**PUNISHMENT IN KINDERGARTEN**

"Punishment in Kindergarten" is a little autobiographical poem by the famous Indo-Anglian poet Kamala Das.  She recalls one of her childhood experiences.  When she was in the kindergarten, one day the children were taken for a picnic. All the children except her were playing and making merry.  But she alone kept away from the company of the children.  Their teacher, a blue-frocked woman, scolded her saying.

                        "Why don't you join the others, what

                        A peculiar child you are!"

            This heard, all the other children who were sipping sugar cane turned and laughed.  The child felt it very much.  She became sad at the words of the teacher.  But the laughter by the children made her sadder.  She thought that they should have consoled her rather than laughing and insulting her.  Filled with sorrow and shame she did her face in a hedge and wept.  This was indeed a painful experience to a little child in the nursery school.

            Now after many years she has grown into an adult.  She has only a faint memory of the blue-frocked woman and the laughing faces of the children.  Now she has learned to have an 'adult peace' and happiness in her present state as a grown-up person.  Now there is no need for her to be perturbed about that bitter kindergarten experience.  With her long experience in life she has learned that life is a mixture of joy and sorrow.  She remembers how she has experienced both the joy and sorrow of life.  The long passage of time has taught her many things.  She is no more a lonely individual as she used to feel when she was a child.  The poet comes to a conclusion that there is no need for her to remember that picnic day, when she hid her face in the hedge, watching the steel-white sun, that was standing lonely in the sky.

            The poem is written in three stanzas, each having different number of lines – the first with seven lines, the second with six and the third with nine.  The poem does not follow any regular rhyme scheme.  The subject matter of the poem has two parts, the first of which being the description of the painful experience of the kindergarten days and the second, the adult's attitude to the incident at present when she is no more a child.

            The poet seems to be nostalgic about her childhood days.  There are certain expressions in the poem that are worth remembering.  The poet says that the child buried its face in the hedge and "smelt the flowers and the pain".  "Smelt the flowers" can be taken as an ordinary expression, but "smelt the pain" is something very evocative and expressive.  In the first stanza of the poem, the poet describes the pain caused to the child, "throwing words like pots and pans".  This again is beautiful.  The phrase used by the poet to describe the child's teacher, namely, "blue-frocked woman" can be justified from the child's point of view.  But to the poet who is an adult the use of the phrase looks a little too awkward.  On the whole, the poem can be taken as the poet's interest in remembering her childhood days.

**TRYST WITH DESTINY**

Tryst with Destiny was a speech made by Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), the first Prime Minister of independent India. The speech was made to the Indian Constituent Assembly, on the eve of India's Independence, towards midnight on 14 August 1947.  
  
It focuses on the aspects that transcend India's history. It is considered to be one of the greatest speeches of all time and to be a landmark oration that captures the essence of the triumphant culmination of the hundred-year non-violent Indian freedom struggle against the British Empire in India. The phrase "rendezvous with destiny" was used by Franklin D. Roosevelt in his 1936 Democratic National Convention speech, inspiring the similar phrase "tryst with destiny" by Jawaharlal Nehru.

Satyagraha was a major root for success of the seemingly never-ending struggle for freedom in India and this is deeply acknowledged in Nehru’s speech. The reference made to the concept and its pioneer, coupled with particularly effective pathetic appeal would only cause fierce patriotism and love in the heart of any Indian who listened to it because of the fervour with which they respected and idolised the Father of the Nation and his ideas.

Nehru’s speech is very devotional to his country and its people; every sentence and every remark might have caused the audience to feel pride and all the tyrannical British leaders to feel ashamed at their deeds. Pandit Nehru in his speech, at one point, expresses, “A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance.” The Indian man, who had been facing the same immense wretchedness and woe that his ancestors had been facing for almost 300 years, would find himself very proud that he was one of those many people who brought about peace and sovereignty to his nation.

