of time, the myths become so naturalised in the society that they become an intrinsic part of the very cultural consciousness of the people and a way to connect to their roots.

But as times pass, over the centuries, societies change, people change and so do the ideologies. While talking about the ancient Indian society when *The Mahabharata* came into being, in comparison to the present times, the society has inevitably changed as the time gap between the two periods is huge. With the opening up of the global market and the advent of modern ideas, the ideologies of the people have become more and more progressive and inclusive as compared to the ancient times. The British colonialisation and the freedom thereafter has also brought up many more ideas and schools of thoughts into being. With access to the global ideas and the newly found freedom after the British colonialisation, the intellectuals and the socio-political activists sought to valorise the contribution of erstwhile British subjects, i.e. the Indian masses. The struggles of the freedom fighters who were, in the British narratives described as insurgents, gained prominence bereft of the negative connotation attached to their names. This was the time when the 'sub-altern' came into being. At the global level, the Sub-Altern Theory came up as a subset of the larger Post-Colonial theory, as it sought to highlight and recover the voices, histories and experiences of the marginalised groups that were earlier oppressed or silenced by the hegemonic narratives. Sub-Alternity as a concept, majorly referred to the condition of being outside of the hegemonic power structure, be it in the social, cultural or the political sphere.

In the context of India, sub-alternity manifested itself in the political and literary endeavours by the activists and writers who sought to bring out the experiences of the oppressed and the sidelined masses. They started writing about the atrocities committed by the colonisers and how the masses were brutally suppressed under the colonial rule. As during the British rule, most of the indigenous literature was suppressed, the voices of the Indian masses never reached the world. It was after the British left and India gained Independence, that the narratives of the earlier suppressed gained eminence. As far as literature is concerned, the Indian English writers sought to write about the colonial experiences of the masses in an attempt to reclaim their silenced and marginalised voices. Many of their writings strived to revisit and revive ancient Indian literature in an attempt to consolidate nationalist feelings and build a connection with the cultural roots. As a result, in the Post-colonial period, a lot of literature came up which focused on ancient mythological & religious texts of India. The Ramayana and Mahabharata especially witnessed new a phase in the form of translations, adaptations and different versions of the story. Much focus was given on

empowering the sub-altern in these stories and thereby creating a new consciousness among the people.

Taking into account particularly the new literature on *The Mahabharata*, many Indian English writers sought to provide newer and alternative perspectives to the age-old tale of *The Mahabharata*. As they sought to revise and retell the story of the epic narrative in the wake of Post-Colonial consciousness, they majorly focused on voicing out the marginalized, silenced, and the peripheral characters. The Sub-altern characters got an opportunity to finally come out of the margins and narrate the atrocities they went through and to voice out their versions of the story. As a result, the criteria of caste, gender, class etc became newer lenses to help reimagine the sub-altern in these narratives. In this new wave of literature, the classical and hegemonic presentation of the so-called 'heroic' characters of the epic narratives got challenged thereby giving the mythological texts a newer democratic and inclusive look. In reference to *The Mahabharata*, for instance, many writers sought to present modern retellings of *The Mahabharata*, majorly from the perspectives of the sub-altern characters.

Prominent works among them were, to name just a few, Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* which narrates the story of *The Mahabharata* from Uruvi's (Karna's wife) perspective and brings out the issue of caste-related injustices in the text. Next comes MT Vasudevan Nair's *Bhima: Lone Warrior* which uses Bhima, the lesser known Pandava's perspective to retell the story of *The Mahabharata*. Next is Anand Neelkantan's *Ajaya: Epic of the Kaurava Clan* which talks about the story of Duryodhana and other Kauravas as opposed to Pandavas getting all the limelight. Another novel is Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, which is framed as a political satire as it juxtaposes mythology with history to allegorically showcase the story of *The Mahabharata* in the context of India's freedom struggle. In all these narratives, the authors make the select sub-altern character the protagonist of the novel and uses his/her perspective to bring out their version of the story. In these fictional narratives, the events and characters are described as the sub-altern character would have seen them if they were given a chance to be heard. Many more such novels got prominence among the modern audiences. To name a few more, are, Shivaji Savant's *Mrityunjaya*, written in Marathi, which gives an elaborate account of Karna's perspective to the events of *The Mahabharata*. *Shikhandi: And Other Tales They Don't Tell You* by Devdutt Pattanaik brings up the story of Shikhandi, the gender-neutral or queer character from the story of *The Mahabharata*. Pattanaik's work is not a novel but a collection of many short tales from Indian mythology that explore the themes of gender fluidity, queerness and role-reversals. His Collection majorly focus on the sidelined or forgotten stories of queerness in Indian mythology.

