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This dissertation titled
Authorship, History, and Race in Three Contemporary Retellings of the *Mahabharata:*
*The Palace of Illusions, The Great Indian Novel, and The Mahabharata* (Television Mini Series)

by

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Abstract

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In this study, I explore the manner in which contemporary artistic reimaginings of the Sanskrit epic the Mahabharata with a characteristically Western bent intervene in the dominant discourse on the epic. Through an analysis of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s The Palace of Illusions (2008), Shashi Tharoor’s The Great Indian Novel (1989), and Peter Brook’s theatrical production The Mahabharata (1989 television mini-series), I argue that these reimaginings represent a tendency to challenge the cultural authority of the Sanskrit epic in certain important ways. The study is premised on the recognition that the three works of art in question respond, some more consciously than others, to three established assumptions regarding the Mahabharata respectively: (1) the Sanskrit epic as a product of divine authorship; (2) the Sanskrit epic as history; and (3) the Sanskrit epic as the story of a particular race. In their engagement with the epic, these works foreground the concepts of the author, history, and race respectively in such a manner that the apparent stability and unity of those concepts disappear and that those concepts become sites of theoretical reflection. In this sense, the three works could ultimately be seen as theoretical statements or discourses on those concepts. Given that the concepts in question are inextricably linked to the Sanskrit epic and the dominant discourse on the
epic, the success and importance of each of the contemporary works as an approach that challenges the cultural authority of the *Mahabharata* depends upon the extent to which it complicates the concept that it engages with and foregrounds that concept as a site of theoretical reflection.
To the three women in my life,

Methuli

Lavanya

and

Ramya,

who make every moment of my existence meaningful!
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Chapter 1: Introduction

My dissertation explores the manner in which contemporary Western or Westernized artistic reimaginings of the Sanskrit epic the *Mahabharata* intervene in the dominant discourse on the epic. Through an analysis of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), and Peter Brook’s theatrical production *The Mahabharata* (1989 television mini-series), I argue that these reimaginings represent a tendency to challenge the cultural authority of the Sanskrit epic in certain important ways. The study is premised on the recognition that the three works of art in question respond, some more consciously than others, to three established assumptions regarding the *Mahabharata* respectively: (1) the Sanskrit epic as a product of divine authorship; (2) the Sanskrit epic as history; and (3) the Sanskrit epic as the story of a particular race. In their engagement with the epic, these works foreground the concepts of the author, history, and race respectively in such a manner that the apparent stability and unity of those concepts disappear and that those concepts become sites of theoretical reflection. In this sense, the three works could ultimately be seen as theoretical statements or discourses on those concepts. Given that the concepts in question are inextricably linked to the Sanskrit epic and the dominant discourse on the epic, the success and importance of each of the contemporary works as an approach that challenges the cultural authority of the *Mahabharata* depends upon the extent to which it complicates the concept that it engages with and foregrounds that concept as a site of theoretical reflection.
Scope and Methodology

The main goal of the study is to explore the ways in which the three works of art in question render themselves as gestures that undermine the authority of the *Mahabharata* by functioning as sites where the concepts of the author, history, and race—concepts that are inextricably linked to the Sanskrit epic and whose conceptual potential is often used to construct and reinforce the epic’s identity as an authoritative text—become destabilized. The mainstream conceptualizations of the *Mahabharata* base themselves on the dominant, naturalized understandings of these concepts, and therefore, those concepts, within the dominant discourse on the Sanskrit epic, embody a centralizing or centripetal tendency. The three works of art in question, more than anything else, foreground, consciously or unconsciously, those concepts in such a manner that their apparent singularity is problematized and their inherently dialogic nature is revealed. The artworks, in this sense, embody a decentralizing or centrifugal tendency. Part of my goal is to highlight the importance of this decentralizing tendency as a necessary step towards countering the authority of the Sanskrit epic.

I recognize the *Mahabharata* and the three works of art under analysis as distinct voices in the Bakhtinian sense of the term. As Caryl Emerson notes, “A voice, Bakhtin everywhere tells us, is not just words or ideas strung together: it is a ‘semantic position,’ a point of view on the world, it is one personality orienting itself among other personalities within a limited field.”¹ The voice that each artwork represents can be understood on two levels: voices that signify alternative narrative possibilities and voices

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¹ Caryl Emerson, preface to *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, by Mikhail Bakhtin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxxvi.
that foreground alternative understandings of the concept in question. These voices intervene in the broader *Mahabharata* tradition and interact with certain dominant voices of that tradition. In this sense, the artworks embody a dialogizing tendency.

Textual and performance analyses constitute the methodology of the study. The study involves a close reading of those sections of each work of art that are relevant to the corresponding theoretical concept. Given that the primary focus of each chapter is to foreground how the relevant artwork engages with the corresponding theoretical concept, my engagement with each artwork takes the form of an analysis of selected sections of that artwork. One could argue that focusing on selected sections of each artwork, instead of engaging with the artwork as a holistic unit, could lead to a distorted understanding of the artwork. While this argument is valid in itself, it, in my view, does not apply to the present study in a decisive manner, as the primary goal of the study is not to present comprehensive analyses of the artworks in question, but to recognize the ways in which they complicate the three concepts in question. Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism, primarily as understood in the context of his theory of language, provides the main theoretical framework for the study. In addition to this overarching theory, a theoretical position specific to each of the three concepts—Roland Barthes idea of the death of the author, Hayden White’s idea of history as a fundamentally literary construct, and Stuart Hall’s idea of race as a floating signifier—is used in the relevant chapter. I use these theoretical positions not as comprehensive theoretical frameworks, but as theoretical points of departure for the analysis of the artworks’ engagement with the relevant concepts.
The *Mahabharata* tradition is saturated with numerous retellings of the epic found not only in its traditional Indian context, but also in the broader South and Southeast Asian context. These retellings are also found in numerous different languages and art forms. In such a context, the choice of artworks for the present study was made primarily on the basis of their affinity to the West. These works are Western in three important ways. First, all three authors in question are immersed in a characteristically Western artistic and scholarly tradition. Peter Brook was born and raised in Britain, and he is primarily associated with Europe. His reputation as an English producer-director of Shakespeare’s plays indicates the important position that he occupies in the English theatre tradition. Shashi Tharoor was born in Britain and educated in India and the United States. He completed his Ph.D. degree at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at the Tufts University. He was also awarded an honorary D.Litt. by the University of Puget Sound and a Doctorate *Honoris Causa* in History by the University of Bucharest. The awards that he has received include a Commonwealth Writer’s Prize and the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman, India’s highest honour for overseas nationals. Tharoor is mostly known for his positions of senior advisor to the General-Secretary of the United States during the Cold War and also Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations for Communication and Public Information. He is currently serving as Member of Parliament in India.² Born in India, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni completed her postgraduate studies in the United States. She earned her Master’s degree in English from Wright State University, Ohio, and her Ph.D. in the same from the University of Bucharest.

California, Berkeley. She is currently teaching in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Houston. Her works have been translated into twenty-nine languages.²

Second, implied in each of the three works is a characteristically Western approach to the main concept that the work engages with. Third, all three works use the English language as their medium.⁴ Considering their popularity (at least, relative popularity) in the West, it could be argued that these works have played an important role in popularizing the Sanskrit epic in the West. It could also be argued that these works function as sites in which characteristically Western and non-Western traditions enter into a dialogue with each other.

Justification of Key Basic Assumptions of the Study

The Mahabharata as an Authoritative Text

Despite its common identity as an epic, the Mahabharata is primarily regarded as a religious text in its traditional Indian and also the broader South Asian context. It is inextricably linked to the Hindu religious tradition. James L. Fitzgerald who has explored the religious dimension of the Sanskrit epic calls it “a religious epic.”⁵ He claims, “From its very beginnings the Mahābhārata has played a fundamental role as a sacred ‘scripture’ in defining the Hindu world.”⁶ The Sanskrit epic is fundamental to Hinduism to such an extent that it is known as the fifth Veda, an addition to the four most

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⁴ Brook’s play was originally in French, but the English version is as equally famous as, if not more famous than, the French one.


⁶ Ibid.
sacred texts in Hinduism called the *Vedas*. Fitzgerald discusses the essentially religious character of the epic in the following manner:

As it presents itself, the *Great Bhārata* [the *Mahabharata*] has the same purposes and power which Brahmans had earlier ascribed to the Vedas; that is, it contains all knowledge necessary for the social, material, and religious welfare of human beings. And like the four Vedas, the power of its acoustic reality alone, that is, the power of its merely being recited, is potent, is capable of purifying the effects of one’s evil actions and promoting one’s material and bodily well-being.  

The section of the Sanskrit epic where the epic’s religious ideology is most explicitly presented is the *Bhagavad Gita*, commonly referred to as the *Gita*. This section, which takes the form of a conversation between Krishna and Arjuna that takes place on the battlefield just before the war begins, “explicitly states an ethic for a proper conduct of life, such that the interests of both society and individual person would be satisfied to the highest degree possible” and “reveals an ontology which articulates those interrelationships among persons, the world, and that which is of ultimate value and which makes this complex ethic possible and plausible.”

Although the emphasis on the religious dimension of the *Mahabharata* in the dominant discourse on the text has given it the appearance of an ahistorical reality, the text is one that has emerged in a specific context in response to specific circumstances, which James L. Fitzgerald argues are fundamentally economic and political. He claims, “The *Mahābhārata* was called into existence by a crisis perceived by the Brāhman elite of Ancient India—a crisis threatening its very existence because of unprecedented competition for patronage and support in the context of the new political and economic

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8 Ibid., 615.
institution of the Mauryan empire.” In the face of the rising popularity of the competing religions like Buddhism at that time, the Hindu elite had to find an effective way of reaching out to the populace, and the *Mahabharata* was their strategy. In this sense, Fitzgerald calls the *Mahabharata* “a religiously energized political response” to the social, political, and religious atmosphere of the context in which the epic came into existence.

The context and manner in which the Sanskrit epic has come into existence suggests the possibility of the epic having political underpinnings, which are as strong as, if not stronger than, the epic’s religious and philosophical underpinnings. The following excerpt from Fitzgerald where he talks about the parallel between the idea of *karmayoga*, which is central to the ideology proposed in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and certain Upanishadic and Buddhist teachings, points in the direction of such possibility:

The *Bhagavad Gītā* accepted the basic psychology of these Upanishadic and Buddhist self-transformative regimens. It too insisted that one must detach oneself from oneself from one’s normal world of desires and actions in order to do away with the limited version of oneself and realize the state of ultimate perfection. But it argued that this transformation could and should occur primarily within the context of the social and material world, within the context of one’s specific social and material reality as a Brahmin, Kṣatriya, Vaishya, or Śūdra.

Implied by this statement is the idea that countering the popularity of the competing religions involved assimilating the key teachings of those religions into Hinduism and

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9 Fitzgerald, “Mahābhārata” 72.
10 “They [the creators of the *Mahabharata*] could have found no more appropriate rhetorical medium for an ideology which strongly valorizes the material and social worlds as emanating from and structured by God and as being the primary loci of the most important human endeavors than an imaginative presentation through a narrative with the grandeur, sweep, and density of heroic epic” (Fitzgerald, “The Great Epic of India as Religious Rhetoric” 628).
11 Fitzgerald, “Mahābhārata” 72.
12 Fitzgerald, “The Great Epic of India as Religious Rhetoric” 617.
redefining them so as those teachings present themselves primarily as Hindu. This implication, on one level, highlights the role of the Sanskrit epic in an expansionist project; on another level, it foregrounds the fundamentally political nature of the process that has shaped what has today come to be known as Hinduism.

Fitzgerald also suggests the possibility of the Sanskrit epic having served a broader political project:

It seems plausible that this narrative of social and political transformation, and the vision of the social and political order on which it is based, was related in the mind of the creator of the text to political realities in Northern India in the period after the rise of the Mauryan empire. This vision can be seen as providing an early Brahminic Vaisnava ideological grounding for an empire—whether as an unfulfilled fantasy, an imaginative projection intended to inspire such action, or a retrospective justification for something already accomplished or attempted; and again, whether or not it was ever actually used to provide such a grounding by an actual political power—the Śungas, the Guptas, or some ambitious or merely fanciful petty king sometime in between. In any case, the type of political integration and subordination required to produce a harmoniously disciplined society and imperial state certainly must not have come easy to the imagination of the old political elites of Aryan society, which were fractious and agonistic; and the Great Bhārata provides a forceful argument for the necessity of such a transformation, while suggesting, through its overwhelmingly powerful narrative, that great social cost was involved. Thus, the four quasi-patricides are not merely hyperbole; occurring within the familial metaphor which constitutes the heart of the Great Bhārata’s narrative, these killings would seem to demonstrate to their audience that the required annihilation of the old order involves the awful sacrifice of something cherished, fundamental to, and formative of, oneself.13

While one could argue that this comment constitutes a specifically Western reading of a characteristically South Asian text, particularly given its emphasis on the idea of individuality, it cannot be denied that it foregrounds certain important interpretive possibilities of the text. The ways in which the Sanskrit epic has played into various political projects in contemporary India, and also broader South Asia, and defined the

13 Ibid., 625-26.
dominant Indian political consciousness indicate the validity of this interpretive possibility. Considering that the *Mahabharata* largely functions as a authoritative text that plays an important role in structuring society in the Indian context, one engaging with the text, in my view, should always be conscious of this interpretive possibility.

Given its position as a text of religious importance in the Hindu tradition, the *Mahabharata* is closely associated with the *Hindutva* ideology, which has come to define contemporary Indian politics. As an ideology that asserts the supremacy of Hinduism over all other religious and cultural traditions and maintains, as its goal, the establishment of a *Hindu Rashtra* or Hindu regime, it advocates an extremist form of Hinduism.

Dirk Wiemann discusses how certain contemporary reimaginings of the *Mahabharata*, and also the *Ramayana*, have resulted in advancing this *Hindutva* ideology. Given the characteristically multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multilingual nature of Indian society, the very association of the *Mahabharata* with the *Hindutva* ideology

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14 R. N. Dandekar points out how closely related the Sanskrit epic is to the Indian consciousness when he claims, “[M]en and women in India from one end of the country to the other, whether young or old, whether rich or poor, whether high or low, whether simple or sophisticated, still derive entertainment, inspiration, and guidance from the Mahabharata. … There is indeed no department of Indian life, public or private, which is not effectively influenced by the great epic. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the people of India have learnt to think and act in terms of the Mahabharata” (quoted in Shashi Tharoor, *Bookless in Baghdad: Reflections on Writing and Writers* [New York: Arcade Publishing, 2005], 18).

15 Although the *Ramayana* is the text that is most closely associated with the idea of *Hindutva*, the *Mahabharata* also features prominently in the discourse on *Hindutva*.

16 Surveying the history of the *Hindutva* concept, P. R. Ram claims, “Hindutva did away with whatever little flexibility and pluralism which was probable in the earliest constructs of Hinduism” (“A Way of Life” *Economic and Political Weekly* 31, no. 9 [1996]: 519).

17 Focusing on the television productions of the two Sanskrit epics telecast on the leading Indian television channel called Doordarshan in the late 1980s and the 1990s, Dirk Wiemann claims, “Transferred from the classical orientalist niche of Sanscritic high culture into the domain of popular culture, the broadcast versions of the classical versions of both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* as devotional serials contributed to the *Hindutva* effort of rearticulating cultural unity by suggesting a national mass culture aggressively conceived as Hindu” (*Genres of Modernity: Contemporary Indian Novels in English* [Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008], 87).
indicates certain important ways in which the Sanskrit epic has come to reinforce certain bases of division and discrimination in contemporary Indian society.

In addition to constituting a significant part of what could be considered the foundation for the *Hindutva* ideology, the *Mahabharata* has also found its way into everyday political rhetoric in India. The Sanskrit epic is often used in conceptualizing everyday political realities. Commenting on certain disagreements within the main opposition coalition National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in 2013, the Shiv Sena\textsuperscript{18} claimed that the Bharathiya Janata Party (BJP), the largest party in the coalition, “should take allies into confidence on the issue of its prime ministerial candidate or else there could be a ‘Mahabharata’.”\textsuperscript{19} Also, following the humiliating election defeat of the Indian National Congress (INC) at the 2014 Lok Sabha (parliamentary) elections at which the party was reduced to an all-time low of forty-four members in the Sabha, its Lok Sabha leader Mallikarjun Kharge described the party’s position in terms of the *Mahabharata* imagery. It is reported that “swinging a Bheem-like rhetorical club, he [Mallikarjun Kharge] stated that while macho Kauravas may have numbered much more than the Pandavas, the latter weren’t scared and won ultimately in the Mahabharata.”\textsuperscript{20} Commenting on the former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, his media advisor Sanjaya Baru once said, “The PM tried his best given his political limitations. He was like

Bheeshma of the Mahabharata, not Dhritarashtra. … [H]e was certainly not blind.”

In August 2010, the BJP leader Kirti Azad, commenting on the controversial Commonwealth Games project, is reported to have told then Urban Development Minister, “Shakuni and Duryodhana are busy making money. The Delhi government is like the blind-folded Gandhari and you are sitting quiet like Bheeshma Pitamah.”

At the same time, in March 2008, then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh invoked the Sanskrit epic when he appealed the former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to support the Indo-US nuclear deal. He is reported to have said, “Bheeshma Pitamah of Indian politics Atal Bihari Vajpayee should listen to his conscience and let national interest prevail upon narrow politics.”

The numerous invocations of the Sanskrit epic like these in everyday Indian rhetoric indicate the extent to which the Mahabharata has become part of the modern Indian political consciousness. They also indicate how the Sanskrit epic has become a naturalized code in terms of which political realities are conceptualized.

An interesting invocation of the Mahabharata in support of one of the most brutal military offensives in contemporary South Asian history is reported from Sri Lanka. Velupillai Prabhakaran, the late leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who fought a deadly war with the Sri Lankan government for twenty-six years had allegedly justified all the killings that his organization had undertaken on the basis of the Mahabharata, particularly the Bhagavad Gita section. He is said to have treasured this

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22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
section of the Sanskrit epic “not for its spiritual riches but for the passage where Krishna told Arjuna that it was his duty to fight and kill even his relations.”

Raghavan describes the moment when Prabhakaran realized the possibility of using the Bhagavad Gita to justify his actions in the following manner:

On one occasion, in 1976, Prabhakaran and another LTTE member assassinated a police intelligence officer who was accused of spying on Tamil youths. After the assassination, he cycled to one of the hideouts and, coincidentally, a song from a Tamil film called Karna (a figure from the epic Mahabharata) was playing on the radio. This song was about the discourse between Arjuna and Krishna, which explained the notion of dharma and the right to kill the enemy. He was very excited, and felt that his actions were thus justified.

In a context where he had explicitly rejected Mahatma Gandhi’s doctrine of ahimsa or nonviolence and treated historical figures like Alexander the Great, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Subhash Chandra Bose, his approach to the Sanskrit epic presupposes the possibility to the epic lending itself to interpretations that support and legitimize authoritarianism.

The ongoing debate in India regarding the proposal to include the Mahabharata and the Ramayana in the education curriculum points to an important dimension of the position of the Sanskrit epics in Indian society. The expressed intention behind this proposal is “[t]o rid the country of ‘cultural pollution’ and inculcate ‘values’ among young minds.” The fact that this proposal has been made by a government comprised

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26 “Prabhakaran.”
of a coalition led by the BJP, a party that thrives on the Hindutva ideology, indicates the extent to which the epics have become part of a specific political agenda. The decision to teach the epics not as mere stories but as accounts that incorporate details of specific scientific achievements of ancient India indicates how the Sanskrit epics are being used, in the modern context, to redefine even the idea of science. In a document prepared by the Ministry of Culture in relation to this decision, it is reported that the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad has been identified as a text that reveals “that airplanes and rocket launchers existed in the Ramayana era” and suggests that “atomic bombs and tear gas shells were used during the Mahabharata era.” These claims indicate the extent to which the Sanskrit epics are being used to redefine everything including the Western idea of science in such a manner that this redefinition advances a specific political ideology that functions as a basis for intense division and discrimination in Indian society.

In a context where the Sanskrit epics in general and the Mahabharata in particular contribute to strengthening certain fundamental bases of division and discrimination in society, I emphasize the need for a broader discourse on the political and ideological dimensions of these epics. Given that every form of description entails some form of prescription, discourses on these epics that do not engage with their political and ideological dimension result in reinforcing those bases of division and discrimination directly or indirectly. I recognize the three works of art under analysis as important interventions in the Mahabharata tradition mainly because they, in my view, engage with

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28 Interestingly, this decision was made at a meeting not of educationists, scientists, and experts on the Vedas, but of the President of the BJP and the education ministers of the BJP-ruled states.

the Sanskrit epic in such a manner that the political and ideological dimension of the epic becomes highlighted and even challenged in important ways.

**The Mahabharata as Advancing a Monologic Worldview**

I recognize the *Mahabharata* as a text and tradition that advances a largely monologic worldview. This is not to undermine the inherently diverse nature of the Sanskrit epic. Its diversity could be conceptualized on three levels. First, as a narrative text (the Sanskrit written version) comprised of eighteen *parvans* or books, which are further divided into subsections, with a total of almost seventy-five thousand verses—a length that has earned the *Mahabharata* the title the longest epic in the world—one could hardly expect it to represent a single voice within itself. Not only is the text saturated with numerous characters with their own distinct voices, but many of those voices are openly in conflict with each other as well. Second, the text contains numerous stories, including a version of the *Ramayana* itself, that are not relevant or related to the main storyline of the epic. In these stories, one would encounter characters that have nothing to do with the characters of the main narrative and whose voices are sometimes strong enough to distract the reader from the main storyline. Third, the *Mahabharata* is a tradition that has grown over the course of its history and one that continues to grow.  

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30 Shashi Tharoor describes the diversity of the *Mahabharata* tradition when he claims, “[T]he Mahabharata has had so many accretions over the years in constant retellings that there is practically no subject it does not cover. Its characters and personalities still march triumphantly in Indian minds, its myths and legends still inspire the Indian imagination, its events still peak to Indians with a contemporary resonance rare in many twentieth century Works. The basic story, if the tale of the dynastic rivalry between the Pandava and Kaurava clans may be called that, has been so thoroughly the object of adaptation, interpolation, and reinterpretation that the Mahabharata as we now have it overflows with myths and legends of all sorts, didactic tales exalting the Brahmins, fables and stories that teach moral and existential lessons, bardic poetry extolling historical dynasties, and meandering digressions from everything from law to lechery and politics to philosophy. Whenever a particular social or political message was
Given this continuous growth, the idea of diversity could be seen as a defining characteristic of the *Mahabharata* tradition. Nevertheless, irrespective of this inherently diverse nature of the *Mahabharata* tradition, its position in the broader tradition of Hinduism has attributed it an aura of monologism. I acknowledge the *Mahabharata* primarily as a monologic text not in the sense of a lack of diversity of voices within the text, but in the sense that the text, given its inextricable association with Hinduism, has historically come to represent a dominant voice that serves specific political and ideological purposes. I recognize the three works of art in question as important platforms where this aura of monologism is challenged.

**The *Mahabharata* as an Apocalyptic Text Celebrating a Way of Life**

My engagement with the *Mahabharata* is largely based on the assumption that the Sanskrit epic is dominantly perceived as a celebration of a certain way of life. One could problematize this assumption on the basis that the Sanskrit epic is an apocalyptic text and that such a text, by virtue of the fact that it is an apocalyptic text, invariably entails a rejection of the way of life that the text is dominantly perceived to be a celebration of. I challenge this problematization on the basis of two arguments. First, as destructive as the epic war in the *Mahabharata* is, it does not lead to a total collapse of the existing world. At best, it marks a transition from one age to another—from the *Dvapara-yuga* to the *Kali-yuga*. Importantly, it is the Pandavas, whose way of life the Sanskrit epic is dominantly perceived to be a celebration of, who survive the war and enter the next age.

The narrative ends with the Pandava brothers reunited in heaven. Therefore, the

sought to be imparted to Indians at large, it was simply inserted into a retelling of the Mahabharata” (*Bookless in Baghdad* 21).
*Mahabharata* is fundamentally a celebration of the way of life that the Pandavas embody. Second, irrespective of its position as an apocalyptic text, the Sanskrit epic has come to define and propagate a specific social, political, cultural, and religious way of life in its contemporary reception. The extent to which the Sanskrit epic is used to uphold that specific way of life indicates that the text’s apocalyptic dimension has failed to present itself as a defining aspect in the contemporary reception of the text.

**Art as Capable of Making Serious Political Statements**

To view the contemporary works in question as revealing and also challenging the political and ideological dimension of the Sanskrit epic is to conceptualize them as essentially political entities that are capable of making serious statements regarding the external world. This conceptualization raises important questions regarding the nature of the relationship between art and the external world or “reality.” Emphasizing the distinction between the two, Vladimir Marchenkov argues, “Art is a ludic reflection of reality—a reflection that does not conceal its own ludic (‘unreal’) nature.” Based on this conception, one could argue that because art is first and foremost ludic, to read a work of art as making a serious statement of political and ideological nature is to misconceptualize the very concept of art. On one level, this argument provides important philosophical insights into the nature of art. It provides a useful framework for understanding the relationship between art and everyday reality on a conceptual level.

Nevertheless, this argument is problematic for two reasons. First, it downplays the important role that the creator and receiver’s rhetorical situatedness plays in the

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construction of a given work of art. Every human being is largely a product of a specific social and political context, and her worldview is largely determined by that context. Her position in the broader context invariably determines how she perceives the world. When one makes art whatever flows into the creation is essentially filtered through and configured by her rhetorical situatedness. Similarly, one’s situatedness determines how a given work of art is read. In this sense, every work of art, irrespective of its position as a ludic reality, is political at a fundamental level. Second, this argument overlooks the possibility of interpreting playfulness as a possible form of resistance. Marchenkov does acknowledge the political dimension of play when he argues, “Play is a fundamental subversion of the existing order of things as the only possible one.” Nevertheless, his conceptualization of play as something “unreal” undermines its capacity to present that subversion as a political statement that needs to be taken seriously. In a context where the Mahabharata functions as a defining text of a broad cultural and religious tradition, to reimagine it from non-conventional perspectives itself entails a certain violation of the text. To conceptualize this violation as an instance of play that an artwork embodies by default, in my view, is to undermine an important set of interpretive possibilities not only of that artwork, but also of the broader Mahabharata tradition.

Parallel Studies

The Mahabharata, like its counterparts across the globe, has lent itself to numerous retellings over the centuries of its existence, and many of these retellings have been discussed as sites in which the Sanskrit epic is redefined from the perspectives that

32 Vladimir Marchenkov, in discussion with the author, September 2014.
33 The available literature on each of the three works of art under analysis will be discussed in the relevant chapter.
are characteristic of the times of those retellings. Romila Thapar’s Śakuntalā: Texts, Readings, Histories could be cited as a case in point. Thapar takes the story of Śakuntalā from the Sanskrit epic and examines how it has been retold over different periods of history. Based on an analysis of the retellings of the story ranging from Kalidasa’s play Abhijñāna-śākuntalam to contemporary Indian reimaginings of the story, she advances the argument that any change in the theme of the story that a given retelling embodies illumines the historical moment to which it belongs. She also argues that the historical moment, in turn, may account for the change. She also points out that in the retellings of the story there are manifestations of culture and cultural ideologies in the way Śakuntalā is projected as a woman. Thapar’s work is important mainly in that it shows that each and every retelling of the story is always grounded in the historical context of that retelling. Although the present study does not approach the three works under analysis as necessarily representing three distinct historical moments, it explores the extent to which the three works represent certain modes of thinking that are characteristic of the time that they belong to.

There is a significant body of literature that interprets the epic from perspectives that are characteristically contemporary. The recent book Mahābhārata Now: Narration, Aesthetics, Ethics comprises a set of articles that point to certain contemporary perspectives from which the epic could be understood. In the Foreword to the book, Peter Ronald deSouza discusses three strategies that are used to “contemporize” the epic: (1) bringing the contemporary tools of “reading a text” to bear on the epic, (2) humanizing and secularizing the epic, and (3) finding in the epic moral puzzles that need
to be analyzed with a view to recognizing the lessons that they contain for our individual and collective lives.\textsuperscript{34} In the present study, I explore the ways in which the chosen contemporary works employ the first two strategies in their engagement with the epic.

Lakshmi Bandlamudi takes an anthropological approach to the epic in her exploration of contemporary understandings of the text. In a study conducted in the 1990s, she explored how forty-eight adults of Indian origin residing in the United States understood and responded to four episodes of the television series titled \textit{Mahabharat} directed by Ravi Chopra and produced by B. R. Chopra. This study points to the impact that the participants’ past experience with the text and their cultural background and contemporary cultural location have on their interpretation of the text. Although Bandlamudi’s work is methodologically different from the current study, it is important mainly in that it indicates the role that the receiver’s subject position plays in determining the nature of the reception of the Sanskrit epic.

Chapter Overview

Chapter 2 lays out the theoretical framework of the study. This framework consists of three components: Mikhail Bakhtin’s distinction between the epic and the novel; Bakhtin’s idea of dialogism and Jullia Kristeva’s idea of intertextuality (as an extension of dialogism); and dialogism on the level of the word. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 are dedicated to the analysis of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s \textit{The Palace of Illusions}, Shashi Tharoor’s \textit{The Great Indian Novel}, and Peter Brook’s \textit{The Mahabharata} respectively. In these chapters, I discuss how the artworks, through their engagement with the Sanskrit

\footnote{\textsuperscript{34} Peter Ronald deSouza, foreword to \textit{Mahābhārata Now: Narration, Aesthetics, Ethics}, ed. Arindam Chakrabarti and Sibaji Bandyopadhyay (New Delhi and Oxon: Routledge, 2014), ix-xi.}
epic, foreground the corresponding theoretical concepts—the ideas of the author, history, and race. Chapter 6 presents the concluding remarks of the study.
Chapter 2: From Singularity to Multiplicity: The Theoretical Framework

Introduction

This chapter lays out the main theoretical framework of the present study. The theoretical framework consists of three sections. The first section discusses Mikhail Bakhtin’s distinction between the epic and the novel as a problematic, yet useful, theoretical framework for the framing of the relationship between the *Mahabharata* and the three contemporary works under analysis. The second section engages with the Bakhtinian notion of dialogism, with a focus on the intrinsic relationship between dialogism and language. It also briefly discusses Julia Kristeva’s notion of intertextuality as an extension of Bakhtinian dialogism. The third section focuses on dialogism specifically as it functions on the level of the word. Each of these sections is followed by a brief discussion of the ways in which the theoretical ideas outlined in that section become relevant and applicable to the present study.

Bakhtin’s Distinction between the Epic and the Novel

Bakhtin draws a clear distinction between the genres of the epic and the novel. To him, these two genres belong to two clearly distinguishable modes of thinking. He recognizes three defining characteristics of the epic: “(1) a national epic past … serves as the subject for the epic; (2) national tradition (not personal experience and the free thought that grows out of it) serves as the source for the epic; (3) an absolute epic distance separates the epic world from contemporary reality.”35 Elaborating on the first two characteristics, Bakhtin argues that the epic world “is a world of ‘beginnings’ and

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'peak times’ in the national history, a world of fathers and of founders of families, a world of ‘firsts’ and ‘bests.’”  

The notion of the epic distance establishes the narrative of the epic as a reality that is completely removed from the time of the composition and reception of the epic. Bakhtin claims, “Both the singer and the listener, immanent in the epic as a genre, are located in the same time and on the same evaluative (hierarchical) plane, but the represented world of the heroes stands on an utterly different and inaccessible time-and-value plane, separated by epic distance.”  

This disconnect between the time of the narrative and the time of its composition and reception creates a space in which the epic emerges as representative of a past that is “absolute and complete.”  

These three features that Bakhtin identifies as defining features of the epic as a genre provide important insights into the mode of thinking that his concept of the epic represents. The emphasis on the term “national” in his description of the first two features indicates the essentially communal dimension of the epic. This emphasis undermines the validity of any idiosyncratic reading of the epic that is not consistent with the dominant and socially sanctioned readings of the same. Bakhtin’s claim that “Epic discourse is a discourse handed down by tradition” emphasizes the need for any reading of the epic to take into consideration its tradition, a requirement that further limits the interpretive possibilities of the text. The absolute disconnect that the third characteristic

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36 Ibid., 13.  
37 Ibid., 14.  
38 Ibid., 16.  
39 “[T]radition isolates the world of the epic from personal experience, from any new insights, from any personal initiative in understanding and interpreting, from new points of view and evaluations” (Ibid., 17).  
40 Ibid., 16.
marks between the time of the narrative and the time of its composition and reception also creates a space in which the assumed supremacy of an already privileged approach to understanding the epic over the available alternative approaches could be justified. This understanding leads to the conclusion that the epic, by its very constitution, is fundamentally a monologic discourse.

In her engagement with the idea of the epic, Kristeva reinforces Bakhtin’s stance that the epic as a fundamentally monologic discourse. She views monologism as an organizational principle of the epic structure itself. She claims, “There is no dialogue at the level of the apparent textual organization (historical enunciation/discursive enunciation); the two aspects of enunciations remain limited by the narrator’s absolute point of view which coincides with the wholeness of a god or community.” She also claims, “Epic logic pursues the general through the specific; it thus assumes a hierarchy within the structure of substance. Epic logic is therefore causal; that is theological.”

The identity of the novel as a genre, according to Bakhtin, lies largely in its ability to challenge the monologism of the epic and also the other genres that predate the novel. Bakhtin views the emergence of the novel as a result of a specific “rupture in the history of European civilization: its emergence from a socially isolated and culturally deaf semipatriarchal society, and its entrance into international and interlingual contacts and relationships.” He also claims, “A multitude of different languages, cultures and times

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42 Ibid., 48.
43 Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel” 11.
became available to Europe, and this became a decisive factor in its life and thought."44 Accordingly, it could be argued that the notions of rupture and multiplicity were defining aspects of what generated the condition of possibility for the emergence of the novel; therefore, these notions are part of the very structure of this genre.45 The novel, according to Bakhtin, is a genre of the new world and “the only developing genre” which therefore “reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding.”46 He also calls the novel “a genre-in-the-making.”47 This conceptualization of the novel as a genre that belongs to the new world order and one still in the making contrasts the novel with the genres that predate it, particularly the epic.

Bakhtin identifies three defining features of the novel that fundamentally distinguish that genre from the other genres:

(1) its stylistic three-dimensionality, which is linked with the multi-languaged consciousness realized in the novel; (2) the radical change it effects in the temporal coordinates of the literary image; (3) the new zone opened by the novel for structuring literary images, namely, the zone of maximal contact with the present (with contemporary reality) in all its openendedness.48

The first feature, which is linked to Bakhtin’s idea of heteroglossia, indicates a clear move in the direction of inclusivity. Bakhtin discusses the extent to which heteroglossia,

44 Ibid., 11.
45 The rupture that Bakhtin is referring to here is Western colonialism. Given the relationship between this rupture and the novel as a genre, one could argue that the novel carries the imprint of colonialism and question the extent to which such a genre be truly liberatory. While this argument raises a valid concern, to conceptualize the novel as a genre primarily defined by its colonial imprint is to overlook the transformations that the novel has undergone since its inception. Numerous examples from the field of postcolonial literature indicate how the novel, as a genre, has been converted into a powerful medium for advancing specifically anti-colonial sentiments.
46 Ibid., 7.
47 Ibid., 11.
48 Ibid.
the coexistence and intersection of languages in a given context, has become a defining structural feature of the novel as a genre. He recognizes the novel as an acknowledgement of the idea that “[t]he new cultural and creative consciousness lives in an actively polyglot world.” In a context where the close connection between the notions of language and worldview is assumed, the novel becomes a space in which different worldviews represented by different forms of language intersect each other. This does not mean that the different worldviews that intersect within a given novel carry the same sense of importance or seriousness within the context of the novel. Depending on the novelist’s perspective, certain worldviews are more privileged than others. However, what is important is that the novel creates a space that accommodates worldviews that a conventional understanding of the epic may not necessarily have space for. The second feature recognizes a certain destabilization of the literary image that the novel as a genre brings about. This destabilization is brought about by the novel’s ability to challenge the situatedness of the literary image. The literary imagery of a closed world and an absolute past is characterized by a certain degree of stability; its shape is largely defined, and its meaning largely undisputed. Nevertheless, when the novel breaks open this closed world that sense of stability that the closedness of the former world had

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49 Ibid., 12.