Nehru was very sensible in his approach towards the matter of independence in his speech and at no point did he make any reference to the freedom movement as being an intense struggle due to the injustice meted out by the British; the words he used had positive connotations and did not accuse anyone. In his speech, he pointed out, “This is no time for petty and destructive criticism, no time for ill-will or blaming others” and also proudly declared, “[...] India stands forth again, after long slumber and struggle, awake, vital, free and independent”. These lines would make the Indians, despite having faced the wrath of the British Empire and paramount injustice, feel like they should learn to forgive as this was nobler thing to do, and because it supported the idea of satyagraha; this feeling would cause them to lift their heads in pride and know that they are on the correct path. Meanwhile, the same lines would make a person who along with his people was the perpetrator of vindictiveness to an innocent nation to bow his head in guilt for causing such wrong. All in all, Nehru’s speech, despite being supremely neutral, caused fierce emotions to arise in the hearts of people.

In other words, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru’s speech was not only extremely stately, but also full of humility and paid homage to all people and their efforts (satyagraha) in bringing about the position of self-governance to India.

His references to dawn and awakenings relate to the new beginning that Indians are experiencing at the time in which the speech was delivered. He refers to India as *the star of freedom in the East*, a reference to both the rising sun and a bright star, in which Nehru hopes India to become. He also makes reference to the struggles in which India has suffered, yet states his optimism in India becoming a prosperous nation.

Throughout his speech he also discusses peace with not only each other, but the rest of the world. Pakistan and Bangladesh considered and subsequently split from the original India, however Nehru wanted to emphasize the *noble mansion of* *free India in which all her children may dwell*.

Even with his constant references to peace, equality and freedom for the newly born India, he also does not fail to mention that much work needed to be done. Talking about the vast rates of poverty in India, he strikes a more personal chord with the audience. Nehru continues to pull on people’s thoughts on a personal level throughout the entire speech, and also instils in them a sense of optimism for the future of the new state of India.

Nehru uses his impeccable speaking ability, hence his power, to draw parallels between the struggles of the Indian people and the bright future in which he envisions for the new nation. This manipulation and influence in which Nehru demonstrates is a form of invisible yet strong power, and it is this that he continued to demonstrate throughout his successful 17 years as Prime Minister of the new, powerful India.

**PROFESSIONAL MOURNERS**

Alagu Subramaniam’s “Professional Mourners” portrays an episode from a funeral in a village in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. Although the short story fluently reads a piece of creative writing, it conveys a careful survey on an ostentatious and meaningless tradition connected with the funeral rites of the community concerned. Subramaniam has formulated the topic for the short story capturing the core of the subject he deals with. To many parts of Sri Lanka the deployment of professional mourners at a funeral sounds hilarious. Yet it is a tradition of central importance to certain communities in the Northern and North-Western Provinces of Sri Lanka. When somebody dies in a family all the survivors of his or hers will naturally become mourners and, depending on the level of their emotional attachment to the diseased, they may silently cry or vociferate their lamentations. Yet they all cannot join in the long-winded howling expected to be performed inside the room where the coffin is deposited. They may be busy organizing various aspects of the funeral or they may take time to reach the location. So the affluent middle-class families in these territories deploy a group of professional mourners whose sole job is to sit by the coffin and howl, especially when an important guest arrives to pay respect to the diseased. Their intention is to simulate an emotional atmosphere so as to impress upon the guest that the diseased is so highly missed by a large group of people from within the family as well as from the neighbourhood. The professional mourners are basically women. They become professional through their creativity demonstrated in terms of integrating themselves into the atmosphere, cleverly pretending to be part of the family, wailing and reciting panegyrical statements on the diseased as if they have associated with him or her for many years, impacting the emotions of the others, and getting them to join in the sobbing, crying, and howling. The type of emotionalism they energetically engender into the atmosphere is however beyond the imagination of the closest relations of the diseased. One has to be emotionally distant to the diseased to preserve the energy for the theatrical type of mourning required by the families. Today funeral organisation has become a lucrative industry all over the island of Sri Lanka. On the basis of the demands their clients make, the funeral undertakers have differently-priced funeral packages with various features, and some include even a team of mourners to suit the clients they deal with. Subramaniam covers a period some decades before, when funeral undertaking evolved into a commercially-appreciated service industry like today. He appropriately adopts the voice of a juvenile to relate his experience so as to turn the narration into a consummate account of the setting. If not for that, he would not be able to satirize the custom of retaining professional mourners so effectively.