It is important to note that amongst all of these works focusing on sub-altern characters, many of them have been written from Draupadi's perspective. Among them, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is well known. Divakaruni's work explains Draupadi's journey right from her birth to the end of the final war of *The Mahabharata*, simultaneously highlighting on her inner emotions, her desire for education, her complex relationships with her five husbands, amidst her struggle for identity, power, and autonomy in a patriarchal world. Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* is another prominent work which puts into focus Draupadi's perspective. It majorly takes into account the larger issue of the emotional, moral, and gendered marginalization of women in ancient times. Next is Ira Mukhoti's *Song of Draupadi* which explores Draupadi's perspective to re-center female experience with political agency. Mahasweta Devi's *Dopdi* is a powerful short story that reimagines *The Mahabharata*'s Draupadi in a contemporary, political context. It tells the story of Dopdi Mejhen, a tribal woman and Naxalite rebel, in reference to Mahabharata's Draupadi, and portrays her as rebellious

woman who fights against state violence, oppression and patriarchal setups. All these novels move beyond the 'heroism' of the epic and provide a more female-centric point of view as they seek to put forward the woman's question in the Indian society.

We see how the contemporary writers seek to bring up the peripheral characters of the tale in order to voice out their sub-alternity in the modern context. As they use the perspectives of different sub-altern characters, they bring up newer and alternative criteria to read and interpret the ancient mythological texts.

Professor Dwijen Sharma, in his scholarly essay titled, *The Politics of Retelling Myths*, explains how myths at point of time, work to reflect as well as affect ideologies of the people. In his essay, he discusses the power that mythology and mythological texts wield in any society. He also argues that as myths reflect the mindsets of the people at any given time, then analysing ancient mythological texts can be a very useful tool to determine the cultural beliefs and practices of the people of that time. Complementing the archaeological finds, literature also plays a major role in reflecting the mindsets of the people long lost. As these ancient mythological texts help historians to seep out information of the ancient society, in the same way the contemporary revisionist literature on the ancient texts also serves as reflections of the society they are placed in i.e. the present day society. As more and more contemporary Indian writers attempt to revisit the ancient mythological texts and provide them a new form, they do reflect their texts the contemporary ideologies. Sub-alternity, Post-colonialism, feminism, equality, etc. are the various theories that affect the contemporary writers of mythology who attempt to retell the ancient stories.

Conclusion

The Mahabharata, as one of the most enduring epics of Indian civilisation, has always functioned as more than a mythological narrative—it has been a cultural text shaping moral, social, and ideological frameworks. Yet, as contemporary times call for inclusivity, plurality, and revision of inherited traditions, the epic has become a fertile ground for subaltern reinterpretations. Through the lens of Subaltern Theory, modern writers attempt to shift focus from the hegemonic narratives of the heroic and dominant figures to the silenced, marginalised, and peripheral characters who were historically denied agency. By retelling *The Mahabharata* from the perspectives of Karna, Draupadi, Shikhandi, Bhima, Duryodhana, or even allegorical figures like Drona, contemporary authors democratise the epic, transforming it into a text of resistance and reclamation. These revisionist works not only amplify the voices of women, outcasts, and the socially marginalised but also challenge the cultural hegemony that has long normalised inequality in the guise of tradition. In doing so, they open new interpretive possibilities that make the epic resonate with present-day struggles against patriarchy, caste oppression, class divisions, and political subjugation. Ultimately, the reimagining of *The Mahabharata* through subaltern perspectives affirm the dynamic nature of myth. They prove that myths are not static relics but living, evolving discourses that continually absorb, reflect, and contest the ideological currents of their times. The rise of these marginalised voices in literature is not merely an act of revisiting the past; it is a profound act of rewriting cultural memory, ensuring that the silenced are heard and the forgotten are remembered. In this way, subaltern retellings of *The Mahabharata* not only enrich Indian literature but also embody the transformative power of narrative to shape social consciousness.

Works Cited

- Arnold, David, and Ranajit Guha. "Subaltern Studies." *New Subaltern Politics* (1982): 257.
- Hauser, Walter. "Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India. By Ranajit Guha. Oxford University Press, 1983. xi, 361 pp. Rs. 140." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 45.1 (1985): 174-177.
- Kumar, Priyanka PS. "The fascinating world of retellings: Retellings of the Indian epics." *Research Journal of English Language and Literature* 4.2 (2016): 793-797.
- Sharma, Dwijen. "The Politics of Retelling Myths." *Editors Speak* (2023).

