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The Word and the World

Bimal Krishna Matilal on the epics

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IN AN ESSAY on Virginia Woolf's critical writings, James Wood discusses how Woolf dealt with the competition that she faced from the subject matter at hand: other people's books. This competition, combined with Woolf's talent as a writer, gave the language of her criticism a metaphorical—or literary rather than explanatory—quality, not different from that which imbues her own fiction. "A flurry of trapped loyalties," as Wood calls it, drives this tone of intimacy, where the usually distant language of criticism is perforated with the linguistic finesse and play of the primary material, both competing with it and "speaking to fiction in its own accent."

Indian commentaries on the classical epics, Mahabharata and Ramayana, tend to use a comparable critical language, one that combines close assessment of the epic with a creative recasting. The long tradition of commentaries by Sanskrit authors on the whole or part of the epics began in the eleventh century. These commentaries were tailored to the interests of the commentator, or the school of thought to which she belonged. Devabodha's *Jnanadipika*, an eleventh-century commentary on the Mahabharata, is one of the earliest examples of writings on the epic, along with Abhinavagupta's early-eleventh-century *Gitartha Samgraha*, a commentary on the Bhagavad Gita that reads this episode of the Mahabharata as prevailing over the dichotomy of the self and the other.

Before Devabodha's commentary, the epics were often treated as textbooks of ethical principles, as *dharmaśastras*. For scholars such as the eighth-century Kumarila Bhatta, they were indistinguishable from texts of systematic philosophy. On the other hand, aesthetes such as Anandavardhana and Kuntaka, who wrote in the ninth and tenth century respectively, saw in the Mahabharata the success of literary archetypes. Over time, just reading the epics was not enough, and commentaries became the medium through which to approach, or appropriate, them. These commentaries were also the basis of various philosophical positions, with commentators from Karnataka, such as Vadiraja Tirtha, using them to endorse devotional movements such as Vaishnavism. Some Sanskrit scholars and commentators, such as Debi Misra and Chaturbhuj Misra, were called to Akbar's court from Bengal to assist with the Persian adaptation of the Mahabharata, titled *Razmnama*.

Even when not in direct competition with their source material, commentaries on the Sanskrit epics involve a distinctive reading strategy that one seldom encounters in essays or scholarly works on contemporary or classical literature. This comes out of the way these commentaries handle their subject—as texts with an independent array

of references, ethics and actions. In his essay “Sanskrit Literary Culture from the Inside Out,” the scholar Sheldon Pollock describes the distinction made in theories of Sanskrit literature between texts created by a normal human agent (*kavya*, or literature), by a special agent or a mythic seer (*itihasa-purana*, or epics such as the Mahabharata and Ramayana) and from no agent whatsoever (revealed texts, such as the Vedas). These categories were, however, permeable and unstable, the best example of this instability being Ved Vyasa’s Mahabharata, which has elements of both *kavya* and *itihasa*. However, there remains a crucial difference between commentary on a work of *kavya*, which is in the nature of critique and interpretation, and on an *itihasa-purana*, which can take the form of interpolation. According to Pollock, this is true of the Mahabharata. Further, a “whole history of reading the epic, which is sedimented in centuries of commentary on it, never treats the work as anything but a text of the seers, with an ontology, authority, and referentiality radically different from *kavya*.”

In an essay from 2010, titled “Sanskrit Philosophical Commentary,” Jonardon Ganeri, a professor of philosophy at New York University, describes the different kinds of commentaries that have been prevalent in the Sanskrit tradition. Those primary texts, known as *sutras*—such as *Nyaya sutra* and *Vaisesika sutra*—are highly compact, so some commentaries on them, such as *bhasya*, were mere simplifications of what was contained in the original text. There were other commentaries, though, known as *varttika*, that critically engaged with the source text by looking into what has been said (*ukta*), what has not been said (*anukta*) or what lacks clarity (*durukta*). This engagement, however, was superseded by the kind of freedom assumed by a *gudhartha* commentary, which was an all-out interpretation, a close reading of the text. As the name suggests, *gudhartha*—or “hidden meaning”—took it upon itself to reveal the text’s deeper resonances and produce alternative readings of it. Madhudusana Saraswati’s sixteenth-century commentary, *Gudartha Dipika*, is one such work about the Gita.