*Exciting Element in Death*

Subramaniam provides an effective introduction to his short story by reviving the excitement of the narrator as a child caused by his grandmother’s death. In terms of recollections he presents the unusual changes seen in the atmosphere as entailed by this late-night incident. Death turns into an exciting social occasion by immediately attracting a large group of people into the house of the diseased. The hustle-bustle becomes so vibrant that it even wakens the children sleeping fast in the neighbouring houses. The “cries” and “the sound of drums” function as immediacies of the social occasion developing on the basis of death which is bereavement for the adults and adventure for the children. “ We pushed our way through the crowd to the centre of the hut in search of our mother. We were feeling afraid because it was the first funeral we had attended.”

 Through the excitement of the children, Subramaniam achieves anticipation for something special. As his subject is “professional mourners” it is understood that the particular group of people employed so are supposed to play an important role in the narrative.

*Uncle’s Self-Importance as Master of Ceremonies*

The ritualization of death leads to the creation of a voluntary appointment for an enthusiastic person as “Master of Ceremonies”. The narrator’s uncle, “a teacher in a small school and a trifle mad”, seems to have appointed himself for it in this setting, generating an element of absurdity. Subramaniam sarcastically introduces him by this designation to imply that he uses it to show off his power and prestige in a capacity as the person “in charge of all arrangements on such occasions”. He characterizes this schoolmaster uncle as an empty vessel in the statement, “He always spoke rapidly and loudly”. The metaphor of “shout” repeatedly connected with his presence reinforces his portrayal as a self-important garrulous man. Subramaniam dramatizes the man’s loud behaviour, to suit the theme of mourning in the short story.

*Uncle’s Hunt for Mourners*

“I was anxious to see the mourners about whom I had heard many stories”. The narrator’s confession makes it clear that the mourners are a curious lot. Their dwellings are located in a remote place isolated from the rest of the community . The auditory hallucinations of “ jackals”  and “snakes” that occur to the narrator suggest  the element of solitude dominating the “sandy lanes and narrow winding footpaths”  he walks through with his uncle. The location where the “Master of Ceremonies” arrives in at first is a fishing village. Capitalizing on the superior class status he holds, the man condescendingly shouts at the fishermen he meets, "Stop, stop…  Don't you know that my aunt's funeral is to take place today? … You should be there instead of on the seashore." He means that, under any circumstance, they have a strict order to work for him. The insults he applies on them, “stupid rascals” and “low-minded fellows”, suggest intimidation. The men’s response to all this shouting and threatening implies their ungrudging servitude. "We shall be there soon." They leave all their work behind and get ready to go to his place. Then the man walks on to a set of huts much smaller than those of the fishermen’s. "That is where these wretched women live." He sounds more vigorous before the mourners as they are much weaker than the fishermen. Subramaniam portrays the mourners as women, dressed in coarse saris which did not come over their shoulders or heads, wearing bangles from their wrists to their elbows and anklets that jingled as they came forward. They are basically artists in their own right. The “Master of Ceremonies” continues to threaten them with his angry shouting. The mourners, on bended knees, continue to plead with him by all means. Utterly dissatisfied with the availability of two mourners, he asks for the others, and gets to know of two sisters among them, bereaved of their mother. Disregarding their obligation to pay respect to their own mother who died the same day, he gets the others to lead the way. “Nonsense!” His response suggests he has no regard for them at all. When the two sisters report their inability to leave their own mother and cry for some outsider, the man shouts, “Impudence!” He just wants them to cry for his aunt. "It is not fair, as they will have to shed tears of genuine sorrow on the loss of their mother instead of pretending at your place." The mediator’s words uttered in favour of the two daughters who have lost their mother the same morning reveal the truth about their sad plight under the command of this wicked uncle of the narrator. Yet his response does not differ at all though he uses a different term, “Insolence!” He even reprimands the narrator for nodding approval of what the women say. "Don't be a silly fool… What do you know of these things? Your father's lawyer friends are expected. His Honour the Supreme Court Judge and the Police Magistrate are coming, and what will they think about us if we don't have enough mourners?" The explanation he conveys at this point reveals the insignificance of this tradition. It is only an effort focused on ostentation and aggrandizement. Just because some elite members of society would come for the funeral the host intends putting up a grand show of mourners. The theatrical wailing is supposed to enhance the tragic element of death, engaging even the powerful and strong visitors in the mourning. Claiming their indispensability at their own mother’s funeral, they unsuccessfully try to have a release from the man. Yet the man does not change. They promise to come on another occasion when there is a funeral. "I'll have you flogged by the magistrate for such impudence." The man threatens to get them prosecuted through his influential relations and punished for disobeying his command. He even physically drags them by their saris. Finally, he releases them when they assure him of their coming. In its entirety, what the “Master of Ceremonies” does to employ the mourners at his aunt’s funeral is a hunt. He threatens them, intimidates them, insults them, disregards their grievances, and forces them out of their house, where their mother lays dead and cold waiting to be interred that afternoon. The deprivation the women suffer at the hand of this wicked self-important man is symbolic of the agony of their servitude. The man acts as a feudal lord commanding his vassals.