50 Here, I’m drawing upon the Wittgensteinian aphorism, “The limits of my language means the limits of my world” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logic-Philosophicus*, trans. d. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961], 115). In the context of his discussion of heteroglossia, Bakhtin engages with language on a sociological dimension where he focuses on individual, and also standardized, forms of language (“national languages”), whereas Wittgenstein engages with language on a deeper philosophical level where language is equated to consciousness; therefore, there is a difference between what the two theorists refer to as language. There is, however, a complex inextricable bond between the two levels of language in question. Given this bond, the Wittgensteinian aphorism could be used to theorize the relationship between worldview and the Bakhtinian idea of language as a social phenomenon.
attributed to its literary imagery disappears. This transformation results in a radical change in the temporal coordinates of that imagery, a change that is emancipatory by nature. The third feature, which is closely linked to the second, focuses on what Bakhtin calls the zone of maximal contact that the novel generates. This zone could be understood as a space where the uncontested and relatively stable worldviews associated with the monologic discourses come across new worldviews and are made to compete with them. In this sense, this zone functions as a site of struggle, a site where the authority of the monologic worldview is contested.

Any application of the Bakhtinian distinction between the epic and the novel as a theoretical framework for framing the relationship between the Sanskrit epic and the three contemporary retellings of the epic in question runs into three methodological complications that need to be addressed. The first methodological complication concerns the problematic nature of the strict distinction that Bakhtin draws between the epic and the novel. To begin with, this classification, which projects the epic and the novel as two mutually exclusive entities, is too schematic. This schematic distinction, which present the two genres as ahistorical realities, conveys the implication that there is an absolute disconnect between the two. This reductive oversimplification of the distinction between the epic and the novel is inconsistent with Bakhtin’s own thesis that the novel is a reality that is generically rooted in the epic.51 This thesis, which he advances in his discussion of the idea of the chronotope, is couched in a story of a gradual transition from the epic to the novel. A strict adherence to Bakhtin’s distinction between the epic and the novel

51 See Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the novel.”
would overlook any valuable insights that his own idea of this gradual transition may have to offer into the nature of the two genres.

At the same time, Bakhtin’s schematic distinction between the two genres conceptualizes monologism and dialogism as characteristics that are structurally inherent in the epic and the novel respectively. It is true that the epic subordinates all diversity to some kind of unity, and this unity and the movement towards it are defined by a certain set of fundamental assumptions or mythology. Nevertheless, to see this characteristic as an exclusive and defining feature of the epic and one that sets the epic apart from the other genres including the novel is problematic. Given the modern nature of the novel as a literary form, it may be open to multiple perspectives in a way that the epic was not, but any given novel embodies its own unity, which involves subordinating multiplicity to a dominant perspective. At the same time, the modern novel in general undermines worldviews that are pre-modern in nature, a tendency that projects the novel as part and parcel of modern cultural homogenization. This shows that the novel is also defined by its own form of monologism, which is structurally inherent in the novel. At the same time, the epic, particularly the Mahabharata is dialogic in an important way. The epic contains a multiplicity of characters with their own distinct worldviews interacting with each other. Irrespective of its generic identity, a work as extensive as the Mahabharata is bound to be defined by such multiplicity. Given this multiplicity, one could argue that the epic has its own dialogism, or at least, the potential for what Bakhtin recognizes as dialogic. In a context where the novel, which Bakhtin celebrates as the best expression of dialogism, itself is, as argued before, monologic at a fundamental level, it could be
argued that any difference between the dialogism of the novel and that of the epic is relative and not absolute. Accordingly, it could be argued that to view monologism and dialogism as *defining structural* characteristics of the epic and novel is to misconceptualize the very nature of the two genres.

My conceptualization of the *Mahabharata* as a predominantly monologic discourse and the three contemporary works as predominantly dialogic discourses is different from Bakhtin’s conceptualization of the relationship between each genre and the relevant discourse type. I do not subscribe to the idea that monologism and dialogism are defining structural characteristics of the *Mahabharata* and the three contemporary works respectively. I argue that the sense of monologism that has come to define the Sanskrit epic is a characteristic that it has acquired as a result of its close historical affinity with Hinduism as a religious and cultural tradition. Due to this affinity, the Sanskrit epic has over time acquired a predominantly Hindu character, and this has largely come to define the epic in its contemporary receptions. As far as the contemporary works are concerned, I view them as dialogic discourses mainly in the sense that they function as sites in which characteristically modern perspectives self-consciously engage with the dominant understanding of the Sanskrit epic with the goal of complicating the latter. Given that the dialogism of each contemporary work involves privileging the modern perspective over the pre-modern one, that dialogism is invariably defined by a sense of monologism. Therefore, in the context of the contemporary works, I recognize dialogism more as a condition that exists and enables the intersection of the pre-modern and modern
perspectives *until* the latter triumphs over the former, than as a characteristic inherent in the relevant genres.

The second methodological complication is one that concerns any transference of a model designed in and for one specific context to a different context for the purposes of explaining realities that are specific to that context. Bakhtin was, among other things, a Western, and specifically European, literary scholar, and there is no evidence to suggest that he directly engaged with traditions other than European. He engaged with the notions of the epic and the novel as they were understood in the European literary and philosophical tradition, and the theoretical distinction that he draws between the two is based on his knowledge of specifically European examples. In such a context, to use his model to understand a characteristically non-European tradition like the *Mahabharata* raises a fundamental methodological problem.

Shubha Pathak presents a helpful framework within which this methodological complication could be understood. While pointing out that the term “epic” originated primarily as an appellation for the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, she argues that the term has mostly been understood in relation to those two works. 

In such a context, to use the term to describe the *Mahabharata*, and also the *Ramayana*, Pathak argues, results in three important implications for the discourse on the notion of the epic. First, such labeling exposes the notion of the epic as an amnesiac metaphor in the Derridean sense of the term. 

Second, it “foreground[s] the features of the Sanskrit works that are analogous to

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53 Ibid., 45-46.
attributes of the Greek ones.” The first implication, and also the second, to a certain extent, depict the concept of the epic as one with a “primitive meaning,” which has effaced as a result of the term being in use for an extended period of time. This “primitive meaning” of the term epic is arguably relatively akin to the sense in which the term is used in Bakhtin’s discussion of the novel, and the use of the term to refer to the Sanskrit works in question indicates the distance that the term has travelled. Accordingly, the recognition of the Sanskrit poems in question as epics points to a radical reconceptualization of the very notion of the epic.

Given this apparent gap between the sense in which the term epic was used by Bakhtin and the current meaning of the term, especially in a context where the term has been extended to conceptualize the status of the Sanskrit works emanating from a radically different context, one could argue that to use the Bakhtinian model even as a broad framework to frame the relationship between the Mahabharata and the three chosen contemporary works is a misguided endeavour that even amounts to an act of cultural appropriation. This argument is important as it underscores a sense of vigilance, which, in my view, should be a characteristic component of the methodology of any study that involves cross-cultural and cross-contextual engagements. That said, I would defend the applicability of the Bakhtinian framework for my study on the basis of the two following arguments. First, there is a considerable body of literature that draws parallels

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54 Ibid., 46.
55 Ibid.
56 See Derrida.
between the Western epics and the Sanskrit works in question,\textsuperscript{57} and the very existence of that literature points to a basis on which the use of the term epic for the Sanskrit works can be justified, or, at least, such use cannot be completely rejected. Pathak who foregrounds the problematic nature of the categorization of the Sanskrit works as epics herself acknowledges the importance of continuing with the existing categorization.\textsuperscript{58}

Second, the \textit{Mahabharata} is not a primary object of my study; I engage with it only as a point of departure in my discussion of the three contemporary works. Therefore, any fundamental theoretical issues concerning the conceptualization of the Sanskrit work as an epic do not necessarily have a direct impact on my approach. My treatment of the \textit{Mahabharata} as an epic is based on the extent to which it functions as an authoritative monologic discourse.

The third methodological complication concerns the employment of the Bakhtinian category of the novel as a framework for the analysis of Peter Brook’s theatrical production. Although Bakhtin uses many examples from theatre in his theory, he never discusses theatre in the same way he discusses the epic and the novel. His references to theatre are found mainly in his discussions that distinguish the novel from theatre. Theatre, in this sense, mainly functions as a point of departure for his discussion of the novel. While placing theatre in the same category as the epic, Bakhtin recognizes

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{57} See N. J. Allen, Alles, Baldick, Chew, Gresseth, Guttal, and West. \textsuperscript{58} Pathak draws the following conclusion: “[R]eminding an amnesiac metaphor that it is a metaphor is a method designed to be a point of analytical departure, not a terminus. As a starting point of a cross-cultural comparative study, this method may not lead you to all of the areas that you want to explore, but it can show you some of the directions in which your terminological choices can take your comparison. As such, my metaphorical method is not a map depicting analytical destinations but rather a guide for comparativists to consult before moving across cultures” (“Epic’ as an Amnesiac Metaphor”\textsuperscript{53}).}
theatre specifically as a monologic discourse. He marks the distinction between theatre and the novel when he argues:

The internal dialogism of authentic prose discourse, which grows organically out of a stratified and heteroglot language, cannot fundamentally be dramatized or dramatically resolved (brought to an authentic end); it cannot ultimately be fitted into the frame of any manifest dialogue, into the frame of a mere conversation between persons; it is not ultimately divisible into verbal exchanges possessing precisely marked boundaries.\(^{59}\)

According to him, dialogism, which is a characteristic principle of the novel, cannot be used to understand theatre. Dick McCaw emphasizes this idea when he claims, “Dialogue is such a term in Bakhtin’s theory: in his eyes it categorically does not refer to theatre.”\(^ {60}\) This understanding of theatre as found in Bakhtin’s theory calls for a justification of my choice of the Bakhtinian category of the novel as a framework for the analysis of Peter Brook’s theatrical production.

I would justify my choice on the basis of an argument found within Bakhtin’s discussion of the novel itself. In addition to describing the novel as a revolutionary genre, Bakhtin also describes it as a revolutionizing genre. He sees the novel as a genre that has a direct impact on the other literary genres. He argues that at those times when the novel emerges as the dominant genre, “All literature is then caught up in the process of ‘becoming,’ and in a special kind of ‘generic criticism.’”\(^ {61}\) He also claims that at such


\(^{61}\) Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel” 5.
times, “almost all the remaining genres are to a greater or lesser extent ‘novelized.’”

He defines what he means by novelization in the following manner:

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

This idea of novelization posits the novel as an approach that forces the other genres out of their unique spaces and makes them consciously revisit the assumptions that those genres are based on. In this sense, the novel could be seen as a force that has ushered in a paradigm shift in the field of the arts. I approach theatre, particularly the kind of theatre one sees in Peter Brook’s production, as a form that has directly been part of this paradigm shift. At the same time, my treatment of the contemporary works under analysis more as works that embody a particular perspective, which is markedly different from that of the epic, than as works that represent particular generic identities (those of the novel and theatre) also creates a space in which the application of the Bakhtin’s ideas regarding the novel to Brook’s theatrical production could be justified without the latter’s generic identity as theatre becoming an issue.

Bakhtinian Dialogism

Dialogism is a key theoretical concept dominantly attributed to Bakhtin. It is probably the most important of his manifold contributions not just to the field of literary theory, but also to human thought in general. The extent to which this concept has come

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62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., 7.
to define later theoretical positions, particularly in the Western tradition, indicates how important a milestone it is in the evolution of human thought. Although the idea of dialogism is at the centre of Bakhtin’s literary theory and philosophy of language, Bakhtin does not present a comprehensive discussion of the concept per se in his writing. The idea of dialogism is mainly derived from his discussion of the novel as a genre. Discussions of dialogism as a comprehensive theoretical concept are found in later commentaries on Bakhtin’s theory.

Michael Holquist, a key Bakhtin scholar, presents a comprehensive discussion of Bakhtin’s idea of dialogism. His discussion implies indeterminacy, which, according to Bakhtin, is a defining characteristic of the novel as a genre and the related approach, as the theoretical foundation on which dialogism is based. He argues, “The non-identity of mind and world is the conceptual rock on which dialogism is founded and the source of all the other levels of non-concurring identity which Bakhtin sees shaping the world and our place in it.”\(^64\) This non-identity presupposes an irreducible gap between the human mind and what may be termed the objective reality, a gap primarily characterized by indeterminacy. Given this sense of indeterminacy, this gap comes across as a space of multiplicity and infinite possibilities. It is this gap that arguably makes dialogism possible.

The idea of multiplicity is central to dialogism. Holquist argues, “dialogism is the name not for a dualism, but for a necessary multiplicity in human perception.”\(^65\) The idea of multiplicity is central to dialogism to such an extent that “unlike many other theories


\(^{65}\) Ibid., 21.
of knowing, the site of knowledge it posits is never unitary.”\(^{66}\) If the capacity of multiplicity and infinite possibilities is a structural feature of any given dialogic space the idea of otherness is always alive in that space. Holquist provides insights into the place of otherness in dialogism in the following manner:

In dialogism, the very capacity to have consciousness is based on otherness. The otherness is not merely a dialectical alienation on its way to sublation that will endow it with a unifying identity in higher consciousness. On the contrary: in dialogism, consciousness is otherness. More accurately, it is the differential relation between a center and all that is not that center.\(^{67}\)

Marking its break from dialectical thinking, Holquist further argues, “Dialogue … knows no sublation. Bakhtin insists on differences that cannot be overcome: separateness and simultaneity are basic conditions of existence.”\(^{68}\) What is noteworthy here is that dialogism is not about closure or resolution of tension, but precisely about the maintenance of tension. It is always about the differential relation between multiple contending perspectives. The tension generated as a result of the simultaneous operation of different and differing forces is a fundamental characteristic of any dialogic space and its meaning making process.\(^{69}\) Dissonance, in this sense, is an organizing principle in dialogism.

Bakhtin recognizes an inextricable bond between the concepts of dialogism and language. For him, language is fundamentally a dialogic reality. He underscores the relationship between dialogism and language when he argues, “Dialogic interaction is

\(^{66}\) Ibid.,16.  
\(^{67}\) Ibid.,17.  
\(^{68}\) Ibid.,18.  
\(^{69}\) “Dialogism argues that all meaning is relative in the sense that it comes about only as a result of the relation between two bodies occupying simultaneous but different space, where bodies may be thought of as ranging from the immediacy of our physical bodies, to political bodies and to bodies of ideas in general (ideologies)” (Holquist 19).
indeed the authentic sphere where language lives.” He criticizes the established “science” of language, for failing to account for the dialogic dimension of language and his emphasis on the need to treat language as discourse, which he defines as “language in its concrete living totality,” point to his conviction that language has no existence, at least one that is worth engaging with, outside dialogism. He claims, “The entire life of language, in any area of its use …, is permeated with dialogic relationships.”

One of the important levels on which Bakhtin engages with language is the utterance. His treatment of the utterance as an important unit of analysis is based on his conviction that the real life of language is to be found not in the abstract system, which language is reduced to in linguistics, but in the actual use of language. The actual use of language is contextual and involves dialogue, and in dialogue, individuals express themselves in utterances; therefore, the utterance becomes the site in which dialogic relationships manifest themselves most evidently. Graham Allen summarizes Bakhtin’s approach towards the utterance as an important unit of analysis when he argues, “All utterances are dialogic, their meaning and logic dependent upon what has previously been said on how they will be received by others.” Every utterance is a response to at least one other utterance that has already been made and always embodies the anticipation of being responded to by at least one future utterance.

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71 Ibid., 181.
72 Ibid., 181-83.
73 Ibid., 183.
74 “Language lives only in the dialogic interaction of those who make use of it.” (Bakhtin, *Problem of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 183).
Bakhtin provides further insights into the nature of utterances where he discusses the implications of a dialogic relationship among utterances to a monologic discourse:

The weakening or destruction of a monologic context occurs only when there is a coming together of two utterances equally and directly oriented toward a referential object. Two discourses equally and directly oriented toward a referential object within the limits of a single context cannot exist side by side without intersecting dialogically, regardless of whether they confirm, mutually supplement, or (conversely) contradict one another, or find themselves in some other dialogic relationship (that of question and answer, for example). Two equally weighted discourses on one and the same theme, once having come together, must inevitably orient themselves to one another. Two embodied meanings cannot lie side by side like two objects—they must come into inner contact; that is they must enter into a semantic bond.\(^{76}\)

This excerpt provides important insights into the way utterances function. First, utterances oriented towards a given referential object are bound to interact with each other. This interaction takes place irrespective of whether such an interaction was consciously intended or anticipated by the agencies that issued them. It follows from this argument that an utterance, once made, acquires a life of its own, which refuses to be constrained by authorial intent. Second, the excerpt reaffirms the idea that the end goal of the interactions is not to resolve the dialogue, but to keep it going. The emphasis on the idea of intersection, as opposed to the dialectical notion of synthesis, underscores the unfinalizable nature of any dialogue. The semantic bond that the utterances enter into, in this sense, needs to be understood not as a space defined by resolution or reconciliation, but as one defined by difference and contestation. Third, Bakhtin points out that the interaction of utterances can take various forms ranging from mutual confirmation to complete contradiction.

\(^{76}\) Bakhtin, *Problem of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 188-89.
Bakhtin discusses dialogism mainly as part of his literary theory, and therefore, the examples that he uses are mainly from the field of literary discourses. He explains the idea of dialogism using three types of literary discourses. He presents the first two in the following manner:

Unmediated, direct, fully signifying discourse is directed toward its referential object and constitutes the ultimate semantic authority within the limits of a given context. Objectified discourse is likewise directed exclusively toward its object, but is at the same time the object of someone else’s intention, the author’s. But this other intention does not penetrate inside the objectified discourse, it takes it as a whole and, without changing its meaning or tone, subordinates it to its own tasks. It does not invest it with another referential meaning. Discourse that has become an object is, as it were, itself unaware of the fact, like the person who goes about his business unaware that he is being watched; objectified discourse sounds as if it were direct single-voiced discourse. Discourses of both the first and second type have in fact only one voice each. These are single-voiced discourses.\footnote{Ibid., 189 (italics in original).}

While Bakhtin here provides a useful scheme for the categorization of certain literary discourses, his branding of these two types single-voiced, therefore, monologic, discourses is problematic for two reasons. First, if, as Bakhtin himself argues, language is an inherently dialogic reality, every discourse (literary or otherwise), by virtue of the fact that there is an inextricable bond between language and discourse,\footnote{Arjuna Parakrama explores the subtle relationship between language and discourse when he argues, “Discourse, however, is certainly not identical with language. Yet it would not be unthinkable to say that the only way that language has existence is through discursive practices, if discourse is then defined as the possibility of making sense. Language in this view can be studied significantly only as discourse, only in its use within the context of discursive formations. Hence, what was argued for language becomes equally valid for discourse” (De-Hegemonizing Language Standards: Learning from (Post)Colonial Englishes about ‘English’ [London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1995], 79).} is dialogic at a fundamental level. Given this fundamentally dialogic nature of any discourse, Bakhtin’s idea of monologism needs to be understood in a relative sense. Second, Bakhtin here places the discourses in question under the complete control of the authorial voice. This
placement entails the assumption that the author is always a unified and consistent agent who has full control over the meaning it generates, an assumption that has increasingly proven to be problematic. Given this problematic nature of the said categories, I approach them not as self-contained categories of classification, but as categories representative of a particular perspective that functions as a useful point of departure for a discussion of the third type of discourse that Bakhtin presents.

The third type of discourse that Bakhtin identifies, which is the type that is most relevant to my study, is introduced in the following manner:

[T]he author may also make use of someone else’s discourse for his own purposes, by inserting a new semantic intention into a discourse which already has, and which retains, an intention of its own. Such a discourse, in keeping with its task, must be perceived as belonging to someone else. In one discourse, two semantic intentions appear, two voices. Parodying discourse is of this type, as are stylization and stylized skaz. Here we move on to the characteristics of the third type of discourse.

Stylization presupposes style; that is, it presupposes that the sum total of stylistic devices that it reproduces did at one time possess a direct and unmediated intentionality and expressed an ultimate semantic authority. Only discourses of the first type can be the object of stylization. Stylization forces another person’s referential (artistically referential) intention to serve its own purposes, that is, its new intentions. The stylizer uses another’s discourse precisely as other, and in so doing casts a slight shadow of objectification over it. To be sure, the discourse does not become an object. After all, what is important to the stylizer is the sum total of devices associated with the other’s speech precisely as an expression of a particular point of view. He works with someone else’s point of view. Therefore a certain shadow of objectification falls precisely on that very point of view, and consequently it becomes conditional. The objectified speech of a character is never conditional. A character always speaks in earnest. The author’s attitude does not penetrate inside his speech—the author observes it from without.

Conditional discourse is always double-voiced discourse.  

Focusing specifically on parody, which he recognizes as a form that comes under the third type of discourse, Bakhtin argues:

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Here, as in stylization, the author again speaks in someone else’s discourse, but in contrast to stylization parody introduces into that discourse a semantic intention that is directly opposed to the original one. The second voice, once having made its home in the other’s discourse, clashes hostiley with its primordial host and forces him to serve directly opposing aims. Discourse becomes an arena of battle between two voices.  

Stylization and parody as representatives of the third type of discourse in Bakhtin’s scheme of literary discourses points to a critical engagement with a given text. They represent an approach that recognizes a text as an utterance that embodies a particular voice or a semantic position. Any dialogic engagement with such a text results in creating a new text that is double-voiced, which, as Gary Saul Morson observes, embodies “both a version of the original utterance as the embodiment of its speaker’s point of view … and the second speaker’s evaluation of that utterance from a different point of view.” Morson views this text as “a special sort of palimpsest in which the uppermost inscription is a commentary on the one beneath it, which the reader (or audience) can know only by reading through the commentary that observes in the very process of evaluating.”

The kind of dialogic interaction that Bakhtin conceptualizes here forms the grounds on which Kristeva’s definition of the text is based:

The text is defined as the translinguistic apparatus, that redistributes the order of language by relating communicative speech, which aims to inform directly, to different kinds of anterior or synchronic utterances. The text is therefore a productivity, and this means: first, that its relationship to the language in which it is situated is redistributive (destructive-constructive), and hence can be better approached through logical categories rather than linguistic ones; and second, that

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80 Ibid., 193.
82 Ibid.
it is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another.\textsuperscript{83}

According to this definition, there is no text that can be called original. At its best, a text is a new configuration of what is already in existence. What Kristeva recognizes as already being in existence are language and other texts. Language predates the user, which presupposes that any utterance or text that she creates is made of linguistic resources which have already been in use. The new utterance or text, in this sense, is a response to some form of pre-existing meaning or discourse.

Intertextuality, which is a keyword in Kristeva’s definition of the text, indicates an important extension of the Bakhtinian notion of dialogism. Intertextuality, which is universally attributed to Kristeva, has acquired such theoretical importance in the field of literary studies that irrespective of its position as an extension of the idea of dialogism, it is seen as a concept in its own right.\textsuperscript{84} I would argue that Kristeva’s contribution lies mainly in the fact that she highlights the applicability of dialogism, which within Bakhtin’s discussions primarily comes across as a modality for understanding linguistic communication, that too within artistic contexts, to understanding intersections among larger discourses or texts. In other words, she refashions dialogism in such a manner that it becomes better suited as a framework for the analysis of the relationship among broader texts. Her claim, “Each word (text) is an intersection of word (texts) where at


\footnote{For accounts of the close connection between dialogism and intertextuality, see Graham Allen (35-46) and Becker-Leckrone (92-93). For a concise discussion of the place of dialogism and intertextuality in the broader history of ideas, see Alfaro.}
least one other word (text) can be read,”<sup>85</sup> indicates the nature of her refashioning.

Kristeva envisions a scenario in which broader discourses interact with each other in place of individual speakers, hence her claim, “The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity.”<sup>86</sup> This refashioning entails that what Bakhtin has said about the intersection of linguistic utterances and discourses becomes equally valid for the intersection of broader texts.

The notions of dialogism and intertextuality define the theoretical framework of my study. I approach the <em>Mahabharata</em> primarily as a monologic (at least, relatively) discourse and the three contemporary works under analysis as dialogic realities whose main aim is to “dialogize” that monologic discourse mainly from three important directions. I view the contemporary works as utterances in the broadest possible sense of the term, which respond to three pre-existing and culturally established utterances about the Sanskrit epic that reinforces the epic’s position as an authoritative text: (1) the Sanskrit epic is the product of divine authorship; (2) the Sanskrit epic is (real) history; and (3) the Sanskrit epic is the story of the survival of a race. Framing the relationship between the <em>Mahabharata</em> and the contemporary works within a dialogicality or intertextuality would enable me to read the contemporary works as dialogizing the Sanskrit epic in a manner that the said utterances are challenged.

**Dialogism on the Level of the Word**

Another level on which Bakhtin engages with language is the word. He views the word not as an isolated unit of meaning but as a constituent of a broader utterance,
thereby emphasizing the essentially contextual nature of any given word. Bakhtin’s engagement with language on the level of the word points to two ways in which the idea of dialogism defines the status of the word. First, it reveals the word as a unit that necessarily inhabits a dialogic space. Its position in a space that is dialogic by definition entails dialogism as the only medium and condition of its existence. Bakhtin makes this idea clear when he argues, “no living word relates to its object in a singular way: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme, and this is an environment that it is often difficult to penetrate.”87 He also claims, “The word, directed toward its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group.”88 The dialogic space in which the word is situated is such that the word exists only in dialogic relationships. In other words, dialogism is not a mere condition, which words choose to enter for meaning making purposes, but the ultimate condition, which provides the condition of possibility for the very existence of words.

Second, Bakhtin’s engagement with the word projects the word in itself as a site of dialogic relationships. According to him, a word reveals itself as a site of dialogic interactions “if that word is perceived not as the impersonal word of language but as a sign of someone else’s semantic position, as the representative of another person’s

88 Ibid.
utterance; that is, if we hear in it someone else’s voice.” This argument, on the one hand, echoes his critique of linguistics for engaging with language in a manner that rids language of its true life, while projecting itself as the science of language. On another level, it recognizes the word not only as an embodiment of a voice or a semantic position, but also as a space in which different voices interact with each other. The word, in this sense, could be seen as a site of struggle.

Related to the idea of the internal dialogism of the word is Bakhtin’s argument that the word is a unit with specific history:

[T]he word is not a material thing but rather the eternally mobile, eternally fickle medium of dialogic interaction. It never gravitates toward a single consciousness or a single voice. The life of the word is contained in its transfer from one mouth to another, from one context to another context, from one social collective to another, from one generation to another generation. In this process the word does not forget its own path and cannot completely free itself from the power of these concrete contexts into which it has entered.

Not only does the word function as a site of dialogic interactions at a given point in time, it also carries the trace of all the possible dialogic interactions that it has “hosted” over time. The dialogism of a given word, in this sense, can be explained both synchronically and diachronically. Given its trace, every word that is in existence is always already charged not only with meaning but also with the marks of various contestations that have made possible and shaped that meaning. Provided that it is simply impossible to completely sever a word from its diachronic trace, every use of that word, even when that use is intently regulated to avoid reflecting certain meanings and highlight certain others,

89 Bakhtin, *Problem of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 184.
90 Bakhtin claims that any word is dialogic “as long as two voices collide within it dialogically” *(Problem of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 184).
91 Ibid., 202.
triggers that trace. It follows from this argument that every use of language is an inherently political act and that to use language is to take part in some form of ongoing power struggle.

A Marxist analysis of language would provide important insights into the dialogic nature of the word, which projects the word as a site of struggle:92

The word is implicated in literally each and every act or contact between people—in collaboration on the job, in ideological exchanges, in the chance contacts of ordinary life, in political relationships, and so on. Countless ideological threads running through all areas of social intercourse register effect in the word. It stands to reason, then, that the word is the most sensitive index of social changes, and what is more, of changes still in the process of growth, still without definitive shape and not as yet accommodated into already regularized and fully defined ideological systems. The word is the medium in which occur the slow quantitative accretions of those changes which have not yet achieved the status of a new ideological quality, not yet produced a new and fully-fledged ideological form. The word has the capacity to register all the transitory, delicate, momentary phases of social change.93

Voloshinov recognizes what he calls the “social multiaccentuality” of a sign, which effectively means the dialogic nature of a sign, as what enables the sign or the word to maintain “its vitality and dynamism and the capacity for further development.”94 Any attempt to restrain the social multiaccentuality of a word, he argues, is a reactionary move

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92 Given the dominant tendency in the field of Bakhtin studies to dissociate Bakhtin from Marxism (see Young), one could argue that the parallel that I draw between Bakhtin’s and Marxist theories of language is problematic. I counter this problematization on the basis of three arguments. First, there is a significant body of literature in Bakhtin studies that presents a Marxist reading of Bakhtin (see Hirschkop, Shepherd, and White). In an academic context where connections between Bakhtin and Marxism have already been made, the parallel I draw is arguably within the established tradition of Bakhtin studies. Second, V. N. Voloshinov, whose Marxist theory of language I use in this chapter, is both a contemporary and a colleague of Bakhtin’s, and it is likely that they had an impact on each other’s thinking. Third, Bakhtin wrote at a time when Marxism was operating as an influential political and ideological approach at a global level. In such a context, even if it is assumed that Bakhtin was anti-Marxist, it would be counter-intuitive to argue that he could avoid the influence of Marxist thought.  
94 Ibid., 23.
which not only parallels and exposes the repressive conduct of the ruling class, but also rids the word of its dynamism. Based on this point of view, it could be argued that any sense of monologism that a word may appear to represent is not a natural state of its existence, but is artificially imposed upon it by a specific power centre for its own purposes.

Bakhtin’s idea of the carnivalesque provides a useful perspective from which to approach language, and the word as a constitutive element of language, as a site of struggle. Bakhtin sees carnival as a context where the official or ruling culture is challenged in a profound manner. The official discourse is characterized by its strict adherence to rules and structure, and it defines itself primarily through exclusion. The carnivalesque discourse challenges it mainly by being open to multiplicity in such a manner that the limited and limiting nature of the official discourse becomes evident. The carnivalesque, in this sense, becomes a dialogic space defined by a clash between what Bakhtin calls centripetal and centrifugal forces and tendencies. At the heart of the carnivalesque discourse is language. As Krystyna Pomorska notes, “The inherent features of carnival that [Bakhtin] underscores are its emphatic and purposeful ‘heterglossia’ (raznogolosost’) [sic] and its multiplicity of styles (mnogostil’nost’).” Accordingly, linguistic multiplicity constitutes a significant component of the kind of

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95 “The very same thing that makes the ideological sign vital and mutable is also, however, that which makes it a refracting and distorting medium. The ruling class strives to impart a supraclass, eternal character to the ideological sign, to extinguish or drive inward the struggle between social value judgements which occurs in it, to make the sign uniacentual” (23).

96 “A sign that has been withdrawn from the pressures of the social struggle--which, so to speak, crosses beyond the pale of the class struggle--inevitably loses force degenerating into allegory and becoming the object not of live social intelligibility but of philological comprehension” (23).

97 Bakhtin discusses what he calls centripetal and centrifugal forces in “Discourse in the novel.”

multiplicity that the idea of the carnivalesque represents. Explaining the idea of the carnivalesque in relation to language, Kristeva claims, “Carnivalesque discourse breaks through the laws of a language censored by grammar and semantics and, at the same time, is a social and political protest. There is no equivalence, but rather, identity between challenging official linguistic codes and challenging official laws.”99 This identity between challenging the official linguistic code and challenging official laws reveals language as an effective medium of symbolic resistance.

The poetic or literary word is always defined by an element of the carnivalesque. Kristeva touches upon this element of the carnivalesque when she argues, “The poetic word, polyvalent and multi-determined, adheres to a logic exceeding that of codified discourse and fully comes into being only in the margins of recognized culture.”100 Given its position in the realm of art, a realm of existence where imagination reigns over convention, the poetic word arguably enjoys a considerable degree of freedom. The restrictions that apply to the general word (the non-poetic word) do not apply to the poetic word with the same degree of intensity. The poetic word is less bound by convention than the general word is.101 Therefore, in a context where the general word is conceptualized as a site of dialogic intersections, the poetic word could be thought of as a site where those intersections manifest themselves with greater intensity. I would go so far as to argue that the dialogic intersections within the poetic word manifest themselves with such intensity that the dialogicality of that word becomes the most evident and

100 Ibid.
101 Kristeva view the carnival as “the only space in which language escapes linearity (law)” ( “Word, Dialogue, and Novel” 49).
defining characteristic of that word. Any attempt at grasping a fuller picture of such a word requires one to go beyond the ruling discourse on that word and take into consideration all the possible peripheral discourses.

An engagement with the word as a site of dialogic intersection and contestation is central to my study, as a key focus of my study is to examine how the words or concepts of the author, history, and race as engaged with in contemporary works reveal themselves as sites of dialogic intersection or contestation. I look at how each of those words as a literary word proves itself to be what Kristeva calls “an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point (a fixed meaning).” Such a discussion will highlight the “monologicality” of the sense in which those words function in the dominant discourse on the Sanskrit epic. Such an engagement, I hope, will point to ways in which to understand the Sanskrit epic itself as a (relatively) monologic text that defines itself through exclusion in certain important ways.

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102 In the context of this argument, Kristeva’s claim that the poetic word is “at least double” and “acts as a multi-determined peak” (Kristeva, “Word, Dialogue, and Novel” 40 [italics in original]) needs to be understood not as suggesting that duality or multiplicity is an exclusive characteristic of the poetic word, which sets that word apart from the general word, but as suggesting that that duality or multiplicity, which is a fundamental characteristic of language in general, manifests itself most evidently in the poetic word.

Chapter 3: *The Palace of Illusions and the Idea of the Author*

Introduction

Much of the importance that the *Mahabharata* carries as an authoritative text in the Hindu religious and cultural tradition is attributed to Vyasa’s authorship of the text. This authorship explains the position that the text holds as the “Fifth Veda” even when the text is structurally different from the four *Vedas* of Hinduism. Vyasa’s position as a sage has always projected the text as a product of divine authorship. Much of the importance of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s novel *The Palace of Illusions* as an intervention in the *Mahabharata* tradition, I argue, lies in that it directly engages with the established assumption that the Sanskrit epic is a product of divine authorship. Divakaruni engages with this idea by shifting the authorship of the Sanskrit epic from the Vyasa to Draupadi. Given that the assumed divine authorship of a given religious text mostly ensures the uncritical acceptance of that text within the relevant religious tradition, this shift from Vyasa the sage to Draupadi who is first and foremost a woman indicates a radical reconceptualization of the Sanskrit epic. In addition to presenting the Sanskrit epic from a significantly different point of view, the novel, I argue, foregrounds the concept of the author in such a manner that the concept itself becomes a site of theoretical reflection.

The chapter begins with a review of the available literature on *The Palace of Illusions*. The literature review is followed by a biographical account of Divakaruni to the extent that it is relevant to understanding her approach to the Sanskrit epic. I then present a brief discussion of Roland Barthes’s idea of the death of the author, as a
theoretical point of departure for the analysis of the novel. In the next section, I discuss the existing understanding regarding the authorship of the *Mahabharata*, and this section is followed by a discussion of the shift to Draupadi’s authorship in the context of the novel. The analysis of the novel, which follows next, consists of two sections. The first section focuses on the significant ways in which the novel deviates from the Sanskrit epic, whereas the second section focuses on the ways in which the novel could be seen as echoing certain conventional understandings of the epic. The chapter ends with a discussion of the novel’s implications for the idea of the author.