The sheer range of exegetical material available on classical texts is evidence that the epics remain indispensable to our literary past, and in some ways are formative to our present. This past, more often than not, looms heavily like a cloud, from which each commentary draws a different kind of rain. Whether they make a philosophical point or an ideological one, commentaries have been a tool of both addressing the past and, in some ways, appropriating it for the demands of contemporary discourse.

Bimal Krishna Matilal was a leading Indian philosopher and commentator of the twentieth century. Matilal does not treat the epics as the work of “seers” and his assessment largely concerns itself with the ethical tumult at the heart of these classical narratives. Besides commenting on specific episodes from the epics, there is an impulse in Matilal’s essays, as in commentaries from the more distant past, to restate these epics. Even when not transcribing them in their entirety, Matilal and his predecessors extensively quote and paraphrase the stories from them. This is to present evidence for the arguments being made, but this restating also brings back attention to certain aspects that might have been lost from public memory. Matilal’s essays, along with many others written by philosophers, historians and economists in recent years—Arindam Chakrabarti, Romila Thapar and Bibek Debroy, to name a few—not only grapple with the meanings of the epics, but, by repeating and curating these stories, foreground the language of the epics.

While Matilal had a prolific career as a philosopher of Sanskrit grammar and logic, the reasoned yet sensitive critical language he employed in his reading of Indian epic literature holds some value for our reading culture in general, and criticism in particular. The short, accessible essays in which he undertook this commentary were written in the 1980s, the last years of his career, but were concerned with the ethical and aesthetic dilemmas that had occupied him throughout. Matilal, whom Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak referred to as “the greatest alternative epistemologist I have known,” consciously distanced himself from the kind of commentary that sought to only place its subject in history, locating the characters and the issues involved in the classical past. At the same time, he did not go so far as to make contemporaries out of these epical characters, which is a recent trend in a lot of self-help and corporate-driven commentaries on the Mahabharata, particularly the Gita. Instead, he drew on his training in philosophical analysis, particularly in the field of ethics, to understand what the epical tradition might reveal for humanism and morality in general.

Matilal’s reading of the epics, as well as his assessment of earlier readings by Rabindranath Tagore, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, tells us something about how an intellectual tradition comes into being by constantly rereading and engaging with the literature of the past. Matilal reads the epics not just as an analytic philosopher with a thorough knowledge of Indian texts, but also as someone who views these texts as part of the rich storytelling culture of the subcontinent. Matilal’s commentary walks a fine line between

submitting to the narrative authority of the text and extending its unresolved conundrums into a discussion of ethics, and reasoning in general. This makes for a kind of reading that is both sympathetic to what the text discloses and alert to what it resists and is uncomfortable with. It is the latter that is so often missing from the prescriptive readings of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* by commentators such as Devdutt Pattanaik and Gurcharan Das, who do raise ethical questions found in the epics, but also see them as resolved in the text, ready to be absorbed in one's everyday life as leadership lessons or behavioural skills. Matilal shows us how to constantly renew our bonds with a text as readers without yielding entirely to its logic.

BIMAL KRISHNA MATILAL WAS BORN in Joynagar in 1935 and, alongside being trained at the University of Calcutta, acquired the degree of *tarkatirtha*—master of logic—under the guidance of Sanskrit pandits. He pursued doctoral work at Harvard University under Daniel Ingalls, a leading Sankrit scholar and translator. After teaching in Toronto for a decade, he was, in 1976, appointed the Spalding professor of eastern religion and ethics at the University of Oxford—a position held previously by the leading philosopher and former president of India, S Radhakrishnan. His training in Indian philosophy, although limited to the schools of Nyaya and the philosophy of logic, was crucial to his later engagement with Western analytical philosophy, particularly his research on mathematical logic with the likes of WVO Quine, the famous analytic philosopher and logician, and his pupil D Føllesdal.

