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Modern Mythologies: The Epic Imagination in Contemporary Indian Literature

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by

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DEDICATION

To my mother: for pencils, erasers, and courage.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

This project delineates a cultural history of modern Hinduism in conversation with contemporary Indian literature. Its central focus is literary adaptations of the Sanskrit epic the *Mahābhārata*, in English, Hindi, and Bengali. Among Hindu religious texts, this epic has been most persistently reproduced in literary and popular discourses because its scale matches the grandeur of the Indian national imagining. Further, many epic adaptations explicitly invite devotion to the nation, often emboldening conservative Hindu nationalism. This interdisciplinary project draws its methodology from literary theory, history, gender, and religious studies. Little scholarship has put Indian Anglophone literatures in conversation with other Indian literary traditions. To fill this gap, I chart a history of literary and cultural transactions between both India and Britain and among numerous vernacular, classical, and Anglophone traditions within India. Paying attention to gender, caste, and cultural hegemony, I demostrate how epic adaptations both narrate and contest the contours of the Indian nation.

A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

In this dissertation, I have used diacritics based on the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST) for Sanskrit, Hindi, and Bengali words. Unless these words are names of characters such as Draupadī or Kṛṣṇa, they have also been italicized. However, many modern epic adaptation authors and scholars do not use the same transliteration system. When discussing or quoting their works, I have deferred to the authors' spellings. In my own analysis, when *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* are italicized with diacritics, I am refering to specific pre-modern Sanskrit texts attributed to Vālmīki and Vyāsa respectively. When citing the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* or its English translations, I have used the abbreviation MhB. When Mahabharata and Ramayana not in italics or marked with diacritics, I am gesturing to the broader epic traditions which include their many oral, written, and media versions.

INTRODUCTION

> "India a nation! What an apotheosis! Last comer to the drab
> nineteenth-century sisterhood! Waddling in at this hour of the
> world to take her seat! She, whose only peer was the Holy Roman
> Empire, she shall rank with Guatemala and Belgium perhaps!"
> – E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India,* 361

In a passionate moment at the end of *A Passage to India,* Dr. Aziz declares to his friend
Cyril Fielding that India deserves sovereignty and nationhood. Fielding mocks this desire, his
ironic tone suggesting that to imagine India as a nation would be the very opposite of an
apotheosis. In emphasizing the ephemerality and novelty of the project of nationalism, he
appears to suggest that India is an unchanging but glorious abstraction that would, in fact, be
debased by its association with nationalism. He sees nationalism as a lackluster sorority to which
less culturally illustrious regions have childishly tottered. The underlying assumption is that it
would be better for the British to continue protecting and curating Indian culture than for Indians
to entertain their infantile fantasies of nationhood.

While Fielding implies that nationhood would not be an apotheosis for India, collectively
imagining the nation as an entity worthy of religious devotion significantly catalyzed Indian
independence. Further, this continues to make nationalism and patriotism compelling to many
contemporary Indians. In the early twentieth century, nationalist thinkers and freedom fighters
fueled their desire for political sovereignty by elevating the nation to a god-like entity. This
project will show how Indian nationalism specifically borrowed the language of religious

devotion from its very inception and that this has emboldened Hindu-nationalism in the twenty-first century. Specifically, I argue that the epic traditions the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, have been a key tool in helping close the gap between religion and nation. In doing so, the epic imaginary has helped erect several modern mythologies that circulate in the nation, upholding specific beliefs about Hindu-ness, gender, patriotism, and national culture.

The making of modern India and its nationalism began long before 1947, when the British formally gave up their imperial claim to the region. My work begins in the nineteenth century, when anti-colonial sentiment marked a new series of debates about consolidating Hinduism and Indian culture. Since then, the grand narrative of what Indian national culture should compromise has been written over multiple times with specific political intent. Literature has been a key component in this imaginary because it solidified notions of time, space, and history. For over two hundred years, Indian writings have been drawing extensively from an existing body of pre-modern Hindu religious works, especially the epics. The two Sanskrit epics have been consistently reified as the key signifiers of Hinduism in the national imagination. As the rise of print capitalism in the Empire brought literary forms like the British realist and modernist novel to India, these iterations of history, religion and culture have found the means to become further legitimized in popular discourse. Although numerous stories from Hindu mythology circulate orally, the stories from the epics have been translated, rewritten and adapted extensively in written form. These retellings of the epics extend their life, cementing their place in the imagination of a people looking to garner cultural and political solidarity in a polemical dialogue with their lived realities.