The Analysis in Context

Two recurrent ideas could be identified in the limited scholarly literature available on *The Palace of Illusions*. The first is an acknowledgement of the fundamentally male bias that the mainstream narrative of the Sanskrit epic embodies and the extent to which such bias could constitute a basis for discrimination of women. Bir Singh Yadav refers to this aspect not only of the *Mahabharata* but also of the existing traditions of storytelling when he claims, “Story-telling colored in male-didactic world also naturalizes and strengthens the shackles in which a woman is imprisoned, and every story in its retelling process, comes out with more fresh and new strength from a particular point of view.”¹⁰⁴ Focusing specifically on the Sanskrit epic, L. Kavitha Nair claims, “In the case of Draupadi, all the previous versions of the story have been ‘constructionist accounts’

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which served the cause of a patriarchal hermeneutics.”\textsuperscript{105} Both Bir Singh Yadav and Nair view Divakaruni’s intervention in the \textit{Mahabharata} tradition as a problematization of the male-centric worldview that the Sanskrit epic embodies. Gourhari Behera develops this idea and shows how “resistant interpretations” like the novel make the reader take a critical approach to grand narratives:

Thus, these “resistant interpretations” of the classical texts ideologically counter the dominant feudal, patriarchal and castelist notions of womanhood, honour, purity so on and so forth filling the gaps in the metanarratives that results not only in the production of an altogether new text but also makes the contemporary reader reflect on the grand narratives in a much more critical manner.\textsuperscript{106}

Although whether \textit{The Palace of Illusions} as a resistant interpretation results in the creation of an entirely different text is problematic, this argument emphasizes the impact that such an interpretation has on the Sanskrit epic.

The other recurrent theme found in the available literature of the novel is the novel’s celebration of Draupadi, particularly her acquisition of a voice. Nair describes the nature of this celebration in the following manner:

Draupadi in Divakaruni’s novel does not want to play “some role” but rather the leading role whose presence determines the action of the story, thereby demanding an unwavering attention and focus on her. In other words, she does not want to play a role in someone else’s script which will cripple her movement and diminish her impact. Knowing well that “script is destiny”, (that is, a character in a play neither has choice nor freedom to lead an individual life not dictated by the script), Draupadi does not want to be a mere character in somebody else’s script. She considers all the previous versions of the story as scripts which denied her freedom and progress.\textsuperscript{107}

\textsuperscript{106} Gourhari Behera, “Re(Visioning) Draupadi: Resistant Interpretation in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s \textit{The Palace of Illusions},” \textit{Labyrinth} 5, no. 3 (2014): 184.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid.
Nair further emphasizes this idea when she claims:

Draupadi in Chitra Divakaruni’s The Palace of Illusions, journeys from being a woman repeatedly made the subject of narration by patriarchal narratives to becoming a woman who subjectivizes narration itself, in the process, overthrowing the narratives that have constructed her womanhood through centuries. By becoming both the narrator and agent of action, Divakaruni’s Draupadi recovers the voice of womanhood.  

Bir Singh Yadav goes to the extent of describing Panchaali as a “postmodern woman,” and by this he means a woman who has freed herself from the burdens of her traditional role and acquired full control of her destiny. Although this idea that Divakaruni’s Panchaali is a postmodern woman with total control of her destiny is problematic (for the reasons that will be discussed in this chapter), this claim clearly recognizes the important manner in which she calls the system into question simply by acquiring a voice and articulating her side of the story.

This chapter attempts to take the current discussion on The Palace of Illusions a step further by reading these recurrent themes in relation to the idea of the author. In addition to building upon the arguments that the novel challenges the fundamental male bias of the Sanskrit epic and celebrates femininity by empowering Draupadi with a voice, the chapter also explores the nature of the insight that Divakaruni’s engagement with the Mahabharata provides into the authorship of the epic and also into the idea of the author in general.

Divakaruni’s Subject Position/Intervention

An understanding of Divakaruni’s background would help one better understand her intervention in the Mahabharata tradition. Divakaruni was born (in 1956) and raised

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108 Ibid.
in Bengal, India. What could be considered the traditional Bengali culture has played a key role in her life as a child and adolescent. Having completed her Bachelor in Arts degree in India, she left for the United States for her postgraduate studies, where she completed her Master’s degree and Doctoral degree in English studies with a dissertation on Christopher Marlowe (1985). After the completion of her Ph.D., her literary pursuits gradually took over her scholarly activities. In one of her interviews, she discusses why she became a writer:

When I was finishing up my dissertation, I began to feel this great intellectual disconnect between my everyday life and what I was doing intellectually. It just wasn’t fulfilling to me anymore. I mean I still love the Renaissance, and I taught it for a number of years after my Ph.D, but I thought that my reality as a person of color living in the U.S. was so different, and I needed to connect and explore this. That’s when writing became really important to me. I felt that writing was the way in which I could bring back that part of my life into my intellectual sphere of activities. I had been in this country for six or seven years, and I felt that I was beginning to forget India. I was beginning to forget details and how people think and important cultural things. Writing was a way to bring that into focus and to remember.

This shows that her decision to take up writing as a career is closely linked to her desire to stay connected with her Bengali and broader Indian cultural heritage. Her engagement with the Indian culture in general and the Mahabharata tradition in particular could be seen as one important way in which she tries to connect with her roots.

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110 Divakaruni speaks dearly of her engagement with the traditional Bengali culture. Commenting on the idea of storytelling, she claims, “I have always believed that storytelling itself is very powerful. It transforms us, the teller as well as the listener. This perhaps comes out of my own personal background, where my grandfather was a great oral storyteller. In my childhood, I would go spend my summer holidays with him in a little village, where at that time there was no electricity and no running water. I thought it was quite a magical place. Every evening he would light a kerosene lamp, and he would bring all of us cousins together. He told us stories out of our epics and out of our fairytales and folktales. I think I have thus developed a great love for the epic stories and the folktale tradition.” (Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, “The Power of Storytelling: An Interview with Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni,” by Metka Zupančić, *Contemporary Women’s Writing* 6, no. 2 [2009]: 90)

While connecting with her cultural heritage is an important dimension of her literary work, to reduce her engagements to that dimension would be to trivialize what she attempts to accomplish through her work. Divakaruni is a literary artist who has channeled her creative energy into building a discourse, or contributing to the existing discourse, on one of the fundamental bases for division and discrimination in society: gender. In her literary works, she aims at accomplishing this goal by foregrounding the feminine voice and making it heard. This approach that she takes in her writing is an important expression of her commitment to a just society:

I think that [the female voice] is an important ongoing theme in my stories, and I’m sure that is influenced by the community work that I’ve been doing for many years now with battered women. It’s become more and more important to me that women should be allowed to have choices and live lives of dignity and not have to put up with abuse, and that they should take their own domestic space and empower it.\(^{112}\)

According to her, placing the female voice at the centre of a literary work is an important way of empowering women:

It appears that writing with the intent to place women at the center of my work has been another one of my enterprises. Sometimes I feel that is enough work in itself. There may be critics who feel that my work is not what they would consider radical. But if we look at the world as it is, placing the woman in the center of your work is radical enough, giving her the humanity, allowing her to tell her story. It makes her into a hero because she is interpreting the world for us through her eyes.\(^{113}\)

Divakaruni emphasizes the need to break down borders and dissolve boundaries in society.\(^{114}\) Empowering women by giving them a voice is an important way in which she

\(^{112}\) Ibid., 7.
\(^{113}\) Divakaruni, “The Power of Storytelling: An Interview with Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni” 91.
attempts to achieve that goal. Given these emphases, *The Palace of Illusions* could be seen as her attempt to remedy a historical injustice.

**The “Death” of the Author**

Roland Barthes’s famous theorization of the idea of the author, which he presents in his seminal article titled “The Death of the Author,” provides a useful theoretical point of departure for a discussion of the implications of the novel’s engagement with the broader *Mahabharata* tradition for the idea of the author. According to Barthes, literature always produces a special voice made of several indiscernible voices and it is impossible to place the origin of this special voice. The example with which he starts his essay indicates the complexity of this special voice:

In his story *Sarrasine* Balzac, describing a castrato disguised as a woman, writes the following sentence: ‘This was woman herself, with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her instinctive worries, her impetuous boldness, her fussings, and her delicious sensibility.’ Who is speaking thus? Is it the hero of the story bent on remaining ignorant of the castrato hidden beneath the woman? Is it Balzac the individual, furnished by his personal experience with a philosophy of Woman? Is it Balzac the author professing ‘literary’ ideas on femininity? Is it universal wisdom? Romantic psychology?115

Given that this composite voice comes into existence only and necessarily within the text construction process, it has no origin that preexists the text. It is in this sense that Barthes claims that “the modern scribe is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written here and now.”116 In a context where the author of a text is dead, the

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116 Ibid., 145 (italics in original).
unity of that text, according to Barthes, is always to be found in the reading of the text, hence his claim, “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.”\(^{117}\) He views the reader as the site in which what could be referred to as the meaning of the text is generated.

The Authorship of the *Mahabharata*

The established understandings regarding the authorship of the *Mahābhārata* underscore the Sanskrit epic as a text of religious and mythical importance. Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa, commonly referred to as Vyāsa, is established almost undisputedly as the author of the Sanskrit epic. Although the historicity of Vyāsa has been questioned and his position in the broader Hindu tradition has been construed to be rather “symbolic”\(^ {118}\) than actual, he continues to be revered as the author of the Sanskrit epic and an important figure in the broader Hindu tradition. His importance in the latter is mainly attributed to the belief that he divided the original body of *Veda* into four sections known as *saṁhitās*.\(^ {119}\) Ludwik Sternbach refers to this understanding regarding Vyāsa when he recognizes him as “a cosmic entity born again and again to arrange and promulgate the scriptures.”\(^ {120}\) This engagement with the most sacred body of knowledge in Hinduism suggests that, rather than being a mouthpiece for a higher authority, he himself is the author of that very knowledge. Bruce M. Sullivan recognizes this aspect of Vyāsa’s engagement with the *Vedas* when he argues that Vyāsa is “the earthly

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\(^{117}\) Ibid., 148.


counterpart of Brahmā,” the god of creation.121 Sullivan also refers to the two instances in the *Mahābhārata* where Vyāsa is equated to Nārāyana Viṣṇu, the Supreme God in Hinduism.122 Given this association of Vyāsa with Brahmā and Viṣṇu, Sullivan argues that Vyāsa augments the status and authority of the Sanskrit epic as a religious text.123

There are scholarly attempts at raising some important questions regarding Vyāsa’s authorship of the *Mahābhārata*. The questions raised by K. Satchidanandan draw attention to Ganeśa’s role in the composition of the Sanskrit epic.124 The conditions that Vyāsa and Ganeśa get each other to agree upon before embarking on the epic project, according to Satchidanandan, imply the possibility of the relationship between the two as one that goes beyond a relationship between a “dictator” and a stenographer into one where the stenographer enjoys more liberties.125 This possibility raises questions about Vyāsa’s role as the all-important author of the Sanskrit epic. Satchidanandan’s analysis of the term “Vyāsa” also makes one reexamine the uniqueness of Vyāsa’s identity. He claims, “[A]ccording to tradition, there were 28 Vyāsas of whom it was Vedavyasa who composed the *Bharata [Mahābhārata]*, Puranas and Upapuranas and classified the Veda into four.”126 Based on this claim, he argues that Vyāsa should be seen not as a single person, but as “a generic name that included several Vyāsas and thus becomes a synonym

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123 Ibid., 337.
124 According to the legend, Vyāsa composes the great poem and requests Brahmā to provide him with someone who is qualified to document the poem. Brahmā assigns the the task to Ganeśa (also known as Ganaṇapati), the patron god of letters and learning. Ganeśa accepts the job on the condition that Vyāsa should never stop his dictation until the epic is complete. While accepting this condition, Vyāsa insists that Ganeśa should fully understand the meaning of every word before he takes it down.
126 Ibid., 6.
for the institution of the author itself.” The argument invites one to view the Sanskrit epic more as a text composed by a writer of an established writerly tradition than one produced by a divinely inspired individual with a unique identity. K. M. Shembavnekar emphasizes this idea of Vyāsa as a non-divine when he argues, “A careful investigation into the origin and development of this Veda-Vyāsa myth will furnish, perhaps, the best example of the way in which Puranic writers, as a class, have superseded, defied, twisted or perverted old and carefully preserved Vedic traditions in order to glorify a particular personage or religious creed.” The depiction of Vyāsa in Buddhist literature as an example not to be emulated because of his passionate involvement with a woman further emphasizes the worldly nature of Vyāsa. These understandings raise questions that challenge the established understandings regarding the authorship of the Sanskrit epic.

The Shift of Authorship from Vyasa to Draupadi

Divakaruni’s depiction of Vyāsa parallels the established understanding of Vyāsa in the broader Hindu tradition. Vyāsa is first introduced through the words of a maid in Panchali’s palace, and her description of Vyāsa makes Dhai Ma imagine him as a “fortune teller.” Although Vyāsa’s position in the broader Hindu tradition cannot be reduced to the position of a fortune teller, this conceptualization of him as a one is in line with the dominant understanding of him in that tradition. Describing him further, the maid says, “Truth to tell, he scared me, with a beard that covered his whole face and

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127 Ibid.
128 Shembavnekar114.
glittery red eyes. He looked like he could put a curse on you if you made him angry.”

This introduction presents him largely as a mythical figure. His seclusion as suggested by the long journey that Panchaali and Dhai Ma undertake in order to reach him and the atmosphere of his chamber amplify the mysticism that surrounds his character. This depiction echoes the suprahuman nature of Vyāsa’s identity in the broader Hindu tradition.

The novel acknowledges Vyāsa as the author of the great epic. There are a number of references in the novel to this effect. In Panchaali’s first meeting with Vyāsa, she observes him with “a thick book made of palm leaves.” Asked what he is writing, Vyāsa responds, “The story of your life, if only you’d stop interrupting it. And of your five husbands. And of the great and terrible war of Kurukshetra that will end the Third Age of Man.” Later in the novel, just before the war begins, Vyāsa appears before Panchaali and says, “The war will work itself out the way it’s meant to—the way I’ve set down already in my book.” When a worried Panchaali asks him what the outcome of the war will be, he says, “Is it fair to ask the playwright to give away the climax of his play? But in this case, I’m not even the playwright—merely a chronicler. It would be presumptuous of me to reveal the end before the ordained time.” Vyāsa’s authorship is reiterated during the climax of the war when Panchaali, viewing the duel between Arjun and Karna, thinks, “Vyasa describes it as a glorious battle, equally matched, each hero

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131 Ibid.
132 Ibid., 41.
133 Ibid.
134 Ibid., 253.
135 Ibid., 255.
countering the other’s astras with unconcern.”\textsuperscript{136} In a further reiteration of Vyāsa’s authorship, Panchaali directly quotes from Vyāsa on two occasions: first in her description of Karna’s fall\textsuperscript{137} and second in her description of the encounter between Arjun and Aswatthama.\textsuperscript{138} Both quotes are preceded by the clause “Vyasa writes.” These instances indicate that Divakaruni’s retelling of the epic narrative is not aimed at distancing the narrative from its traditionally established author.

Draupadi the Radical

**Draupadi’s Acquisition of a Voice**

The historical injustice that Divakaruni seeks to address through her intervention in the *Mahabharata* tradition is the marginal position that Draupadi, also known as Panchaali, is accorded in the mainstream understandings of that tradition.\textsuperscript{139} She recognizes this absence of adequate attention to Draupadi as part of the patriarchal bias, which not only the *Mahabharata* tradition but also epics in general embody. Commenting on the female characters in the Sanskrit epic, she claims, “... in some way, they remained shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions portrayed only when they affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers or sons.”\textsuperscript{140} She also claims that she has always wanted to “uncover the story that lay between the lines of the men’s

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 294.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 297-98.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., 307.
\textsuperscript{139} For the convenience of reference, I use the name “Draupadi” to refer to the character in the Sanskrit epic and “Panchaali” to refer to its counterpart in the novel.
\textsuperscript{140} Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, author’s note to *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (New York: Anchor Books, 2009), xiv.
Commenting specifically on Draupadi, she claims, “But Panchaali was never at the center of the story. As in many epics, the central position was reserved for men, with wars, weapons, strategy, and court maneuvers.” This patriarchal bias, she argues, denies the female characters their due position and attention. Problematizing this bias, Divakaruni raises some important questions. “What was the story of all these interesting and complex characters, all these strong women who are never at the center of the narrative? What were they feeling? What were they thinking?” She attempts to find answers to these questions by making Draupadi speak not in specific segments of the story but for the entire duration of the narrative.

One of the important developments with regard to Draupadi’s acquisition of a voice is found in the outset of the novel is the manner in which Panchaali’s birth is described. In the Sanskrit epic, the reader learns about her birth from a conversation between the Pandava brothers and a Brahmin who is knowledgeable about her and her family. During this conversation, the Brahmin relates the unusual story of her birth in response to a query by the Pandava brothers regarding her. Accordingly, Draupadi becomes knowledge through the words of a group of men who are both representatives as well as guardians of a world order that is patriarchal by nature. On the one hand, she emerges as the object of a particular knowledge construction process; on the other hand, she does not have any control over how she is perceived. Divakaruni challenges this process of knowledge construction in two ways. First, she accords a greater importance

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141 Ibid., xv.
143 Ibid.
144 According to the Sanskrit epic, Dhristadyumna (also referred to as Dhri) and Draupadi emerge from a fire.
to Panchaali’s birth by placing it at the outset of the novel. By doing so, she implies that stories could begin not only with the birth of men but also with that of women. Second, Divakaruni grants Panchaali some authority over how her birth story is related. In the novel, the story is related by Dhai Ma (Panchaali’s governess) who is another woman, and it is Panchaali who makes her tell that story over and over again. While Dhai Ma relates the story, Panchaali interrupts the story with her comment to which Dhai Ma fails to respond without resorting to the assumed superiority of adults’ knowledge over children’s knowledge:

“An eyeblink later,” she continued, “when you emerged from the fire, our jaws dropped. It was so quiet, you could have heard a housefly fart.”

I reminded her that flies do not perform that particular bodily function. She smiled her squint-eyed, cunning smile. “Child, the things that you don’t know would fill the milky ocean where Lord Vishnu sleeps—and spill over its edges.”

I considered being offended, but I wanted to hear the story. So I held my tongue, and after a moment she picked up the tale again.

Later in the tale, Panchaali interjects by getting ahead of Dhai Ma and contributing to the story. The idea that Panchaali is in a position not only to make others relate her story at her request but also to interrupt it and contribute to it indicates the sense of agency that she enjoys. At the same time, the story contains two prophecies: “He [Dhrishtadyumna] will bring you the vengeance you [King Draupad] desire, but it’ll break your life in two” and “[S]he will change the course of history”. On one level, these prophecies promise achievement for the Draupad family; on another, they also convey a great sense

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145 “And though she [Dhai Ma] knew many wondrous and edifying tales, the one I made her tell me over and over was the story of my birth” (1).
146 Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions* 2.
147 Ibid., 3-4.
148 Ibid., 4 (italics in original).
149 Ibid., 5 (italics in original).
of uncertainty about the future and also danger that eclipse the promised achievements. In such a context, Panchaali’s initiative to have such a story told and retold provides interesting insights into her character. This initiative of Panchaali’s, on one level, indicates a deviation from image of the “ideal” South Asian woman for whom the well-being of her family, especially the male members of it, is supposed to be more important than her personal freedom.\textsuperscript{150} On another level, such initiative implies a certain resistance towards her family, particularly her father, whose conduct has resulted in curtailing her freedom in a substantial manner.

While Panchaali finds the story of her birth to be empowering, she takes a critical approach towards the stories that others, particularly the mainstream elements in society, find to be empowering. Commenting on the stories that celebrate Krishna’s suprahuman powers, she claims, “I didn’t pay too much attention to the stories, some of which claimed that he was a god, descended from celestial realms to save the faithful. People loved to exaggerate, and there was nothing like a dose of the supernatural to spice up the drudgery of facts. But I admitted this much: there was something unusual about him.”\textsuperscript{151} For Panchaali, Krishna is more of a confidante and a friend-in-need than a being of suprahuman powers who is necessarily superior to her. This attitude of Panchaali’s is important for her character development in three ways. First, her rejection of the established stories entails a rejection of the order which those stories reinforce, an order that crystallizes a certain set of inequalities and solidifies her position as a subordinate.

\textsuperscript{150} This is not to say that Panchaali is not concerned about the future of her family members. There are many instances in the novel where she genuinely worries about the promised plight of her brother. What is important to note is that such worries do not prevent her from having her story told over and over again.  
\textsuperscript{151} Divakaruni, \textit{The Palace of Illusions} 10.
Second, her rejection of the dominant stories about Krishna enables her to view him and also the divine, which he is the most apt symbol of, in her own terms. Third, through her reconceptualization of Krishna, she acquires the ability to maintain a close relationship with him that would eventually lay the foundation for a more spiritual connection:

But Krishna was a chameleon. With our father, he was all astute politics, advising him on ways to strengthen his kingdom. He commended Dhri on his skills with the sword but encouraged him to spend more time on the arts. He delighted Dhai Ma with his outrageous compliments and earthy jests. And me? Some days he teased me until he reduced me to tears. On other days he gave me lessons on the precarious political situation of the continent of Bharat, and chastised me if my attention wandered. He asked me what I thought of my place in the world as a woman and a princess—and then challenged my rather traditional beliefs. He brought me news of the world that I was starving for—even news that I suspected would be considered improper for the ears of a young woman. And all the while he watched me carefully, as though for a sign.

In a context where Krishna’s divinity has already been established, this relationship that Panchaali maintains with him points to novel ways in which one could relate to the divine. In these respects, many of the stories that Panchaali articulates in the novel could be considered counter-stories.

From articulating counter-stories, Panchaali moves on to articulating counter-traditions. Her plans for her future sons could be cited as a case in point:

I thought of the husband and sons that everyone assumed I would have someday. The husband I couldn’t visualize, but the sons I imagined as miniature versions of Dhri, with the same straight, serious eyebrows. I promised myself I’d never pray for their deaths. I’d teach them, instead, to be survivors. And why was a battle necessary? Surely there were other ways to glory, even for men? I’d teach them to search for those.

The Sanskrit epic is centered around the tension between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, and the Kurukshetra war is the culmination of that tension. In this sense, the war is a

152 Ibid., 11-12.
153 Ibid., 26.
necessary component of that epic. Therefore, when Panchaali problematizes the validity of war she is effectively challenging one of the foundational aspects of the *Mahabharata*. The reevaluation of men’s goals in life that she undertakes here points to a worldview that is qualitatively different from the one espoused in the Sanskrit epic. By making Draupadi, as one of the main female characters in the narrative, articulate this worldview, Divakaruni suggests that the worldview espoused in the Sanskrit epic as an uncontested approach to life may not necessarily have been shared by the women in that narrative. This assumption, in my view, foregrounds the fundamentally gendered nature of the Sanskrit epic, particularly that of its authorial voice, which the cultural, religious, and spiritual aura of the same eclipses.

**Draupadi’s Relationship with Karna**

The manner in which Divakaruni engages with the relationship between Draupadi and Karna provides interesting insights into her reconceptualization of Draupadi’s character. The Sanskrit epic contains many episodes that hint at a kind of relationship between the two characters, which, from the perspective of a contemporary reader, could well have developed into a romantic relationship. Divakaruni describes a powerful episode from the Bengali version of the *Mahabharata* in which Draupadi admits in the presence of her five Pandava brothers and Krishna that her deepest secret is her love for Karna. Although such scenes in the Sanskrit epic indicate the extent to which Karna is important to Draupadi, the epic’s preoccupation with Dharma cancels out any space in

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which such a relationship could have developed. Divakaruni deviates from the central focus of the Sanskrit epic when she chooses to develop this relationship in her retelling of the Sanskrit epic.

In the novel, Panchaali learns about Karna for the first time before her swayamvar when she sees him on the side of a portrait of Duryodhan. Her first impression of Karna is described in the following manner:

Older than the prince and austere-faced, the man sat upright, his lean body wary, as though he knew the world to be a dangerous place. Though in the midst of a court, he seems utterly alone. His only ornaments were a pair of gold earrings and a curiously patterned gold armor unlike anything I’d seen. His eyes were filled with an ancient sadness. They pulled me into them. My impatience evaporated. I no longer cared to see Arjun’s portrait. Instead, I wanted to know how those eyes would look if the man smiled. Absurdly, I wanted to be the reason for his smile.\(^{155}\)

In this initial encounter with Karna itself, Panchaali finds him to be a special person to whom she could relate on a deep, personal level. She is attracted to him to such an extent that she finds herself to be no longer interested in Arjuna who is the one suitor approved not only by everyone around her but also by the broader culture in which the epic is embedded. This clear preference for Karna that Panchaali makes explicit early on in the novel and also at the beginning of the process to find a suitor for her is important for Divakaruni’s project in two ways. First, this explicit acknowledgement of Panchaali’s preference for Karna entails a symbolic rejection of many of the expectations that the people around her have for her. In this sense, it is a clear assertion of her individuality. Second, this acknowledgement conveys the idea that this retelling of the Sanskrit epic is

\(^{155}\) Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions* 69.
going to assign greater importance to personal and worldly concerns, as opposed to issues of spiritual nature and those that concern the broader humanity.

Although romance constitutes a significant portion of what characterizes Panchaali’s attitude towards Karna, to reduce her attitude to mere romance would be a trivialization of her true feelings for him. Panchaali sees Karna as one who has faced serious forms of injustice since his birth. She offers a rather sentimental reimagining of Karna’s separation from his mother soon after his birth:

Over and over I imagined the mother who had abandoned him—for I was sure that it was she and not the gods that had set him adrift on the river. Against my closed eyelids, I saw her as she bent to the water to cast the child—her own sweet, sleeping flesh—into its night currents. In my imagination, she was very young, and the curve of her turned-away face was a little like Gandhari’s, though that was a silly thing to think. She didn’t weep. She had no tears left. Only fear for her reputation, which made her draw her shawl more closely over her head as she watched the casket. Just for a moment; then she’d have to hurry back. She’s left all her jewelry in her bedchamber, had clothed herself in her oldest sari. Still, it would be a disaster if the city watchman discovered her so far from her parents’ mansion at a time when only prostitutes are abroad. She choked down a cry as the bobbing casket disappeared around a bend in the river. Then she walked home, her steps only a little unsteady, thinking, At least it’s done.

My heart ached for both mother and child, because even I who knew so little of life could guess that such things were never done. For the rest of her life, she would wonder where her son was. Passing every handsome stranger, she’d ask herself (just as he would, walking by women he didn’t know), Could this be—? Each morning when they woke—in the same town, or kingdoms apart—their first thoughts would be of each other. In anger and regret, they’d both wish she’d had the courage to choose another way.\(^{156}\)

Here, she describes what she imagines to be the situation of a young mother who felt compelled to get rid of her newborn not out of any lack of love for him or free choice but simply out of fear of social pressure. While generating sympathy in the mind of the reader for Karna, this description invites the reader to view Karna’s plight as one

\(^{156}\) Ibid., 78-79.
necessarily linked to the plight of women in society. This conceptualization of Karna’s situation enables Panchaali to relate to him on a more personal level.

Panchaali’s reaction to the way Karna had been treated by Parasurama also indicates the extent to which her love for Karna is intertwined with her tendency to question injustice. Karna proves himself to be an excellent student, and the fact that Parasuram grants him *pasupata*, the ultimate weapon, at his request indicates the extent to which Parasuram had been impressed with his performance. The graceful manner in which Karna bears the intense pain caused by the repeated stings of a scorpion in an attempt to ensure Parasuram’s sleep is not disturbed indicates the deep love and respect that he had for his teacher. Although Karna embodied all the qualities expected of an ideal student, Parasuram becomes disappointed in him when he determines Karna to be a warrior and not a Brahmin, and he revokes the *pasupata* by cursing Karna to forget how to launch the weapon at the moment he attempts to launch it. When Panchaali hears of this curse she recognizes it as a clear act of injustice. She responds, “Didn’t Karna’s years of devoted service mean anything to Parasuram? What of his love for his teacher, because of which he bore the scorpion’s sting? Wasn’t that worth some forgiveness?”

She also says, “Each painful detail of Karna’s story became a hook in my flesh, binding me to him, making me wish a happier life for him.” This shows that her love for Karna is closely linked to her overall resistant attitude.

Panchaali’s consistent tendency to assess her husbands—first Arjuna and then all the Pandava brothers together—in relation to Karna indicates the central role that Karna

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157 Ibid., 86.
158 Ibid., 87.
plays in Panchaali’s world. Soon after the swayamvar where Arjuna, disguised as a poor Brahmin, wins and marries Panchaali, he leaves for his mother’s place with Panchaali on foot. Panchaali who had lived her entire life as a princess finds this journey to be a harrowing experience. When Panchaali’s brother points out that she is not used to the hardships that such a journey would involve, Arjuna only says, “She must learn it now.”\(^{159}\) This rather insensitive attitude of Arjuna’s pushes Panchaali into a helpless situation, and the only refuge that comes to her mind is Karna. She says, “An insidious voice inside me said, Karna would never have let you suffer like this.”\(^{160}\) Later, when Kunti asks all the Pandava brothers to share Panchaali as their common wife Panchaali once again finds herself in a rather helpless situation. Disturbed by Arjuna’s compliance with that request, she immediately thinks of Karna. “I was uncomfortable, miserable, disillusioned—and most of all angry with Arjun. I’d expected him to be my champion. It was the least he could have done after plucking me from my home. When inside me a voice whispered, Karna would never have let you down like this, I did not hush it.”\(^{161}\) The rest of her life as the common wife of the Pandavas contains many instances where she echoes similar sentiments about Karna. She thinks of him even in the hour of her death, at a moment when all her husbands have virtually abandoned her. “Karna would never have abandoned me thus. He would have stayed back and held my hand until we both perished. He would have happily given up heaven for my sake.”\(^{162}\) Given that Draupadi’s identity is largely defined as the consort of the Pandavas who are both the

\(^{159}\) Ibid., 99.
\(^{160}\) Ibid.
\(^{161}\) Ibid., 109.
\(^{162}\) Ibid., 347 (italics in original).
ultimate symbol of goodness and the ultimate winners in the Sanskrit epic, her allegiance
to Karna embodies a certain contestation of what the Pandavas stand for. Divakaruni’s
foregrounding of such allegiance indicates a conscious attempt at foregrounding this
contestation. Such contestation is a remarkable assertion of her individuality.

The relationship between Panchaali and Karna is defined by a blend of love and
hatred, and this blend makes that relationship dynamic. For Divakaruni’s Panchaali,
Karna always represents a tension between her deep feelings of love on the one hand and
her familial and social obligations on the other. The following confession indicates the
nature of this tension:

I confess: In spite of the vows I made each day to forget Karna, to be a better wife
to the Pandavas, I longed to see him again. Each time I entered a room, I glanced
up under my veil—I couldn’t stop myself—hoping he was there. (It was foolish.
If he’d been present, surely he’d have turned away, my insult still a fresh gash in
his mind.) I eavesdropped shamelessly on the maids, trying to discover his
whereabouts. On the verge of asking Dhai Ma to find out where he’d disappeared
to (for she had her ways of unearthing secrets), I bit back my tongue a hundred
times. If she’d heard me pronounce his name, she would have known how I felt.
And even to her who loved me as she loved no one else, I didn’t dare reveal this
dark flower that refused to be uprooted from my heart.\textsuperscript{163}

Karna occupies a place deep down in Panchaali’s heart that none of her husbands is able
to reach. The memories of him are always alive in her mind, and there are many
instances in the novel that show that she is yearning to see him.\textsuperscript{164} The episode that
involves Karna’s visit to the Pandava palace as a member of Duryodhan’s party gives the

\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 130.

\textsuperscript{164} The manner in which memories of Karna are triggered in Panchaali’s mind during Panchaali’s
visit to the river accompanied by Bheeshma indicates the extent to which Karna is present in her mind.
When Panchaali thinks of the miraculous story of how that river had drowned eight babies and saved one
(who is Bheeshma) she immediately makes a connection to Karna: “As I thought the words, I saw on the
waters a bobbing casket, a gold-adorned child moving rapidly on the swirling foam. Even then he knew
not to weep. As he passed us, he opened his eyes and fixed his gaze on me, though surely a newborn
couldn’t have done that” (134).
reader access to the kind of confusion that the idea of Karna has created in Panchaali’s world. Given Duryodhan’s position as the arch enemy of the Pandavas, his arrival at their newly built palace puts them on guard; nevertheless, what concerns Panchaali the most about this visit is Karna’s presence in her palace.\(^{165}\) She describes his visit as something she had “both feared and longed for”,\(^{166}\) and she makes many attempts, though without much success, at diminishing the tension between him and her.\(^{167}\) “This manner in which she conducts herself during his visit indicates the extent to which he is important to her. The famous episode of the game of dice also provides insights into the complex attitude that she has towards Karna. Despite Karna’s position as a close confidante of Duryodhan’s, Panchaali expects him to come to her rescue.\(^{168}\) This “betrayal” brings about a considerable change in her attitude towards Karna. She says, “I called on pride to freeze my tears to stone. I mustered all the hatred I could find within me and focused it on Karna.”\(^{169}\) She acknowledges a clear change of her feelings when she says, “Of one thing I was glad. What happened today had stripped away all ambiguities from my heart. Never again would I long for his [Karna’s] attention.”\(^{170}\) Nevertheless, although one would expect hatred to define her attitude towards Karna from that point onwards, her reaction to Arjuna’s claim that he was going to kill Karna

\(^{165}\) Here, the novel’s focus on Panchaali’s thoughts as opposed to the political consequence of Duryodhan’s visit places greater importance on Panchaali’s individuality as opposed to matters of the state. 

\(^{166}\) Divakaruni, The Palace of Illusions 160.

\(^{167}\) “And so when Karna arrived, I put away passion and folly and the awkwardness that goes with it. I stood by my husbands and welcomed him the same way I welcomed the rest of the Kaurava party, without my voice trembling, or my gaze faltering. I created occasions where I could be hospitable to him. I was determined to erase, through graciousness, my past insult. We were none of us young and foolish as we’d been at the time of my marriage. We could put the past behind us” (161).

\(^{168}\) “He was our enemy. I had recently rebuffed his attempt at cordiality. Why then did I feel betrayed because he hadn’t come to my rescue of his own accord?” (192).

\(^{169}\) Ibid., 192.

\(^{170}\) Ibid., 194.
once he obtain the ultimate weapon indicates that her love for Karna has not changed much.\textsuperscript{171}

Divakaruni also explores Karna’s feelings for Panchaali. Since Karna’s first encounter with Panchaali at the \textit{swayamvar} where she supports her brother’s humiliating demand that Karna reveal his father’s identity, Karna’s attitude towards her appears to be defined by anger. When Karna arrives at the Pandava palace as a member of Duryodhan’s party he refuses all the special arrangements that Panchaali has made for him in an apparent attempt at restoring and normalizing her relationship with him.\textsuperscript{172}

Nevertheless, a gesture that Karna makes during the commotion that takes place at the same palace during the same visit hints at his caring attitude towards her. When Krishna kills Sisupal during the \textit{yagna} held at the Pandava palace the majority of the participants become angry over the killing, and this anger soon develops into a commotion. As the uneasiness develops, Karna intervenes to ensure that Panchaali leaves the scene safely.\textsuperscript{173}

Although Karna protects Panchaali at this event, he refrains from doing so at her greatest moment of humiliation, which comes in the famous scene of the game of dice. When Duryodhan orders Panchaali to be disrobed she finds herself in an extremely helpless situation. Her Pandava husbands fail to come to her rescue as Yudhisthir’s loss has already reduced them to Duryodhan’s property. In such a context, she hopes that Karna would come to her rescue, but he does not do anything. According to Panchaali, had she

\textsuperscript{171} “When I heard that, the blood fled from my face. My knees buckled and I fell to the ground. I, who hadn’t weakened so even at the moment of my great insult in Duryodhan’s court” (217).

\textsuperscript{172} “Slowly it came to me, with a sinking of the heart, that he was not going to allow me to redeem myself” (161).

\textsuperscript{173} “As Bheem hurried me along, I noticed Karna. He’d been holding back the surging crowds that were trying to rush to the doorway near the dais, patient with their plailing terror. When he saw that I was safe with Bheem, he gave him a curt nod and turned to leave” (167).
pleaded with Karna he would have come to her help, but she claims, “But I wouldn’t lower myself to that, not if I died.” Her refusal to plead with Karna even in a context that is entirely hostile to her indicates her strength, and her conduct destabilizes him.