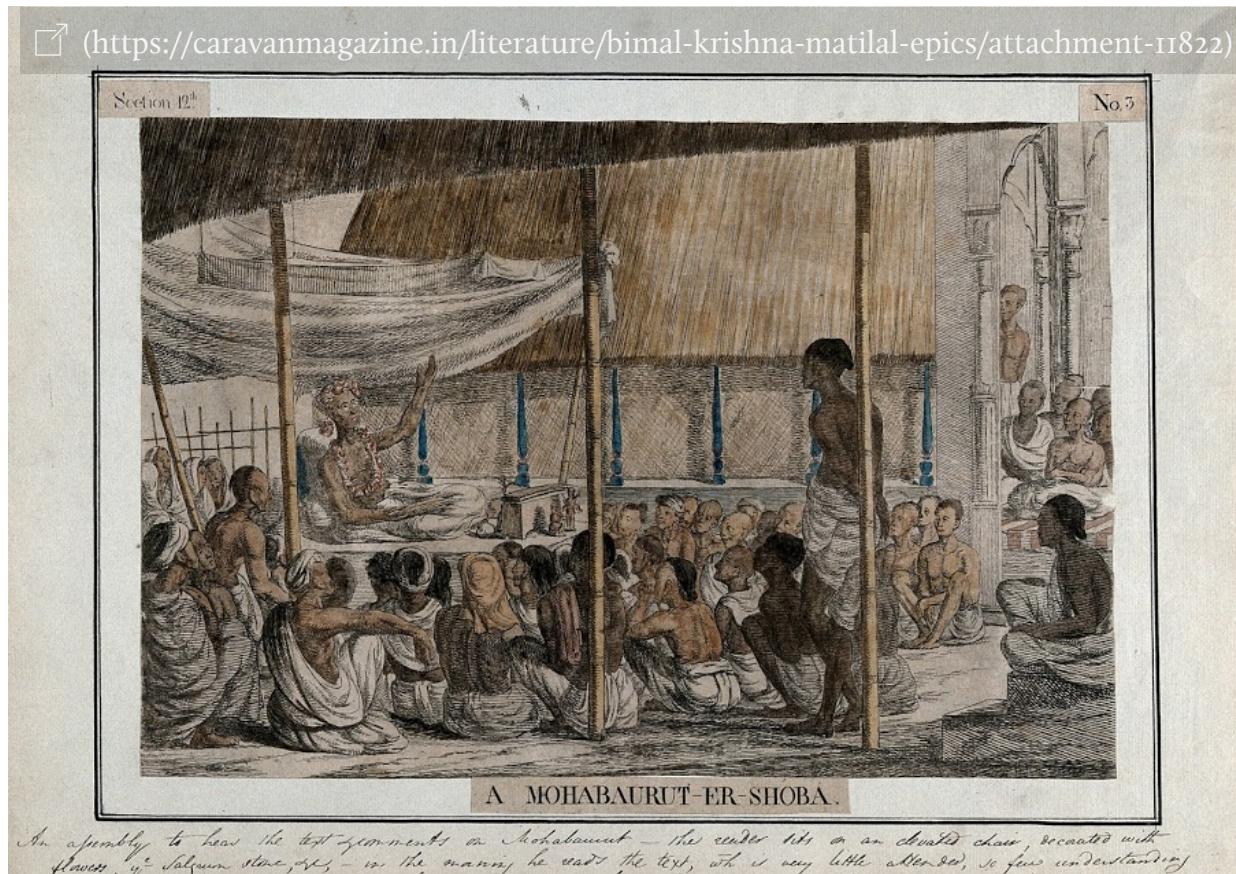
**Bimal Krishna Matilal's reading of epics
tells us something about how an
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The two volumes of *The Collected Essays of Bimal Krishna Matilal*, edited by Jonardon Ganeri, bring together his lectures, articles and shorter essays over two volumes. The second volume, aptly titled *Ethics and Epics*, collects Matilal's pieces on the ethical conundrums in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. In an essay on Rama, who in many past commentaries is recognised as the touchstone for ethical behaviour, Matilal sees the hero's moral choices as “nothing if not formalistic in character.” By this he means that the authority with which Rama makes these choices are not drawn from Rama, but from a “dehumanized norm of human conduct” that governed social

relations of the time. Matilal catalogues the compromises that Rama makes throughout the epic, and yet the epic reserves the highest place for him and his ethical standards. This is not a mere oversight; Rama is protected by the very laws that he allegedly evades. Matilal writes:

If the opinion of the citizens was so important that Sita had to be abandoned in an almost inhuman manner, why did Rama go to the forest in the first place against the will of all citizens? The answer lies in understanding the same kind of formalistic ethical principles that held the highest authority in the society of which Rama was a part. It is the most flexible and pervasive Sanskrit term, *dharma*.