The epics' ethical and political directives are well suited to the purposes of burgeoning nationalism and building solidarities in the postcolonial nation state. The *Rāmāyaṇa* tells the

story of Prince Rāma, the incarnation of the Hindu god Viṣṇu and embodiment of male virtue on earth. Although he is the rightful ruler of the land of Ayodhyā, he endures various personal trials before he is finally crowned the King of Ayodhyā. This includes living out a fourteen-year exile in the forest, the kidnapping of his wife Sītā by the evil demon Rāvaṇa, and a war to rescue Sītā. Throughout the text, Rāma and Sītā experience several protracted separations and in fact, are never fully reunited. They consistently choose their duties over their personal desires, which brings them tremendous grief. On the other hand, the *Mahābhārata* tells the story of a great war fought by two sides of the same family, the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas, to establish which of them will rule the Kuru kingdom. The dilemma of warring with one's own family, especially elders, causes deep existential crises in several characters. The well-known *Bhagavadgītā* deals with such a moment of concern experienced by Pāṇḍava warrior Arjuna, who is then reassured by the appearance of Kṛṣṇa, a reincarnation of Lord Viṣṇu. Both texts raise key concerns about the human propensity for folly. They elaborate heroic journeys and present Othered enemies to defeat, so that justice and political order may be restored.

Even though in both epics the restoration of order comes at a great personal cost, and in the case of the Mahabharata, political cost, the two epics have been re-presented differently in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The Ramayana is seen through a felicitous lens to invoke a nostalgia for an idealized, unlived past while the Mahabharata's portrayal of interpersonal rivalries and familial ugliness is played up to highlight the scourge of the times. If the Ramayana shows who the righteous ruler is, the Mahabharata shows what chaos may ensue when the righteous order has not been established. I demonstrate how the two epics' different enemies are crucial for different parts of the Indian nationalist project. Where the Ramayana's Othered villain provides an analogy for the British or Muslim threat, the Mahabharata's intimate

enemy makes it pertinent to recognize that the greatest threat to the nation exists within its own people. This project takes the Mahabharata and its adaptations as its central focus. The text's specific contents about familial disorder, political disagreement, and large-scale war have been considered especially apt in the last four decades and therefore, adapted significantly more than the Ramayana. The *Mahabharata* and its myriad reimaginings typically provide more occasions to register great discontent about religio-political failure, which have created an engaging dialogue with large-scale economic, social, and political changes in contemporary India.

Mahabharata as Palimpsest

At the outset, it may be important to clarify that while the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* forms an important part of this project, the so-called original text is not the primary text of the same. The *Mahābhārata* is a fantastical spectre that lurks over the broader tradition of Indian literature itself. Its influence is most pronounced in contemporary adaptations of the epic: these adaptations, rather than the pre-modern epic, are the primary texts of this project. Further, it is difficult to point to a singular, original epic text. Many theorists, including but not limited to Herman Oldenburg, David Shulman, and James Hegarty, point out that the epic text is inherently unstable and endlessly dynamic. In fact, there have been several attempts to organize and annotate a stable version of the epic, many of which have ended in failure for reasons I will discuss later. However, the orality, plurality, and the instability of the text are also the very qualities that promote its many popular adaptations. I will demonstrate how popular adaptations of the epic have not only been more instrumental in contemporary politics than the original epic but ensured its vital afterlife.

Nevertheless, it is important to briefly qualify the form and context of the pre-modern *Mahābhārata*. German indologist Herman Oldenburg suggested that the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* mutated from a simple narrative about war and heroism to "the most monstrous chaos" over several centuries (qtd in Mishra 195). David Shulman similarly notes that even the Sanskrit text's very construction belies its mutability and multivalent orality. Shulman describes the first book of the epic, where the text opens with multiple narrators who present the events of the epic: a bard named Ugraśravas narrates a story he has heard from a sage named Vaiśampāyana, who in turn has heard it from the original composer, Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana. Ugraśravas himself notes that repetition is integral to the proliferation of the epic: just as he is repeating Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana's tale, others will repeat it after him (MhB 1.23-24, 1.50-51). Thus, Shulman reminds us that "we are dealing with less a fixed text than a message…reflecting a specific range of vision and perception…and remains an unbalanced, imperfect vehicle for unanswerable questions" (25, 29). This instability and unanswerability has been sustained over the centuries the epic has been in circulation: events have been interpolated, minor characters elevated, and entire narratives reorganized to suit new literary and political trajectories. To a large extent, the epic revels in this formal unpredictability because its content is also a meditation on instability, albeit political. The epic embraces chaos as inevitable and necessary, given the Hindu belief in the cycle of destruction and renewal that marks every new epoch.