*Service in Full Swing*

Although it is prose narration, Subramaniam dramatizes the histrionic behaviour of the professional mourners through his verisimilitudinous portrayal of their performance. They boost the “crying” carried out “in groups of twos and threes” by the women relatives and friends of the dead , with a new wave of energy generated by “throwing their hands in the air”, ruffling “their hair”, and beating their “heads”, “shoulders” and “breasts”.

 The gestural force added to the sobbing and wailing boosts and volumes the vocal effect. Yet there is a subtle class distinction between the genuine mourners in the family and the professional mourners hired for the occasion maintained through the distance in the seating arranged for them on a carpet. Quite professionally, they take the lead in the choral mourning by reciting whatever expressions they pick up from the whispering among the others. Thereby they try to achieve pathos in the sentimental funeral audience. "Your grandson has come, wake up, my beloved! Your grandson has come, wake up, my darling!" They formulate such slogans based on the information gathered by eavesdropping on what the others mutter among themselves. The mythical beliefs the family maintain about God Siva allowing the old woman a new lease of life till her favourite grandson Thampo has returned from Malaya gather weight from the emphasis the mourners lay on them during their wailing. They try to engender a mystic element into the atmosphere through allusions to miracles as such. Thus it is clear that the objectives of the deployment of professional mourners are to mystify the life and death of the diseased, add importance to certain relations, generate pathos, create a popular image of the diseased, and make a show of the family strength. However, other than glorification, they all do not have a rational basis in relation to the needs and wants of practical life.

*Mission Impossible*

The “Master of Ceremonies” has forced these women, known as professional mourners, out of their obligation to pay homage to their own mother, in order to cut a figure within his family clan as an able personality. So vainglorious about himself, he triumphantly boasts about the pressure he exercised upon them, too impatient to wait for the others to praise him. Nevertheless, rather than attracting him credit from his friends, it horrifies everybody at his cruelty. Moreover, it puts him in a terrible predicament. They force him to apologize to the two women, bereft of their mother, for the violation he caused them by drawing them from their own mother’s funeral.

Suddenly, to the disappointment of the “Master of Ceremonies”, everybody’s sympathy is drawn to the women. “

Many of the guests, too, offered their condolences to the sisters, and my father, after promising to compensate them adequately, told them to go home.