An etching by the Belgian painter Frans Balthazar Solvyns, depicting a crowd listening to a recital and commentary on the Mahabharata in Calcutta. COURTSEY WELLCOME COLLECTION

Although a formal code of conduct would suggest that a rigid system of laws and dharma, or ethical principles, in the epic is contingently defined, or, at best, spelled out in moments of crisis. Ironically, though, no one in the epic, especially not Rama, claims a place outside these laws. Acts of transgressions, thus, do not signal a freedom from these laws but rather a new crisis of definition.

The killing of Bali, the invincible monkey-ruler of Kishkindha, is another instance where Rama's presumably faultless nature comes under serious examination—this time not in a commentary but within the epic itself. In exchange for Sugriva's support, Rama vows to kill Bali, Sugriva's brother, and Sugriva, who was earlier deposed from the throne and banished from the kingdom on the charges of betrayal, uses Rama's promise to finally execute his revenge. Bali, however, had been granted the boon of invincibility, which is why Rama chooses to shoot an arrow at him from behind a tree. Bali, in his dying moments, asks Rama to explain his conduct, and the latter justifies his actions with an oblique reference to Sugriva, and suggests that it was Bali's violation of ethical codes of conduct that led to the confrontation in the first place.

The Indian nationalist and teacher Bal Gangadhar Tilak's comment about this episode, quoted by Matilal, not only extends Rama's logic but also is characteristic of Tilak's activist reinterpretation of the epics: *dandartha adhe darsanana peksanat* — ethics do not circumscribe punitive action. The implication is that formal ethics of war are annulled when a killing is a punitive action. On such occasions in the epic, Rama has to justify his own position with regard to the principles of dharma. This is what encourages Matilal to read Rama's moral decisions, and the justifications he offers for them, as a straightforward affirmation of the formal code of conduct. These codes are not formulated in the character of Rama or by him, but rather form the framework for Rama's actions and his utterances. Krishna is the only character in the Mahabharata who is above these formal codes and, as we shall see, there is a rationale provided for his transcendence.

In an essay on the Bengali novelist and poet Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Matilal writes:

He expended a considerable amount of time and intellectual energy writing an almost modern commentary of the colossal epic, the *Mahabharata*, to chisel out the character of Krishna, the supreme deity after his heart: *Krishna-Caritra*. His Krishna was, however, a different kind of Krishna; he was the Perfect Man, the Perfect Diplomat and the Perfect Upholder of Justice. He rejected in a somewhat high-handed manner everything else in the epics and the puranas about Krishna (including the Vrindavana-lila) as spurious or interpolations by later hands. In his words, whatever his late nineteenth-century sense of

decency did not find congenial, was declared as only an *upanyas* (a fiction). Most of his arguments in his *Krishna-carita* would be found unacceptable and wrong today.

Chattopadhyay reads classical texts, particularly sections from the *Mahabharata*, *Bhagvata Purana* and *Harivamsa*, so as to make definitive claims about an idealised Hinduism. The perfection in Krishna's character was for Chattopadhyay a useful symbol for his reworking of Hinduism in the light of what he saw as the errors of Western Indologists. Matilal, however, sees in Chattopadhyay's work an ambition not very different from the Indologists he was writing against. Chattopadhyay's commentary too, like that of the Indologists, is concerned with the question of historicity, such as the dates of the Kurukshetra war, and rather than questioning what Matilal calls the "explanatory principle of Indology," which searched for evidence only to affirm their agreed-upon assumptions, Chattopadhyay too was working with a pre-conceived conclusion—the moral perfection of Krishna.