The impact the epic has had on the Indian literary imagination is inescapable. Mishra claims that "*The Mahābhārata* is the founding text of Indian culture…all Indian theatrical, literary, and filmic texts endlessly rewrite the [same]" (195). It should be known that Mishra's essay has a specific intention: to critique British playwright Peter Brooks' theater and later film adaptation of the epic in the 1990s. Broadly, he praises Brooks for harnessing the epic's

theatricality and postmodern instability, arguing that this adaptation of the epic will add to its palimpsestic nature. On the other hand, he petulantly questions Brooks' right to represent the epic because he is not Indian and cannot begin to understand the epic's sacrality and gravity in Indian culture (201, 202). Part of Mishra's argument then, is to underline the fantastic history and profundity of the epic, which leads him to make some grand statements. Mishra freely admits that to call the epic India's founding text is a "wilful generalization" (195). It is of course not true that all Indian texts are Mahabharata adaptations, just as not all third world texts are national allegories in Frederic Jameson's famous proclamation. However, what links these two bombastic claims is the tremendous project of nation-making and the conscious reframing and homogenizing of its cultures, facilitated in no small part by imaginative literature. In a broader sense, this project attempts to understand why and how the Mahabharata has come to be regarded as the founding text of Indian culture by persons like Mishra and scores of others, even when countless Indians have been excluded from it or oppressed by its Brahmanical ideology.

Nevertheless, Mishra points us in a useful direction: that the Mahabharata is a palimpsest that has been written over several times, and more recently in various media. He provides a succinct typology of these the various versions of the Mahabharata. The first, he says, is the edited, scholarly Sanskrit version of the text, ostensibly the "original". However, this too is a version of other variations, what has been compiled and made available today of the *Mahābhārata* texts that were written between the sixth century BCE and the second century CE. Following this, he considers the translated version in major Indian and world languages another version of the epic text. A third type of the epic is the multiple oral versions passed down from generation to generation: here, Mishra is right to point out the importance of female storytellers such as mothers and grandmothers. The notion that women must be educated enough to transmit

culture within the home has had far reaching consequences on gender politics in India. The fourth is the popular version that is frequently reproduced in literature, drama, and more recently film adaptations (200-201). Although my work is chiefly an exploration of the popular, literary Mahabharata, it also discusses what all of these variations of the epic achieve together in the realm of Indian society and politics. For this reason, it may be important to unpack how each of these types of the Mahabharata is deployed in this project.

Providing an exact date for when the earliest *Mahābhārata* manuscript was written is difficult but several scholars have pointed us to a range of dates within which it was composed. Shulman, for instance, writes that the epic was produced at some time between "the final centuries B.C. and the early centuries A.D." (21). Mishra appears to agree with Shulman when he says that the epic reached its final form in the second century CE. On the other hand, as he also argues, its composition may have begun as early as the fifth or the sixth centuries CE (195). Arti Dhand similarly discusses the development of the epic beginning in the sixth century BCE. Drawing on Govind Prasad Upadhyay's work from 1979, she suggests that "the [early] Mahābhārata is a chronicle of the challenges faced by the Brahmanical community between the period of 600 B.C.E. and 400 C.E. (275). The most comprehensive Sanskrit edition of the *Mahābhārata* was annotated and reproduced for scholarly work all over the world by the Bhandarkar Oriental Institute (BOI) in the twentieth century. On September 22, 1966, the Bhandarkar Oriental Institute in Pune, India completed the mammoth project of compiling the Sanskrit poetic text of the *Mahābhārata* in 19 volumes of over 15000 total pages. The last edition of the same was published in 1972. The endeavor, whose most famous editor was Vishnu Sitaram Sukthankar, was over five decades in the making. Even though this version is generally considered reliable for quoting in scholarship, scholars like Shulman are not convinced this helps

consolidate a definitive singular text of the *Mahābhārata* (25). Others, like Hegarty, have discussed how challenging the project was and therefore, lauded BOI for undertaking and completing it. He writes that there were considerable variations in the manuscripts that the BOI was trying to distill and combine to find "an approximation of an archetype of the Sanskrit Mahābhārata" (26). Further, this version could not contain the numerous oral iterations that were integral in the "formation and transmission" of the Mahabharata. The problems encountered by even the largely successful scholarly endeavor by the BOI demonstrates how hard it is to pin down one definitive text of the epic. Despite this, Hegarty writes that many South Asians believe that the epic is consistent and homogeneous (27). In many ways, my work explores the curious paradox of how an inherently unstable, multiply proliferating, and ever-evolving epic has come to be a source from which stable meaning about Hindu-ness and Indian-ness are derived in contemporary India.