“When he saw the contempt in my eyes, Karna’s face grew white and still, as though made of ivory.” This scene indicates that despite the sense of unwavering strength and stability that defines Karna’s identity, there is something about his relationship with Panchaali that is capable of destabilizing him. The conversation that Karna has with Bheeshma during the war where he speaks of his true feelings about Panchaali gives the reader access to Karna’s emotional dimension. He claims, “even knowing what I know, I desire her! I can’t forget her shining, haughty face at the swayamvar—ah, how many years has it been?” He goes on to say:

‘The long line of her neck,’ he continued, ‘as she raised her chin. Her beautiful parted lips. How her breast rose and fell with passion. All this time, I told myself I hated her for humiliating me worse than anyone else has done. That I wanted revenge. But I was only fooling myself. When Dussasan started pulling at her sari, I couldn’t bear it. I wanted to knock him down, to shield her from the stares. The twelve years she was in the forest, I, too, slept on the ground, thinking of her discomfort. How many times I started to go to her, to beg her to come away with me, to be my queen. But I knew it was hopeless. She was completely loyal to her husbands. My words could only disgust her.

‘When Kunti told me that if I joined her sons, I’d be king instead of Yudhisthir, I wasn’t tempted. But when she used her final weapon, when she said that as her son I, too, would become Panchaali’s husband—I was ready to give up my reputation, my honor, everything! I had to use all my willpower to remain silent!’

This final confession of his love invites the reader to reassess her understanding of Karna and recognize the rather sensitive and emotional individual in him.

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174 Ibid., 192.
175 Ibid.
176 Ibid., 276.
177 Ibid., 276-77.
In Divakaruni’s retelling, there is a clear contrast between Panchaali’s feelings for Karna and her feelings for her husbands. The sense of dynamism that defines her relationship with Karna is not to be found in her relationship with the Pandavas. In the novel, the Pandavas are first mentioned by Panchaali as characters in the story that Dhri and she narrate regarding the relationship between their father King Draupad and Dhrona. When Arjuna is mentioned in the story she says, “for me Arjun was the most exciting part of the story.” This is the only instance in the novel where she mentions Arjun with some excitement, and interestingly, she has not even seen Arjun by this time. In the rest of the novel, she maintains a rather detached relationship with the Pandavas. When she hears the (false) news of the death of the Pandavas before the swayamvar, the reader finds her in deep shock. Although her response could be seen as an indication of her concern for the Pandavas, the reader soon finds out that her reaction is out of concern for herself. In the rest of the novel, her attitude towards her own husbands is largely defined by anger as well as sarcasm. This attitude that she maintains towards her husbands is her way of reacting to the rather detached relationship that they maintain with her. There is one instance in the novel where she recognizes Bheem’s attitude towards her as genuine love, but she does not show particular interest in it. It is important to note that Panchaali’s attitude towards Yudhisthir and Arjun who are the celebrated heroes in the broader Mahabharata tradition is almost always defined by indifference, anger, and sarcasm.

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178 Ibid., 19.
179 “My head whirled. Part of me was aghast at the terrible thing that had happened to the Pandavas and their mother, but a large part could think only of myself. Fear makes us selfish. If Arjun was dead, what would happen to me?” (72).
Panchaali and Karna occupy positions that are subordinate to the Pandavas in the broader *Mahabharata* tradition—the former mainly because she is a woman despite her position as the consort of the Pandavas and the latter mainly because of his position as a chief rival of the Pandavas despite his unmatched skills. In such a context, Divakaruni’s decision to explore the inner feelings of those two individuals with a focus on the relationship between them in such a manner that exploration limits the narrative space assigned to the Pandavas indicates a refusal on her part to endorse the mainstream understanding of the Sanskrit epic.

**The Problematization of Dharma**

One of the areas in which the novel deviates from the mainstream tradition of the Sanskrit epic in a rather explicit manner is its treatment of *dharma* or righteousness. The Sanskrit epic, in many ways, is a celebration of *dharma*, and this explains the epic’s position as a religious text. Yudhisthir who is the son of Indra is largely seen as an embodiment of *dharma*, and his position as the eldest in the Pandava family as well as the ultimate winner indicate the overall outlook of the narrative that celebrates the values that he embodies. The novel challenges the established understanding of *dharma*. One of the main ways in which the novel does this is by limiting the narrative space and importance accorded to Yudhisthir. Divakaruni’s Yudhisthir does not enjoy the same position of importance that he does in the Sanskrit epic. He, like all the other characters in the novel, is presented through Panchaali, and this presentation is always defined by her explicit assessment of his character, which is largely not a favourable one. The fact that Yudhisthir who is seen as a perfect embodiment of the very values that the Sanskrit
epic is believed to celebrate is obliged to go through Panchaali’s mediation in order to become knowledge and also the fact that he is largely presented in a negative light indicate the (relatively) marginal position that he occupies in Divakaruni’s retelling.

Panchaali’s direct criticism of the idea of dharma is found in her response to what happens at the game of dice. When her husbands fail to come to her rescue at her greatest moment of insult she reaches the following conclusion:

> All this time I’d believed in my power over my husbands. I’d believed that because they loved me they would do anything for me. But now I saw that though they did love me—as much perhaps as any man can love—there were other things they loved more. Their notions of honor, of loyalty toward each other, of reputation were more important to them than my suffering. They would avenge me later, yes, but only when they felt the circumstances would bring them heroic fame. A woman doesn’t think that way. I would have thrown myself forward to save them if it had been in my power that day. I wouldn’t have cared what anyone thought. The choice they made in the moment of my need changed something in our relationship. I no longer depended on them so completely in the future. And when I took care to guard myself from hurt, it was as much from them as from our enemies.  

Panchaali presents this criticism in a context where Yudhisthir had wagered her in the game of dice and forfeited her to Duryodhan all in her absence and without her knowledge, and also at a moment when her new owners had just tried to insult her by disrobing her in front of her own husbands who failed to do anything to protect her. Here, Panchaali is at the receiving end not only of the non-dharmic (adharmic) conduct but also of the dharmic conduct. All the insulting by Duryodhan and his party that she is subject to indicates how she falls a victim to adharma, while the Pandavas’ failure to come to her rescue primarily out of their (particularly Yudhisthir’s) respect for dharma shows how she falls a victim to dharma. Interestingly, in both these kinds of

\[180\] Ibid., 194-95.
victimization, her plight is inherently tied to her position as a woman. When Duryodhan orders her to be disrobed, particularly during her menstruation, he is targeting her first and foremost as a woman. At the same time, when the Pandavas decide not to intervene to protect her they overlook their culturally-defined duty to her as their consort. In such a context, this criticism of Panchaali’s suggests that dharma could be as discriminatory as adharma, particularly for women. The novel thereby highlights the essentially gendered nature of dharma, which the Pandavas as well as the Mahabharata as a religious and cultural text uphold and celebrate.

Another place where the idea of dharma is criticized is the final scene where the Pandavas and Panchaali walk towards heaven and Arjun and then Panchaali falls into the abyss on the way:

Only then did I realize that they’d [the Pandavas] gone far beyond me. Arjun was the farthest ahead, scouting the path for danger, closely followed by Nakul and Sahadev. But Bheem and Yudhishthir, conversing as they walked at a more leisurely pace, heard me and stopped. Bheem turned—he was coming to get me—but Yudhishthir put a forbidding hand on his arm. He was reminding him of the law. Once on the path, you couldn’t retrace your steps, no matter what happened.

Resentment flared through me. Rules were always more important to Yudhishthir than human pain—or human love. I knew then that he alone would reach the gate of heaven, for among us only he was capable of shedding his humanity. I wanted to tell him this, one last outburst that he would remember even in heaven. But the bitter words dissolved in my mouth the way the far peaks were dissolving into evening. What use, even if I was right? On the nearest mountain, snow had turned the color of the lotus I’d once made Bheem to pluck for me. I hoped he recognized it and rejoiced in what we’d been: the strongest man in the world, who for the sake of love rushed into danger; the woman born of fire whose glance had the power to make him smolder with imprudence. It was a good memory on which to end a life.

*     *     *

When I stepped from the path into the air, I heard my husbands cry out. As I fell, behind me there was a confused commotion. Bheem, I guessed, was scuffling with Yudhisthir, trying to get past him to me. But Yudhisthir would
win, as he always did, because Kunti, in her efforts to ensure their survival, had trained his younger brothers to obey him without question. Bheem was sobbing. Would the others weep when they heard? Surely even the callous Yudhisthir would shed a few tears! Hadn’t I been by his side all these years, through good times and bad times? But no. I could hear him murmuring consolation, reminding Bheem of their greater goal. It was both infuriating and mortifying.¹⁸¹

She also says, “I could have scrambled up to the path somehow—but for what? To listen to another of Yudhisthir’s sermons? Better to lie here, in relative peace, and gather my thoughts.”¹⁸² This scene, which marks the end of Panchaali, is defined by tension between human feelings and dharma, and contrary to what the mainstream readings of the Sanskrit epic appear to do, she places the former above the latter. She emphasizes that human feelings, particularly those related to love and suffering, are more important and worthy of greater attention than what dharma and Yudhisthir as an embodiment of dharma posit as the greater goal in life. When she mentions the order in which the Pandavas walk she implies that although Yudhisthir is insensitive to the plight of his loved ones, he uses them to achieve his own goal. One could justify his behaviour, from a deterministic point of view, that each of them is responsible for her or his past actions and that there is nothing that he could do to change their fate, but Panchaali points to the need to go beyond this sense of determinism and recognize the value of human relationships.

Draupadi the Conventional

Although Divakaruni’s Draupadi deviates from that of the Sanskrit epic in a substantial manner, she interestingly remains not significantly different from the epic’s depiction of her in certain episodes. Commenting on some of those episodes, Marwood

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 346-47.
¹⁸² Ibid., 346-47.
Larson-Harris claims that those episodes “demonstrate how Divakaruni’s reenvisioned protagonist never establishes herself as a distinct point of view.”\textsuperscript{183} The fact that she stays remarkably faithful to the Draupadi of the \textit{Mahabharata} in those episodes where there is a greater potential for her to be a radically resistant character provides important insights into what Divakaruni is trying to do with her.

The \textit{swayamvar}, which is organized to choose a husband for Draupadi, is one such episode where Draupadi could have made a radical leap from her counterpart in the Sanskrit epic. From the moment the idea of the \textit{swayamvar} comes up in the novel, Panchaali is seen being critical of it. Although the idea of \textit{swayamvar} implies freedom for Panchaali to choose a husband from a group of suitors, the event is planned in such a way that she does not have any control over the choice. She finds out that the \textit{swayamvar} takes the form of a test of skills and the king who wins the competition is to become her husband. Panchaali immediately responds to this plan: “‘Why even call it a swayamvar, then?’ … ‘Why make a spectacle of me before all those kings? It’s my father, not I, who gets to decide whom I’ll marry’.”\textsuperscript{184} She makes her displeasure with the plan explicit. Then, when she is shown the portraits of the suitors she immediately finds Karna’s to be attractive. She becomes attracted to his portrait to such an extent that she remains unconvinced even by the arguments of Krishna, which are aimed at distracting her from Karna.\textsuperscript{185} When she learns about Karna’s childhood not only does she immediately

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{183} Marwood Larson-Harris, Review of \textit{The Palace of Illusions}, by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, \textit{International Journal of Hindu Studies} 12, no. 3 (2008), 333.
\item \textsuperscript{184} Divakaruni, \textit{The Palace of Illusions} 56.
\item \textsuperscript{185} Ibid., 70.
\end{itemize}
identify with him, \(^{186}\) she also connects with him at a deeper level. When she hears about the curse that Parasuram has put on Karna she, while empathizing with him, questions the act of injustice. At the *swayamvar*, Panchaali is impressed with Karna’s gentlemanly behaviour. \(^{187}\) These developments leading up to Karna’s turn at the *swayamvar* to display his skills indicate that Panchaali had already formed a positive attitude towards him, which could even have made her pick Karna had she been in a position to exercise her free choice. Nevertheless, what happens when Karna’s turn comes shows that she does not allow herself to be guided by her true feelings for him. When her brother Dhri challenges Karna to reveal the identity of his father, in an attempt to prevent his participation in the contest and possible victory, Panchaali who has so far come across as a rebellious character who questions social conventions supports Dhri. In my view, had Divakaruni wanted her Draupadi to be an entirely radical character that always questions discriminatory social conventions and places her individual liberation above what appears to restrict her freedom she could have made Panchaali side with Karna, or, at the least, stay impartial and let Karna respond to the challenge. Commenting on the scene, Divakaruni explains Panchaali’s intervention as an attempt to protect Dhri by preventing a fight between Karna and Dhri. \(^{188}\)

The scene involving Draupadi’s arrival at the Pandava house with the Pandava brothers following the *swayamvar* also encompasses space for a radical

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\(^{186}\) Panchaali syas, “We’d both been victims of parental rejection—was that why his story resonated so?” (78).

\(^{187}\) “Duryodhan made a comment—probably about me—and his companions slapped their knees and guffawed. Karna alone (I noted with gratitude) sat still as a flame. Only the slightest thinning of his lips indicated his disapproval, but it was enough to silence Duryodhan” (93).

reconceptualization of her character. In the Mahabharata narrative, when the party arrives home Bheema calls his mother Kunti to come and see what they have brought home. Kunti who is in the kitchen at that moment replies that she is too busy to come out and asks the sons to share equally among themselves, as they have always done, what they have brought with them. This advice leaves the brothers and Draupadi in bewilderment. When Kunti learns about the real nature of what her sons have brought home she says that she cannot retract the advice and that the brothers will have to abide by it. As a result, Draupadi ends up with five husbands. Divakaruni presents a faithful depiction of this episode in the novel. She goes beyond the Sanskrit epic by giving the reader access to Draupadi’s thoughts when Kunti confirms her advice. “I stared at her, my brain trying to take in what she had said. Was she joking when she said they must all marry me? No, her face made that clear. I wanted to shout, Five Husbands? Are you mad? I wanted to say, I’m already married to Arjun! But Vyasa’s prophecy recoiled upon me, robbing me of my protests.”  

Considering the rebelliousness that Panchaali has demonstrated up to this point in the novel and also the broader feminist inclinations of the novel, one would expect her not to submit to this advice; nevertheless, she does not, if not fails to, do anything different from what Draupadi in the Sanskrit epic did. “I was to sleep near the brothers’ feet, at a chaste distance. I considered refusing, but I was too weary, I’d save my rebellion for another day.”

The famous episode of the game of dice in the Sanskrit epic is another scene that embodies greater potential for Draupadi to have liberated herself in such a manner that

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189 Divakaruni, The Palace of Illusions 108.
190 Ibid., 109.
questions the patriarchal order that provides the context for the narrative in the Sanskrit epic and channel the narrative in an entirely different direction. In this game of dice, which takes place between Shakuni (representing Duryodhan) and Yudhisthira, the latter wagers everything that he “possesses”—and Draupadi happens to one of his “possessions”—and loses it to his rivals. He starts with his material possessions, such as his kingdom, army, treasury, and clothing, and, once he has forfeited those, he wagers his brothers, himself, and finally Draupadi. Interestingly, this transition of the ownership of Draupadi takes place in her absence and outside her knowledge. In the Sanskrit epic, when Draupadi is told that Yudhisthira had forfeited her to Duryodhan she expresses her anger at what he had done. She even goes to the extent of questioning the validity of what Yudhisthira had done. This is a rare incident in the Sanskrit epic where the actions of Yudhisthira who always comes across as an embodiment of dharma or righteousness are questioned, and that too by a woman. Given that this episode can easily be read as an instance of female resistance, one would expect a radical feminist retelling of the epic, like The Palace of Illusions, to exploit the full potential of the event and further the feminist voice already available in the epic. Nevertheless, Panchaali’s reaction to the incident in the novel is not significantly different from that of Draupadi in the Mahabharata.

An assessment of the role that Vyasa plays in The Palace of Illusions also provides important insights into the nature of Divakaruni’s engagement with the Mahabharata. Vyasa comes across as someone who sees the future and is knowledgeable about many realities that others, particularly Panchaali, do not know
about. This gap between Panchaali and Vyasa is established in their first meeting itself. Panchaali goes to Vyasa disguised as an ordinary individual, but he immediately recognizes her as a princess. This scene marks the beginning of a series of events in which Vyasa is seen as being ahead of Panchaali in his knowledge of the manner in which the narrative unfolds itself. In a context where the *Mahabharata* provides the broadest frame of reference for the novel, Vyasa’s knowledge of the future unfolding of the narrative grants him control over Draupadi’s future even in Divakaruni’s reconceptualization of the narrative.

The prophecies that Vyasa makes about Panchaali’s future during their first meeting itself provide a framework for Panchaali’s future actions:

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

Panchaali is startled by some of the prophecies, and when she begins to think about ways to avoid certain future possibilities that those prophecies predicted, Vyasa indicates the futility of her efforts as he says, “You don’t have a choice, my dear.” Also, When Panchaali asks Vyasa if he would be able to change the future he says, “Only a fool meddles in the Great Design. Besides, your destiny is born of lifetimes of karma, too

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191 Ibid., 37.  
192 Ibid., 39 (italics in original).  
193 Ibid.
powerful for me to change.” These responses, on the one hand, imply that, irrespective of what Panchaali is going to do to change what the prophecies predicted, her future is already scripted and her fate sealed. On the other hand, the association of Vyasa with the “Grand Design” that they entail symbolizes the fundamentally patriarchal nature of what is generally viewed as the “Grand Design.” In this sense, the novel presents a situation where Panchaali is primarily trapped in a patriarchal world order in which she does not have real control over her future.

In addition to defining the broader framework for Panchaali’s action, Vyasa, at one point in the novel, goes beyond his traditional role and gives her advice that imposes additional restrictions on her agency. Having pointed out that he cannot change Panchaali’s future, he says:

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

According to Bir Singh Yadav, Vyasa, through this piece of advice, reduces Panchaali to a subaltern “by internalizing the quality of passivity in her thinking and doing.” In a context where such direct advice from Vyasa to Draupadi is not to be found in the dominant version of the Sanskrit epic, this scene in the novel that entails a reduction of Panchaali to a subaltern is directly attributed to Divakaruni. The scene entails a weakening, if not denial, of Panchaali’s agency in two ways. First, it emphasizes the

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194 Ibid., 40.
195 Ibid., 40.
primacy of the “grand plan” within which Panchaali’s options are limited. Second, it creates a space in which one could argue that it is Panchaali’s exercising of her will that exclusively causes all the destruction that happens at the end. This scene further echoes the position of superiority that Vyasa both as a sage and a man enjoys in the broader Mahabharata tradition.

The final chapter of the novel, which describes the transcendental realm, interestingly presents a clear affirmation of the worldview that the dominant readings of the Sanskrit epic associate the epic with. Panchaali’s description of her thoughts as she falls into the abyss conveys this affirmation:

Everything’s turning to snow-dust, even my brain. But with the last of my strength I formulate a thought: That was the yagna fire out of which I came into this world! Were you there with me even then, before I took on this birth?

I feel him [Krishna] smile. He’s glad I made the connection in time.

I did forget everything, didn’t I? Made a mess of things?

There’s something else I want to ask, but it’s hard to focus because thoughts are passing through me like water through a sieve.

“You did what you were supposed to do. Played your part perfectly.”

“Even when I got furious? When I held hatred in my heart? Loved the wrong man? Tortured the ones closest to me? Harmed so many people?”

“Even then. You didn’t harm them that much. Look!”

Above me there is light—or rather, the absence of darkness. The mountains have vanished. The air is full of men—but not men exactly, nor women, for their bodies are sleek and sexless and glowing. Their faces are unlined and calm, devoid of the various passions that distinguished them in life, but with some effort I recognize each one. Here’s Kunti and my father, finishing up a conversation. Here’s Bheeshma, floating amicably beside Sikhandi and Dhai Ma. Duryodhan is positioned between Dhrona and my brother, all of them smiling as though at a recent joke. Four of my husbands are here (Yudhisthir must still be toiling up the path), along with Gandhari, who holds Sahadev close as one would a young child. Spread out behind them are countless others, their bodies erased of the wounds that killed them at Kurukshetra, their faces evincing the satisfaction of actors who have successfully concluded their roles in a great drama.197

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197 Divakaruni, The Palace of Illusions 358 (italics in original).
Panchaali who had questioned everything up to this point in life comes to the realization that worldly life is mere drama. She finds her new realm of existence to be one where she is “beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego.” This conclusion underscores the dominant worldview associated with the Sanskrit epic in two ways. First, it affirms the presence of a realm or existence beyond the worldly realm. Not only does it affirm the presence of such a realm, it also presents that realm as one preferable to the worldly realm. Second, this conclusion reinforces the idea of a cosmic order or a “grand plan.” Not only do these propositions underscore the conventional reading of the Sanskrit epic, they also, in a sense, undermine the struggle that Panchaali’s life has embodied.

Panchaali’s ultimate realization that Krishna has always been the true love of her life marks an important turn of events, which underscores the conventional understandings of the *Mahabharata*. Although this realization is not found, or, at least, emphasized, in the dominant version of the Sanskrit epic, it could be argued that this turn of events resonates with the conventional reading of the text. While the relationship between Draupadi and Krishna in the Sanskrit epic is dominantly perceived to be a *sakhi-sakha* relationship, i.e. a relationship between two friends, certain episodes in the epic, particularly the episode of the game of dice, convey the impression that their relationship was deeper than that. It is this perceived depth of their relationship that Divakaruni exploits when she constructs the relationship between the two characters in the novel. From the beginning of the novel, Krishna comes across as a mentor and protector figure to Panchaali. Introducing Krishna, Panchaali says, “He asked me what I thought of my

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198 Ibid., 360.
place in the world as a woman and a princess—and then challenged my rather traditional
beliefs,” and this shows the role that he has played in shaping her worldview and
voice. Panchaali’s claim that Krishna has been “the air I breathed—indispensable and
unconsidered” indicates the extent to which Krishna has been part of her life.
Nevertheless, their relationship never grows into a romantic one. At the very end of the
novel, Panchaali comes to the following realization:

> It’s only now I see that he’s always been there, sometimes in the forefront,
sometimes blended into the shadows of my life. When I thought myself
abandoned, he was busy supporting me—but so subtly that I often didn’t notice.
He loved me even when I behaved in a most unlovable manner. And his love was
totally different from every other love in my life. Unlike them, it didn’t expect
me to behave in a certain way. It didn’t change into displeasure or anger or even
hatred if I didn’t comply. It healed me. If what I felt for Karna was a singeing
fire, Krishna’s love was a balm, moonlight over a parched landscape. How blind
I’d been not to recognize it for the precious gift it was!  

This ultimate realization that Panchaali reaches, that too at the very end of the novel,
clearly places transcendental, spiritual love above sensual love. Viewed strictly from the
perspective of this realization, this privileging of transcendental, spiritual love, in a sense,
dermines her radical sentiments that defined her approach to many issues, particularly
to those that concerned Karna. This situation could make one question the validity of
Panchaali’s struggles. At the same time, this ultimate celebration of Krishna also entails
a certain celebration of the worldview that is dominantly associated with him in the
contemporary Hindu world.

Accordingly, it could be argued that, despite the radical perspectives that the
novel introduces to the broader *Mahabharata* tradition, *The Palace of Illusions* is not an

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199 Ibid., 12.
200 Ibid., 70.
201 Ibid., 356.
explicit rejection of that tradition. At best, it could be seen as an attempt to incorporate a radical contemporary voice into the broader tradition that it is engaging with. The explicitly feminist and humanist approach that Divakaruni takes to the Sanskrit epic calls into question certain fundamental assumptions regarding the Sanskrit epic; nevertheless, the fact that the novel remains within the established narrative structure of the epic entails an acceptance, and therefore, a certain endorsement, of the tradition. In a context where this acceptance of the tradition is established, it could be argued that the change that the novel intends to effect is a change from within the tradition. The manner in which the novel attempts to achieve this goal is by blending the alternative perspectives that it introduces with the existing understanding of the tradition. The duplication of the author is an important strategy that the novel employs in this regard. Giving Draupadi a voice and creating space for a discussion of the issues that matter to the subject position that Draupadi represents, while accepting and also reiterating Vyasa’s authorship of the Sanskrit epic, the novel draws attention to certain fundamental biases embedded in the tradition that constitute a basis for division and discrimination in society.

Conclusion

Divakaruni’s intervention in the Mahabharata tradition, which explicitly engages with the epic’s authorship, invokes Barthes’s views on the relationship between a text and its author.\textsuperscript{202} When Divakaruni decides to take the Sanskrit epic, which is dominantly

\textsuperscript{202} What Divakaruni responds to by writing The Palace of Illusions is not a specific written text, but a culturally established broader tradition. In this sense, the object of her engagement does not constitute a “text” in the same sense that Barthes understands it. Nevertheless, what she is responding to is a specific narrative with a relatively stable central storyline with a relatively agreed-upon interpretation, it could be considered a “text,” and, in this sense, I would argue that Barthes ideas that apply to written texts become equally valid for the “unwritten text” in question here.
attributed to Vyasa, and retell it from a different perspective, she openly challenges Vyasa’s authorship. The prominence that both Vyasa and the *Mahabharata* as a text hold in the broader Hindu tradition highlights the intensity of this challenge. The validity of Divakaruni’s engagement is based on the assumption that there is no author behind the *Mahabharata* as a text that regulates how that text is interpreted, or the nature of the text is such that the author is not in a position to regulate the interpretation. Divakaruni’s refusal to uncritically subscribe to the authoritative interpretation of the Sanskrit epic and her initiative to re-write the epic as part of that refusal point to the liberties that she enjoys as a *reader* and also the power that she is in a position to exert on the text as one. This privileged position of the reader that she occupies highlights the importance that Barthes attributes to the reader.

Nevertheless, to conceptualize Divakaruni’s engagement with the *Mahabharata* tradition as a complete denial of Vyasa’s authorship and an unconditional celebration of her position as a reader would be not only to misconstrue the nature of her engagement but also to trivialize what she intends to achieve through this engagement. When Divakaruni gives Panchaali a voice she is responding to what she recognizes as a bias embedded in the *Mahabharata* that has resulted in an unfair treatment of a particular subject position. This act also entails Divakaruni’s recognition that this unfair treatment is predicated on the manner in which the *Mahabharata* as a narrative or text is organized. Such recognition immediately grounds the text in a particular social, political, and cultural context and marks it as representative of a particular subject position that is characteristic of that context. In this sense, the recognition of the Sanskrit epic as a text...
authored by Vyasa or an institution representative of what Vyasa stands for is crucial for Divakaruni’s project. Any move to distance Vyasa from the Sanskrit epic and depict the epic as a text without an author and hence virtually open for any kind of interpretation would weaken the link between the epic and the broader Hindu tradition, thereby anesthetizing the ideological dimension of the text. Such anesthetization of the ideological dimension of the text removes any space in which counter narratives like The Palace of Illusions become possible. In this sense, it could even be argued that the attribution of the Mahabharata to Vyasa is a necessary precondition for The Palace of Illusions as it is that attribution that provides the condition of possibility to the novel.

The same can be argued for the novel as well. The identity of the novel, at least a significant portion of it, depends on the extent to which the novel is recognized as an expression of a particular ideological stance, which is primarily feminist and humanist. The failure to recognize this voice in the novel is to deny the novel the special position that it holds in the broader Mahabharata tradition. This is particularly the case, given that the stance that the novel endorses is a historically suppressed one and that the novel’s endorsement of it is an important measure towards rectifying, or, at least, drawing attention to, a historical injustice. In such a context, to merely view the novel as a text free from any authorial intent and virtually open for any kind of interpretation is to trivialize the important political and ideological role that the novel is intended to play, or, at least, capable of playing.

Divakaruni’s subtle engagement with the Sanskrit epic, which results in injecting a radical, contemporary, even Western, perspective into the Mahabharata tradition,
without necessarily altering the overall narrative structure of the epic, provides important insights into the very idea of the author with a focus on its relationship with the text. Her retelling mainly foregrounds an injustice, which is embedded within the Sanskrit epic as well as in society. The dominant readings of the epic have resulted in perpetuating this injustice in the broader Hindu tradition. By drawing attention to this aspect of the text, the novel highlights the essentially contextual nature of the text over the perceived universality of the same. It reminds the reader that the Sanskrit epic is a result of an endeavour undertaken by a specific individual or institution with a specific subject position under specific circumstances. This foregrounding of the essentially contextual nature of the *Mahabharata*, which weakens its religious and mythical aura, enhances the space for a critical understanding of the text. The fact that the novel foregrounds the relevant injustice without deviating from the overall narrative structure indicates that the emphasis of the contextual nature of a text and its author does not necessarily, or in itself, undermine any philosophical insights that the text may have to offer. An idea of the author’s subject position always leads to a more informed engagement with the text.
Chapter 4: The Great Indian Novel and the Idea of History

Introduction

Shashi Tharoor’s The Great Indian Novel blends the Mahabharata with contemporary Indian history by resetting the epic plot in the context of twentieth century Indian history. When Tharoor reconceptualizes contemporary Indian history in terms of the Sanskrit epic, he engages with the established understanding of the Sanskrit epic as itihās or history. Based on an analysis of the novel, with a focus on how the novel blends the Sanskrit epic with contemporary Indian history, I explore the ways in which the novel foregrounds the term history as a site of theoretical reflection and contestation.

The chapter begins with a review of the existing literature on The Great Indian Novel. I then present a detailed discussion of Hayden White’s ideas about the fundamentally literary nature of historiography. This section is followed by a discussion of how the novel could be approached as a treatise on history. In this section, I discuss the kind of theoretical perspective that emerges out of those sections of the novel that constitute overtly theoretical statements about the idea of history. Through an analysis of a short scene from the novel, I examine how the narrator gives expression to that theoretical perspective in his practice of historiography. This section is followed by a discussion of the place of the Mahabharata in the novel. This discussion focuses on how Tharoor situates the novel in the Mahabharata tradition. The following section comprises a discussion of the depiction of certain key characters in the novel. In the conclusion section, I discuss how the novel invites a theoretical discussion on the idea of history by deliberately foregrounding the literary dimension of historiography.
The Analysis in Context

One of the criteria that the existing assessments of *The Great Indian Novel* engage with in varying degrees is the extent to which the novel remains faithful to the *Mahabharata*, as the source text that provides the background narrative for the novel, and the twentieth century Indian history the key events of which the novel retells. Given the prominent place that the Sanskrit epic and recent Indian history play in the novel, such an engagement is arguably not only important but also crucial to any assessment of the novel. Nevertheless, an overemphasis of this idea of faithfulness in any reading of the novel is problematic for two reasons. First, such an approach entails the assumption that both the Sanskrit epic and contemporary Indian history constitute unified texts with more or less fixed meanings.\(^\text{203}\) This assumption indicates a reduction of the characteristically broad and diverse *Mahabharata* tradition to a particular interpretation of that tradition. It also privileges a particular understanding of the twentieth century political history of India. Second, this approach fails to recognize the novel first and foremost as a creative act.

Ashutosh Mohan foregrounds this idea of faithfulness in his engagement with the novel. While claiming that the novel is “an overtly biased political discourse,”\(^\text{204}\) he argues, “In *The Great Indian Novel* the isomorphic relationship between mythology and Indian political history thwarts, subverts and disfigures both, as it provides a conveniently

\(^{203}\) Wiemann argues that the very idea that *The Great Indian Novel* is a retelling of the *Mahabharata* leads to the misconception that there is a unified *Mahabharata* (85-86).

pliable framework to the author to validate his proclivities and biases.”

The key areas of the novel that Mohan identifies as embodying problematic interpretations include the glorification of the Janata Front over the Congress, the deification of Mahatma Gandhi’s killer, the implied marginalization of the position of South India in the broader picture of Indian politics and history, the critical stance towards the key figures in the Indian Independence movement (such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru), and the emphasis on politics of aggression over other forms of politics. Mohan frames his critique of the novel within a broad framework defined by the assumption that “myth as a base-cum-superstructure of fictional history [should] invariably elevate literature to an impersonal plane” instead of becoming “a camouflage or a strategy to advance one’s own prejudices, political or otherwise.”

Mohan’s approach to the novel is problematic for two reasons. First, he assumes that Tharoor’s treatment of contemporary Indian history, especially when framed within a narrative structure of mythical significance, should be objective. He is of the view that even within the context of literature, the concepts of myth and history should be treated with the same degree of seriousness that those concepts enjoy in their respective domains. This view implies that there is something inherent about each of the two concepts that the creative dimension of literature fails to override completely. This assumption, on the one hand, questions the position of literature as a domain independent of mythology and history; on the other hand, it undermines the principle of freedom of thought that literature by definition upholds. Second, Mohan fails to recognize that the mainstream

205 Mohan 47.
206 Mohan 47.
understanding of the historical events that he subscribes to is just one of the many possible readings of the events, which is invariably characterized by a certain set of biases. His uncritical acceptance of the dominant reading of a given historical reality turns a blind eye to the political and ideological forces that have institutioned that reading as the accurate reading to the exclusion of the other readings of the same reality. At the same time, B. Samrajya Lakshmi’s argument that the novel displays a faithful transposition of the *Mahabharata* characters and events to the modern context indicates that there are alternate views regarding the faithfulness of the novel to the Sanskrit epic and contemporary Indian history.207

Matthias Galler challenges the kind of thinking that is behind Mohan’s claim, when he argues, “Tharoor’s account of political events in the guise of a mythological narrative points to the distortion of reality in official versions of [Indira] Gandhi’s rule.”208 According to him, the official narratives of many of the political realities that Tharoor engages with in the novel are objective and accurate representations of those realities. Those narratives embody the realities in question as they are conceptualized by the dominant discourse. This conceptualization, like any other conceptualization, embodies its own set of biases, but the dominant discourse legitimizes it in such a way that it carries the appearance of a disinterested representation. By foregrounding his own conceptualization of the events in question, Tharoor mainly calls this apparent

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disinterestedness of the official narratives into question. In this sense, Tharoor’s perceived intervention in Indian historiography should be seen as an enriching move.

*The Great Indian Novel* has also been discussed as presenting a historiographic practice that challenges dominant Western historiographic practices. Ram Bhavan Yadav argues that the novel “challenges and subverts colonial historiography to reclaim India’s national history. Its agenda lies in revisiting and rewriting the western version of Indian history. It attempts to present history of the twentieth century India from a postcolonial perspective.”²⁰⁹ According to him, one of the main ways in which Tharoor challenges the traditional Western historiographic practices and develops a specifically postcolonial historiographic practice is by incorporating into his approach “ancient Indian myths, oral tradition, digressive narrative technique, and other literary devices such as satire, magic realism, and other metafictional devices.”²¹⁰ Kanishka Chowdhury agrees that the novel challenges the colonial historiographic practices, but he argues, “Tharoor’s revisionist history, history from a privileged vantage point, thus ultimately remain ‘traditional,’ for he fails to recover the history of the silenced voices, the voices which made the national struggle possible.”²¹¹


²¹⁰ Yadav 1.

The Great Indian Novel has largely been discussed as a postmodern novel. G. R. Taneja draws attention to the essentially postmodern dimension of the novel when she argues:

The disenchantment with the inherited world order leads Tharoor to cast a shadow of doubt upon the very foundations of ancient wisdom enshrined in the Mahabharata. In presenting essentially stable, unchangeable values through events (and individuals) which themselves are presented in new versions, Tharoor maintains that there is no Truth but truths, no Reality but realities.

Viewing the novel as a work that took Indian fiction to a new level, P. K. Rajan argues, “With the publication of this book, it is said Indian literature has taken ‘a dazzling leap beyond into post-modernism’.” This claim conveys the impression that the significance of Tharoor’s intervention in the Mahabharata tradition lies mainly in that he introduced the idea of postmodernism to the existing discourse on the Sanskrit epic. O. P. Juneja, however, is of a different view. He argues that postmodernism has always been part of Indian culture and that the Sanskrit epic itself is a postmodern text.

Punyashree Panda and Sulagna Mohanty advance a similar argument when they claim, “By retelling a story from the past about inbreeding between high and low cultures, Tharoor firmly establishes the presence of the postmodern in both the epic The Mahabharata as well as his contemporary novel.” Although the claim that the Sanskrit
epic is a postmodern text problematic, particularly given the characteristically Western underpinnings of postmodernism, these arguments situate the novel as an explicitly postmodern work.

The present chapter is different from the existing studies on the novel mainly in that its main goal is to examine how the novel, through its engagement with the Sanskrit epic, complicates the idea of history. Galler claims that the primary goal of the novel is “to point to the relativity of any historical narrative,” and part of my goal in this chapter is to substantiate this claim through a close reading of the novel.