” Subramaniam develops an anticlimax through the destiny of the “Master of Ceremonies” where he loses the credit he coveted for providing the mourners. The offer the women make on their own to stay and finish their job to the full reinforces the effect of the anticlimax. This adds insult to the injury in the plight of the pathetic Master of Ceremonies. Subramaniam continues the caricaturing of the Master of Ceremonies by highlighting his engagement in various other activities in the house, on being told off for his foolishness. By whatever he does he wants to show to the world that he is a genius. Having left the mourners, he gets hold of the drummers, ridiculing them for their inability to compete with the professional mourners and exhorting them to beat their drums faster and louder. His obsession with noise again suggests his character to be “an empty vessel making the most noise”. When he feels enough of the drummers, he starts doing some heavy work such as carrying bags full of rice and supplying “ceremonial necessities to the bedside of the corpse”. Exhausted by the strenuous walk to the mourners’  village and the laborious work in the ritual, and frustrated by the severe reprimand he has received from the family and the friends, he collapses on the ground in a fainting fit. His poor physical and mental condition fails him in withstanding the shame. Everybody becomes busy in a rescue operation on him. The anticlimax emerging from his character becomes complete with the helpless state he ends up in. The role of “Master of Ceremonies” disappears and he is now an emergency patient only

. “His friends assured him that there were others to help in the arrangements and asked him to rest for some time.” Subramaniam manifests how wickedness is repaid in the freeze the Master of Ceremonies is compelled to make, after his recovery.

*A Cacophony to Mock the Perpetrator*

The humour of the story reaches its climax after the collapse of the Master of Ceremonies. “The two sisters among the mourners, whose voices had till now lacked their usual intensity, rose and rent the air with their shrill cries, quite unconcerned about the fate of the Master of Ceremonies. ” A paradox appears in the women’s rise to importance and the Master-of-Ceremonies’ fall into disgrace.

 "The poor will miss you, oh, you charitable one! Who is going to feed us on festival days? Your grandson has come, wake up, my beloved! Your grandson has come, wake up my darling!" The wailing brings no more joy to the man. Instead, it irritates him by poking the psychological wounds he sustained in a useless run for glory. The professional mourners, now socially elevated as volunteers and respected for their commitment to their professional etiquette, operate with fresh energy. They systematically grab limelight for Thampo, the favourite grandson of the diseased, by repeatedly mentioning his name in their wailing. The priest’s attention to Thampo is totally the result of their work. "What fate was it that kept me away? And when I came at last, you lay unconscious on the bed and I was not even able to speak to you." His lamentation is just inspired by the professional mourners who have been repeating those words for quite some time by now. The man’s professional status is duly publicized in the wailing and that brings satisfaction to the entire family while enhancing the utility value of the professional mourners.

"Why do you remain silent, mother of a great lawyer? Answer for the sake of your loved ones! Open those eyes that are shaped like a fish! Like those of Minakshi, famed goddess of Madura! Your grandson has come, wake up, my beloved! Your grandson has come, wake up, my darling!"

The end provided in this incoherent string of words depicts how the professional mourners continue their service until the cortege leaves the residence. They want the dead woman to speak, look around, wake up, and answer the questions they raise. Don’t they understand that a dead person would not be able to do these? They do. Then why do they utter such requests? As Subramaniam implies it is their job and it is what society wants them to do. They remain professional mourners simply because they can act so. In this particular situation the cacophony they produce through their wailing ironically rouses the anger of the Master of Ceremonies, without allowing him an interval to lick his wounds.

*Conclusion*

The story is based on a childhood experience of a family situation. The narrator’s uncle, who acts in his self-imposed responsibility as Master of Ceremonies at family functions, does not represent the family in its entirety. The rejection and reprimand he suffers from the others in the family suggest that he is an individual only and that everybody in the family does not approve of the violation he commits by depriving the two women of their right to pay respect to their dead mother. They see injustice as injustice, no matter who commits it. However, there is room for a collective acceptance of employing professional mourners in this society. The uncle’s behaviour is representative of the popular attitude to the custom, however useless it is. If not for the professional mourners, Thampo, fresh from Malaya, has no way of attracting publicity as a lawyer educated abroad. If not for them, the others will not sustain their emotionalism and sensationalism as mourners. If not for them, the atmosphere will be dominated by silence to the distaste of the audience. If not for them, the image of the family as well as the diseased will not gather any social significance. That is why they are so indispensible in this society. The mourners’  task of lamenting the death of the diseased is closely knitted together with the values of their paymasters. When show off is so important, equally important becomes noise. Therefore the message Alagu Subramaniam coveys is that there are silent beneficiaries of the custom.