Although Mishra classifies the translated *Mahābhārata* as another category, I would consider it a crucial extension of the original—particularly since it moves the text from one language to another while meticulously preserving and annotating many of its elements. The BOI version is not the best-known version of the epic. No scholarship is now conducted in Sanskrit: translations, oral recitations, and literary adaptations of the epic have become the standard text for many audiences. As Hegarty notes, the *Mahābhārata* is a Sanskrit text that is ironically rarely known in Sanskrit (12). Further, most English language translation projects of the *Mahābhārata* have been dogged by unfortunate fates. Superstitions and rumors surround the text, suggesting that those who work on it will meet with personal tragedy. At the very least, the sheer length of the epic has proved daunting: it comprises 200,000 individual lines and is divided into eighteen volumes called *parva*s. No scholar's lifetime has yet been long enough to finish its translation.

University of Chicago's Johannes van Buitenen passed away after translating five of the eighteen volumes into English. His students have been trying to complete his work ever since. One of them, James Fitzgerald, published translations of Book Eleven and a part of Book Twelve. A more recent translation effort by the Clay Sanskrit library, where the text is provided both in International Alphabet of Sanskrit Translation (IAST) and English side-by-side, has only managed to cover books II-XII.

For the purposes of this dissertation, the van Buitenen version has been used as the primary point of reference when tracing specific events that are later re-imagined in the contemporary adaptations: direct quotations are from van Buitenen's translations. Even though this translation only extends to Book Five of the epic, the *Udyoga Parva* (The Book of Effort), it covers a lot of the narrative that has been compelling to the modern adaptors. Many adaptations are especially interested in the lives of individual characters and their final destiny rather than the events of the war. I have found that is has not been uncommon for writers to chiefly focus on events from the first five books, skim quickly through the books on the war (Books 6 to 15), and reconsider the last three books that discuss the afterlife of the characters. The *Bhagavadgītā* is a small part of the *Bhīṣma Parva* (The Book of Bhīṣma) or the sixth book of the *Mahābhārata* (MhB 6:25-42). This episode is particularly prominent in the national imaginary, chiefly due to Gandhi's deep interest in the same. Curiously, it is not given much prominence in many of the adaptations I have discussed. In fact, male figures like Kṛṣṇa and Yudhiṣṭhira are decentralized in recent adaptations as a move to give voice to marginalized characters, particularly Draupadī, or only spoken of in relation to them.

These primary texts, the epic adaptations that articulate these new concerns, are drawn from the third category Mishra describes, the realm of popular literature and mass media. The

Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* converses with these new adaptions that often both resist, reproduce, and even radically alter its ideology. I have selected a variety of such adapted epic texts from the Indian English, Hindi, and Bengali literary traditions that speak to specific concerns in post-Emergency and later, post-liberalization India, including but not limited to national grand narratives, gender, caste, and globalization. I have also included discussions of the wildly popular *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* television shows. The epic texts were adapted for national, state-controlled television in Hindi in the 1980s. I believe these television versions to have created an authoritative, hegemonic version of the epic texts that were instrumental in fueling Hindu-nationalism. It may be argued that of all the texts discussed in this dissertation, the television adaptations had the most far-reaching social and political consequences primarily because their language of transmission and mass-medium allowed them to travel the furthest of them all. In this sense, the televised epics are both adaptations and an important moment in the lives of the epics.

The other texts such as Shashi Tharoor, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Mahasweta Devi's works circulate in different literary spheres. They are affected by the complex power hierarchies between Indian languages but have also traveled beyond national boundaries in the global literary market and academic realm, where they are often used to uncritically represent India. These texts both inform and are informed by the oral and other popular iterations of the epic. Although the "original" Sanskrit epic, whether as the twentieth century document by BOI or as a more ambiguous ancient entity, undoubtedly remains connected to these variations, the proliferation of the text in popular discourses has had the most significant impact of the politics of the Indian nation. In fact, the more the text circulates, the more it mutates, affirming itself as a chaotic palimpsest that continues to tremendously impact real-life perceptions.