The Mahabharata as History

The Sanskrit term *itihās* or *itihāsa* features as a defining term in the conventional discourses on the *Mahabharata*, and also on the other famous South Asian Sanskrit epic the *Ramayana*. The term means “an account of the way things had been” or “thus indeed it was.” Based on these meanings, Pathak calls the *Mahabharata* “an old eyewitness account of the way things had been.” She identifies fourteen instances in the Critical Edition of the Sanskrit epic where the epic refers to itself as *itihāsa*. While claiming that the term is inextricably linked to the Sanskrit epic, she points out that this link between the term and the epic has played a prominent role in medieval interpretations of the epic. The scholarly attempts that have been made to date the

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217 Galler 297.
220 Pathak, *Divine Yet Human Epics* 50.
221 Ibid., 40.
222 Ibid., 42.
Mahabharata war and identify the places mentioned in the epic indicate the extent to which the Sanskrit epic has been regarded as actual history even within scholarly circles.

Although the Indian term *itiḥāsa* is commonly translated into English as “history,” there is a difference between the two terms on the conceptual level. Distancing the Indian terms from its Western, and also Chinese, counterpart, Ranjan Ghosh argues:

They [the Hindus] were more tradition-minded than history-minded but this is the way they generated meaning out of their interface with the past. One needs to acknowledge that mere chronological progression does not make up the fundamental ingredient of Indian history; Indian history requires an understanding of an abiding spiritual quest for the ultimate changeless reality, a quest that can lead it to overlook strict documentation of the rise and fall of an empire, the ascension and dethronement of kings, and so on. In this way Indian history can flaunt the luxury of achronicity and ahistoricity. So the Indian mind would prefer the “general to the particular,” and meaning to chronology.

He views the Indian concept of history as an embodiment of a combination of philosophy and religion. He argues, “Hence, a strong mythic structure undergirds the concept of history, and there is no denying that history for the Hindus is lived-in reality and Hindu culture has both a paleocentric and mythopoetic character.”

This fundamental distinction between the Western concept of history and the Indian concept of *itiḥāsa* needs to be taken into consideration in any analysis of the Sanskrit epic as “history.”

*The Great Indian Novel* functions as a space in which the Western concept of history blends with the Indian concept of *itiḥāsa*. Although the broader tradition that the novel engages with is characteristically South Asian, more specifically, Indian, the novel itself is predominantly positioned in the Western tradition for three reasons. First, the
novel as a genre is a specifically Western phenomenon, and this Western generic identity of the specific novel in question plays an important role in determining how the content of the novel is understood. Second, the novel is in English, a characteristically Western language embedded in the British colonial project. This linguistic dimension of the novel ensures that the image of the West is inextricably linked to the novel. Third, Tharoor is a person of a characteristically Western scholarly and artistic background, and given this background, his engagement with the Sanskrit epic is more likely than not to have incorporated Western modes of interpretation. Given these reasons, it could be argued that the Western concept of history is implicit in the novel’s engagement with the Mahabharata and presents itself as an alternative contending conceptualization of the idea of history to the traditional Indian conceptualization of the same.

History as a Literary Artifact

Given that The Great Indian Novel is first and foremost a literary work engaging with realities that belong in the domain of history, the distinction or relationship between history and literature is at the centre of the novel. Hayden White’s ideas about history and its relationship with literature provides a useful perspective in understanding the nature of the blend of history and literature that the novel embodies. Hayden White calls into question the mainstream understanding of history as an objective record of the past. He draws attention to the essentially subjective nature of the historian’s engagement with

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226 For a detailed discussion of the novel as a Western phenomenon, see Watt.
227 To call English a characteristically Western language is not to ignore the extent to which South Asia has indigenized and redefined the language. The extensive body of literature available on different South Asian varieties of English indicate the important ways in which English, or rather “Englishes,” are establishing themselves as local languages. Nevertheless, irrespective of this localization, the established reputation of English as a Western, colonial, hegemonic language is still largely alive.
the past in every act of formulating a historical narrative. He recognizes the essential filtering process that the past goes through when entering into a historical narrative as a defining aspect of that narrative. In this sense, the content of such a narrative, White argues, is always “as much invented as found.” In a context where invention constitutes a significant part of the historian’s approach, the forms of such narratives “have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences.”

According to White, the goal of a historical narrative is not so much to merely record the past as to explain it by representing what has happened in the past. He recognizes five levels of conceptualization in a historical account: chronicle, story, mode of emplotment, mode of argument, and mode of ideological implication. The chronicle of a historical account comprises the historian’s selection of the events that she intends to include in the account. These events are then arranged in the form of a story. This arrangement of the events in the form of a story involves identifying, and even creating, connections among the chosen events. This arrangement also imposes the structure of an independent story with a beginning, middle, and an end. The mode of emplotment refers to the broader category of story that the narrative falls into. White identifies different categories of story, such as tragedy, comedy, romance, and satire, and shows that a given account belongs to one or a combination of these categories. These categories define the

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229 Ibid.
231 Ibid., 5-29.
overall tone of the narratives. The mode of argument concerns the underlying structure or argument that shapes the narrative. It refers to the theoretical lens through which the relationships among the chosen historical events are explained. The kinds of relationships discussed on this level of conceptualization, which go beyond the overt relationships among the chosen events, characterize a matrix of causal relationships that provides the context for those overt relationships. Finally, the mode of implication, which is ideological in nature, concerns the ethical dimensions of historiography. White writes, “The ideological dimensions of a historical account reflects the ethical element in the historian’s assumption of a particular position on the question of the nature of historical knowledge and the implications that can be drawn from the study of past events for the understanding of present ones.”

He identifies the mode of implication as the level on which “an aesthetic perception (the emplotment) and a cognitive operation (the argument) can be combined so as to derive prescriptive statements from what may appear to be purely descriptive or analytical ones.”

Implied in White’s writing is the idea that what becomes history is not so much what has merely taken place in the past as what gets recognized and projected as having taken place. The historian—be it a professional historian writing a history classic or a mere individual reflecting on the past—herself plays a central role in constructing history. According to White, the historical events in themselves are value-neutral, but the historian’s act of selecting them for the narrative infuses them with value. In this sense, every historical narrative is a subjective account of a select set of events that

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232 Ibid., 22.
233 Ibid., 27.
234 White, Tropics 84.
belong to the past, and therefore, is value-laden. In the construction of any historical narrative, the rhetorical situatedness of the historian functions as a filter through which the supposedly value-neutral events are obliged to go through in order to make their way into the narrative. These value-laden set of events then have to be weaved into each other in such a way that they constitute a coherent account, and the shape that the narrative takes is primarily determined by “the historian’s decision to configure them according to the imperatives of one plot structure or mythos rather than another.”235 The sense of coherence that characterizes a given historical narrative, in this sense, is not so much one that exists among the concerned historical events prior to the construction of the narrative as one that is read into, or imposed upon, those events by the historian in the process of constructing the narrative.

This understanding of history underscores the essential literariness or “storyness” of any historical narrative, and this essential literariness or “storyness” of history calls into question the perceived objectivity and disinterestedness of historical narratives. A historical narrative even in its most ideal form is first and foremost a story with a plot structure. Outside of this plot structure, the narrative loses its coherence as a result of which the events reveal themselves primarily as isolated incidents. The same set of events can be mapped into different plot structures so as to create different historical narratives or stories. White argues, “All the historian needs to do to transform a tragic into a comic situation is to shift his point of view or change the scope of his perceptions. … How a given historical situation is to be configured depends on the historian’s subtlety in matching up a specific plot structure with the set of historical events that he wishes to

235 Ibid. (italics in original).
endow with a meaning of a particular kind.\footnote{Ibid., 85 (italics in original).} From this point of view, he claims the construction of history to be “essentially a literary, that is to say fiction-making, operation.”\footnote{Ibid.}

White’s claim that the construction of history is essentially a fiction-making operation does not mean that there is no difference between history and literature (as the domain of fiction). White makes it clear that to call the construction of history a fiction-making operation “in no way detracts from the status of historical narratives as providing a kind of knowledge.”\footnote{Ibid.} He adheres to the mainstream conception of the distinction between history and literature when he says that the former is interested in the “actual” rather than in the “possible.”\footnote{Ibid., 89.} He claims that history has always functioned as “the ‘realistic’ pole of representation.”\footnote{Ibid.} He believes in no uncertain terms that history is the domain of the “actual” and the “real.” Having made that premise clear, he argues that there is something fundamentally literary about the way history represents the “actual” and the “real,” and that without this fundamentally literary aspect of the construction of history no history is possible.

White also views this fundamentally literary aspect of historiography as what renders classic historical narratives irrefutable. He argues that history classics cannot be disconfirmed, and “it is their nondisconfirmability that testifies to the essentially \textit{literary} nature of historical classics. There is something in a historical masterpiece that cannot be
negated, and this nonnegatable element is its form, the form which is its fiction.”

White does not define what he means by history classics, nor does he specify how a history classic is different from any other historical narrative; nevertheless, it could be assumed that his choice is based upon the general perception that the factual accuracy of those classics is established or that there are no major, noteworthy disputes regarding their accuracy. In a context where the accuracy of a given set of historical events is more or less established, the differences among the narratives that deal with those events are largely formal. In this sense, it is the form of a given narrative, more than its content, that defines its identity.

While highlighting the central role that the rhetorical situatedness of the historian plays in the construction of a historical narrative, White is careful not to lead to the conclusion that historical narratives are mere idiosyncratic accounts whose shapes are solely determined by individual historians. He argues, “Properly understood, histories ought never to be read as unambiguous signs of the events they report, but rather as symbolic structures, extended metaphors, that ‘liken’ the events reported in them to some form with which we have already become familiar in our literary culture.”

This claim indicates that the forms that historians give to their narratives are culturally defined. Entailed is the idea that emplotment is more a case of one having to select from a range of forms that have been made culturally available to the historian than a case of one having to develop a new form on her own. It also indicates the extent to which the rhetorical situatedness of the historian is defined by the culture that she is part of.

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241 Ibid. (italics in original).
242 Ibid., 91.
The extent to which every act of historiography is culturally defined becomes evident in White’s discussion of the linguistic dimension of historiography. He recognizes historical narratives primarily as “verbal artefacts,” thus highlighting the important position that language occupies in any act of historiography. White distinguishes between what he calls technical language and figurative language. He views technical language as being comprehensible only to “those who have been indoctrinated in their uses.” History does not have such technical language with specialized vocabulary. What is available at their disposal is “ordinary educated speech,” which represents the figurative mode of language. Given that this form of language in any given context is deeply embedded in the culture of that context, to use that language to construct history is to work in terms of the parameters that that culture has made available.

*The Great Indian Novel* as a “Treatise” on History

Tharoor explicitly states that his novel is about the historical, geographical, and political entity known as India. He introduces the idea of “India” in the very first sentence of the novel, and he keeps the reader reminded of this idea throughout the novel. In his first paragraph, Tharoor writes, “I tell them that if they would only read the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, study the Golden Ages of the Mauryas and the Guptas and even of those Muslim chaps the Mughals, they would realize that India is not

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243 Ibid., 94.
244 Ibid.
245 Ibid.
246 The first sentence of the novel reads, “They tell me India is an underdeveloped country” (17), and the novel ends with the same sentence (418).
an underdeveloped country but a highly developed one in an advanced state of decay.”

This sentence, which anchors the novel in Indian soil, convinces any reader with even an elementary knowledge of the dominant discourse on India that the novel is about the actual geographical and political entity called India, as opposed to an imaginary state.

The frequent occurrence of “India” and “British rule” in the narrative and the references to certain dates of historical importance, such as “August the fifteenth, 1947,” and “26 January 1950,” which are the Independence Day and the Republic Day of India respectively, function as clear indicators that make the narrative unequivocally about the real geographical and political state of India.

Although the novel’s preoccupation with the actual historical and political realities of contemporary India gives it the appearance of a historical narrative, the novel consciously presents itself primarily as a work of art. The narrator Ved Vyas constantly reminds the reader that what she is reading is not a traditional historical narrative but a story, a literary work. At the outset, the narrator says, “This is my story, the story of Ved Vyas, eighty-eight years old and full of irrelevancies, but it could become nothing less than the Great Indian Novel.” Tharoor emphasizes a couple of times in almost every chapter that the narrative is a story told from a subjective point of view. The narrator once claims, “Facts, that is all I intend to record, facts and names. This is history, do not forget, not pornography,” and this claim indicates that the narrator is engaged in a

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248 Ibid., 222.
249 Ibid., 224.
250 Ibid., 18.
historiographic act, but what should be noted is that this historiographic act is fundamentally embedded in fiction.\textsuperscript{251}

The novel’s position as a satirical work of art needs to be taken into consideration in any analysis of its engagement with the idea of history. Edward Rosenheim frames the relationship between satire and the idea of history when he argues that satire “consists of an attack by means of a manifest fiction upon discernible historical particulars.”\textsuperscript{252} The \textit{Great Indian Novel} is filled with many discernible historical particulars, and the novel’s approach to them primarily takes the form of an attack in the sense that it challenges the manner in which those particulars are understood in the dominant discourse. The emphasis that Rosenheim places on “discernible historical particulars” indicates that this attack entails taking seriously not only the historical details in particular but also the idea of history in general. In this sense, satire presents itself as an interpretive possibility.

While rejecting the conventional conception of satire as an approach that condemns a vice and recommends another, Dustin Griffin views satire as an openended inquiry into serious moral and social issues.\textsuperscript{253} In this sense, the interpretive possibility that satire offers is always inconclusive. Given that the idea of history that the novel in question engages with, the satirical approach that Tharoor employs is instrumental in highlighting the idea that history is an inconclusive concept.

The novel’s preoccupation with the actual history of India, on the one hand, and its self-proclaimed position as a work of art, on the other, point to a complex interfusion

\textsuperscript{251} Ibid., 86.
\textsuperscript{253} Griffin presents this idea mainly in the first three chapters of his book.
of history and fiction in the context of the novel. What Linda Hutcheon defines as historiographic metafiction provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding this interfusion of history and fiction. Distancing the historiographic metafiction from the conventional historical or non-fictional novel, Hutcheon claims that “the certainty of direct reference” that characterizes the latter is not to be found in the former. She also argues, “Historical metafiction works to situate itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction.”

Historical metafiction assigns more or less equal importance to both history and fiction, and by doing so, it challenges “both any naive realist concept of representation and any equally naive textualist or formalist assertions of the total separation of art from the world.”

One of the main ways in which the novel engages with the idea of history is by theorizing about it. The position that the novel assumes, which is external to history as a discipline, enables it to view history objectively. Ved Vyas articulates a theory of history when he argues:

We tend, Ganapathi, to look back on history as if it were a stage play, with scene building upon scene, our hero moving from one action to the next in his remorseless stride to the climax. Yet life is never like that. If life were a play the noises offstage, and for that matter the sounds of the audience, would drown out the lines of the principal actors. That, of course, would make for a rather poor tale; and so the recounting of history is only the order we artificially impose upon life to permit its lessons to be more clearly understood.

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255 Ibid.
256 Ibid., 6.
Here, Ved Vyas articulates two theoretical positions. First, the unmediated past, or what White may call the chronicle of events, is saturated with individual and even isolated personalities and incidents, and only a select few of those persons and incidents make their way into “history.” The formation of a historical narrative invariably results in excluding, or, more precisely, happens at the expense of, numerous personalities and incidents that are of historical value. Entailed is the idea that the history of any given context at any given moment is always a paradigmatic choice made by a certain perspective. The idea of history as an artificially imposed structure reflects White’s idea of emplotment. Second, Ved Vyas problematizes the mainstream understanding of history as a reality defined by linear progression. Here, the novel echoes the Foucaultian notion of historical discontinuity. The sense of continuity, which a historical narrative mainly acquires in the phase of emplotment, is not inherently present in the events themselves, or even anywhere outside the narrative. Therefore, to view the sense of continuity observed in historical narratives as a quality inherent in any relationships among the relevant events prior to the formation of those narratives is problematic.

Based on these two theoretical positions, one could deny the validity of history, arguing that every act of historiography is discriminatory and limited by its very nature. Nevertheless, Ved Vyas points to a different approach:

So it is, Ganapathi, that in this memoir we light up one corner of our collective past at a time, focus on one man’s actions, one village’s position, one colonel’s duty, but all the while life is going on elsewhere, Ganapathi: as the shots ring out in the Bibigarh Gardens babies are being born, nationalists are being thrown into prison, husbands are quarrelling with wives, petitions are being filed in courtrooms, stones are being flung at policemen, and diligent young Indian students are sailing to London to sit for the examinations that will permit them to

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258 See Foucault.
rule their own people in the name of an alien king. … History marched on, leaving only a few footprints on our pages. Of its deep imprints on other sands, you do not know because I do not choose to wash in the waters that have swept them away.\footnote{Ibid., 109-10.}

Towards the end of the novel, Ved Vyas says:

\[F\]or every tale I have told you, every perception I have conveyed, there are a hundred equally valid alternatives I have omitted and of which you are unaware. I make no apologies for this. This is my story of the India I know, with its biases, selections, omissions, distortions, all mine. But you cannot derive your cosmogony from a single birth, Ganapathi. Every Indian must for ever carry with him, in his head and heart, his own history of India.\footnote{Ibid., 373.}

The narrator acknowledges that the history that he has presented is his own version of history and that it is only one among the many possible accounts of the realities in question. Not only does the narrative make no pretensions to being a comprehensive and authoritative account of the history of India, it also consciously distances itself from that position, which many mainstream historical narratives assume either directly or by implication. The narrator demonstrates his awareness of all the biases that any act of historiography involves. Yet, he comes to the conclusion that even with all these biases, history is important. Implied in his “treatise” on history is the idea that any respect for or acceptance of history as a useful discipline and specific historical narratives as valid accounts of the past should necessarily be based on the awareness that no historical narrative is a comprehensive account of any given historical reality.

Many of the episodes in the novel embody the theoretical perspective on the idea of history that the narrator presents self-consciously. The episode of what the narrator calls “the Hastinapur Massacre” or “the Bibigarh Gardens Massacre” could be cited as a
case in point. While mainstream Indian history contains no real historical event by those names, the account echoes the actual event that is popularly known as “the Amritsar Massacre” or “the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre” that took place on April 13, 1919. The novel describes the event in the following manner:

Historians have dubbed this event the Hastinapur Massacre. How labels lie. A massacre connotes the heat and fire of slaughter, the butchery by bloodthirsty fighters of an outgunned opposition. There was nothing of this at the Bibigarh Gardens that day. Rudyard’s soldiers were lined up calmly, almost routinely; they were neither disoriented or threatened by the crowd; it was just another day’s work, but one unlike any other. They loaded and fired their rifles coldly, clinically, without haste or passion or sweat or anger, resting their weapons against the tops of the brick walls so thoughtfully built in Shantanu’s enlightened reign and emptying their magazines into the human beings before them with trained precision. I have often wondered whether they heard the screams of the crowd, Ganapathi, whether they noticed the blood, and the anguished wails of the women and the stampeding of the trampling feet as panic-stricken villagers sought to get away from the sudden hail of death raining remorselessly down upon them. Did they hear the cries of the babies being crushed underfoot as dying men beat their mangled limbs against each other to get through those tragically narrow gateways? I cannot believe they did, Ganapathi, I prefer not to believe it, and so I think of the Bibigarh Gardens Massacre as a frozen tableau from a silent film, black and white and mute, and Indian Guernica.

The soldiers fired just 1600 bullets that day, Ganapathi. It was so mechanical, so precise; they used up only the rounds they were allocated, nothing was thrown away, no additional supplies sent for. Just 1600 bullets into the unarmed throng, and when they had finished, oh, perhaps ten minutes later, 379 people lay dead, Ganapathi, and 1,137 lay injured, many grotesquely maimed. When Rudyard was given the figures later her expressed satisfaction with his men. ‘Only 84 bullets wasted,’ he said. ‘Not bad.’

Even those figures were, of course, British ones; in the eyes of many of us the real toll could never be known, for in the telling many more bled their lives into the ground than the British and the press and the official Commission of Inquiry ever acknowledged. Who knows, Ganapathi, perhaps each of Rudyard’s bullets sent more than one soul to another world, just as they did the Raj’s claims to justice and decency.  

Although the real name of the actual massacre is not mentioned in the narration, a reader who is even marginally familiar with the historical event of the Amritsar Massacre would

261 Ibid., 80-81.
have no trouble making the connection between the two events. The statistics that the narrator provides in this excerpt is similar to that of the Amritsar Massacre found in the historical narratives of that massacre. Therefore, in a context where the parallel between the Amritsar Massacre and the Hastinapur Massacre is established, the narrator’s account would emerge as a factually valid and verifiable account of the event in question. If there is no factual or statistical discrepancy between the two accounts, any preference for the former over the latter as a more accurate account of the event has to do with the obvious discrepancy with regard to the labels used in the two accounts to refer to the event. The actual massacre happened in the Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar, thus the commonly used labels “Amritsar Massacre” and “Jallianwala Bagh Massacre.” The terms “Hastinapur” and “Bibigarh” are not associated with this massacre; therefore, one could argue that the labels “Hastinapur Massacre” and “Bibigarh Garden Massacre” are inappropriate, if not misleading, labels for the event. Nevertheless, there is nothing inherently “Amritsarian” or “Jallianwala-Baghian” about the event in question, and from this point of view, the strict distinction between the traditional labels and the new labels as terms of reference for that event becomes problematic. It is thus evident that the traditional labels are nothing more than paradigmatic choices made from a particular point of view that is external to the event. In this sense, any preference for the traditional labels over the new ones entails an endorsement of the ideological perspective embodied in the choice of those traditional labels. Through the use of the labels “Hastinapur Massacre” and “Bibigah Garden Massacre,” the novel thus substantiates White’s idea

262 See Collet.
that a historical narrative is primarily a product of certain *choices* made either by the historian or by the broader culture.

A ground on which the novel’s account of the massacre could be problematized as a factually inaccurate account of the event is the discrepancy between the actual name of the General who oversaw the massacre and the name by which he is referred to in the novel. The name of the General, as mentioned in the historical accounts of the event, is Reginald Dyer, and the novel refers to him as Rudyard. From the perspective of history, the use of any name other than the “real” name of the General raises serious issues with regard to the factual accuracy of the account. However, such a problem does not arise in the context of the novel because the novel, by virtue of the fact that it is first and foremost a work of art, does not make any claims to factual accuracy. This, however, does not mean that the novelistic account of the massacre is a less serious, merely playful engagement with the event. In fact, it provides certain important insights into the event, which an accurate and objective description of the event may not be in a position to provide. In my opinion, through the use of the name “Rudyard” in place of “Reginald Dyer,” the novel problematizes the sense of singularity that mainstream historical accounts attribute to the massacre through their excessive attention to the details of the event. The choice “Rudyard,” which is recognizably a British name like “Reginald,” is phonetically close enough to “Reginald” for someone who is familiar with the details of the massacre to recognize who is being referred to. At the same time, it is significantly different from “Reginald” to suggest that who is responsible for the massacre is not only Reginald Dyer as an individual but the system that he is part of. By highlighting the
“replaceability” of Reginald Dyer in the narrative, the novel goes beyond the specific picture that strictly historical accounts depict of the massacre and points to the broader reality that the massacre is yet another manifestation of British oppression. This idea is further emphasized when the narrator says, “Who knows, Ganapathi, perhaps each of Rudyard’s bullets sent more than one soul to another world, just as they did the Raj’s claims to justice and decency.” It could therefore be argued that this “factually inaccurate” detail, which is only permissible in a literary discourse (as opposed to a historical discourse), provides insights into deeper historical truths, which mainstream historical accounts may not necessarily be interested in or capable of giving expression to.

This novelistic account of the massacre, whose validity may be questioned from a strictly historical point of view, points to a problematic aspect of the mainstream historical conceptualizations of the event in question. The narrator suggests that the standard interpretation of the event as a “massacre” overlooks certain details that are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the specific event in question. For example, labeling the event as a “massacre,” the narrator argues, tends to prevent one from inquiring into the attitudes of the soldiers. Here, this act of labeling tends to privilege certain perspectives on the event and render the others invalid. The narrator’s engagement with the mainstream conceptualization of the event as a “massacre” thus provides insights into a process that White argues characterizes any act of historiography: the process of selection. Further, it substantiates White’s claim regarding the central role that language plays in constructing history.

When the narrator draws attention to the reaction of the people who were murdered at the event and conjectures what impact those reactions would have had on the soldiers he introduces a perspective, one, which objective historical accounts of the same event may not necessarily be interested in or capable of incorporating. This particular perspective, in my view, can be given expression to effectively only from an explicitly subjective point of view, a point of view that accommodates the narrator’s personal feelings about what she is describing. Yet, the emphasis of the subjective point of view, which any attention to the narrator’s personal feelings would entail, is in contradiction with the principle of objectivity that mainstream approaches to historiography appear to advocate. Any step towards accepting that perspective as a historically valid perspective even in the context of a literary work like *The Great Indian Novel* thus presupposes going beyond the conventional boundaries of historiography.

The importance that the narrator gives to the reaction of the victims of the atrocious act indicates a move in the direction of subaltern historiography. In the mainstream accounts of the event, those who have fallen victims are nothing more than entities that add up in counts such as the death toll and the injury toll. They, as individuals, are not accorded the same narrative importance that is accorded to General Reginald Dyer in those accounts. They are not recognized as individuals with subjectivity, or, at least, subjectivity that matters. In this sense, the victims come across as subalterns who have historically been deprived of a voice. By drawing attention to those victims and highlighting their voicelessness, the novel creates a space in which the
ideologically biased nature of the mainstream historical narratives on the event becomes evident.

**The Place of the *Mahabharata* in *The Great Indian Novel***

The presence of the *Mahabharata* is felt throughout the novel, starting from its very title. With “Great India” being one of the meanings of the term “Mahabharata,” the title of the novel means “the novel of the *Mahabharata*.” This interpretation of the title anchors the novel in the Sanskrit epic. The depictions of Ved Vyas, Ganapathi, and Brahm, the three characters that are introduced in what could be considered the prologue to the novel, give the reader clear indications that what is to come is the story of the *Mahabharata*. The entire novel is presented from the perspective of Ved Vyas, and both his name and his position as the narrator evoke Ved Vyasa, or simply Vyasa, of the Sanskrit epic. Ganapathi who is introduced as a scribe who is assigned the task of writing down Ved Vyas’s story is the counterpart of Lord Ganesh in the epic. His position as a scribe, his name (Ganapathi, which is yet another name used for Lord Ganesh in the South Asian context), and his physical characteristics such as his “big nose and shrewd intelligent eyes” and “elephantine tread, broad forehead and all” point to unmistakable parallels between the two characters. Brahm who is introduced as an old friend of Ved Vyas’s and who finds Ganapathi for Ved Vyas is evocative of Lord Brahm, the Lord of the world in Hinduism, who, in the Sanskrit epic, finds Ganesh for Vyasa. By depicting these three characters the way he does, Tharoor clearly situates his novel in the *Mahabharata* tradition.

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264 Ibid., 18.
One of the most noticeable ways in which the novel places itself in the *Mahabharata* tradition is by emulating the form of the Sanskrit epic. The novel is organized into eighteen chapters, or, as Tharoor calls them, “Books,” and they signify the eighteen *parvas* of the *Mahabharata*. Each “Book” consists of a number of subsections, and they reflect the subdivisions within each of the *parvas* of the Sanskrit epic. Further, the novel presents certain episodes in verse, thus reminding the reader of the verse form of the Sanskrit epic. Although the sections in verse are limited in both length and number, especially compared to the sections in prose, their presence in the novel plays an important role in invoking the Sanskrit epic. Tharoor also reminds the reader of the *Mahabharata* tradition through his employment of the narrative technique of digression. The Sanskrit epic is full of minor stories that are not necessarily relevant to its main storyline. The novel echoes this characteristic of the Sanskrit epic by constantly digressing into minor stories. Unlike those in the *Mahabharata*, these minor stories in the novel are relevant to the overall plot in one way or another; therefore, there is a difference between the forms of digression found in the two texts. Nevertheless, the sense of self-consciousness that the digressions in the novel embody indicates the extent to which Tharoor wanted the novel to incorporate the idea of narrative digression, and, by doing that, invoke the Sanskrit epic.

\[265\] However, there is no clear correlation between the “Books” of the novel and the *parvas* of the Sanskrit epic in terms of content. The number of the subsections of a given “Book” also does not match that of its corresponding *parva*. 
Character Depictions

The depiction of certain key characters in the novel embodies an interesting blend of the *Mahabharata* and contemporaneity. One such key character is Ganga Datta who is also referred to as Gangaji. The narrator describes Ganga Datta as follows:

Gangaji, the man in charge of Hastinapur for all practical purposes, thin as a papaya plant, already balder than I am today, peering at you through round-rimmed glasses that gave him the look of a startled owl. And the rest of his appearance was hardly what you would call prepossessing. He had by then burned his soup-and-fish and given away the elegant suits copied for him from the best British magazines by the court master-tailor; but to make matters worse, he was now beginning to shed part or most of even his traditional robes on all but state occasions. People were forever barging into his study unexpectedly and finding him in nothing but a loincloth.  

A reader who is even marginally familiar with the historical personality of Mahatma Gandhi would recognize Ganga Datta as an unmistakable reference to him. Gandhi’s slender body, his round-rimmed glasses, and his practice of wearing loincloths are some of the key characteristics that define the popular image of Gandhi. By attributing the same physical characteristics to Ganga Datta, the novel establishes a clear connection between the two characters. Ganga Datta’s position as “the man in charge of Hastinapur for all practical purposes” parallels the important and influential position that Gandhi occupied in the social and political domains of India, particularly in the pre-Independence period. At the same time, Ganga Datta’s “reputation for triumph without violence” is a straightforward reference to Gandhi’s movement of nonviolence. The numerous instances in the novel where Ganga Datta achieves his goals through his *satyagraha*

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266 Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel* 35.
267 Ibid., 27.
policy—the policy of passive resistance—constitute too clear a reference to Gandhi for any reader familiar with contemporary Indian history to miss.

Through the fictional character of Ganga Datta, Tharoor links the historical personality of Mahatma Gandhi to the mythical character of Bhishma of the *Mahabharata*. As early as in the first *parva* of the Sanskrit epic, Bhishma takes a vow of celibacy, and this vow plays a crucial role in defining how the rest of the events unfold. If not for this vow, there would not have been the two lineages called the Pandavas and the Kauravas the conflict between which the Sanskrit epic is centred around. Tharoor draws a parallel between this act of celibacy and the one taken by Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi’s vow of celibacy defines his identity in an important way. Gandhi describes how central this vow of celibacy was to his overall worldview. The pronounced goal of this vow being the practice of self-restraint, the vow, in a way, represents a necessary commitment to certain fundamental values, which his movements of nonviolence and passive resistance were based on and without which those movements would not have been possible.

The name “Ganga Datta” also points to an interesting manner in which the connection between Bhishma and Gandhi could be conceptualized. The river Ganga (Ganges) plays an important role in the two worlds to which Bhishma and Gandhi belong. In the Sanskrit epic, Bhishma is also called “Gangaputra,” which means the son of Ganga. He is born of the marriage between the legendary king Shantanu and a woman who is later revealed as a manifestation of the river Ganga itself. When Tharoor

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creates a connection between Bhishma and Gandhi through the fictional character of “Ganga Datta” he uses Bhishma’s relationship with Ganga as his point of departure. There is no clear evidence in the novel whether and how Tharoor intended the name “Ganga Datta” to be evocative of “Gandhi,” other than on the basis of the phonetic similarity between the two names. Nevertheless, I argue that when Tharoor refers to Gandhi as “Ganga Datta” he builds upon the cultural meaning of Ganga. Ganga, which is the longest river flowing within the Indian territory, enriches a large part of North India, and therefore, it is an integral part of the social and economic life of the country. It is also known as a river of religious and mythical significance. While Ganga occupies a position of central importance in Hindu mythology, the daily ritualistic life of millions of Hindus in India is organized around it. When Tharoor equates Gandhi to Ganga he taps into the mainstream Indian perception that Gandhi is an iconic figure that is fit to represent what Ganga stands for.

Another character in the depiction of which the blend of the epic past and contemporaneity is evident is Mohammed Ali Karna. Mohammed Ali Karna stands for Mohammed Ali Jinnah who is credited with creating Pakistan. Through this character, Tharoor creates a connection between Karna of the Mahabharata and the historical personality of Mohammed Ali Jinnah. The primary basis on which this equation is established is the perceived outsider status of the two personalities in their respective contexts. In the Sanskrit epic, Karna comes across as an individual who is as skilled as Arjuna, the most talented of the five Pandavas and the greatest hero of the epic. When

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269 In Gandhi: An Autobiography, Mahatma Gandhi (Mohandas K. Gandhi) himself makes multiple references to the mythical significance of the river Ganga.
Karna challenges Arjuna to a duel he expresses his confidence that he would be able to defeat Arjuna. The heroic deeds that Karna performs during the war, including defeating the invincible Ghatotkacha, and the fact that Arjuna manages to kill Karna at the final battle only with external support indicate that Karna’s confidence was not unfounded. Nevertheless, despite his skills, his perceived status as the son of a chariot driver assigns him an inferior position among the Pandavas and Kauravas. Thus, Karna embodies the position of an individual whose social standing is entirely determined by his ascribed status.

Similar to Karna, Mohammed Ali Jinnah is also known as a highly skilled individual. He had a reputation for being an accomplished attorney-at-law and an excellent orator. His accomplishments enabled him to emerge as a leading figure in the Indian National Congress, which led the Indian Independence movement. He initially emerged as a national leader of the same standing as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, but his identity as a Muslim invariably defined him more as a Muslim leader than as a national leader. The special role that he was expected to play as an ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity in the movement points to this marked status of Jinnah. The tensions between the extremist Hindu and Muslim elements in the movement eventually pushed Jinnah to a point where he distanced himself from the Hindu leaders of the Congress and identified himself more with the Muslim League. This move by Jinnah foregrounded the ethnicity-based fractures in the movement, which had hitherto been seen as a national movement. Convinced that the Muslims were not going to be treated as equal citizens in a Hindu India, he started a struggle for a separate Muslim state on
Indian soil. He won this struggle when the British decided to partition India and create the separate state of Pakistan in 1947, a few months before the British granted independence to India. In a context where the central role that Jinnah played in forming a separate state on Indian soil is recognized, it could be argued that what paved the way to the partition, an event that the mainstream elements in the Indian Independence movement were in vehement opposition to, was Jinnah’s outsider status as a Muslim and his perception of himself as a leader of the Indian Muslims.

The fictional character of Mohammed Ali Karna blends the identities of the mythical character of Karna and the historical personality of Mohammed Ali Jinnah in interesting ways. Introducing Mohammed Ali Karna, the narrator notes, “... of his brilliance—and ‘brilliant’ was a word universally applied to his appearance, his intellect, his scholastic performance and his speech—there was no doubt.” The narrator also notes:

Karna’s poise and confidence were matched by his forensic skill. Few dared debate with him and those who did emerged shorn and shredded by his razor-edged tongue. His success in the courtroom brought him wealthier and more influential clients, invitations to speak at public meetings, and seats on major committees. Before long it began to be said that if there was an Indian of his generation born to shine and to lead, it was clearly the illustrious Mohammed Ali Karna.

This introduction depicts Mohammed Ali Karna as an individual of excellent achievements, and this depiction reflects the positions of Karna and Jinnah as individuals of accomplishment. Having introduced him as an individual of achievement, the novel

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270 For detailed discussions of Jinnah’s role in the formation of Pakistan, see Talbot and Singh; Khan; Nanda; and Metz.  
272 Ibid., 137.
proceeds to highlight his outsider status. The first indication of his outsider status is conveyed when he is presented as the son of “a man in a driver’s uniform.” In the novel, this revelation takes place at an important Working Committee meeting of the Kaurava party, where Mohammed Ali Karna delivers a speech in which he voices his disapproval of the disobedience movement launched by the Kaurava leaders like Ganga Datta and Dhritarashtra. He criticizes the disobedience movement claiming, “In no country in the world do the ‘masses’ rule: every nation is run by its leaders whose learning and intelligence are the best guarantee of its success.” This speech given in Dhritarashtra’s presence, in addition to depicting Mohammed Ali Karna as an individual of strong opinions, also demonstrates his ability and readiness to challenge Dhritarashtra’s authority as the party leader. At this moment defined by heightened tension between the two leaders, the “man in a driver’s uniform” walks into the meeting calling Mohammed Ali Karna his son and informing him of his mother’s deteriorating health condition. This incident exposes Mohammed Ali Karna as a person of inferior birth thereby widening the gap between the two leaders in question. Using the opportunity to rebuke his opponent, Dhritarashtra criticizes Mohammed Ali Karna for adopting an elitist stance while himself being a member of the masses. “Karna was gone, defeated—like so many of his compatriots—by his origins.”