Research Papers -2

ISSN:(O) 2320-5407, ISSN(P) 3107-4928

Int. J. Adv. Res. 13(08), August-2025, 489-491



Journal Homepage: - www.journalijar.com

**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)**

Article DOI: 10.21474/IJAR01/21539
DOI URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/21539>

ISSN NO. 2320-5407



RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE ELEMENT OF GUILT AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY IN MADHAVI MAHADEVAN'S THE KAUNTEYAS

Aayushi Sangharshee¹ and Jatinder Kaur Kohli²

1. For the completion of PhD Thesis.
2. Professor, Govt. Arts College, University of Kota.

Manuscript Info

Manuscript History

Received: 09 June 2025
Final Accepted: 11 July 2025
Published: August 2025

Key words:-

sub-altern, guilt, emotions, moral
responsibility, female-centric, retelling.

Abstract

As most of the Epics around the world narrate the stories of the 'heroes' and talk about their strength, valour, the wars won, the territories annexed etc, rarely do they focus on the emotional and personal side of the stories. Also, the women characters remain majorly overshadowed by the eccentric male-centricism of these narratives. Keeping this premise in mind, many contemporary Indian English writers sought to revisit, revise, and re-present the story of the ancient epics from sub-altern point of view, which included the women's point of view also. In reference to the contemporary retellings of the Mahabharata, amongst the many writers, Madhavi Mahadevan chose to bring out the perspective of the woman character Kunti in her work. Her novel, *The Kaunteyas*, is a fictional narrative which revolves around the life of Kunti during the course of the Mahabharata, highlighting her struggles and the choices she made in life. As the novel focuses on a woman's point of view, the personal and emotional elements which lay overlooked in Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata gain prominence in the modern retelling. To achieve the desired effect, the motifs of guilt and moral responsibility play major role in highlighting the inner conflicts and struggles that many characters, including Kunti, go through in the novel.

"© 2025 by the Author(s). Published by IJAR under CC BY 4.0. Unrestricted use allowed with credit to the author."

Introduction:-

Madhavi Mahadevan is a novelist, short-story writer, translator, editor and famously an author of children's books. Her novel, *The Kaunteyas*, which was first published in the year 2016, is a significant contemporary retelling of the Mahabharata from perspective of the character of Kunti. The novel seeks to present an alternative angle to critically examine the story of the Mahabharata as it foregrounds a woman's perspective, as opposed to the conventional male-centric perspective to the epic narrative.

As Mahadevan explains in the Prologue to her novel, "Women's stories are written in water. Passed in silence from mother to daughter... I wonder what would happen if women started telling their own stories. Like water that grinds down the hardest rock, would these stories change the shape of the world?" (2). As the Prologue to the novel focuses on telling the story from a woman's point of view, the areas of focus also change. While conventional male-centric

Corresponding Author:- Aayushi Sangharshee
Address:- For the completion of PhD Thesis.

epic narratives focus on attributes like heroism, valour, chivalry, wars etc., the narratives by women would in turn focus on the emotional aspects of the story. To quote Mahadevan, in the Prologue to her novel she lists what women's stories are about, "About things perishable: flesh, blood, feelings, tears. Suffering. Endurance is a sign of womanliness" (2). We see how Mahadevan sets the stage in the Prologue itself, preparing the readers for her novel to begin. As the novel focuses on Kunti as the central figure and narrator of the novel, the axis of the narrative shifts towards her personal and emotional journey, highlighting her struggles amid the intersections of moral duty, cultural consciousness, societal expectations, and personal desires. As personal emotions take centre space, the motifs of guilt and personal sacrifice become very prominent.

Mahadevan's novel explores the element of Guilt in a number of characters in the novel, the most important among them being Kunti. Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas, plays a significant role in shaping the course of the events of the Mahabharata, yet her narrative remains majorly over-looked or marginalised, under the largely male-dominated narrative of the Epic. Her biggest guilt stems from her act of abandoning her first born child, Karna. As the novel highlights the circumstances in which Karna was born, from Kunti being a maiden in a conventional patriarchal world, she had no choice but to abandon the child in order to survive respectfully in the society. She knew that the world would call her son illegitimate and would dishonour her for bearing a child before marriage.

The novel highlights the gravity of her struggle, as she is seen contemplating, "An illegitimate child carries the sin of his mother" (Mahadevan, 61). The novel explains how the Sage Durvasa had blessed Kunti with the knowledge of the Vashikaran Mantra by using which she could call upon any God of choice. To quote, Durvasa had said, "Meditate upon the devata you wish to call; he will appear before you, obedient to your command" (Mahadevan, 59). Unknowing of the immense power of the Vashikaran Mantra and its irrevocability, Kunti once just accidentally happened to call upon the Sun God as she casually reminisced about the words of the Mantra while offering her prayers to the Sun. Little had she known that her act would actually call upon the Sun God, whose demands she would have to fulfil in return.