Imagination/ Devotion/ Adaptation

Popular versions of the Mahabharata have had a keen impact on the afterlife of the ancient epic, so much so that they have transformed the larger understanding of the text. It may be noted that the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* itself encourages interpretive endeavors. For instance, a passage at the end of the text claims interpreting the epic will cleanse the reader of sin and help him attain emancipation (MhB 18.6). Scholars have noted the text's self-reflexivity keeps the epic open to multiple possibilities. For instance, Arti Dhand writes:

> Mahābhārata is what might cautiously be termed a pluralist text, that engages a
> variety of religious doctrines and explicitly or tacitly permits them to coexist,
> without insisting on dogmatic uniformity. The text thus lends itself to multiple
> interpretations, and this may be telling of the historical period in which it was
> composed, as well as of the relatively ecumenical spirit of the text itself. (340-2)

Shulman argues similarly that the *Mahābhārata* shows conflicting viewpoints without actively attempting to resolve them (28). However, it is interesting to note that even though the Sanskrit text itself is pluralist, even if "cautiously," many of the contemporary adaptations promote a singular narrative about Hinduism. Even epic adaptations that critique Hindu ideology, particularly new adaptations concerning women and their roles, tend to assume an inherent ideological stability that is then pushed back against.

Further, whether resisting a specific understanding of Hinduism or affirming it, every time a new epic version circulates, it builds on what Laurie Patton calls the "*imaginaire*". She uses the French word to describe what defines as "a series of tropes and figures about which the public has general knowledge, and would have basic associations" (54). For the sake of simplicity, I will follow Patton's definition but stick to the English words "imaginary" and

"imagination" to indicate the commonly known tradition and the collectively performed act respectively. Similarly, Hegarty has also written about the impact the Mahabharata has had on what he calls the "public imagination" in India. He notes that the text "was a major and self-conscious intervention in the public imagination of early South Asia" (6). Although he writes about the text within its pre-modern context, his ideas remain useful for the contemporary period as well. He defines public imagination as "the collaborative construction and evocation of times and places and of people and things, as well as causes and consequences, that are not present to us" (4). He emphasizes that this imagination is collaborative, performative, and public: in the case of South Asia this is strengthened by the political applications of story-telling and the larger preference for narratives (5,7). The Mahabharata then, has consistently been a successful catalyst for a collective, public act of imagining community.

The reinforcement and expansion of this epic imaginary, along with its immediate links to the nation, is at stake in this project. This has an immediate resonance with Benedict Anderson's well-known conception of the nation as an imagined community:

> The nation is an imagined political community…imagined both as inherently limited and sovereign. Regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. (6-7)

In India, these twin imaginings, of a shared mythological past and a political sovereign present, come together powerfully in literary texts. This is especially true Indian literature in the nineteenth century where one finds an overlapping development of realism and mythicism in the Indian literary traditions. When writers deploy the Mahabharata imaginary, one sees a bi-

directional movement—a desire to return to an often ideally imagined past as well as a need to challenge it to emerge into a new future.

A very important aspect of the national imagination in India is the way in which spirituality and an allied devotion to the nation are encouraged and invited. Several Subaltern Studies historians, such as Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty, have argued that Indian nationalism had a multivalent relationship with the spiritual and the uncanny. Chatterjee, for instance, writes that the project of Indian nationalism "[divides] the world of social institutions into two domains, the material and the spiritual". Here, the material is the domain of the "outside", the public sphere of science, technology, economy and statecraft: many of these institutions are modeled based on British colonial knowledge. On the other hand, the spiritual domain is of the "inside": the realm of the home, the roles of women, religious and indigenous cultural traditions. In anticolonial nationalisms such as India, he argues that while the features of the material are studied and replicated based on the colonizing power's arrangement of the same, the spiritual domain is fiercely protected from what is believed to be the distinctly different colonial culture and its power (6). The epic, and the larger understanding of Hinduism, chiefly belongs in the spiritual realm. For this reason, Indians have been careful to guard it against outside influences and nurture it while folding it into their own national aims. My project certainly indicates that to preserve an authentic, unchanged spiritual culture in its pre-modern form is neither fully possible nor desirable. As Homi Bhabha, Benedict Anderson and other postcolonial theorists have shown us, most postcolonial national cultures are hybridized regardless of their guardians' intentions, particularly because the bilingual elites can never fully dispense with colonial ways of thinking. Nevertheless, this project also shows the unending give

and take between the material and spiritual realms of Indian nationalism, particularly where a (mis)understanding or essentializing of the spiritual transforms material politics.