This scene establishes an unmistakable parallel between the fictional character of Mohammed Ali Karna and the mythical character of Karna. Mohammed Ali Karna’s speech where he calls into question an initiative advocated by Dhritarashtra and the other

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273 Ibid., 138.
274 Ibid.
275 Ibid., 139.
Congress leaders, in the presence of Dhritarashtra himself, the revelation of Ali Karna as an individual of inferior birth, Dhritarashtra’s rebuke of Ali Karna on the basis of that revelation invoke that episode in the Sanskrit epic where Karna challenges Arjuna to a duel and is then rejected by Arjuna and the rest of the Pandavas on the basis of the perceived inferiority of Karna’s birth. Tharoor reinforces this parallel by making the profession of Ali Karna’s father reflect that of Karna’s father. The later revelation that the “man in a driver’s uniform” is not Ali Karna’s biological father and that Ali Karna is Kunti’s eldest child who was born to her of a foreigner named Hyperion Helios further aligns Ali Karna with Karna of the *Mahabharata*. Nevertheless, the contextual differences between the scene in the novel and that in the Sanskrit epic keep the reader reminded of the contextual gap between the two Karnas.

This contextual gap that Tharoor maintains between Karna of the *Mahabharata* and Ali Karna of the novel enables him to fashion the identity of Ali Karna in a way that reflects the identity of Jinnah. According to the available historical accounts of Jinnah, he was the son not of a driver but of a middle class Khoja merchant.276 Given that the middle-class social position and trade-related professions did not necessarily function as indicators of social inferiority during Jinnah’s time, his being a son of a middle-class merchant does not necessarily or in itself define him as a socially inferior individual. Therefore, in a context where social inferiority is established as a defining trait of Ali Karna in the novel, if the character of Ali Karna is to be seen as a representation of Jinnah it should fashion itself in such a way that it incorporates a dominant characteristic.

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of Jinnah that represents some form of inferiority. The novel’s shift of focus from Ali Karna’s father’s identity as a driver to his identity as a Muslim indicates a move in that direction. This move is evident in the following account of Ali Karna’s past:

His father, devout Muslim though he was, had been reluctant, the story went, to risk the slightest harm to his golden fondling, and had left the baby uncircumcised. One day the young Mohammed Ali, bathing in the river with his father, asked him why he was different in that crucial respect.

‘Because you are not really my son,’ the grey-haired chauffeur replied; ‘God allowed me to find you, but that did not give me the right to change the way He had made you.’

‘But I am your son,’ the boy declared. ‘I do not care what I was before you found me; my past abandoned me. I will be like you.’

Whereupon he seized a knife and circumcised himself.

Hearing of the boy’s deed the chauffeur’s master, Indra Deva, expressed his admiration of the lad. ‘You shall be known, in the glorious tradition of our national epic, as Karna,’ he announced. ‘Karna, the Hacker-Off.’

This account depicts Ali Karna primarily as a Muslim, and this aspect of his identity defines his character for the rest of the novel. The predominance of this particular aspect of Ali Karna’s identity is parallel to the role that the Muslim identity plays in defining Jinnah’s personhood and his position in the broader social and political scenario. The conceptualization of Ali Karna’s Muslim identity as an integral part of his social inferiority or outsider status echoes the outsider status of Jinnah and the rest of the Muslims in the mainstream social and political culture of India dominated by the Hindu ethnic identity.

The act of circumcision that Ali Karna performs on himself has a parallel in the Sanskrit epic, which is Karna wrenching the natural shield that he was born with off his chest and giving it to Lord Indra at his request. This voluntary act deprives Karna of a gift that he had naturally been blessed with and renders him vulnerable. Similarly, Ali

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277 Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel* 141 (italics in original).
Karna’s act of circumcision renders him vulnerable, though in a different way.

According to the narrator’s account of Ali Karna’s past, Ali Karna is of the same lineage as the Pandavas who are Hindus. Given that circumcision is primarily seen as a Muslim cultural practice, his self-initiated act of circumcision entails a rejection of the option of reverting to his Hindu identity and a self-conscious assumption of the Muslim identity.

In a context where the Hindu identity is largely an asset and the Muslim identity is more a liability than an asset, this choice of Ali Karna’s confirms his status as an outsider. Ali Karna’s formal assumption of the Muslim identity runs parallel to Jinnah’s move to distance himself from the Indian National Congress, which, at least in principle, placed the broader Indian identity over individual ethnic and religious identities, and identify with the Muslim League, which represented specific ethnic and religious interests.

In addition to building upon the cultural understanding of Karna of the Mahabharata, Tharoor also draws upon the literal meaning of the word karna in his fictional conceptualization of Jinnah’s identity. In Hindi, karna means “hypotenuse,” which signifies the longest side of a right-angled triangle. This geometrical meaning of the word, which evokes the ideas of division, separation, and dissection, provides additional insights into the process of signification in question. In the context of the novel, the word karna taken in this geometrical sense signifies two kinds of dissection. The first is the act of circumcision that Ali Karna performs on himself. The semantic parallel between the title “Hacker-Off” that he earns by performing this act and the geometrical meaning of the word karna indicates the extent to which this geometrical meaning is expected to be part of the meaning making process. The second kind of
dissection is of a political kind. It signifies the Partition of India, which carved a separate state called “Karnistan” out of the Indian territory. The term “Karnistan,” on one level, means Karna’s land; on another level, especially when the stem karna is taken in its geometrical sense, it means the “hacked-off” land. These two kinds of dissection that the term karna as understood in its geometrical meaning arguably stands for in the novel reverberates Jinnah’s act of distancing himself from the Indian National Congress on an ethnic and religious basis and the Partition of India in 1947, which formed the Islamic state of Pakistan.

The approach that Tharoor uses in recasting the Mahabharata character of Draupadi is different from the one he uses in his depictions of other characters like Bhishma and Karna. Unlike those characters, which represent specific historical individuals, Draupadi represents an institution: democracy. By naming her Draupadi Mokrasi or D. Mokrasi, a name that is phonologically similar to the word “democracy,” and citing, as her birthday, January 26, 1950, which is the same date on which the Constitution of India was solemnly promulgated, the novel presents Draupadi as a symbol of Indian democracy. Through this conceptualization, Tharoor creates a space in which the qualities and characteristics of Draupadi of the Mahabharata become attributable to Indian democracy. The narrator describes Draupadi as “an admirable, beautiful, complicated, desirable … creature,” and this description resonates with the image of Draupadi in the Sanskrit epic.278 By casting Indian democracy in the image of Draupadi, the narrator makes the statement that Indian democracy is also an admirable, beautiful, complicated, and desirable reality.

278 Ibid., 245.
One of the key characteristics that define Draupadi Mokrasi in the novel is the illegitimacy of her birth. She is introduced as a child born of an illegitimate relationship between Dhritarashtra and Lady Georgina Drewpad. This illegitimacy of Draupadi Mokrasi’s birth, which resonates with the extraordinary nature of Draupadi’s birth in the *Mahabharata*, could be interpreted as signifying at least two kinds of “illegitimacy” that have shaped the post-independence era of India. The first concerns the very nature of Indian democracy. Since the formal introduction of democracy to India with the enactment of the Constitution in 1950, it has faced numerous challenges. Although India is today called the largest democracy in the world, the post-Independence era is littered with incidents of communal riots, which have raised serious questions about the nature of Indian democracy. Given this situation, the illegitimacy of D. Mokrasi could be viewed as an indication of some sort of recognition of the problematic nature of the Indian democratic system. The second kind of “illegitimacy” concerns the nature of the relationship between Jawaharlal Nehru (“Dhritarashtra” in the novel), the first Prime Minister of Independent India, and Lady Edwina Ashley Mountbatten (“Lady Georgina Drewpad” in the novel), the wife of Lord Mountbatten (“Drewpad” in the novel). This relationship has been seen as having played a politically significant role in the last stage of the Indian struggle for independence.\(^{279}\) By highlighting this relationship, the novel provides insights into certain aspects of the personal life of the founder of modern India an exploration of which may not necessarily complement the importance accorded to him by mainstream historical narratives.

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\(^{279}\) See von Tunzelmann.
The relationship between Draupadi Mokrasi and Priya Duryodhani in the novel also provides insights into the nature of Indian democracy in the post-Independence period. The fictional character of Priya Duryodhani blends the personalities of the *Mahabharata* character of Duryodhan and the late Indian Prime Minister Indira Priyadarshani Gandhi (commonly known as Indira Gandhi). The casting of Indira Gandhi in the image of Duryodhan who is largely perceived as a symbol of evil in dominant readings of the Sanskrit epic creates a space in which what Duryodhan stands for comes to define the identity of Indira Gandhi. Thus, from the moment of her first introduction in the novel, Priya Duryodhani, and through her, Indira Gandhi, comes across as a symbol of evil. At the same time, her identity as Dhritarashtra’s legitimate daughter places her in a position that is oppositional to that of Draupadi, the emblem of democracy. Priya Duryodhani’s claim, “Draupadi would never listen to me. There … there isn’t the required … trust between us” points to the rift between what the two characters stand for.\(^{280}\)

This conceptualization of Indira Gandhi as Duryodhan and democracy as Draupadi provides a frame of reference within which to understand the nature of the Indira Gandhi era of Indian politics, particularly those periods defined by her alleged move towards dictatorial rule through the imposition of a State of Emergency\(^ {281}\) and the political rivalry between her and Morarji Desai (who, in the novel, is presented as

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\(^{280}\) Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel* 312.

Yudhishtir). The narrator describes the developments in the Indian political scenario effected by Gandhi’s moves in terms of physical changes that Draupadi goes through: when Duryodhani defeated Yudhishtir in the Kaurava Party leadership election, “Draupadi Mokrasi, still beautiful, began to appear plump, her instinctive smile creasing the flesh of her face in the slightest suggestion of a double chin ...”; when Yudhishtir resigned from the Kaurava Party protesting Duryodhani’s move towards authoritarian governance, “Draupadi Mokrasi, bolstered with vitamins and tonics, returned a little unsteadily to her household chores ...”; when the Bank Nationalization bill, presented by Duryodhani’s supporters, was passed by the parliament, “Draupadi Mokrasi felt her head swim as one spell of dizziness succeeded another ...”; when Duryodhani proposed and promoted one of his close allies for the post of the President of the country over the one nominated by the Kaurava Party, “Draupadi Mokrasi, blinking her eyes, did not know why she felt faint ...”; when Duryodhani won the election defeating the “old guard” of her own party, “Draupadi Mokrasi was diagnosed as asthmatic, her breath coming sometimes in short gasps, the dead air trapped in her bronchia struggling to expel itself, her chest heaving with the effort to breath freely ...” and when, in the narrator’s dream sequence, Bhim, Arjun, and Krishna defeated Jarasandha at

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282. The Janata Party was founded in response to the situation that arose in India when Indira Gandhi declared a State of Emergency on June 25, 1975. The Janata Party pointed out that the State of Emergency was a move towards dictatorial rule and started to organize the public against it. They defeated the Gandhi government at the 1977 parliamentary elections to form the first non-Congress government in Indian history of which Morarji Desai became the prime minister.
284. Ibid., 346 (italics in original).
285. Ibid., 347 (italics in original).
286. Ibid., 348 (italics in original).
287. Ibid., 352 (italics in original).
Duryodhani’s direction, “Draupadi Mokrasi knew moments of good health, entire periods when her breath came sweet and clear into her lungs and the radiance of living reddened her cheeks.”

In recasting the *Mahabharata* characters of Bhim, Arjun, Nakul, and Sahadev, Tharoor uses an approach that is similar to the one he uses in his depiction of Draupadi. They, like Draupadi, represent institutions:

Turn the page of our primer, Ganapathi, and you would find a large, muscular figure in battle fatigues. Bhim embodied the physical strength without which the new nation could not have defended itself. He joined the army; to many of us, he was the army. His pureness of heart and spirit, his courage and bravery, the depth of his convictions, were at the nation’s disposal at the borders, and—in times of emergency—wherever it was needed within the country. Belying the profuse moustache whose bristles he proudly groomed, Bhim was gentle and considerate with those in his care, especially his mother and Draupadi Mokrasi. But he was as thick-skinned and unimaginative, as incapable of original initiative, as the strongest ox in a fertile field.

Our textbook would probably devote most space to the paragon of perfection, Arjun. There he would stand straddling two pages, his shining gaze as steady as his strong legs. I thought of Arjun with the paradoxical mixture of attributes, as the spirit of the Indian people, to which he so ably gave voice as a journalist. India could not be India without the loud, vibrant, excited babel of contending opinions that its free press expresses. Arjun, himself a man of contradictions, perfectly reflected both the diversity and the discordance of the Indian masses, whose collective heartbeat he heard and echoed. His gentleness of expression, his frequently troubled frown of reflection, mirrored the doubts and questions that were as much a part of his nature as the decisive flurries of action he undertook when circumstances generated their own certainties.

Madri’s twins Nakul and Sahadev—can one ever speak of them separately?—were destined early for the twin pillars of India’s independent governance: the administrative and diplomatic services. Nakul’s quickness and agility kept him always a step ahead of his brother. He spoke with breathtaking speed, the words tripping out as if only the act of utterance could give them stability and coherence. Nakul was made, Yudhishtir drily said, for diplomacy, since he could speak a lot without saying anything. Sahadev was both opposite

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288 This incident refers to the Indira Gandhi administration’s successful intervention in the Bangladesh Liberation War against Pakistan and the role it played in establishing the independent nation of Bangladesh. This is the only initiative by Indira Gandhi that the narrator views in a positive light.

and complementary: quiet, reflective, willing to let Nakul speak for him—until and unless he was sure of his own view, in which case his diffidence quietly gave way to clarity and firmness. One might have imagined that, with these attributes, it would be Nakul who would articulate the blib banalities of diplomacy and Sahadev who would confront the agonizing dilemmas of administration. But Fate, and a shrewd Public Services Commission interviewing panel, willed otherwise, and each went into the profession seemingly suited for his brother. 

Through these depictions (particularly those of Bhim and Arjun, which reflect the defining characteristics of their corresponding Mahabharata characters), the novel attributes certain cultural meanings to the Indian armed forces, popular media, and the administrative and diplomatic services. In addition to attributing certain character-specific qualities of the Mahabharata characters to these institutions, the depictions also organize these institutions within a framework defined by the brotherhood of the Pandavas. By doing so, the narrative emphasizes that these institutions need to be seen more as aspects of an organic whole than as individual entities. Further, the Pandavaness of these institutions implies that their rightful place is by Yudhishtir (Morarji Desai and the Janata Party), as opposed to Duryodhani (Indira Gandhi), and their positions as Draupadi’s husbands point to their prime role as protectors of democracy.

Conclusion

If, as White claims, historiography is fundamentally a fiction-making operation, The Great Indian Novel self-consciously foregrounds that aspect of historiography. It does this mainly by embedding contemporary Indian history in the plot and narrative structures of the Mahabharata. The Sanskrit epic, by virtue of the fact that it is an epic, belongs to the absolute past, which is totally removed from the present time in which the novel is set. Given this disconnect between the two times, any attempt at establishing a

290 Ibid., 320-21 (italics in original).
connection between them would invariably highlight the artificiality or strangeness of the connection. This artificiality or strangeness of the connection, in my view, keeps the reader conscious of the overtly fictional dimension of the history presented in the novel.

The reading of contemporary historical realities in terms of the plot and narrative structure of the Sanskrit epic highlights White’s notion of emplotment. The apparent objectivity of a given historical narrative makes the plot structure of that narrative invisible. Even if the plot structure is visible as such, the narrative tends to be seen as being reflective of a natural sequence of events. For instance, the formation of Pakistan as a separate Islamic state would generally be seen as the necessary outcome of the Hindu centric outlook of the Indian National Congress and the Indian Freedom Movement. In the same way, the emergence of the Janata Party led by Morarji Desai would be seen as a natural development in response to Indira Gandhi’s move towards dictatorial rule. The perceived naturalness of the relationship between the cause and the effect in each case conceals certain conscious decisions made by historians to emphasize that relationship in such a way that the two events in question fit into the overall story that they construct. By imposing the plot structure of the *Mahabharata* on top of the naturalized plot structure of the historical narrative, the novel initiates certain denaturalization of the historical narrative, thereby highlighting the presence of a plot structure in the historical narrative.

In addition to the idea of emplotment, the conceptualization of contemporary historical realities in terms of the *Mahabharata* plot structure also foregrounds the last two levels of conceptualization in White’s scheme: the mode of argument and the mode
of ideological implication. Again, due to the perceived objectivity of a given historical narrative, the underlying argument and the ideological underpinnings of that narrative may not necessarily be obvious. Nevertheless, when the historical narrative is embedded in the *Mahabharata* these two levels of conceptualization become noticeable. The *Mahabharata* as a text of religious and mythical significance embodies specific arguments and ideological positions. Therefore, the presence of the Sanskrit epic in the narrative makes one expect what comes under those two levels of conceptualization to be an integral part of the historical narrative given expression to in the form of the novel.

The linguistic dimension of the novel supports White’s position regarding the role that language plays in any act of historiography. The novel could be seen as illuminating White’s ideas with regard to the linguistic aspect of historiography on two levels. The first level concerns the discourse style of the novel. The novel is written in ordinary conversational language, or, what White calls “ordinary educated speech,” which he identifies as the only mode of language available for the construction of history. The novel does not involve any technical jargon the comprehension of which demands a discipline-specific expertise on the part of the reader. In fact, the conversational nature of the language that Tharoor uses gives the discourse a rather colloquial touch. This colloquial touch emphasizes the ordinary-ness of the language of the novel.

The second level on which the novel illuminates White’s ideas about the linguistic dimension of historiography concerns the meaning-making capacity of the language used. The words of any given language are charged with value that they have acquired by being in use over time. The value-laden nature of words is more evident in the figurative mode
of language than in the technical mode. Given that “ordinary educated speech” primarily represents the figurative mode of language, the “value-ladenness” of the language that the historian uses comes to define the way the historical narrative makes meaning. The novel highlights this idea of “value-ladenness” by using names from the *Mahabharata*, which are explicitly charged with cultural value. All the *Mahabharata* characters used in the novel enter the novel with certain cultural, religious, mythical, and even political meanings, and these meanings play a central role in defining the historical personalities that the said characters supposedly represent.

Based on this analysis, it could be argued that *The Great Indian Novel* provides important insights into the idea of history, which provide a basis for a theoretical understanding of the concept. By blurring the boundary between history and literature or fiction to such an extent that it becomes unclear if the text is a work of history or literature, the novel foregrounds the essentially literary character of history and historiography.
Chapter 5: The Mahabharata and the Idea of Race

Introduction

The idea of race is central to Peter Brook’s The Mahabharata (theatre production in 1985 and television mini-series production in 1989). Alf Hiltebeitel indicates the role that the idea of race plays in the production when he claims that the production is “a discourse about the ‘saving of a race’.” This production engages with the idea of race in a manner that evokes different understandings of that idea. In his production, he uses the idea of race as understood in relation to the Sanskrit epic as a point of departure and engages with that idea in a manner that the Western idea of race, which is not traditionally associated with the Sanskrit epic, is foregrounded. One of the important ways in which he foregrounds the Western notion of race through his production is by casting in certain roles actors whose physical appearances and/or voices are evocative of certain racial identities many of which are at the centre of the Western discourse on race.

The existing assessments of the production recognize Brook’s multicultural and multiracial cast as a, if not the, defining feature of the production, and this recognition indicates the extent to which the (Western) notion of race is central to the production. Based on an analysis of the television mini-series production, I explore how Brook’s engagement with the idea of race reveals race as a concept in the context of which multiple meanings intersect each other.

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291 Although the production is almost always attributed to Brook, Jean-Claude Carrière has also played a key role in making the production possible. The production is the result of collaboration between Brook and Carrière over a period of eight years. (For detailed accounts of this collaboration, see Carrière and Brook [Foreword].) The text or screenplay on which the production is based was written by Carrière.

This chapter begins with a review of available literature on the production. The literature review is followed by a discussion of Brook’s conception of race. I then discuss Stuart Hall’s proposition of race as a floating signifier, as a useful theoretical point of departure for an understanding of the production’s engagement with the idea of race. I then discuss, in detail, the specific ways in which the production engages with the concept of race and how those engagements invokes different meanings of the concept. This section is followed by a conclusion where I tie together the different meanings of race that manifest themselves within the context of the production.

The Analysis in Context

The existing literature on Brook’s production ranges from critical, personal, and emotional responses, which posit that the production is based upon an inaccurate and insensitive reading of the epic, to positive assessments that argue that it presents a new understanding of the Sanskrit epic. The areas that the existing scholarly commentaries on the production focus on include the characteristically Western cultural perspective from which Brook and Jean-Claude Carrière have conceptualized the epic, the extent to which the production remains a faithful rendering of the epic, and Brook’s use of an international cast in the production and its performance related issues. In my view, these commentaries, irrespective of the nature of their attitude towards the production, engage

293 The literature available on Brook’s intervention in the Mahabharata tradition is mostly focused on his nine-hour long theatre production of the epic. There is hardly any literature that specifically focuses on the TV mini-series production or draws attention to the distinction between the two productions. This absence of literature on the television mini-series production could be seen as reflective of the absence of any major distinctions between the two productions in terms of either the narrative structure or the performance aspect. There is a significant distinction between the two productions in terms of length, with the theatre production being almost nine hours long and the television mini-series production being less than six hours (three hundred and eighteen minutes) long, and this distinction could largely be attributed to a truncation of the narrative that has taken place in the adaptation process and also the differences in the styles of presentation between the two art forms in question.
with a set of fundamental assumptions that can be related to the idea of race. These fundamental assumptions relate to questions such as: What is the proper meaning of the Sanskrit epic and who is in a position to interpret it? Who are the real owners of the text? What is the proper context for the epic? Who has a right to use it? And, who has a right to give life to *Mahabharata* characters? The sense of access restriction that these questions imply resonates with race-based access restrictions in the contemporary Western context.

A survey of the literature shows that the responses that the production has evoked are more negative than positive. A key accusation that is leveled against the production is that it constitutes a case of cultural appropriation. Rustom Bharucha, who is probably the severest critic of this production, calls it “one of the most blatant (and accomplished) appropriations of Indian culture in recent years.” He also argues, “He [Brook] has taken one of our most significant texts and decontextualized it from its history in order to ‘sell’ it to audiences in the west.” Here, he foregrounds two important aspects of this appropriation: stripping the text of its “proper” meaning and context, and refashioning it in such a manner that it fits the expectations of a Western audience. Almost all the existing negative responses to the production problematize Brook and Carrière’s approach on these two grounds.

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295 Ibid., 230.
296 Certain responses, especially those by commentators of Indian origin, indicate that they find this appropriation to be deeply offensive on a personal level. Bharucha argues, “There is a Mahabharata to be fought in India today, not just against cultural appropriations like Brook’s production, but against systems of power that make such appropriations possible. We can begin by fighting this battle on our own soil, for our own territory” (250-51). Dasgupta expresses a similar attitude when he argues, “But now that even India possesses the bomb, *The Mahabharata*, yes, Peter Brook’s and Jean-Claude Carrière’s
The commentaries that conceptualize the production as a form of cultural appropriation unquestioningly assume that the *Mahabharata* is first and foremost Indian. According to Gautam Dasgupta, “Brook’s *Mahabharata* falls short of the essential Indianness of The Epic.” 297 Hiltebeitel takes this “essential Indianness” of the text for granted when he argues, “To my mind, they [Brook and Carrière] fail to present anything ‘authentic’ and ‘Indian’ about the *Mahabharata*.” 298 Such arguments indicate the assumption that any imagining of the epic that is detached from its “essential Indianness” is problematic. Bharucha’s argument that any claims to the universality of the *Mahabharata* should necessarily be grounded in the recognition that the text is essentially Indian points to the assumption that the Indianness of the epic is what provides the broadest frame of reference for any reimagining of the epic. 299 The claim by Brook himself that part of the goal of the production was to suggest a flavour of India to a certain extent acknowledges this dominantly perceived Indianness of the text. 300

Another aspect of the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* that is emphasized alongside its essential Indianness is its embeddedness in the broader system of Hindu thought. The commentaries that are critical of the production depict it as a violation of the Hindu *Mahabharata*, apocalyptic ending in place, should be performed in the land from which it originated. The eternal cycle will be completed, for today both India and the west possess the ultimate weapon, the *pasupata* which Shiva bestows as a gift to Arjuna” (Gautam Dasgupta, “Peter Brook’s ‘Orientalism’,” in *Peter Brook and the Mahabharata: Critical Perspectives*, ed. David Williams [London and New York: Routledge, 1991], 267).

297 Dasgupta 266.
298 Hiltebeitel 156.
299 Bharucha’s assumption regarding the essential Indianness of the *Mahabharata* becomes evident when he argues, “If Brook truly believes that The Epic is truly universal, then his representation should not exclude or trivialize Indian culture, as I believe it does. One cannot agree with the premise that ‘The Mahabharata is Indian but it is universal’. The ‘but’ is misleading. *The Mahabharata*, I would counter, is universal because it is Indian. One cannot separate the culture from the text” (231).
300 Bharucha, nevertheless, claims that through this acknowledgement “he [Brook] is gracefully avoiding a confrontation of the historical context of Indian culture” (232).
thought. Claiming that the production highlights the tragic in the epic, Dasgupta argues, “The tragic *rasa* or mode, which the Brook productions suggests [*sic*], is inimical to Hindu norms of aesthetic decorum and religious beliefs. The tragic is irreversible, it is definite. It has no place in the endless cycle of birth and rebirth, the crux of Hindu thought.”\(^{301}\) The epic is saturated with instances that are clearly tragic in nature, and therefore, the tragic constitutes a legitimate topic in any discourse on the epic. Although, in this sense, Brook’s engagement with the tragic is not outside what is permissible from a conventional Hindu perspective, the excessive emphasis that the production places on the tragic incidents in the Sanskrit epic is viewed as a violation of the system of beliefs that the epic is embedded in. Hiltebeitel points to another violation of the sacred Hindu thought when he argues, “One of the main ways that the Indian *Mahabharata* traditions sustain their theological complexity is by not centering themselves on one theological strand to the destruction of other deities in the Hindu devotional universe. The Brook-Carriere *Mahabharata*, on the contrary, gives us a virtually monotheistic *Mahabharata*.\(^{302}\) Given that polytheism is a defining characteristic of Hinduism, the production’s move towards a monotheistic universe is a clear deviation from the traditional Hindu-centric reading of the Sanskrit epic. Dasgupta voices the common expectation that even artistic reimaginings of the epic should necessarily conform to the fundamentals of the Hindu thought, when he argues, “There is no dramatic or epic kernel to the *Mahabharata* outside of its theological value system.”\(^{303}\) He also claims, “*Mahabharata* is nothing but an empty shell, if it is merely read as a compendium of

\(^{301}\) Dasgupta 267.

\(^{302}\) Hiltebeitel 153.

\(^{303}\) Dasgupta 265.
martial legends, or revenge, valour and bravura,” and then draws the conclusion, “And that precisely is the reading attributed to The Mahabharata by Carrière and Brook.”

Nevertheless, the existing literature on the production also presents alternative understandings of the production’s perceived deviation from the “authentic,” Hindu-centric reading of the epic. These perspectives, on the one hand, question the primacy of the Hindu-centric reading of the epic; on the other hand, they problematize the expectation that the production, or any adaptation of the Sanskrit epic for that matter, should remain faithful to the epic. Leonard C. Pronko raises an important question about what is perceived to be the dominant meaning of the text, when he argues “Brook quite clearly is more interested in the deeper meaning of the Mahabharata and its implications to man today.” According to Pronko, not only is Brook’s production well within the Mahabharata tradition, Brook also engages with and gives expression to a fundamental meaning of the epic, which is broader than what is generally understood to be the meaning of the same. At the same time, the argument also shows that the “truth” that many commentators have criticized Brook’s production for failing to capture and represent is merely one of the many possible meanings that could be attributed to the Sanskrit epic. Roger Long argues, “neither Jean-Claude Carriere’s play nor Brook’s production is Asian; they merely have Asian content. They are not Indian, Asian, or European. What has evolved is an international production, created by an international

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304 Ibid., 264.
company.” This argument points to grounds on which the perceived requirement for the production to remain faithful to the epic could be problematized. Michael Kustow conveys a similar idea when he claims that the production is “an equal embodiment [of the performance culture of Asia and the east and European ideas] in a cross-cultural actors’ group telling a far reaching tale.” Pointing out that the production emanates from a context that is radically different from the context of the Sanskrit epic, Long and Kustow imply that the production does not have to be strictly bound by the traditional readings of the epic.

The argument that the production refashions the Mahabharata in such a way that it fits the expectations of a Western audience is emphasized in Hiltebeitel, Bharucha, and Dasgupta’s discussions. They view this move as a further violation of the Sanskrit epic. The literature points to two levels on which this refashioning takes place in the case of the production: simplifying key Vedic concepts into forms that are comprehensible to a Western audience and reconceptualizing the narrative of the epic in terms of Western storytelling and theatrical traditions. Hiltebeitel draws attention to the first level when he points out that the production simplifies three Indian complexes “for Western sensibilities”: the reincarnation-caste-lifestage-goals complex, the lunar dynasty-cosmic time complex, and the theological complex that centres on Krishna. These simplifications, according to Hiltebeitel, project a distorted understanding of key Vedic concepts of reincarnation, caste, lifestage, human goals, time, and divinity. Dasgupta

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308 Hiltebeitel 150.
points to another dimension of the refashioning when he argues that the production imposes “a Homeric idea of The Epic on the apocalyptic skeins of an Indian legend.”

While pointing out that the Homeric influence is clearly felt in the characterizations of Arjuna, Karna, and Krishna, Dasgupta argues that these perceived parallels between the two realities in question are fundamentally flawed.

The refashioning that takes place on the second level is more structural and theatrical than conceptual. Focusing on the structure of the production, Bharucha claims that Brook “has reduced The Epic to a chronological sequence of episodes that are structurally linked to the well-made play tradition of Scribe and Sardou and the historical chronicles of nineteenth century theatre.” At the same time, Hiltebeitel claims that Brook imposes a strained linearity on the epic by providing it a beginning, middle, and an end. Kent Devereaux’s argument that the adaptation has rendered the epic more “direct,” “clear,” “contemporary” and “condensed” it into a version that ‘reads smoothly’ indicates the extent to which these structural changes have transformed the epic into a work that better appeals to a Western audience. The reduction of the Sanskrit epic to a mere chronological sequence of events and the imposition of a strained linearity on the epic, the commentators argue, distorts the meaning of the Sanskrit epic.

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309 Dasgupta 264.
310 Bharucha 237.
311 Hiltebeitel, “Transmitting Mahabharatas” 151.
312 “Although at first I found the brevity of Carriere’s adaptation disturbing, I quickly began to appreciate it for the directness and contemporary tone it lends this two-thousand-year-old Sanskrit epic. What the adaptation lacks in beauty, compared to more verbose translations, it makes up for in clarity. Ultimately, it succeeds better in summarizing the epic tale than any existing literary condensation of the principal narrative. Brook’s English translation of the original French transcript like wise [sic], reads smoothly” (Kent Devereaux, “Peter Brook’s Production of The Mahabharata at the Brooklyn Academy of Music,” Asian Theatre Journal 5, no. 2 [1988]: 227).
The argument of cultural appropriation immediately creates a space in which Brook’s intervention in the Mahabharata tradition is assessed in terms of Eurocentrism and Orientalism. Bharucha, Dasgupta, and Hiltebeitel argue that the framework within which Brook conceptualizes the Sanskrit epic is fundamentally Eurocentric and Orientalist. The idea that Brook is using the Mahabharata, which is sacred to Indians and which is an integral part of their collective identity, in a rather irresponsible fashion to achieve his personal goals is recurrent in these discussions.\^313 Bharucha echoes this idea when he claims, “Of course, one has to accept that Brook has not grown up with the Epic in his childhood, unlike most Indians who have internalized The Mahabharata through a torrent of feelings, emotions, thoughts, taboos, concepts, and fantasies.”\^314 This claim, on the one hand, points to the central position that the epic occupies in the lives of most Indians; on the other hand, it emphasizes Brook’s status as an outsider. The contrast that this argument draws between Brook and the average Indian is reminiscent of the contrast between the colonizer and the colonized. In the context of this parallel, the cultural appropriation that the production represents echoes the colonial project.

Bharucha argues, “I believe that it is Brook himself who is more seriously Eurocentric in

\^313 Brook counters this claim in an interview given after twenty-five years since his first production of the Mahabharata. He argues, “[E]very country in the world, including India, hasn’t hesitated for several hundred years to translate Shakespeare, to use Shakespeare. He is considered part of the world’s heritage, and nobody in England has denounced the productions in Arabic and Swahili and Hindi. Here is a work that doesn’t belong to India. It is a great heritage of India, but it has meaning for others. They can do their Mahabharata in their way better than anyone, as we can do our Shakespeare in our way better than anyone. But these works have a meaning not for Indians, or for white people, but for this being called Man. The Mahabharata belongs to mankind. So if it can find an echo we do it. If you call that stealing from you, then I can understand your reaction. It is absolutely true that Western colonialism has stolen from every culture it’s touched. But that doesn’t apply to The Mahabharata following its destiny, which is to become recognized throughout the world” (Peter Brook, “The Mahabharata Twenty Five Years Later: Peter Brook in Conversation with Jonathan Kalb,” by Jonathan Kalb, PAJ – A Journal of Performance and Art 96 [2010]: 69-70).

\^314 Bharucha 231.
his advocacy of a theatre where the cultures of the world can be subsumed within his European structure and framework of values.”

This argument acknowledges the colonialist dimension of Brook’s approach. Pointing to another dimension of Brook’s Orientalist approach, Hiltebeitel and Probir Guha present what amounts to unethical behaviour on Brook’s part during his visits to India prior to the production. The selfish and insensitive attitude that Brook is said to have shown towards the very context from which he acquired the *Mahabharata* reinforces the idea that the production is quite in line with the colonial project.

Many of the commentators who are critical of Brook’s production make it a point to state that they are not against the epic being used or adapted into artistic creations, even by artists outside the Indian context, such as Brook and Carrière. They subscribe to the idea that the epic is of universal significance. The main requirement that they underscore is that such creations not negate or violate the meaning and context of the epic. Bharucha argues, “Having emphasized the contextual necessity for any representation of *The Mahabharata* I should stress that I’m not against Brook’s production because it is ‘western’. What disturbs me is that it exemplifies a particular

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315 Ibid., 246.
316 Hiltebeitel gives an account of the unethical behaviour that Brook and his company had demonstrated during one of their visits to Thamilnadu in India, a visit facilitated by Hiltebeitel himself with the help of one of his close assistants in India, named C. T. Rajan. Instances of his unethical behaviour, as narrated by Rajan, include demanding a troupe to start their performance earlier than usual, which against the tradition, simply so that it would fit Brook’s schedule better; intervening in multiple performances (staged by multiple tropes) with his questions, causing those performances to stop, an act that had angered not only the actors but also the villagers; leaving the performances abruptly when decided that they were not helpful to him, while asking Rajan to take them to a different performance; and also getting into a quarrel with a receptionist at a hotel over a reservation. Probir Guha, in his interview with Phillip Zarrilli, relates the story of an embarrassing situation that a sixteen year-old boy from India had to face because of Brook. Having seen the excellent dancing skills of this boy, Brook had promised to take him to Paris with him for rehearsals, but then he had completely neglected his promise (Phillip Zarrilli, “The Aftermath: When Peter Brook Came to India: An Interview by Phillip Zarrilli,” *The Drama Review: TDR* 30, no. 1 [1986]: 93-95).
*kind* of western representation that negates the non-western context of its borrowing.\(^{317}\)

Dasgupta makes an argument along the same lines:

> It should be clear that I’m not remotely suggesting that representations of the east be the sole prerogative of non-western artists. Nor am I naïve enough to argue that any and all representations of this grand epic staged in India—the episodes of *The Mahabharata* are performed throughout India in theatrical forms that range from the classical Kathakali to the rural Jatra—lie any closer to the original intent of the poem. But what is indisputably true is that such stagings do address, implicitly or explicitly, a deep ingrained structure of ritual beliefs and ethical codes of conduct intrinsic to its audience.\(^{318}\)

Hiltebeitel, too, makes a similar argument when he claims that the imaginings of the *Mahabharata* in the South Indian Terukkuttu tradition are characterized by “deep theological overtones.”\(^{319}\) According to these commentators, anyone, be she or he inside or outside India, is free to use the *Mahabharata* for artistic creations as long as they preserve what is perceived to be the “original” meaning of the epic.