A painting from the eighteenth century of Bali's funeral pyre in the Ramayana. DINODIA PHOTO

This is a mistake that Matilal also warns of in his essay "Krsna: In Defense of a Devious Divinity," pointing out that unconditionally valuing the ethical system of the

epic actually blinds us to the schisms that often ossify these ethics in the first place. The objective of reading, he appears to suggest, is not to affirm the ethical beliefs voiced by one section of the text, but to see how these beliefs sit with the ethical paradigms stated in other places in the same text, and within the history of Indian philosophy. Describing Krishna as a “moral agent,” Matilal thinks of his “devious” stratagems in the Kurukshetra battle, which lies at the heart of the Mahabharata, as ones that uphold dharma and thus seek justice at any cost. The exact nature of dharma is never spelt out in the epic, yet it is the abiding code of human action, as it was for Rama even when killing Bali. Matilal describes the operative dimension of such a code: “It is assumed that to breach the code is to lose one’s honour and one’s place in the social order, circumscribed by that moral code. But this rigidity can sometimes be challenged by a proper agent who has proven to be superior to others.” Krishna is this proper agent who effects, in Matilal’s words, “a paradigm shift,” and shows the limitations of a “generally accepted moral code of truth-telling and promise-keeping.” If Chattopadhyay’s Krishna was rendered perfect, for Matilal Krishna transcends other characters within the epic, and thus is allowed a unique threshold for his actions. This uniqueness is not a result of a dharmic perfection, but a transgression that is tolerated by the code.

Multiple commentaries, including those by Matilal, attempted to undo the claims of earlier nationalistic or simply mystical readings of the epics and classical literature.



Matilal’s reading is in many ways both *bhasya* and *gudharth*, in that he both clarifies and extends the reasoning Krishna adopts in the epic, and interprets how such a reasoning could at all be sustained in an epic so concerned with ethical truth. Instead of dismissing the imperfections of Krishna or dismissing the epic for tolerating these imperfections, he thinks of these conundrums as complicit with the ethical logic of the epic, and thereby of humanity. One would do well to remember that Krishna is also probed about his ethical choices after the battle by Gandhari, among others. When reminded of such ethical shortcomings, Krishna compares himself to the passionless cycle of time—that is, an indiscriminate force of destruction—and thereby tries to rise above the rigidity of a moral code. It is probably in the same spirit

that he ultimately becomes responsible for the destruction of his own race—the Yadavas.

Matilal's is not the only such revisionist reading. Multiple commentaries in post-independence India have tried to undo the claims of earlier nationalistic or simply mystical readings of the epics and classical literature. The most prominent of them is *Yuganta*, by the anthropologist Irawati Karve, published in Marathi in 1968 and later translated into English by Norman Brown. It makes a compelling case for characters marginalised by the epic and the commentaries alike, such as Gandhari, Kunti and Karna. These characters, as Karve's reading is devoted to proving, are restricted by the relations of gender and caste, dynamics that the narrative, and by extension ancient India, upheld. At the same time, for Karve, these characters are not merely an index for tracing historical relations, they always remain part of a literary force field in which characters act unpredictably and are constantly overcoming the social and epistemological limitations of their time. Karve is aware of the *Mahabharata*'s layered characterisation; her analysis is as much an assessment of characters in their social relations as it is a retelling of their lives from the epic, which, to say the least, are warped and often contradictory.

Karve, like Matilal after her, also recognises the importance of commentary as form, which is probably why she starts *Yuganta* with an interesting fact of book history: "In Maharashtra almost the first important Marathi book was a commentary on the *Gita* written in the year 1290 A.D." Produced at a time when the epics were just beginning to get renewed scholarly attention in independent India, Karve's own commentary, if one can call it that, goes a long way in glossing certain aspects of the text—especially the details of Gandhari's life—that had not until then figured in canonical commentary. Her work, in this regard, goes further than Matilal's in addressing certain gaps in the commentarial tradition. In *Yuganta*, one often encounters events, such as Arjuna and Krishna's burning of the Khandava forest and the Naga tribe within it, or ideas such as Vidur possibly being the father of Yudhishthira, which are nowhere to be found in the public memory of the epics. Matilal's work on the epics, on the other hand, "is informed, first and foremost, by a deep humanism, a conviction that the classical thinkers should not be thought of as mysterious, exotic or tradition-bound creatures," Ganeri notes, "but as rational agents trying to understand their cultures and societies with as little prejudice as possible." If Karve turns to social

history to undo the exoticising slant of past readings, Matilal turns to philosophy, and ethics and reason in particular.