An important aspect of the spiritual that has been fused into the Indian national imagination, particularly through the interaction of the spiritual and material realms, is devotion. The *Mahābhārata*, as a text, certainly invites devotion. In the first book, for instance, it is explicitly mentioned that reading the epic is as spiritually and intellectually important as reading the Vedas (MhB 1.2.235). The epic, however, invites a different kind of reading and spiritual response. Drawing on the work of Madeline Biardeau, Dhand points out:

> Biardeau reads in the epic several levels of meaning, in which the symbolism of
> the Vedic sacrifice is retained, but recast in the devotional idiom of bhakti. The
> epics are thus quintessentially works of Bhakti. (Dhand 123-124)

Bhakti, or deeply personal devotion, has a detailed history in the Indian subcontinent, to map all of which is beyond the scope of this project. One of the key moments of *bhakti*'s articulation can be found in the medieval Bhakti movement, which arose as an anti-caste, individual-oriented alternative to mainstream Hindu practices. The Bhakti movement is a broad rubric that includes the lives and works of a large group of poets and seers from areas such as Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra, and West Bengal. These traveling poets expressed their devotion to a higher power in profound yet personal ways that encouraged participation at a grassroots level. John Stratton Hawley writes that while the Bhakti movement broadly spanned over 600 to 1600 CE, its key ideas chiefly coalesced during the twelfth century.[1] Within this context, Hawley expresses Bhakti as:

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[1] Hawley's book provides a comprehensive history of the Bhakti movement and its futures in modern India. See Hawley, John Stratton. *A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement*. Harvard UP, 2015.

[H]eart religion, sometimes cool and quiescent, but sometimes hot—the religion

of participation, community, enthusiasm, song, and of personal challenge…It

evokes the idea of a widely shared religiosity for which institutional

superstructures aren't all that relevant… (2)

Bhakti today still recalls a commonly shared devotion that emotionally and personally aligns the

devotee with the higher power. However, unlike the medieval Bhakti movement's eschewing of

"institutional superstructures", one of the ways in which *bhakti* is recalled in contemporary India

indicates a doubling down on the superstructure of Hindu nationalism. In internet parlance,

followers of Prime Minister Narendra Modi are often derided as "Modi-*bhakt*s" (Modi-devotees)

or simply "*bhakt*s" by persons with more centrist or leftist views. The neologism's origins are

uncertain, but many, including Congress General Secretary Digvijay Singh have used the it

("Digvijay Singh Takes a Dig at PM Narendra Modi's 'bhakts' after Spy-ring Bust"). These

"*bhakt*s" are believed to be intolerant of any deviation from their own ideologies, which centers

around the establishment of a chiefly Hindu nation. The term is a radical inflection of *des-bhakt*,

a word in Hindi which aligns with "patriotism" but literally translates to "devotees of the

nation/country". Devotion, thus, continues to be a constitutive element of the very language that

describes national allegiance, especially that which privileges Hinduism.

In some ways, this is also why realist literature has not been sufficient in fully addressing

the needs of the Indian national vision. The poetic expression of and emotions for the nation

have often found means beyond the realism. Writing on the dual poetic and realist prosaic strains

in Rabindranath Tagore's nineteenth century writing, Chakrabarty opines:

It does not take much effort to see that a photographic realism or a dedicated

naturalism could never answer all the needs of vision that modern nationalisms

create. For the problem, from a nationalist point of view, is this: If the nation, the

people, or the country were not just to be observed, described, and critiqued but

loved as well, what would guarantee that they were indeed worth loving unless

one also saw in them something that was already lovable? What if the real, the

natural, and the historically accurate did not generate the feeling of devotion or

adoration? (149-150)

Chakrabarty suggests that an investment in experiencing or seeing the beautiful, the sublime, or

the uncanny ran alongside the interest in the real. Further, a nostalgia for a pre-modern bygone

time coincided with this experience of the uncanny. The Indian national imagining then, has been

consistently supplemented by a wealth of feelings, especially yearning for a pristine past and

equations with religious devotion.