Nevertheless, those commentators who approve of Brook’s approach to the epic hold a different view. According to them, the alternative understanding that the production offers enriches the epic by expanding the existing understandings of it. Vijay Mishra, a key supporter of Brook’s approach, claims that Brook’s production “adds a fifth text to the *Mahabharata,*” while arguing, “This text will inevitably modify the text as received so far, and radically challenge (if not alter) the Indian regimes of reading.”\(^{320}\) Implied in his analysis is the idea that readings of the epic need not strictly be guided by the traditional understandings of the Sanskrit epic. He problematizes the claim that

\(^{317}\) Bharucha 231.

\(^{318}\) Dasgupta 264.

\(^{319}\) Hiltebeitel 145.

alternative understandings of the *Mahabharata* result in any form of violation of the epic. Maria Shevtsova, who claims that deviations from what is dominantly perceived to be the meaning of the epic is natural in any interpretation of that text, argues, “Nor does Brook come to the work with a clean slate. He brings to India’s *Mahabharata* a world-view steeped in the European humanist tradition winding its way down to the present from the Renaissance.”\(^ {321}\) She views Brook’s introduction of a European worldview to the epic as a positive and even enriching development.

The aspect of the production that has attracted the attention of almost all the commentators who have written about it is its multiculturalism, defined by its use of a cast, costumes, as well as music, dance, and acting traditions of different cultural identities. The sense of diversity that actors representing different national, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds have given to the production has particularly generated both negative and positive responses from commentators. While Dasgupta calls the international cast an “international hodgepodge of diverse accents and downright poor acting,”\(^ {322}\) Bharucha sarcastically describes it as “an impressive representation, no doubt; the United Nations of Theatre.”\(^ {323}\) Critiquing the deployment of “the United Nations of Theatre,” Bharucha calls the production a “cultural salad” and Brook its “unacknowledged chef.”\(^ {324}\) At the opposite end of the spectrum of the responses, Roger


\(^ {322}\) Dasgupta 266.

\(^ {323}\) Bharucha 245.

\(^ {324}\) Ibid., 246.
Long calls the blend of actors and accents in the production “unique” and the actors’
physical presence “impressive.”

More than the physical appearance of the actors, what has attracted the
commentators’ attention the most is their linguistic competence as manifested in their
performance. There has been a lot of complaint over the linguistic performance by the
actors in both French and English productions. As Devereaux observes, “Twelve of
the twenty-four-member cast act in English for the first time.” The issues with regard
to the linguistic competence of certain actors have been identified as constitutive of a
barrier that prevents those actors from delivering impassioned speeches in a convincing
manner. In such a context, Bharucha raises the rhetorical question, “[W]hat is the
point if most of the actors’ voices, rhythms, and performance traditions have been
homogenized within a western structure of action, where they have to speak a language
unknown to most of them?” This question indicates the assumption that the use of an
international cast has given rise to unnecessary complications, which could have been
avoided simply by using a monolingual cast.

Nevertheless, the positive responses to the linguistic diversity of the production
posit that the accent-based differences and the perceived issues with regard to the
linguistic competence of the actors need to be understood in a different way. They argue
that the linguistic dimension of the performance resonates with Brook’s proclaimed

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325 Long 233.
326 Pronko 222; Shevtsova 220.
327 Devereaux 228.
328 Ibid., 229.
329 Bharucha 245.
overall theme of universal humanity.330 While arguing that the multiplicity of voices in
the production adds “a new Mahabharata text to the cannon,” Mishra claims that the
apparent confusion created by these voices needs to be understood as an attempt to
introduce the chaotic nature of the Indian audience to the production that is intended for
Western audiences that sit in silence.331 In this sense, the multiplicity of voices is an
attempt to synthesize two traditions of audience participation in theatre. Maria Shevtsova
looks at the linguistic dimension of the production from the perspective of the actors.
While pointing out that the language(s) of performance is either the second or third
language(s) in the linguistic repertoire of most of the actors, she claims that the actors
have to put in more effort and make more planning, compared to their counterparts in a
monolingual cast, into their verbal performance. The linguistic cohesiveness that
emerges from this situation, she claims, “gives way to a linguistic porosity especially
noticeable in accents, tones and timbers and the overall shape of utterances.”332 She
further argues:

The profusion of accents in Brook’s Mahabharata has been remarked upon
negatively. … Whatever else this curious reaction harbours, it protects a puristic
notion of language. Social life, on which the very stuff of language depends, can
hardly secrete linguistic purity, least of all in a century of unprecedented
migration. Brook’s conscious appropriation of impure accents for his production
is a way of acknowledging contemporary realities. Furthermore, although these
impurities are restrained for the sake of clear diction and, therefore, for adequate
communication, the fact that they are not systematically wiped out demonstrates
that they are intended to be an indelible component of the production in its
totality.333

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330 This theme is discussed in detail later in the chapter.
331 Mishra 203-4.
332 Shevtsova 220.
333 Ibid.
According to Shevtsova, the implicit claim that the verbal performance of certain actors suggests that they performed badly and Brook directed poorly only indicates a failure to grasp the overall meaning of the production. Her argument that the perceived weaknesses of the production are in fact strong statements that are very much in line with the ideology that the production promotes points to a radically different way in which Brook’s intervention in the Mahabharata tradition could be conceptualized.\(^{334}\)

The Sanskrit Mahabharata and the Idea of Race

The idea of race is intrinsically related to the dominant discourse on the Sanskrit Mahabharata. Adolf Holtzmann’s Zur Geschichte und Kritik des Mahābhārata (published in 1892), which is considered a foundational text for understanding modern scholarship on the Sanskrit epic, foregrounds an important manner in which the idea of race is relevant to the Sanskrit epic. He recognized the pre-Brahminic ancient “Indians,” the people who created the Mahabharata, as constituting a single race, while claiming that this was one of the three races (the other two being the Greeks and the Germans) who had once shared a common homeland.\(^{335}\) With the goal of making a case for a common Indo-Germanic origin of the Sanskrit epic, he argued, by implication, that the Sanskrit epic was a tradition that was primarily about and belonged to the Aryan race.

The contemporary scholarly claims to the effect that the Mahabharata is a universal text

\(^{334}\) This analysis by Shevtsova resonates with what Georges Banu’s discussion of Brook’s approach to theatre. He argues, “Brook wants to give us a taste the limitless possibilities of heterogeneity, of impurity. A ‘pure’ theatre lacks life. Impurity is a sign of life. There can be a meeting place where people and races are not in conflict, but in opposition to one another. That is the source of its richness. Theatre is like a public place in which one is compelled by the disparate elements present to feel what’s actually developing” (Georges Banu, “Brook’s Six Days: Theatre as the Meeting Place Between the Visible and the Invisible,” in Peter Brook and The Mahabharata: Critical Perspectives, ed. David Williams [London and New York: Routledge, 1991], 272).

\(^{335}\) For a discussion of Holtzmann’s arguments, see Adluri and Bagchee (75-77).
that presents the story of the humanity or the human race not only echo but also build
upon Holtzmann’s thinking. Brook, I argue, responds to this particular strain of
thinking when he engages with the idea of race.

Brook’s Conception of Race

An analysis of Brook’s conception of race would provide important insights into
the way that idea functions within the context of his production. Book does not discuss
race as a concept, nor does the existing literature on him indicate any serious attempt on
his part to theorize it. Nevertheless, his practice of theatre and his reflections on that
practice as found in certain interviews that he has given provide important insights into
his conception of the idea of race.

Brook’s ideas about race emanate from his conception of what he calls “the
reality of zero.” Brook’s concept of “the reality of zero” refers to what could be
considered the bare minimum that all human beings, irrespective of all sorts of
differences among them, share simply by virtue of being human. He argues that at a
moment defined by “the reality of zero,” “geography and history cease to exist.” Phillip Zarrilli contextualizes this claim in Brook’s theatrical practice when he argues,
“Brook works with an international acting company whose style attempts to reach this
zero state of communication by removing any cultural marks that might require of the
audience the ability to read any special cultural codes.” This claim entails a

336 For a recent discussion of the Sanskrit epic as a story of the universal humanity, see de Mora.
337 Brook, “Talking with Peter Brook” 55.
338 Ibid.
339 Phillip Zarrilli, “For Whom Is the King a King? Issues of Intercultural Production, Perception,
and Reception in a Kathakali King Lear,” in Critical Theory and Performance, ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and
problematization of the existing dominant schemes of classification that determine the shape of the human society. Although this claim could easily be read as suggesting otherwise, Brook is not suggesting that the human society is homogeneous or that there are no valid and useful bases of classification. His following argument points to an alternative scheme of classification:

From this zero can come an infinity of forms, provided that one is aware of the qualities each person carries. Within zero nobody is a blank sheet, everybody carries her/his own baggage. If, when those baggages are projected into this living, pregnant void, instead of a cultural preoccupation, there is a dharmic preoccupation, then different individual strands of expression can find their way into this zero moment.\(^{340}\)

It could be argued that Brook envisions a situation where the dominant schemes of classification are challenged through attention to the distinctions that exist at the most fundamental level of the humanity.

Brook takes his rejection of the dominant systems of classification beyond the level of the individual. Asked about Parasurama’s spear in his production of the epic, he argues, “It’s African, I think. But that’s what I mean—it is not necessary, or even possible, for me to separate. There comes a point where these things are shared. It’s the same with the music. One can so easily trick experts and oneself. If you go into it intuitively, you can find music that fits and somebody will say it’s Indian when it’s African or Iranian.”\(^{341}\) Implied here is the idea that all cultures are fundamentally united, or rather, that all cultures share a common core. The perceived distinctions among cultures in terms of which different cultural identities are formed, according to Brook, are rather superficial.

\(^{340}\) Brook, “Talking with Peter Brook” 55.

\(^{341}\) Ibid., 57.
The emphasis that Brook places on humanity as a category and his implication that identities based on perceived cultural distinctions are but superficial and devoid of any intrinsic value problematize the validity of the existing divisions in the broader human society. His approach is premised on the assumption that a person’s position as a human being defines the core of her identity and that the rest of the identities that she is perceived to possess are subordinate to that primary identity.

Brook’s conception of theatre and his theatrical practice provide important insights into his universalist stance regarding the humanity. He claims, “theatre has no categories; it is about life. … Theatre is life.”342 If this is the case, what theatre has to offer should be of direct relevance to life.343 The primary way in which Brook attempts to stay relevant to life is through his engagement with the human condition in his work.

According to David Williams, the questions that intrigued Brook were “avowedly essentialist and humanist.”344 These questions include the following:

Can certain elements of theatre language pass directly between cultures without being filtered through the channels of any single culture’s shared linguistic codes? Could the simple relationship of, for example, a sound and a movement be charged with a ‘poetic density’ touching a chord in anybody and everybody, generating one of those moments at which, in Arthur Koestler’s words, ‘eternity looks through the window of time’? Is there a tonal consciousness common to


343 This, however, does not mean that theatre should be a mirror image of what happens outside the stage, in “real” life. Brook argues, “One goes to the theatre to find life, but if there is no difference between life outside the theatre and life inside, then theatre makes no sense. There’s no point doing it. But if we accept that life in the theatre is more visible, more vivid than on the outside, then we can see that it is simultaneously the same thing and somewhat different.” (*The Open Door* 11). This conception of theatre reflects the Brechtian notion of realism. (For Brecht’s definition of the term, see Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett [New York: Hill and Wang, 1992], 109.)

humankind? Are there archetypal ‘deep structures’ of a vocal or gestural kind -
dynamic, instinctive and intercultural? These questions, which Brook’s theatre practice is presumably defined by, indicate his
desire to use theatre as a space in which existing distinctions in society could be
problematized and even violated in an attempt to find what defines the fundamental
human condition. Those he envisions as being at the receiving end of his practice are not
individuals who belong to specific cultures, religions, nationalities, classes, castes, or
ideological categories, but individuals who are first and foremost human beings. As
Maria Shevtsova argues, Brook’s vision “envelops the presumed total sum of human
experience rather than focuses on particular, socially bounded experiences.”

Race as a Floating Signifier

Stuart Hall’s idea of race as a floating signifier, in my view, provides a useful
theoretical point of departure for a detailed understanding of how the concept of race
functions within the production. Hall recognizes race first and foremost as a discursive
category. This understanding of race is based on his recognition of the untenability of
the existing scientific definitions of the concept that attempt to establish it as a
biologically defined concept. In the absence of a definition that successfully ties the
concept to biological facts, Hall argues that any meaning that the concept is deemed to
have is sociocultural. This is, however, not to say that what are perceived as racial
differences, or any other kinds of difference for that matter, among people are mere
fabrications or are not part of the observable reality. He acknowledges that there are all

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345 Ibid.
346 Shevtsova 210.
sorts of differences in the world. He contends, “However, it is only when these differences have been organized within language, within discourse, within systems of meaning, that the differences can be said to acquire a meaning and become a factor in human culture and regulate conduct. That is the nature of what I’m calling the discursive concept of race.” He also claims, “Differences exist in the world, but what matter are the systems of thought and language that we use to make sense of those differences.”

According to this understanding of the concept, people differ in many respects, including skin color and facial and other physical features, but these differences do not mean anything unless they are read in a particular manner. Hall points out that the ways we read these differences are socially, culturally, and historically defined.

Race is a signifier in the sense that it constitutes a system of meaning that defines how these differences are read. The differences are made sense of only in terms of what is within this system. The nature of this system at a given point in time determines how the differences are understood at that point of time. According to this argument, the physical “blackness” of a person at a given point and in a given context is understood in terms of how this idea of “blackness” is constituted in the broader system of meaning centred around the idea of race at that point and in that context. Implied by this argument is the idea that even if there may be a connection between what one’s skin color and facial and other physical features are taken to represent and what may be considered the “essence” of her or his biological constitution, that connection does not amount to a defining feature of race unless it is incorporated into the said system of thought.

348 Ibid.
349 Ibid.
Race as a signifier, according to Hall, is floating in the sense that its meaning is never complete or fixed. The concept of race at any given point of time and in any given context remains incomplete. It always has space for meanings that are not present within it at any given point. Hall claims that the concept, like any other signifier, “is subject to a constant process of redefinition and appropriation, to the losing of old meanings and the appropriation and collection and contriving of new ones to the endless process of being constantly resignified, made to mean something different, in different cultures, in different historical formations, at different moments of time.”

This constant sliding of meaning creates a scenario in which the multiple meanings that are possible in the case of the concept compete with each other to define it. This explains why the concept stands for related but significantly different meanings in different contexts.

The Idea of Race in the Production

Brook’s production, in my view, participates in the contemporary discourse on race by foregrounding a multiplicity of meanings of the concept. By placing certain key competing meanings of race in the same work of art in relation to each other, the production invites a conscious engagement with the idea of race. Brook introduces the idea of race within the first five minutes of the six-hour long television mini-series version of his production of the *Mahabharata*. Introducing the “Great Poem,” which Vyasa, the mythopoet, says he has just composed, to the boy who walks into his abode, Vyasa says, “It’s about you. It’s the story about your race. How your ancestors were

\[\text{\footnotesize 350 Ibid.}\]
born, how they grew up, how a vast war arose. It’s the poetical history of mankind.”

This quote introduces race as an all-encompassing human category, as in the expression “the human race.” Brook himself stresses this idea of an all-encompassing human category in his following description of the play:

It’s about war, and conflict. More than any Greek tragedy that I know, this vast story is like a prism looking from every direction at this mystery of human existence called conflict. One of the most powerful threads that goes through it is that it’s a story told to a young man so that he can learn how to live through a most difficult, dangerous and terrible period of history—a period, like our own, of everything at an end-of-the-world explosion point.\footnote{Quoted in Garry O’Connor, \textit{The Mahabharata: Peter Brook’s Epic in the Making} (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1989), 68-69.}

Accordingly, the play is not a fantastic story removed from the everyday life experiences of the spectator, but one that explores a fundamental condition of human existence that defines every moment of those experiences. Although the time period in which the play is set belongs to the ancient past, it runs parallel to the current age in the sense that both periods, according to Brook, are on the verge of destruction. In this sense, the play is as much about the present as it is about the ancient time of the narrative. The person to whom the story is related within the play is not a mere fictional character or a specific historical individual from a specific historical and cultural context, but just any human being. Brook says, “If one takes a simple metaphor, the young man [to whom the story is related] is us and the story is told to give us the seeds for our own development.”\footnote{Brook, “Talking with Peter Brook” 61.}

\footnote{\textit{The Game of Dice,” The Mahabharata}, disc 1, directed by Peter Brook (New York: Parabola Video Library, 1989), DVD.}
The essentialist, humanist, and universalist stance that Brook adopts towards humanity indicates that he does not intend the term “race” as it appears within the first few minutes of the production to be understood in the Western sense of the term. As Vyasa specifies immediately after the term is mentioned, the race that the great poem is about is that of the humankind. Even if the initial use of the term race evokes the Western associations of the term in the mind of the spectator, the rather unmarked appearance of the boy to whom Vyasa’s statement is addressed would convince her that Brook’s intention is not to foreground those Western associations or invite critical reflection on the term. The equation drawn between “your race” (as found in Vyasa’s address to the boy) and “humankind” suggests that race is not a concept that provides a basis for intra-group divisions but one that defines humanity as a singular collective, or one that distinguishes the human species from other species. In this sense, race is part of what Brook refers to as “the reality of zero.”

Although the idea of race is central to the production, the specific use of the term “race” in the production has not attracted much critical attention. This absence of attention could be seen as an indication either of the assumption that the use of the term is of no particular significance or of the assumption that the choice of the term is based on a total misinterpretation of the Sanskrit epic. Hiltebeitel’s discussion of the term as used in the production, which is the only available substantial engagement with the term, echoes the latter assumption. According to Hiltebeitel, “The term race occurs [in the production] repeatedly and inappropriately in places where ‘dynasty,’ ‘dynastic line,’ ‘family,’ or
'lineage’ would be fitting.” He views this “inappropriate” use of the term as “misleading.” He also claims, “No doubt Brook is trying to say that all men are brothers, and that the race saved is the human race. But the message gets tangled up by the distortions of the Indian terms.” These arguments indicate Hiltebeitel’s assumption that any artistic creation based on the Sanskrit epic should necessarily be faithful to the epic as it is understood in its “original” context, in its “original” language. This assumption prevents him from even acknowledging the possibility of the term being a conscious choice on Brook and Carrière’s part, and there being an alternative understanding, intended or unintended, of the term in the context of the production. Presenting his view as to what the term means in the production, Hiltebeitel claims, “The ‘race’ involved would presumably be ‘Aryan,’ which raises some disturbing questions.” Although this is a sensible guess to make, especially considering the perceived associations between the “Aryan race” and the context in which the Mahabharata is so deeply embedded, there is no evidence either within the play or in the existing literature on the production to support this claim. To force a relationship between the production’s use of the term race and the “Aryan race,” especially in the absence of any supporting evidence for such a relationship, and then to view this relationship as giving rise to disturbing questions is to introduce a set of problematic, if not unnecessary, complications to the discourse on the production.

Shevtsova presents an argument that justifies Brook and Carrière’s use of the term race. Her interpretation of the title of the Sanskrit epic points to different ways in which

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354 Hiltebeitel 151.
355 Ibid.
356 Ibid.
the concept of race could be understood in relation to the epic. She discusses two possible meanings of the term bharata (in Mahabharata): “race” and “India.” Bharata as race refers to “the martial race holding sway over the region lying between the Ganges and the Yamuna rivers.” Here, the term refers to a specific group of people inhabiting a specific geographical location. The term when understood to mean “India” conveys a broader meaning. Shevtsova’s argument is that “[b]ecause India has been thought to be the cradle of humanity, the word may be understood to say ‘the history of all human beings’.” This understanding of the title challenges the dominant perception that the Mahabharata is essentially a prerogative of Hindu India, and elevates the Sanskrit epic to a point where it could be seen as belonging to and being relevant to the broader humanity. It also releases any readings of the epic, artistic or otherwise, from the perceived requirement to stay faithful to the mainstream Hindu-centric reading of the text and the Indian context. From this point of view, Hildebeitel’s claim that the term race in the production is based on a misreading understanding of the Sanskrit epic itself is based on a failure to account for a possible broader meaning of the epic.

Brook’s emphasis on the idea of a common humanity that cuts across the established divisions within the category of the human, on the one hand, and his choice of a cast that foregrounds the inherently fractured nature of that category, on the other, in my view, form an interesting dialectic that provides insights into Brook’s idea of humanity. Although Brook does not theorize about the concept of race, his choice of a cast that represents different racial identities, many of which have been at the heart of the

357 Shevtsova 206.
358 Ibid., 207.
discourse on race and racism mainly in the West, indicates that his approach is fundamentally racially conscious. Given that his final goal is to establish the idea of “the reality of zero,” his choice of cast points to the underlying assumption that any attempt at figuring out the common core of the humanity must necessarily engage with the idea of race.

An analysis of what Brook has to say about his choice of the cast provides interesting insights into the relationship between the production and the idea of race. It should be noted that Brook never talks about his choice of actors being driven by his consciousness of race. He in fact explicitly denies that he had any preconceived notions as to what the cast should be like. He claims that his only criterion was that “an actor be interiorly open to the subject, exteriorly open to collective work.” Brook cites his choice of Mamadou Dioumé for the role of Bhima in support of this claim:

For example, for Bhima we looked everywhere, because a giant who acts well is rare. We hesitated among several actors before discovering Mamadou Dioume. Originally we didn’t think Bhima would be African, but we finally found him in Dakar. Now Dioume is finding what he has inside himself for this role—not only the exterior, but what is deepest in him, what comes from his roots.

This excerpt contradicts Brook’s earlier claim regarding his approach to choosing actors and points to certain broader assumptions that have governed his choice. He claims that he did not specifically intend Bhima to be African, but his eventual choice of an African for the role reflects, or, at least, could be read as reflecting, certain stereotypical assumptions that are related to the idea of race. In the numerous auditions that Brook

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359 When asked if he wished each of the actors to represent a certain aspect of humanity, Brook says, “I never start off with schematic ideas. I did not do casting à la UNESCO. I worked by searching and sifting” (Brook, “Talking with Peter Brook” 68).

360 Ibid.

361 Ibid.
claims were held to select actors for the production,\textsuperscript{362} it is hard to believe that he did not come across any non-African actors who fit the criterion of “a giant who acts well.” At the same time, given that there are non-African actors who seem to fit that criterion in the chosen cast itself, it would be too simplistic to argue that the said criterion was the only one that determined the choice of Dioumé for Bhima. Brook’s claim that not only Dioumé’s external appearance but also “what comes from his roots” made him an ideal fit for the role indicates that the “giant”-ness that he had been looking for was not merely one embodied in any well-built physique, but a form of “giant”-ness that was historically and culturally defined. The correlation that Brook draws between “giant”-ness and “African-ness” indicates the extent to which his choice of actors had been racially conscious. At the same time, Brook calling Dioumé “African” indicates a certain submergence of Dioumé’s Senegalese identity in the broader African identity. This subordination of a national identity to an identity that is at the heart of the Western discourse on race indicates the importance that Brook assigns, consciously or unconsciously, to race.

Brook’s self-proclaimed approach to casting aligns itself with the practice of colorblind casting. Colorblind casting, an approach that emerged in the United States in the twentieth century, comes under the broader category of nontraditional casting.\textsuperscript{363} It is defined as a form of casting where the choice of actors is based strictly on their talents

\textsuperscript{362} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{363} The term “colorblind” was mainly in use in the 1970s and 1980s. Today, the euphemism “nontraditional” is largely used in place of “colorblind.” I prefer to use “colorblind” for two reasons. First, nontraditional casting also includes other types of casting, such as cross gender casting, and therefore, it is too general a label for the specific practice in question here. Second, the term “colorblind,” as opposed to the alternative euphemism, specifically foregrounds the idea of color.
with no attention paid to their physical appearance. Referring to the longstanding tradition of colorblind casting in the production of Shakespearean plays in the United States, Ayanna Thompson claims, “Colorblind casting has never had one stable definition.” Tracking the development of colorblind casting in the United States, Angela C. Pao argues:

While different race-conscious and race-neutral methods were tried, the most common and readily accepted approach was one that did not call attention to the race of the actors. By the 1970s, the term color-blind was being applied to this approach, but in popular usage it was also often being used rather indiscriminately to include various color-conscious strategies that were being devised.

Thompson points to three forms of colorblind casting that have been in practice. The first form, which is closer to the mainstream understanding, entails ignoring the skin color of the actors completely. All the casting choices are made on the basis of the talents that they possess. The second form, which has emerged out of a certain sense of skepticism regarding the “blind” approach of the first form, acknowledges the need to take the color of the actor into consideration especially in situations where the race of the character is central to the plot. This approach emphasizes the need for the physical appearance of the actor to be in agreement with the imagined appearance of the character. The third form of colorblind casting, which is more contemporary, indicates a tendency to cast actors of color in roles, which are not traditionally associated with race, color, or

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364 “Colorblind casting sought to create an environment in which actors were judged not on their ‘personhood’ or their ‘own face’ but on their talent. Colorblind casting, therefore, was based on a meritocratic model in which talent trumped all other aspects all other aspects on an actor’s ‘personhood’.” (Ayanna Thompson, “Practicing a Theory/Theorizing a Practice: An Introduction to Shakespearean Colorblind Casting,” in Colorblind Shakespeare: New Perspectives on Race and Performance, ed. Ayanna Thompson [New York and London: Routledge, 2006]: 6).

365 Thompson 7.


367 Thompson 6-7.
ethnicity, in such a manner that the actors’ racial, color, or ethnic identity adds new meaning to the roles. This form of casting, which is in a way a violation of the original conceptual framework of colorblind casting, is intended “to make a socio-political statement about the character’s subjection, outsider status, untraditional knowledge, and so on.”^368 If the emergence of colorblind casting indicates a broad social awareness regarding the idea of race and a conscious attempt on the part of theatre to address race-based inequalities in society, the various permutations that this casting has undergone in the second half of the twentieth century, as indicated by the second and third forms of colorblind casting, points to the futility of any attempt to dissociate theatre from the idea of race.

What renders this dissociation of theatre and the idea of race impossible is the actor’s physical presence on stage. Drawing attention to the importance of the actor’s physical presence on stage, Pao argues, “More than any other single element, the actor’s physical presence on stage controls the production of meaning, as his or her body becomes the most arresting point of intersection for visual, auditory, sociocultural, and ideological codes.”^369 Gay McAuley, too, emphasizes the central role that the body of the actor plays in the production of meaning:

The stage, even when set and lit ready for the performance, will keep the spectator’s attention for a very short time if no actors are present, for in the theatre it is the presence of the actors that makes the space meaningful. It is through the body and the person of the actor that all the contributing systems of meaning (visual, vocal, spatial, fictional) are activated, and the actor/performer is without

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^368 Ibid., 7.
^369 Pao 27.
doubt the most important agent in all the signifying processes involved in the performance event.370

Unlike most of the other forms of art, theatre grants the spectator direct access to the physicality of the performer. The sense of immediacy created by this direct access is a defining feature of theatre. The performer is right in front of the spectator to be seen and heard. Even in a context where the actor’s performance is perfect to such an extent that the imaginary character that she gives life to completely overshadows her own identity, it would be naive to expect the spectator not to notice the physicality of the body, which that imaginary character is encased in. If the physicality of the actor is too present to be ignored in favour of the imaginary character, to expect the color of her body not to function as a wellspring of meaning in the context of nontraditional casting only indicates a failure to account for various ways in which the physicality of the actor contributes to the overall meaning of the production.

Given that the actor’s skin color almost always conveys some kind of an indication of her racial identity, it could be argued that race always remains a potential topic of discussion in relation to every single theatrical performance that involves human actors. The extent to which this potential is realized depends on the extent to which the plot foregrounds the idea of race and/or the nature of the ethnic and racial composition of the cast. While the former of these two criteria is true about works of art that belong to almost all art forms, the latter is specific to theatrical performances. A production that uses a cast all members of which belong to the same ethnic and racial identity arguably does not foreground the idea of race through its performance. In such a production, the

actor’s natural skin color and facial features remain among what Pao calls the “unsemanticized” elements of the production.\textsuperscript{371} Colorblind casting, as a form of nontraditional casting, endows these physical features with semantic force. Pao argues, “Once endowed with semantic force, the physical and visual racial markers [do] not just function as discrete signifiers; they [instigate] a new dialectical relationship with the other signifiers, generated by the actor’s body and with other signifying systems of the stage—sets, costumes, lighting.”\textsuperscript{372} Even if the semanticization of the actor’s physicality is not intentional on the director’s part, it cannot be prevented from happening in the view of the spectator.

Although Brook’s self-proclaimed approach to casting gives the impression that he did not intend the natural skin colors and facial features of the actors to be endowed with semantic force, his insistence that his production is of universal relevance problematizes that impression. His claim that his use of a multicultural cast is an attempt to emphasize the universal dimension of the production indicates his assumption that the physicality of the actors functions as an indicator of different human identities.\textsuperscript{373} It could even be argued that the success of the universality theme of the production is predicated, for the most part, on the extent to which the natural skin colors and facial features of the actors function as agents of meaning. Brook’s choice of actors from cultures across the world indicates his assumption that any statement regarding the universality of the humanity, the common humanness that cuts across all human societies

\textsuperscript{371} Pao 27.
\textsuperscript{372} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{373} Talking about the cast of his \textit{Mahabharata} production, Brook claims, “if we had taken only Africans the universal aspects [of the production] would have not been so strongly felt” (Brook, “Talking with Peter Brook” 63).
spread across the globe, or “the reality of zero” should use, as its necessary point of departure, a heightened understanding of the perceived cultural, ethnic, and racial divisions within the human category. The semanticization of the actors’ physicality is an important way in which this heightened understanding could be achieved. Given the centrality of the universality theme to the production, it would be naive to assume that Brook was not interested in exploiting the potential of the physicality of the actors.

Brook’s claim that the Mahabharata is “Shakespearean in the true sense of the word” invites one to compare colorblind productions of Shakespearean plays with Brook’s production of the Mahabharata.\textsuperscript{374} The existing literature on colorblind productions of Shakespeare indicates how the concept of race almost always emerges as a key area of focus in relation to such productions. Focusing on the impact of colorblind casting on the perceived universality of Shakespeare, Thompson argues, “Although Shakespeare is often described as having created ‘universal’ plays with ‘timeless’ themes, the universality and timelessness of the bard’s works are often tested when actors of color are involved.”\textsuperscript{375} This claim indicates the extent to which one’s awareness of the idea of race and racial divisions in the human society immediately overrides the universality of humanity. According to Lisa Anderson, any attempts to emphasize the sense of universality embodied in Shakespearean works through colorblind casting is in fact problematic as it requires the spectator to ignore centuries of cultural, social, and political

\textsuperscript{374} Brook, “Talking with Peter Brook” 64.
\textsuperscript{375} Thompson 2.
Courtney Lehman makes a similar statement in her analysis of Kenneth Branagh’s musical adaptation of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. While pointing out that Branagh turns a completely blind eye to the skin colors of the actors, she argues that this unwillingness to address the ideas of color and race as meaningful signifiers results in reinforcing the status quo that invariably privileges whiteness. Krystyna Kujawinska Courtney shows how certain decisions with regard to the color of the actors in certain productions of Shakespeare draw attention to color-related politics in the broader society. Focusing on Ira Aldridge’s black and whiteface productions of Shakespearean plays and their reception in Central and Eastern Europe, she shows how the performances generated a space in which the national and ethnic concerns of context could be discussed. All these studies indicate that the perceived universality of Shakespearean plays gets overridden by issues of race and color in the context of colorblind productions. This situation with regard to colorblind productions of Shakespeare points to ways in which the impact that Brook’s production of the epic has on the widely claimed universality of the Sanskrit epic could be understood.

Given the emphasis that Brook places on the ideas of multiculturalism and the universality of humanity, one could question the validity and usefulness of a strict focus on the manner in which the skin colors of the actors of Brook’s cast function as semantic

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fields. It may seem that such a focus is both limited and limiting. Nevertheless, I would argue that such a focus is not only valid but also is (at least, should be) at the heart of any discussion of the production for three reasons. First, there is a general understanding as to what the skin color of the race mentioned in the *Mahabharata* is. The epic is often seen as a story about the survival of a race. Although there is no mention within the Sanskrit epic as to what this race is, given the context of the epic, one could safely assume, as Hiltebeitel does, this race to be Aryan.\(^{379}\) The close association between this Aryan race and the white skin color, especially in the eyes of the twentieth-century Western spectator, would set expectations as to what the skin color of the actors playing certain characters of the epic should be.

Second, the Vedic tradition, which the epic is deeply embedded in, recognizes a person’s skin color as an indication of her or his position in society. The system of social stratification in the Hindu culture is called the *varna* system, and the term *varna* literally means “color” or “complexion.” Although one’s *varna* is hereditary and birth-ascribed, and hence is not determined by her or his complexion in practice, the traditional understanding of the system indicates a close relationship between one’s skin color and the *varna* to which she belongs. John Brockington refers to that section of the *Mahabharata* itself where the two ancient sages named Bhṛgu and Bharadvāja discuss the origin of the *varna* system.\(^{380}\) This conversation shows how Brahmā Prajāpati, the

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\(^{379}\) The twentieth century Nazi conceptualizations of the Aryan race have pushed the term “Aryan” to the point where it is predominantly understood in relation to Nazism. However, the references to the term in this study engage with the term in the broader sense. For a detailed discussion of the idea of the Aryan race, see Widney.

creator deity, created the four *varnas* and assigned each a color. The Brahmin *varna*, which is the highest and most respected of the four, is assigned white, while the śūdra *varna*, which is the lowest and the least respected, is assigned black. While the whiteness of the Brahmin *varna*, as pointed out in the said conversation, was the “original” color bestowed by the creator deity himself, the blackness of the śūdra *varna* (along with the redness and yellowness of the kṣatriya and vaśya *varnas* respectively), is seen as a deviation or degenerated form of the “original” whiteness resulting from śūdras’ failure to adhere to the standards and virtuous lifestyle of the Brahmins.  

Given this color-consciousness of the context out of which the epic has emerged and in which it remains deeply embedded, the failure to recognize the significance of the experimentation that Brook’s production engages in with the skin colors of the actors of the cast needs to be taken seriously. This experimentation cannot help being perceived as engaging with this broader sense of color irrespective of whether Brook intended it to be that way or not.

Third, the Western audience for which Brook’s production has been intended is arguably significantly color- and race-conscious. The concept of race as it is understood in the Western context has taken shape mainly in the three centuries prior to the production, and the twentieth century has seen numerous developments with regard to this concept. This formation and establishment of race as a basis for classification was

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381 “Bṛṛgu moves on to give a more symbolic or psychological explanation of the four colours: originally Brahmā created just brāhmans but those who were short-tempered and violent left their *varna*, turned red and became kṣatriyas, those who took to cattle-rearing and agriculture turned yellow and became vaśyas, and those who in their delusion took to injury and untruth turned black and became śūdras” (Brockington 99, emphasis mine).

382 In an impressive survey of the development of the concept of race in the Western world, Ivan Hannaford argues that race as it is understood today began to take shape at the end of the seventeenth century and become fully conceptualized in the nineteenth century. See Hannaford.