**NAWABDIN ELECTRICIAN**

The eight interconnected short stories in Daniyal Mueenuddin’s *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* describe the lives of the family, employees, servants, and acquaintances of aging landlord K. K. Harouni. These stories are set in the Punjab region of Pakistan and explore the state of feudalism and its influence on modern life.

*“Nawabdin Electrician”*

The manager of the wells on K. K. Harouni’s farm in Dunyapur, Nawabdin is a master at rigging the meters to cheat the electric company. Nawab is a tireless worker who takes on many odd jobs to feed the thirteen children whom he has with his wife. Nawab’s status increases after he convinces his master, Harouni, to provide him with a motorcycle and gas allowance to get around on the farm.

One evening as Nawab attends to his work, a poor traveler stops him on the road that leads from the city and begs a ride. After some consideration, Nawab submits. But while riding, the man points a gun at Nawab’s back and demands that he hand over the motorcycle. Nawab fights for his precious possession, and the man shoots him in the groin. The noise from the gun alerts the nearby villagers, who come to Nawab’s rescue and shoot the robber with a rifle. Both men are taken to the village’s clinic, where the attending pharmacist treats Nawab but pronounces the imminent death of the robber. On his deathbed, the robber begs Nawab’s forgiveness, but Nawab considers that the man would have left him to die in the road and refuses to pardon the robber. The man dies, and Nawab is happy that he fought for what is rightfully his.

It includes the conflicts between the lower class and higher class, the poor and the rich, daily aspects of social revolution, and the fear of  death and social hierarchy. The protagonist Nawabdin is a contented handyman who reflects the most common life of people in lower class. The motorcycle symbolizes Nawabdin's social level. "The motorcycle increased his status, gave him weight, so that people began calling him'uncle', and asking his opinion on world affairs, about which he knew absolutely nothing." (*Nawabdin Electrician,*17 ) As a father who has twelve daughters, life is somehow suffering for his family, and the motorcycle reveals his desire to his life. Despite of poverty, Nawabdin still has a kind heart and eagerness to help his customers." He flourished on a signature capability, a technique for cheating the electric company by slowing down the revolutions of the electric meters, so cunningly done that his customers could specify to the hundred-rupee note the desired monthly savings. "(*Nawabdin Electrician,*13)  
  
Nawabdin is a smart workman, but somehow he judges his motorcycle even more important than his life. He does not give up his property easily. When he faces a robber, even though he gets shot, he still tries to stand up and protects his own motorcycle. (24) The reasons of his action are complicated. One of the reason is that if he loses his motorcycle, he cannot afford his 13-people family anymore. Another reason which Nawabdin does not point out is that losing the motorcycle means losing his social status made up by motorcycle. Nawabdin enjoys the feeling of being called "uncle", and because of his vanity, he almost loses his life. In contrast to Nawabdin, the robber is bad but pitiful. It is poverty that forces him to plunder, and he has no choice. Poorness also contradicts the ethics in life. In short, the story reflects the conflicts of humanidad and enlightens the readers to think more about life.

**DRAUPADI (YUGANTA)**

"... I've been privately amusing myself by imagining how these offence-takers would respond to Iravati Karve's classic *Yuganta*, which is one of the most renowned academic studies of the Mahabharata and its characters. Karve, who took a historical-cum-anthropological perspective on the great epic, was dismissive of the idea that Draupadi was a proto-feminist Shakti/goddess figure – she saw her as being just as dependent and subservient as any other woman in a strongly patriarchial society. Her analysis of the crucial episode where the humiliated queen poses a question of Dharma to the elders in the Kaurava assembly is especially scathing: she treats Draupadi as a sort of pretender, trying to speak with authority about things that she doesn't know enough about, and suggests that "she should instead have cried out for decency and pity in the name of the Kshatriya code".

I don't agree with all of Karve's assessments, but the point is that here is a respected academic (and a woman herself) engaging closely and intelligently with the text and treating its heroine as well as the other characters as human beings with strengths and weaknesses. That's the best, most rewarding approach to the *Mahabharata*, which is, first and foremost, one of the world's most complex literary works. I wish more people would appreciate this."