At this juncture it may be important to qualify why this project decenters theories of

adaptation in favor of the broader implications of imagination and devotion. There is no doubt

that the primary texts discussed in this dissertation are adaptations. They are new textual or

media re-presentations of an older text. For this reason, I continue to address these texts as

adaptations but do not measure the new text's fidelity to the original. In the presence of an

inherently unstable original, deviations are a given in later versions. I have found it more useful

to consider the consequences of or the motivations behind the deviations rather than to measure

the degrees of separation between the original text and the new text. When I bring up the ways in

which new texts have changed certain narratives or challenged particularly ideologies, I am more

concerned with "why" rather than "how" and rarely, "how much".

Contemporary adaptation theory itself has long since moved on from insisting on or measuring in fidelity. In her 2006 book Linda Hutcheon follows others like Robert Stam to suggest that taking texts to task for (in)fidelity to an original is not particularly productive:

> Today, if "fidelity" is invoked at all in adaptation studies…in the context of fan-culture loyalty rather than as a quality of adaptive strategies. The "success" of an adaptation today, in the age of transmedia, can no longer be determined in relation to its proximity to any single "original," for none may even exist. Perhaps it is time to look instead to such things as popularity, persistence, or even the diversity and extent of dissemination for criteria of success. (xxvi)

On Hutcheon's terms, then, the acts of adapting the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* have been extremely successful. The text is certainly popular, widely disseminated, and persistent although it has also been irretrievably altered in the process. I also focus on the many ways in which this text's success through sustained and numerous reproductions reshapes contemporary Indian culture and politics. I have found that the myriad adaptations of the epic largely reinforce a repurposed, economically liberal but socially conservative Hindu upper-caste worldview. The fan culture that Hutcheon writes about in the case of other texts is in this case politically powerful, as chiefly Hindu and elite, if not often male.

The ways in which the Mahabharata has been re-read and re-presented in the last and current centuries also plays well with Hutcheon's definition of adaptation:

> In short, adaptation can be described as the following:
>
> - An acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works
> - A creative *and* an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging

- An extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work. (8)

Although the epic text proliferates in all three ways described above, this project is chiefly concerned with adaptations that are "a creative *and* interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging". The Mahabharata's variations and adaptions are so ubiquitous in India, that to collate and comment on all Indian works that transpose or intertextually engage with it is beyond the scope of any scholar's resources and lifetime. In fact, at the time of writing this dissertation, there was a tremendous boom in pulp fiction based on the epic, so much so that every social conversation I engaged in led to someone recommending a new adapted text to me. In this work, I will present the economic and cultural developments that have led to this boom in epic adaptations. To do so, I have chosen to focus on a few epic adaptations that were not only more popular than most others but also illumine larger trends in national politics, Anglophone literary traditions, caste, and gender. Altogether, I am interested in building a historiography of the twentieth and twenty-first century Mahabharata adaptations. In doing so, I wish to delineate a cultural history of modern Hinduism in conversation with postcolonial Indian literature. I identify key moments and movements in history, such as the rise of Hindu nationalism, changes in feminist conversation, and economic liberalization, while showing how epic adaptations map, support or resist these changes. I also discuss several dominant trends in epic adaptations, such as the nationalist epic, postmodern satirical epic, the reverent mass epic, and the contrapuntal epic, although none of these are distinct and separate stages in the life of the epic. In a broader sense, this project is a sustained engagement with the past or what is thought of as the past to illumine the present and the future.

Chapter Outlines

The epic text has dominated national imagination for several important reasons, each of which is explored in detail in the chapters of this dissertation. The first chapter deals with the nineteenth century reconfiguration of Hinduism as a single world religion, which paralleled the development of modern Indian literatures and the contemporary Indian novel. During this time, the epics were put forth as a common cultural heritage or at least specifically presented as one, particularly by the elite thinkers who were typically Brahmin and Hindu. In this chapter, I discuss the politics of Indian languages and the ways in which Sanskrit, Hindi, English, and Bengali have interacted since colonial times. I also discuss the role imaginative literature played in narrating the nation, particularly during the anti-colonial movement. I emphasize the role of British Orientalism in making a cultural intervention in the understanding and framing of Hinduism. Finally, I write about the consistent re-emergence of the mythic past through the process of epic adaptation, which complicates singular understandings of modernity.