Born of her union with the Sun God, Karna became the first born son of Kunti, but in a world where bearing a child before marriage was considered a sin. Utterly pained by the moral responsibility of saving her and her family's honour in the society, she had no choice but to secretly abandon the child. The provocation of the Mantra, the birth of Karna and his final abandonment became the biggest guilt in Kunti's life, almost nightmarish in extent. As Kunti describes it in the novel, "He called it a boon, but it is worse than any curse" (Mahadevan, 62). As the text focuses on the psychological and emotional struggle of Kunti, Mahadevan not only provides humanising attributes to Kunti, but also offers a feminist and subaltern reinterpretation of the rigid constructs of dharma and the patriarchal values embedded in ancient mythology.

Other than Kunti, many other characters also are seen as being embedded in guilt in some form or the another. The first one being Bhishma Pitamaha, who is seen as being guilty of abducting the three Princesses of Kashi for his brother Vichitravirya. As the novel explains, the three Princesses of Kashi: Amba, Ambika and Ambalika were abducted from their swayamvara by Bhishma in the name of Kshatriya dharma. The novel explains how the lives of the Kashi Princesses went through serious consequences after the abduction.

One of the Princesses, Amba, was already betrothed to another King, Salva, whom she had plans to marry to. But after the abduction, when Amba had gone to the King Salva, he outrightly refused to accept her. Grieved by the rejection and loss of her honour in society, she decided to take her own life by committing suicide. By focusing on the incident, the novel highlights the major guilt that the reverent Bhishma Pitamaha had in his life: the guilt of not only the abduction of the three Princesses, but also of the murder of Amba, as a consequence of the abduction.

Another character who is seen as being guilty of their past actions, is Satyawati, the Rajmata of Kuru empire. Satyawati is shown as being an elderly woman who made a few ambitious choices in the past in order to secure the throne for her lineage. Being a fisherman's daughter by cast, and not from a Kshatriya lineage, her marriage to King Shantanu was not easy, and her sons could not legally inherit the throne. In spite of that, she made Shantanu promise her that only her sons and not Bhishma, his rightful heir, should inherit the throne, because of which Bhishma was denied his right to natural succession.

As she says in the novel, "Hastinapur has not ceased to blame me for depriving it of its rightful heir" (Mahadevan, 123). Moreover, years later when her sons became kings, but were found incapable of bearing children, Satyawati

had forced their wives to bear children with the sages in order to continue the lineage. As the narrative quotes other people's views on the incident, it says, "She [Satyawati] and Bhishma, together ruined the lives of all three sisters" (Mahadevan, 167).

The element of guilt and moral responsibility works as a narrative technique in the novel, which focuses on bringing out the emotional side of the story of characters of the Mahabharata. Keeping Kunti as the centre point of the novel, Mahadevan shifts the onus of the story from the dominant male characters, to the female characters of the story, their emotions, and their sufferings.

Works Cited:-

1. Mahadevan, Madhavi. *The Kaunteyas*. Speaking Tiger Books. New Delhi. 2016.
2. Bala, Kanchan, and Seema Choudhary. "A Study of Silent Female Characters in Kavita Kane's Novels." (2023).
3. Parvathy, B. M., and P. G. Student. "Feminist Revisionist Mythology and the Lost Voices—A Subversive Analysis of Select Literary Texts."
4. Luthra, Rashmi. "Clearing Sacred Ground: Women-Centered Interpretations of the Indian Epics." *Feminist Formations*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2014, pp. 135–61. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43860745>. Accessed 6 Aug. 2025.

**Certificate of Seminar/
Conference**



ISSN 2320-6407

International Journal of Advanced Research

www.journalijar.com

A CrossRef Indexed Journal

Impact Factor: 7.08
CrossRef DOI
10.21474/IJAR01

Certificate of Publication

This is Certify that

Prof./Dr./Mr./Miss **Aayushi Sangharshee and Jatinder Kaur Kohli** has contributed a paper as author / Co-author to title **THE ELEMENT OF GUILT AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY IN MADHAVI MAHADEVANS THE KAUNTEYAS** and has got published in Vol **13** Issue **Aug, 2025**. The Editor in chief and the Editorial Board aporeciate the intellectual contribution of the author / Co-author.




Editor Chief


Managing Editor



Publisher

CERTIFICATE

PROUDLY PRESENTED TO

Aayushi Sangharshee

Learn how to access Taylor & Francis Journals subscribed under One Nation One
Subscription

Jun 12, 2025

Date of Completion

Taylor and Francis Group

Organizer