383 See Yudell.
undoubtedly influenced by certain historical events and developments that took place in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (such as the introduction and abolition of Jim Crow laws in the United States and the movements in Europe centred around anti-semitism and the idea of a “pure” Aryan race) whose impact was felt in almost all the levels of society in the Western context. Given these developments, one could argue that the Western society by the end of the twentieth century was rather racially conscious.

Mapping Color in the Production

Given that the Aryan race is the closest to what the term “race” denotes in the context of the conventional understanding of the epic, actors of white skin or fair complexion and associated facial features would arguably be seen as the right or appropriate choice for the members of the two dynastic families in the epic: the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Considering the conventional Indian or South Asian context of the Sanskrit epic, one could have the expectation that these actors of white skin or fair complexion be recognizably Indian or South Asian; nevertheless, given the proclaimed universalist dimension of the production and the fact that the production was specifically intended for a Western spectatorship, that expectation would arguably not have been of binding nature in the target spectator’s view. Given the perceived association between the Aryan race and the white skin or fair complexion, the presence of the actors of that complexion even if they were not recognizably Indian or South Asian would not necessarily have been seen as out of the ordinary. In this sense, it could be argued that the white skin, fair complexion, and the facial features associated with whiteness function

\[384\] Brockington 97.
as unmarked semantic categories. These categories, therefore, cannot be expected to necessarily foreground the idea of race by themselves.

What stands in clear contrast to the general expectation is the presence of actors of black skin or dark complexion. The idea of blackness is in an antithetical relationship with what is considered to be the Aryan identity not only in the Western context where skin color has largely been a defining factor, but also in the traditional Indian context. According to *Rgveda*, which is the oldest of the four most sacred Vedic texts of Hinduism, after the arrival of the Aryans in the South Asian subcontinent, they had to establish themselves by subjugating a “darker indigenous population, the Dasyus.”

The use of the term *varna*, meaning “color” or “complexion,” in the *Rgveda* to distinguish between the Aryans and the Dasyus indicates the extent to which skin color had functioned as an identity marker and specifically “blackness” had functioned as a defining concept of Otherness even in ancient Vedic India. Brockington’s claim that the Sanskrit term *dāsa*, which means “slave,” is a derivation of the term ‘Dasyu’ not only points to the complex relationship, which the concepts of blackness, slavery, inferiority, and Otherness had been in, even in the ancient Indian consciousness, but also indicates remarkable parallels between the Western color consciousness and the ancient Indian color consciousness.

Given the close association between the ideas of blackness and Otherness in both contemporary Western context for which Brook’s production was intended and the ancient Vedic Indian context, which is predominantly seen as the “authentic” context of

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385 Ibid. (emphasis mine).
386 Ibid.
387 Ibid.
the narrative in that production, it could be argued that it is the presence of actors of black skin or dark complexion that strikes the spectator as out-of-the-ordinary and foregrounds the idea of race or the broader idea of difference. An analysis of casting with regard to such actors in the production would not only illuminate the ways in which the production generates meanings with regard to the concept of race, but also provide insights into the nature of Brook’s and also Carrière’s engagement—conscious or subconscious—with the ongoing discourse on race.

One of the key character depictions in the production that foregrounds the idea of race is Bhima. Bhima who is the second of the five Pandava brothers is played by the Senegalese actor Mamadou Dioumé. Dioumé’s black skin, associated facial features, and marked English accent set him apart from the other four Pandava brothers who are of fair complexion. The actors who play those four brothers, namely Yudhistira, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva, are from Poland, Italy, France, and Iran respectively, and therefore, diversity is in a way a defining characteristic of the Pandava family of Brook’s production. However, the fair complexion of those four actors points to a basis on which they could be grouped together irrespective of their cultural and nationality-based differences and contrasted from Dioumé. In this scheme of classification, Dioumé always emerges as the special case. For this reason, his blackness always functions as a marker of his identity. His national identity as a Senegalese is always supplemented, if not overridden, by his identity as a black.

In the *Mahabharata* tradition, Bhima is primarily known for his physical strength, and Brook emphasizes this dimension in his depiction of Bhima in the production.
Bhima’s physicality is highlighted throughout the course of the production. Bhima who is the result of the union between Kunti and Vāyū, the god of the wind, is initially introduced with the phrase “strong as thunder.”\textsuperscript{388} In the game of dice, when Yudhistira decides to play Bhima against the Kauravas, Yudhistira says, “I still have Bhima. Built like a lion, the mightiest of men. He is strength itself. I play him against you.”\textsuperscript{389} At the same time, Amba who comes looking for Bhima to seek his help to kill Bhishma refers to Bhima as “the strongest man in the world.”\textsuperscript{390} He proves his strength a couple of times in the production. In his second appearance, he is seen as engaged in a playful fight with his brothers and his cousins from the Kaurava family in which he defeats everyone.\textsuperscript{391} He kills the dangerous rakshasa (demon) who reigned the forest with terror.\textsuperscript{392} In an attempt to protect Draupadi, he also kills an army general named Kitchaka in a rather ruthless manner. By looking at the way he has been killed, his king says, “only a demon could do that.”\textsuperscript{393} During the war, Bhima also kills an elephant presumably by hitting it in its head with his club.\textsuperscript{394}

Certain references to Bhima’s strength in the production depict that strength in rather subhuman and animalistic terms. When Duryodhana asks his brother Dussasana to take off Draupadi’s robe following Yudhistira’s loss at the game of dice, Bhima threatens Dussasana, “Listen to what I say. When the battle comes I will smash Dussasana’s chest

\textsuperscript{388} “The Game of Dice.”
\textsuperscript{389} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{390} “Exile in the Forest,” \textit{The Mahabharata}, disc 2, directed by Peter Brook (New York: Parabola Video Library, 1989), DVD.
\textsuperscript{391} “The Game of Dice.”
\textsuperscript{392} “Exile in the Forest.”
\textsuperscript{393} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{394} “War,” \textit{The Mahabharata}, disc 3, directed by Peter Brook (New York: Parabola Video Library, 1989), DVD.
and I’ll drink his blood. I swear I will. I will eat his guts and drink his blood. … I’ll open your belly.”

Dussasana calls Bhima a “beast” and a “fat cat” and then gives him a beastly growl apparently suggesting that Bhima is an animal. Bhima later carries out his threat during the final stage of the war. Ripping Dussasana’s chest open and drinking his blood, he says, “My enemy’s blood is more delicious than my mother’s milk, better than honey, sweeter than the sweetest drink on earth.”

Bhima’s threats and actions based on those threats contrast with those of his brothers, mainly Yudhistira and Arjuna. When Bhima, at the conclusion of the game of dice, swears to defeat the Kauravas in battle, Yudhistira does not say anything. However, his facial expressions indicate a strict determination to challenge the injustice that has just been done to them and restore what they have lost. Arjuna does issue a threat similar to Bhima’s, but it is much more graceful than Bhima’s. Interestingly, this threat initially comes out of Bhima’s mouth, and all Arjuna has to do is to endorse it. Bringing Karna who is perceived as Arjuna’s equal in to the scene, Bhima says, “I will open your [Dussasana’s] belly. And Arjuna will kill Karna,” to which Arjuna responds, in a rather controlled tone, “Yes, I will kill Karna. I said so and I will do it.” Karna asserts himself when he says, “I will always be ahead of you. Don’t forget. Take your bow with you and practice,” and Arjuna only replies, in the same controlled tone, “I won’t forget.”

Arjuna never resorts to the kind of language that Bhima uses without any hesitation. The sense of gracefulness with which Arjuna expresses his heroism and determination to avenge the injustice done to the Pandavas marks a clear contrast between Bhima and him.

395 “The Game of Dice.”
396 “War.”
397 “The Game of Dice.”
Another characteristic of Bhima’s that the production highlights alongside his physical strength is his sensuality. Bhima is the only Pandava brother who openly acknowledges sex as a pleasurable activity. When the Pandava brothers find themselves in a situation where all five of them have to keep Draupadi as a common wife, Yudhistira asks the rest of the brothers if they all loved her, and Bhima is the first to admit that he loves her. He says, “Yes, I already feel I love her.”\(^398\) At another point, Bhima points out to Yudhistira the importance of sensual love when he claims, “And love, that’s delicious. Sometimes it’s divine. But I say, my brother, there’s nothing like love. It’s a honey. It’s bliss. Love well made can lead to wisdom.”\(^399\) The section of the production that presents Bhima’s romantic relationship with a female demon named Hidimbi highlights his sensuality in a prominent manner.\(^400\) The production captures the development of this relationship up to the point where Hidimbi gives birth to a child. The fact that this relationship is presented in considerable detail indicates Brook’s possible intention of presenting Bhima primarily as a sensual individual.

The rather different manner in which the sensual aspect of the other Pandava brothers is depicted or suggested in the production indicates the extent to which sensuality is intended to be seen as a necessary character trait of Bhima’s. There are indications that the other Pandava brothers engage in sensual pleasure (mainly in the form of facial expressions), but they do not talk about it. When, in response to Yudhistira’s question, Bhima acknowledges his love for Draupadi, Arjuna says, “I love

\(^{398}\) Ibid.
\(^{399}\) “Exile in the Forest.”
\(^{400}\) Ibid.
her,” and Nakula and Sahadeva simply agree by saying, “So do I.”  Although Draupadi thus becomes a common wife to all the Pandava brothers, there is no indication in the production of a close sensual relationship of between Draupadi and the Pandavas except for Bhima. In the absence of evidence of such a relationship, the sense of intimacy between Draupadi and Bhima that is foregrounded on a number of occasions in the production particularly highlights Bhima’s sensuality.

At the same time, the way the production deals with the sensuous dimension of Bhima’s own brother Arjuna also provides insights into how Bhima’s sensuality is meant to be understood. Arjuna is the one who wins Draupadi at her swayamvara, and this shows that he has had some personal interest in her. The sense of happiness with which he announces his victory to his mother Kunti confirms this idea. However, his love for Draupadi is not even referred to in the entire remainder of the production. Also, on the two occasions when Draupadi’s identity as a married woman is challenged and she is badly in need of her husbands’ support to protect her loyalty and faithfulness to none other than those husbands themselves, Arjuna, like the rest of his brothers except for Bhima, fails her. This behaviour of Arjuna’s indicates either the limited nature of his love and affection for Draupadi or his superior ability to subjugate his sensuality in the best interest of his greater cause and his family including Draupadi. The scene in which Arjuna meets Urvasi, who is known to be the most beautiful of the goddesses, supports

401 “The Game of Dice.”
402 Based on Arjuna’s past heroic record, one could argue that his motivation to participate in the swayamvara needs to be understood more as his desire to display his heroism and assert his position among the other contestants, than as his genuine love for, or, at least, some sort of a personal interest in Draupadi. Nevertheless, there is no evidence in the production that supports this argument.
403 These two occasions are when Dussasana tries to take off Draupadi’s robe following her being lost in the game of dice and when Kitchaka attempts to sexually impose himself on her.
When Urvasi expresses her love for him, he initially responds with a similar interest. His body language indicates a sudden gush of sensual emotions towards her. However, he immediately controls those feelings and says that he respects her as his mother. The contrast that is obvious between the ways in which Arjuna and Bhima deal with their sensual feelings highlights the intensity of Bhima’s sensuality.

Another related characteristic of Bhima’s that is highlighted in a number of instances in the production is his impulsiveness. He is quick to respond to injustice. When Dhritarashtra, in an apparent attempt to favour his own sons (the Kauravas) and distance the Pandavas from them, offers the Pandavas the barren land of Khandavprastha, Bhima is the only Pandava brother to question the move immediately, and he does so in a rather irritated and forceful tone:

**BHIMA:** What?! Those stinking bogs? Those gruesome forests?
**YUDHISTIRA:** Silence, Bhima. (*To DHRITARASHTRA*) I accept, and I thank you.

**BHIMA:** (*To YUDHISTIRA*) Why take charity like a beggar? Yudhistira, what demon has invaded your mind?

**YUDHISTIRA:** Calm down.

**BHIMA:** Why do you grovel at their feet? They’ve only one thought, throw us out of the kingdom when our rights are as good as theirs. And you, you say thank you, I touch your feet, I’m most grateful. What do you put above justice, above our destiny? What?

**YUDHISTIRA:** (*in a stern voice*) Keep calm.

**BHIMA:** (*in an equally stern voice and while briskly moving around*) NO, NO!

At the same time, when the Pandavas start their exile in the forest, Bhima points out the injustice that has been done to them and calls for action to immediately win back their rights. Irritated by Yudhistira’s inaction at his call, he shouts, “Yudhistira, RISE!”

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404 “Exile in the Forest.”
405 “The Game of Dice.”
406 “Exile in the Forest.”
This behaviour of Bhima’s points to a rather rebellious spirit in him characterized by lack of patience and a tendency to question and counter acts of injustice in a rather impulsive manner.

The emphasis placed on the idea of physicality with a focus on physical strength, sensuality, and impulsiveness in the depiction of Bhima on the one hand, and the choice of a black-skinned actor for the role, on the other, in my view, point to certain underlying assumptions with racial overtones that Brook appears to have been guided by, consciously or unconsciously. Even if, based on his proclaimed approach to casting, it is argued that his choice of Dioumé for the role was not based on any preconceived notions with regard to Dioumé’s racial identity, it is hard to deny that this choice generates certain specific race-related meanings and in the mind of the Western spectator. This character depiction conforms to certain traditional stereotypical assumptions regarding the “black” racial identity. The contrast that is evident between the depiction of Bhima and that of the rest of the Pandava brothers only reinforces those stereotypical assumptions.

Another aspect of the production that reinforces traditional stereotypical assumptions regarding “black” racial identity is the depiction of the rakshasa or demon characters. There are three key demon characters in the production: the demon who attacks Bhima in the forest and whom Bhima kills, his sister named Hidimbi who falls in love with Bhima and marries him, and Ghatotkacha who is Bhima and Hidimbi’s son. The demon who attacks Bhima is wearing a mask for the entire duration of his presence in the scene, therefore his face is not visible. However, the complexion of his body
shows that role is played by a “black” actor. Hidimbi (played by Erika Alexander), too, shares the same skin color, and her “blackness” becomes confirmed once she takes off the mask. After falling in love with Bhima, Hidimbi asks him, “You find me beautiful?” to which he responds, “Like the night.” This response could be seen not only as an acknowledgement but also as a celebration of her skin color.

The way Ghatotkacha (played by Bakary Sangaré) is described in the production draws interesting connections between the physical appearance of the actor and the demonic nature of the character. As soon as he is born, Hidimbi describes him as “an enormous son,” and she also says, “He’ll be very strong, great magician. I can already feel his power.” Bhima’s initial reaction at the sight of his son is “Already so big, so black.” When, later in the production, Ghatotkacha enters the battle in support of the Pandavas, Vyasa describes him in the following manner:

VYASA: His eyes are blood, his beard green, his mouth aghast like the gate of death. He is cross-eyed, vast bellied, sharp toothed. His flag drenched in blood. It is crowned with a wreath of guts, and its pinnacle is a vulture, whose wings touch the sky.

GHATOTKACHA: Night increases my power. Elephants piss with fear.

DHRITARASHTRA: And Karna? Where is Karna?

VYASA: He prepares to fight.

GHATOTKACHA: [To KARNA] You won’t escape from my hands alive. [He attacks KARNA and his army first with a rain of fire, and then with predatory birds.]

VYASA: [As the fight continues] Ghatotkacha leaps, he howls into the clouds, he calls down a rain of trees, a hail of rocks. He has a hundred bellies, a hundred heads, then he shrinks into a finger.

DHRITARASHTRA: And Karna?

VYASA: He shoots trays of arrows, reptile arrows. Ghatotkacha becomes ferocious animals. Karna exterminates them all.”

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407 Ibid.
408 Ibid.
409 “War.”
These descriptions, in my view, draw interesting connections between the ideas of blackness, physicality, animality, and also mystery.

While the depictions of Bhima and the *rakshasa* characters in the production conform to certain established stereotypical understanding of the “black” racial identity, the depiction of certain other characters indicate a certain problematization of that understanding. Karna is one such character. Karna is played by Jeffery Kissoon, a renowned black British actor. Although his mainstream British English accent sets him apart from Bhima, his skin color, like Bhima, keeps the viewer reminded of his racial identity throughout the production. Karna is one of the most dynamic characters in the epic, and Brook has successfully captured and recreated this sense of dynamism in the production. Karna is among the most detailed character depictions in the production. Brook depicts Karna in such a way that the viewer has a lot of access to his inner self, probably more access than to the inner selves of the Pandavas. The choice of a “black” actor for this character of central importance, in my view, provides important insights into how the idea of race operates within the production.

Karna, for the most part of the epic narrative, comes across as an individual whose options in life are restricted by what is perceived to be a birth-ascribed identity of his. Karna is the result of the union between the sun god and Kunti, therefore, he is of prestigious blood and equal to his Pandava brothers and Kaurava cousins. However, because he was found and raised by a chariot driver after he was abandoned by Kunti in an apparent attempt to hide her union with the sun god, he comes to be known as the son of a chariot driver. This particular identity of his almost exclusively determines his fate.
Although Karna is extremely skilled in the arts that royal princes are expected to master and proves himself to be Arjuna’s equal, if not his superior, his perceived low birth prevents him from receiving the respect and recognition that he deserves, except by the Kauravas who make him a prince.

There is one scene in the production—the scene where Arjuna demonstrates his mastery at archery to the members of the Pandava and Kaurava families—where the extent to which Karna’s perceived “low” birth hinders his progress in life is clearly demonstrated. Soon after Arjuna demonstrates his skills, Karna enters the scene and says, “Son of Kunti, I can do all that you have done, as well as you, even better.” He proves his words by demonstrating his excellent archery skills. Then he challenges Arjuna to a fight, and Arjuna accepts, but before the fight begins, Drona requires him to reveal his origin, claiming that Arjuna is permitted to fight only his equals. Karna reveals his identity when he says, “I’m called the driver’s son,” and Arjuna immediately responds, “Withdraw, this is not your place.” This shows how the perceived inferiority of Karna’s birth overshadows his excellent, perhaps even incomparable, skills.

In addition to being skillful, Karna is also seen as a rather clever and far-sighted character. He sometimes functions as an advisor to Duryodhana. When Dussasana suggests to Duryodhana that they look for a way to separate the Pandavas from Krishna, Karna says, “Nothing can separate them from Krishna. No amount of cunning can bring them down. If you want to destroy them, I’ve said so before, attack them head on.” This advice indicates that he has studied the Pandavas thoroughly and has been thinking

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410 “The Game of Dice.”
411 “Exile in the Forest.”
of possible ways of bringing their downfall. At the same time, when Karna finds out, from the spies that he had deployed, that Arjuna has travelled to North with the intention of acquiring sacred weapons of incomparable power, he, on his own initiative, sets off to acquire the equally powerful weapon named paśupata. Once he acquires this weapon, he becomes the possessor of the ultimate weapon. The process, which he is said to have gone through in acquiring this weapon, testifies to his diligence and determination.

Karna also comes across as a rather graceful character. His tone and body language show that he is consistently driven by anger towards those who look down upon him for the apparent inferiority of his birth. He always displays a clear determination to destroy them. Nevertheless, he, unlike Bhima, never resorts to vulgar language or action. He always maintains a dignified attitude in everything he says and does. When an earthworm gnaws its way through his thigh he bears the pain without moving so as not to disturb the sleep of the ascetic whose head is lying on his lap. He keeps the word that he gave Kunti that he would not kill Yudhistira. He takes the challenge of defeating the invincible Ghatotkacha single-handedly, and he accomplishes the task. He takes on Arjuna, the greatest of the heroes, and gives him a good fight at the final stage of the battle. He fights with such bravery, skill, and determination that if not for the famous curse that Karna’s teacher had put on him and Krishna’s intervention that encourages Arjuna to violate the rules of knightly combat, the outcome of the battle could have been different.
In addition to depicting Karna as a heroic figure, the production also reveals his emotional dimension. The scene where Kunti visits Karna at night in the battlefield shows the viewer how emotional he could get:

KUNTI: I remember that day, long ago, when in the middle of a tournament you appeared glowing radiant.
KARNA: What do you want?
KUNTI: I’ve come to find you, to hold you by the hand, to take you with me.
KARNA: Your voice draws me deep into the past, back to my childhood. The sound of your voice! I feel a hand on my forehead. Often in my sleep, a veiled woman would come to me. Are you still a dream? Why does the mother of my enemies suddenly make me a child?
KUNTI: Come with me.
KARNA: Rage, hate, passion for victory—all seem false, like fevers at night. Where do you want to take me?
KUNTI: Over there, to the other camp, towards those lights.
KARNA: Towards my enemies?
KUNTI: Yes.
KARNA: Towards Arjuna?
KUNTI: Yes.
KARNA: And there I’ll find my mother again?
KUNTI: Yes.
KARNA: [in a shivering voice] She rejected me from the very first. She put me in a cradle, gave me over to a river. The cruelest enemy couldn’t have done me so much harm. She never gave me a mother’s tenderness, her warmth. [in a steadier voice] Kunti, tonight, for the first time, you are concerned with me. Why?
KUNTI: I want to give you back your rights, your position.
KARNA: [in a stern voice] It’s not true. You know that I intend to fight and you’re afraid I’ll kill Arjuna.
KUNTI: [holding KARNA’s face with motherly affection] Karna, you are my son, my eldest son. You are born of me. Your mother asks your pardon. I was so young. [KARNA breaks into tears.] Go and join Arjuna. When you are reunited, everything will be possible. Give me your hand. [He complies.] Come with me towards the lights. [They get up and walk a few paces together, but then KARNA stops, turns back.]
KARNA: [in a steady voice] I’m the son of a driver. What you have torn, nothing can repair. Leave me alone, naked once again, on this great red river. Go. [She goes. Then he calls her back.] Kunti, I can do one thing for you. I will not kill Yudhistira, I promise you. I will not kill Bhima, I promise you. Nor the twins, the sons of Madri, I will not kill them. I will only kill
This scene presents Karna as an individual who is caught up between multiple worlds. He is a key figure in the Kaurava camp and a close confidante of Duryodhana’s, but at the same time, he discovers himself to be the eldest son of Kunti’s, therefore directly related to the Pandavas. He has yearned for motherly love throughout his life, but the fact that his mother is also the mother of his rivals pushes him to a point where he cannot associate himself with her closely and comfortably. His victory lies in the defeat of the Pandavas, but his emotional obligations towards his mother prevent him from killing his rivals. The conscious decision that Brook makes to illuminate these contradictory positions that Karna holds in the narrative indicates the sense of importance that he assigned to Karna’s role. Given this importance assigned to the role, the decision to cast an actor, for the role, whose skin color functions as a defining characteristic of his identity in the eyes of the intended spectator is “too entangled” in the ongoing discourse on race to be seen as a simple and straightforward decision made purely on the basis of the actor’s acting skills.

Karna reveals another aspect of his character, a reading of which in conjunction with Kassoon’s skin color, could generate specific meanings with strong racial overtones. He talks about this aspect in one of his conversations with Kunti before he finds out that Kunti is his mother:

KARNA: You see this lance. Touch it. Feel how it vibrates. [KUNTI touches the lance.] When I was born I had a golden breastplate, like a second skin. One day, a god disguised as a beggar said to me, ‘Give me your breastplate.’ I heard a voice in the sky crying, ‘Don’t part with that

412 “War.”
breastplate.’ But I couldn’t refuse. I can never refuse anything. Without the least hesitation, I tore it off and gave it dripping with blood. It was then that the god held out to me this lance, with these words: ‘It will kill a living being, whoever you choose, man, god, or demon.’

KUNTI: But it will only kill once. 413

This incident that Karna describes foregrounds a certain degree of vulnerability of his character. What is noteworthy here is that he himself has been complicit in rendering himself vulnerable. If he had the breastplate with him he could have been invincible, but by ripping it off his chest and giving it away, he has compromised that invincibility. In a context where Kassoon’s “blackness” functions as a key marker of his identity, this description, at one level, suggests the vulnerability of the “black” man. Even if this particular meaning is not intentional on the part of the producer, this reading always remains a possibility in the eyes of a racially conscious Western spectator. In the event of such a reading, one could draw remarkable parallels between Karna surrendering his breastplate to a superior being at that being’s request and the black man surrendering his freedom to the white man. What both Karna and the black man receive in return is little in relation to what they compromised, and both are complicit in their eventual downfall or degradation. 414

Kunti and Bhishma are two other characters the depictions of which keep the spectator conscious of the black racial identity throughout the production. These

413 Ibid.
414 For someone who is familiar with the Sanskrit epic, this reading may appear to be a long stretch. In the epic, Karna’s gesture (ripping his breastplate off his chest and giving it to the god who comes disguised as a beggar) is an act of selflessness and fearlessness. It is also a show of superior virtue rather than submission. One could argue that one must ignore all this in order to read this episode as one about the black man submitting to the white man and that therefore the suggested reading is problematic. While I consider this to be a valid objection, particularly from the perspective of the Sanskrit epic, I would argue that the suggested reading remains a possibility, especially in a context where the actor’s blackness functions as a defining characteristic of Karna.
depictions, like that of Karna, points to a black identity that goes beyond the stereotypical understanding of racial blackness. Kunti is played by Miriam Goldschmidt, a well-known Afro-German actor, and a key defining feature of her identity is her dark complexion. She gives life to the role of the mother of three of the five Pandava brothers and Karna who are the true heroes of the epic. She is an indispensable link in the ancestry of the family the survival of whose “race” the epic is said to be chiefly about. When Pandu was not in a position to produce children due to a curse and the future of the family was therefore in danger, it is Kunti who provided the solution to the problem. It is she who ensures the continued existence of a race (and a very important one at that) that was at the brink of extinction. It is she who mothers dharma, goodness, and true heroism to the world. The importance of what she mothers is highlighted by the contrast between her children, the Pandavas, and their Kaurava cousins.

Bhishma’s “blackness” also plays a significant role in foregrounding the idea of race in the production. Bhishma is played by Sotigui Kouyaté who is from Mali. His marked English accent and intonation pattern accentuate his Otherness in the production. In the production, Vyasa’s story begins with Bhishma. In this sense, his appearance and voice in a way could be seen as setting the tone for the narrative. Bhishma is introduced in the following manner:

VYASA: There was a prince called Bhishma, a perfect prince. His mind was clear, his body strong, his heart noble, but he couldn’t be king.
BOY: Why?
VYASA: Because it was impossible for him to marry, to have children.
BOY: Why?

Madri who gives birth to the other two Pandava brothers is also played by a “black” actor (Erika Alexander).
VYASA: Because his father had cast his eyes on Satyavati. He had burned with passion for her.  
BOY: Satyavati? Your mother?  
VYASA: Yes, my mother.  
GANESHA: Your mother is playing a part in your story?  
VYASA: Any objection?  
GANESHA: [smiling] No, no objection at all. Did she marry Bhishma’s father?  
VYASA: Satyavati refused to marry unless her sons could be king, so Bhishma sacrificed himself for his father’s happiness, to avoid all family conflicts. He swore the oath of absolute renunciation.  

In this initial introduction itself, Bhishma comes across as a great sacrificer who renounces his birthright for the greater good of his family, which is also referred to as a “race.” In this sense, he too is an important link in the ancestry that ensures the perpetuation of the “race” in question. At the same time, while this initial introduction establishes Bhishma as a powerful individual, it also points to the balanced nature of his power. He is powerful not only physically, but also mentally and spiritually. This balanced nature of Bhishma is maintained throughout the production.  

In a context where one’s “blackness” functions as a marked characteristic of her identity, these character depictions could be read as making certain statements about racial blackness. While the depictions of Bhima, the rakshasa, Hidimbi, and Ghatotkacha indicates certain conformity to and endorsement of certain mainstream stereotypical assumptions regarding the black racial identity, the depictions of Karna, Kunti, and Bhishma indicate a tendency to directly contradict negative racial stereotypes associated with blackness. While the first set of depictions could be seen as an acknowledgement of the idea of blackness in its established form, the second set of depictions point to the open-endedness of the concept. The absence of a closure for the  

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416 “The Game of Dice.”
idea of “blackness” that this open-endedness suggests always points to the possibility of
the concept acquiring new meanings.

Conclusion

Brook’s production, accordingly, could be seen as engaging with multiple
understandings of the idea of race. The production, at its very beginning, introduces the
idea of a universal human race, and this idea recognizes all human beings as members of
one race. Race, understood in this sense, is a basis not for division but for unification.
This idea of race as a universal human category, then, is challenged by the appearance of
actors who belong to specific recognizable racial identities. The visible and also audible
differences among certain actors in terms of their skin color, facial and other physical
features, and speech styles always remind the viewer of certain established divisions
within the broader human category along racial lines, such as blackness and whiteness.
The production engages with yet another level of the concept of race when it provides
insights into divisions within the established racial categories, particularly within the
black racial category. At the same time, the production, by virtue of the fact that it is
based on a defining South Asian epic that engages with the idea of race, brings the South
Asian concept of race, which is drastically different from the modern Western
understanding of the concept, into the discourse.

These multiple understandings of the concept of race, I argue, are in dialogue with
each one. The dialogue between the first two understandings of the concept (i.e. race as
suggestive of a universal human category without any internal divisions and that as
suggestive of specific established racial identities within the broader human category), no
matter how contradictory it looks, is arguably at the heart of the idea of race. While any attempt at establishing humanity as a single racial category should begin with an acknowledgement of the existing racial distinctions within that broader category, the existing racial categories make sense only to the extent that they are seen first and foremost as human categories. In this sense, not only are the two understandings mutually complementary, but each is also crucial for the meaning of the other. The intra-racial distinctions that the production’s engagement with the idea of blackness foregrounds problematize the perceived stability of the “black” racial identity, or any racial identity for that matter, and this problematization adds a new layer of meaning to the idea of race. This problematization, in my view, indicates the possibility of conceptualizing specific racial identities, such as blackness, in ways that are different from the mainstream conceptualizations of those identities. Finally, the South Asian conception of race participates in the dialogue mainly by being absent from the picture. This conception of race is at the heart of the Sanskrit Mahabharata, but the production makes no explicit reference to it. This absence of meaning, in my view, further emphasizes the open-endedness of the idea of race. The dialogue that these different understandings of the idea of race engage in within the context of the production underscores the floating nature of race as a signifier.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

In this study, I have approached the Sanskrit epic primarily as an authoritative cultural text, which, in its contemporary receptions, has come to define certain ways of life and reinforce certain bases of division and discrimination in the broader South Asian society. My approach to the text has been defined by the broader ideological assumption that the authority of cultural texts such as the *Mahabharata* needs to be challenged as a necessary step towards raising awareness regarding the political role that those texts play in organizing society. The three works under analysis—ChitraBanerjee Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions*, Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel*, and Peter Brook’s *The Mahabharata*—are important in that they engage with the authoritative dimension of the Sanskrit epic by foregrounding and complicating certain established understandings that have traditionally reinforced the authoritative nature of the epic. By doing so, these works also call for a broader understanding of the concepts of the author, history, and race, which are three concepts that are intrinsically linked to the dominant discourse on the Sanskrit epic.

The shift of the authorship of the Sanskrit epic from Vyasa to Draupadi that *The Palace of Illusions* undertakes foregrounds the idea of the author in a manner that invites theoretical reflections on that idea. Draupadi’s position as a woman in a world primarily defined by patriarchal values enabled Divakaruni’s to retell the Sanskrit epic from a perspective that is significantly different from the traditional perspective of the epic. Given the inherently patriarchal nature of Hinduism and the mainstream Hindu culture, which the Sanskrit epic reinforces, this shift of the authorship to a woman in itself marks
a radical reconceptualization of the epic. This shift provides important insights into the
the authorship of the *Mahabharata* in particular and the idea of the author in general.
Given the important position that Vyasa holds in the broader Hindu religious and cultural
tradition, the conventional attribution of the *Mahabharata* to him depicts the Sanskrit
epic as direct word of God. In the traditional context of the Sanskrit epic, this specific
depiction entails a justification and largely uncritical acceptance of everything that the
epic is about, particularly the worldview that the epic advances. By shifting to the
perspective of Draupadi who represents an identity of secondary importance both within
and at the time of the Sanskrit epic and at the time of the novel, Divakaruni draws
attention to the fundamentally patriarchal nature of that worldview. The novel breaks, or,
at least, weakens, the mystical aura of the author of the *Mahabharata*, which had
rendered his gender identity unnoticeable and insignificant, and highlights his man-ness.
This highlighting of his man-ness is a necessary step that enables the reader to understand
the gender biases that the *Mahabharata* worldview involves.

As I have argued, *The Palace of Illusions* supports Roland Barthes’s idea of the
death of the author on one level. Divakaruni’s decision to distance herself from the
dominant perspective of the Sanskrit epic and retell the epic from the point of view of a
character who occupies a relatively underprivileged position in the *Mahabharata* world
indicates that Vyasa or the dominant discourse on the epic do not have complete control
over the text, particularly over how the text is interpreted. This situation echoes
Barthes’s position that a text, once completed, leaves the control of authorial intent.
Nevertheless, I have also argued that a complete denial of Vyasa’s authorial intent
significantly diminishes the novel’s importance as a political statement about the *Mahabharata*. The validity of the novel as a counter statement relies on the extent to which the Sanskrit epic is seen as emanating from a specific social, political, and ideological context. This shows that an understanding of the author’s subject position is important for a serious engagement with a given text. In this sense, I have argued that a serious and insightful engagement with the novel presupposes a relationship between a given text and its author in which the former is free from the latter to the extent that the former lends itself to interpretations that are radically different from its dominant interpretation, but at the same time, the latter is present to the extent that the dominant interpretation functions as a necessary point of reference or departure.

The blending of the Sanskrit epic narrative with contemporary Indian history, which Tharoor’s retelling of the epic involves, on one level, challenges the authority of the epic by telescoping the gap between the divine and mythical world of the epic that the Hindu culture upholds and the mundane world of Indian politics. On another level, it invites theoretical reflections on the very concept of history. Tharoor’s attribution of the *Mahabharata* personalities to contemporary political personalities and his reconceptualization of famous contemporary historical events in terms of the events in the epic result in redefining both kinds of personalities and events as well as blurring the gap between the past and the present, a gap that is central to the idea of history. As the central tenet of the chapter, I have argued that Tharoor’s presentation of established historical facts using the imagery and narrative structure of a story as well known as the *Mahabharata* accentuates the essentially literary nature of every act of historiography,
thus echoing Hayden White’s idea of history as a literary artefact. In my analysis, I have shown how Tharoor’s engagement with both the Sanskrit epic and contemporary Indian history provides a basis on which one could challenge the understanding that historical narratives are accounts of pure facts and recognize the essentially literary dimension of those narratives.

Peter Brook’s engagement with the concept of race in the context of the Sanskrit epic complicates that concept in an important way. Based on his concept of the “reality of zero,” he engages with the Sanskrit epic with the explicit intention of projecting a universalist image of the human being. His employment of a cast that is representative of different racial, cultural, and national identities is an important strategy that he adopts in this regard. I have shown how his engagement with the *Mahabharata* invokes multiple understandings of the concept: race as in the universal human race, race as understood in relation to different racial sub-categories within the broader human category, and the South Asian conception of race. Based on an analysis of Brook’s casting of certain actors of “black” racial identity, I have shown how the depiction of certain characters explicitly problematizes certain stereotypical understandings regarding racial blackness, while the depiction of certain others, consciously or unconsciously, results in reinforcing the same stereotypical understandings. I have argued that the intersection of the different conceptions of race that the play *The Mahabharata* creates a space for foregrounds the open-ended nature of the concept, thus resonating with Stuart Hall’s idea of race as a floating signifier.
This study shows how the three contemporary works function as sites in which the Sanskrit epic comes into contact with the contemporary discourses on the ideas of the author, history, and race. The dialogic and intertextual intersections of the epic and those discourses, on the one hand, results in redefining the epic; on the other hand, they provide important insights into the relevant concepts that the contemporary works engage with. It can be argued that each of the contemporary works calls into question the apparent stability that the relevant concept enjoys in the dominant discourse on the *Mahabharata* and foregrounds it as a site of theoretical reflection and contestation. Given the important place that the concepts of the author, history, and race occupies in the dominant discourse on the Sanskrit epic, this destabilization of those concepts undermines the authority of the epic. My detailed analysis of the ways in which the three contemporary works challenge the authority of the Sanskrit epic, I hope, will reinforce the critical approach to the *Mahabharata* in particular and authoritative cultural texts in general.
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