Commenting on this book would be a minor crime, for there are perhaps few equals to Iravati Karve’s  **Yuganta – The end of an epoch**. Commentaries and commentaries have been written about the ‘Mahabharat’, and continue to be written today, such is the mystery and vastness of that epic. But few have dared autopsied it with the scientific precision of Karve. Little wonder that it won the Sahitya Akademi prize for the best Marathi book of the year in 1967. It was later translated and published in English.

An anthropologist, Karve dissects all characters with an objectivity impossible for most native readers. She begins with a neat introduction explaining the literary tradition of the ‘Mahabharat’. She writes about how the original work was called ‘Jaya’ (victory), and composed/carried forth in the oral tradition by the members of the Suta caste. This *sauta* (of the Sutas) literature is then passed on to different sections of the society (especially Brahmins), who make additions and interpolations, thus enlarging the original story. What we consequently inherit is the ‘Mahabharat’ (great story of the house of King Bharat).

In the subsequent essays, Karve picks each of the major characters of the ‘Mahabharat’, giving an incisive character analysis. The first of the lot is the character of Bhisma. Karve wonders aloud about the contrary motives of some of Bhisma’s actions, who while appearing to sacrifice all for the sake of others, takes some rather peculiar decisions that seem directed at proving his personal greatness.

The two great matriarchs are then dealt with in the next two chapters, which elucidate mainly the injustices suffered by Gandhari and Kunti. Yet, Karve goes on to show the strength of the two Kshatriya women, and what part they played in binding the Kuru clan together. Gandhari’s great sacrifice though laced with bitterness, and Kunti’s pain and guilt on parting with her firstborn, Karna, are some of the instances described in these two chapters.

An interesting chapter called ‘Father and son?’ explores the important character of Vidura, and the possibility of him being Yudhishtir’s (or Dharma as he is referred to in this book) father. Karve points to us the several similarities in character between the two, in addition to the custom of the time when the younger brother was allowed to sleep with his brother’s wife, if the brother was unable to beget children. Vidura’s fondness for Yudhishtir and his firm loyalty to Kunti, apart from an ambiguous passage towards the end of the epic proclaiming that Vidura and Yudhishtir are but one for they both are the reincarnations of Lord Yama, are served as evidence by the author.

There is yet another interesting chapter on Draupadi, and Karve compares and contrasts the character with that of Sita - the female protagonist of ‘Ramayana’. Karve points out the emotional richness and scope of Draupadi’s character as compared to Sita’s formulaic one. She also talks about her unique relationship with her five husbands, her ultimate insult at the Kaurava court and her thirst for revenge that, in part, pushes the Pandavas to war. Several more aspects are noted in this chapter.

Karna’s character too is analysed in detail. Instead of the pitiable hero that Karna is made out to be in the popular renditions of the Mahabharat, Karve paints a not-so-rosy picture of him. Despite the occasional show of the strength of his character, Karna, according to Karve, is a flawed man because of his deep bitterness and rashness.

Krishna is also studied from a very human perspective in Karve’s book. Krishna is not a god, whilst in the ‘Mahabharat’, but a very powerful, charismatic and clever man. He is shown by Karve to be more of a friend of Arjuna and a well-wisher of the Pandavas, rather than a divine being. She explains how subsequent literature, like the ‘Bhagvata’ accorded divinity to Krishna, unlike the Mahabharat. His role in the war, and the rise and fall of the Pandavas and the Yadavas is also spoken about in this chapter.

Of the two remaining chapters, one is a study of the mystical palace of Mayasabha in Indraprastha, and a concluding chapter on the manners of the time. These chapters too hold a wealth of information and detailed study of some of the nitty-gritties of the epic.

Karve opens the reader’s eyes to a lot of fallacies that are wont to be in a creation by human beings. She dispels a handful of myths and interprets the seemingly illogical in a manner best understood in our times. The best part about this book is that it critiques without ever being disrespectful or dismissive. For anyone interested in the ‘Mahabharat’, and the study of Indian mythology in general, this book is a must read.