VYING TO CORRECT the “at best poetic and at worst dogmatic” view of Indian philosophy, Matilal turned to the study of epics only during the last decade of his career. Earlier, Matilal had emphasised, in an essay written on Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, “the particularity of each context” and how every context in itself is “unique and incommensurable.” In all likelihood, he turned to classical literature to find such contexts—a set of “incommensurable” and unique circumstances that require an equally distinctive reading. Perhaps for Matilal, literature also allowed for an instantiation, a context, for ethics that in the domain of philosophy remains an abstraction. This intricate context that literature makes manifest can be said to be of utmost importance to his style of commentary. Matilal writes: “The story-telling activity has thus one important aspect. It is an unconscious concretization of an abstract moral discourse.” Always embedded in a narrative context, the epics allow him to engage with ethics in its most impetuous and singular form. Matilal’s reading of the Duryodhana story is an engagement with one such context.

The commentary makes it clear that Duryodhana’s is not a straightforward tale about greed and eventual downfall. Duryodhana is wronged by others on many counts, as much as he wrongs others. Matilal refers to the sixth-century poet Bharavi’s *Kiratarjuniya*, Canto 1, a graphic account of how Duryodhana was ruling the earth when the Pandavas were away, in which portrayal the prince is far from unimpressive. Neither does the epic, at least in Matilal’s reading, anywhere claim that Duryodhana is innately evil, nor is any other character in the narrative inherently virtuous. Such ambivalence complicates the ethical lessons to be learnt from the epic, and this is precisely Matilal’s point. He does not think of the epic—and one can also say this about his commentary in general—as something meant to assist us in our ethical conduct. Duryodhana’s situation, and that of every other character, remains incommensurable with each other’s, and ours. They each follow the codes that in their contexts they think are ethical, and for Matilal it is this very ethical and humanist temperament that the epics need to be read for. Matilal’s conclusions about Duryodhana, though, are not entirely convincing. He writes, “All the three main characters, Dhritarashtra, Duryodhana and Yudhishthira, who were connected with the throne, came to realize the hollowness of everything. Victory or defeat did not have any effect on the total outcome—a total anti-climax to a great and absorbing

story promising a great climactic finish.” There is scant evidence in the epic that Duryodhana realises this “hollowness,” in the way that, say, Hamlet is capable of reflecting on his flaw. Even in his dying moments, all Duryodhana can talk about are the tactical mistakes that cost him the battle.

Chaturvedi Badrinath’s commentary *Mahabharata: An Enquiry in the Human Condition*, published in 2006, is another text where the humanist temperament of the epic, its proclivity to raise universal questions about human life and action, is brought centre stage. His commentary cites the *dramatis personae* of the epic as being: “the self and the other.” That is how Badrinath recasts a text swarming with social conflicts and moral hierarchies, into a dialectical relationship between the self and the world it is surrounded by. Nevertheless, in his study, which runs into 700 pages and features more than five hundred couplets from the original text, Badrinath never loses sight of these gaps—between legitimacy and illegitimacy, truth and deceit, genders and castes—and shows in each chapter how the *Mahabharata*, and its multiple selves, is occupied by them. These contradictions are not mitigated in the course of the epic. They remain knotted and, on occasion, impenetrable. Matilal, writing much before Badrinath, tries to come to terms with these schisms in his own way.

The narrative of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, according to Matilal, presents an internal critique of discrimination and social hierarchies. He believes that, as rational actors working towards a pragmatic and yet moral end, the epics’ characters are aware of, and express, the unevenness of their world. In his essay “Caste, Karma and the Gita,” he writes that this internal critique is based on “a form of rationality not very different from what we call rationality today. This form of rationality came into conflict with the form of relativism which the caste-relative set of *dharma*-prescriptions encourages.” It is not only in hindsight, and with the critical knowledge that modernity affords, that we are able to read the asymmetry in the epics; this viewpoint is, according to Matilal, implicit in the story.

Matilal suggests that despite having read Indian texts for the longest time, Western philosophers have not been able to locate the texts with its own internal arguments and conflicts.



Matilal's use of the concept of "rationality" as the basis of this "internal critique" does not fully convince, however. Many ethical fissures in the Mahabharata can hardly be rationally explained, and even when mouthed by the actors involved, there is no reason to take it literally. For instance, Matilal's account of sexual relations in the epic, and how they involve consent and agency, remains a very literal reading of the incidents at hand. In his essay "Love and Sensuality in the Epics," he discusses the story of Agastya and Lopamudra, narrated in the Aranya Parva of the Mahabharata, and sees in Lopamudra's refusal to consummate their marriage until her demands are met a moment of agency. The story involves the scheming demon brothers Ilvala and Vatapi. Vatapi would enter bodies of wayfarers in the form of food cooked by Ilvala, and then come back to life at an opportune time, killing the wayfarer and securing the loot. In Matilal's version of events, Agastya overpowers the demons and brings home wealth for Lopamudra:

Ilvala prepared a dish of goat meat, as before, for Agastya. Afterwards, when he was calling his brother back to life, Agastya said with a smile: 'Your brother, Vatapi, has been consumed by me. So, your foul game is over.' Ilvala was thus subdued and he then fulfilled the demands of Agastya. Agastya wanted for each of the three kings ten thousand oxen with an equal number of gold pieces, and for himself twenty thousand oxen, a golden chariot and many other objects of pleasure. Ilvala had to give all these things and now Agastya returned to his hermitage triumphantly to fulfil the desire of Lopamudra.

Lopamudra's desire, however, is entirely dependent on Agastya's "ability" to fulfill it, and one is therefore hard-pressed to read the story as a narrative of freedom, let alone feminine agency. Matilal is quite an adept reader of ethics and the moral relativism that is at play throughout the epics, but his take on the question of freedom and agency seems limited. Spivak, who co-wrote with Matilal an unpublished manuscript titled "Epic and Ethic," cited his reading of Sita as a point of divergence between them. "Matilal's reading, contained again within the discourse of the social institution of marriage, was that Sita was not only a woman who supported her husband in every way but a woman of incomparable courage and self-respect, in that she chose to remove herself from the world rather than be welcomed back with forgiveness. I connected Sita to the feminine transcendental." This is not to say that

Matilal's commentary on Sita does not do justice to the story, but rather the freedom that he attributes to Sita is not always borne out by the story.



A scene from the Mahabharata. The epic, according to Matilal, presents an internal critique of discrimination and social hierarchies. DINODIA PHOTO

MATILAL'S READING IS ALSO SHAPED by a conscious distancing from an Indological past—the writings of William Jones, Henry Colebrooke and August Schlegel, among others. In an essay titled “Radhakrishnan and the Problem of Modernity in Indian Philosophy,” Matilal lauds Radhakrishnan for breaking with the materialist analysis of the past and ushering a more complex understanding of Indian thought:

But the old Indological idea of discovering scientifically, through archaeological excavations, as it were, the *virgin meanings* of the texts, in their pristine purity, has by now been exploded ... Any outstanding philosophical text would be rich with ambiguities, so that it would admit of several, sometimes contesting, interpretations.

While Bertrand Russell's sole issue with Radhakrishnan's first volume of *Indian Philosophy*, a pioneering text in its field, was that it did not address the Hellenistic influences on Indian thought, Matilal, in this essay, is keen to provide a rejoinder. His complaint against Western philosophers is that despite having read Indian texts for the longest time, they have not been able to locate these texts in a tradition with its own internal arguments and conflicts. His commentary on the epics is a step in this direction, as it explores questions of morality, human virtues, duty and freedom without really leaving the narrative of the epics themselves. His commentary is devoted to its source, and this is precisely what makes these essays a dependable resource to approach the epics. Commentaries such as these mediate our relationship with the text but they also, in some ways, replace the text. The Mahabharata and Ramayana can barely be mastered by a reader on her own, and thus commentaries such as Matilal's bring to us an awareness of our own position of centrality as readers of the epic, and how that position can be commandeered to think about our concerns with the epics. In Matilal's case, these concerns are ethical.

From George Orwell's pessimistic dismissal of the Shakespeare criticism—"if there really is such a thing as turning in one's grave, Shakespeare must get a lot of exercise"—to Susan Sontag's suspicions about interpretation as "intellect's revenge upon art," the twentieth century has seen many doubts cast on the practices with which we approach a literary text. Commentaries on the epics do not, of course, escape some of the limitations that have been levelled against other interpretive practices, but all the same, their handling of the epics does not allow the stories to ever lose their appeal, or become anything more or less than inimitable works of literature.

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