In the second chapter, I discuss the changes in the epic imaginary after a major turning point in the life of India: the declaration of a nationwide political emergency and the fall of secularism. I discuss two responses to this event, the irreverent satirizing of national history in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1988) and the reverence towards a pre-modern past inspired by state- televised epic adaptations in the late 1980s. I contextualize Tharoor's work within dominant debates on postcolonial writing, particularly the interest in the national allegory and the repurposing of mythical pasts. In the second part of the chapter, I discuss how the epic television shows attempted to and largely succeeded in creating a new hegemonic version of the epic texts that were now available to wider audiences thanks to the medium.

The narrative form of the epics has been especially useful because they could be easily transmitted orally or reimagined in new literary frameworks. The stories could be told repeatedly, circulating within the communities of those who already knew them, and the ideology could be conveyed therein. In the third chapter, I discuss how this has had important ramifications for gender-based ideologies, where specific female characters from the epics are repeatedly upheld as models for appropriate feminine behavior even in modern India. The epic heroines, Sītā and Draupadī, have increasingly been considered different from one another, where Draupadī is an outraged, vengeful demoness and Sītā is a long-suffering yet obedient spouse. Even though both epics present them as models of those who perfectly fulfil the religious duty of being the ideal, upper-caste Hindu wives, the new epic imaginary has attempted to depart from these conceptions. I begin with a discussion of the two epic heroines, arguing that Draupadī emerges as the more resistant figure of the two and becomes the center of several new epic feminist adaptations. The adaptations I discuss attempt to draw attention to newer modes of gendered oppression in India and beyond. First, I discuss Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's English novel *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) arguing that its feminist project of giving voice to the heroine is curtailed by the over-emphasis on marketing the feminized exoticism of Indian culture. Next, I discuss Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi" (1978), where the author articulates the problems of tribal women and the dangers posed to them by the state. The chapter is also framed by a discussion of the limitations of female heroism within the context of Hinduism, which demands that ordinary women live up to the standards set by goddesses and semi-divinities.

Later in the twentieth century and in the early twenty-first century, the ease with which epic narratives travel in both oral and written form is significantly enhanced by new media, such

as television and social media. In the final chapter, I show how this is tranformative for Indian

politics and the reification of a primarily Hindu national identity. Even as woman-oriented

adaptations are rightly critiquing the Hindu Brahmanical discourse from within, there is a

marked lack of caste-based critique in the same vein. The few epic adaptations that retell the

story from the perspective of lower caste characters like Éklavya tend to reinforce conventional

ideas about gender and caste. I discuss how while many thinkers insist that the epic is every

Indian's cultural heritage, Dalit activists and writers have rightly point out that the proliferation

of the epic imaginary has been an exercise in confirming Hindu hegemony. I also show that the

market for epic adaptations has expanded further in the last decade, particularly due to a

globalized, elite Hindu audience and an interest in exoticised Hinduism.

Methods and Directions

Illustrious religious studies scholars such as Wendy Doniger, Sheldon Pollock, David

Shulman, and Alf Hiltebeitel have written extensively on the original epics. Regardless of

whether these scholars have been directly cited in this project or not, their work has been

instrumental to my understanding of Hinduism and the epic texts. They have highlighted the

inherent qualities found in the epics, such as their orality, philosophical resistance, and endless

reproducibility which makes its numerous contemporary adaptations imminently possible. Other

scholars, such as Richard King and Sharada Sugirtharajah, have also been useful in showing how

modern Hinduism has been reconstructed over the past two centuries. In this project, these

approaches come together with postcolonial theory and feminist criticism to articulate how the

popular Mahabharatas function within contemporary Indian realities. Postcolonial criticism has

been relevant in theorizing nation and nationalism as well as contextualizing Indian English

writings that repurpose the colonizer's language to reflect the hybrid realities of the present. However, I continue to be suspicious of the "post" in postcolonial and strongly agree with Anne McClintock's contention: to call postcolonial "post" is problematically celebratory and obfuscatory (13). In fact, this project shows that the colonial past and its formulations are not yet in the past because they have been re-packaged and sold in a neo-imperialist global marketplace. The feminist scholarship used in this work is similarly suspicious of celebrating such an emancipation from domination. Scholars like Lata Mani, Gayatri Spivak, and Arti Dhand are helpful in unpacking the key problematic that emerges in the overlapping epic and national imaginaries: the role of women in Indian society.

This project also hopes to put Anglophone literatures in productive conversation with other indigenous literary traditions in Hindi and Bengali. Many scholars have discussed how Anglophone Indian literature or even single Indian English writers like Salman Rushdie tend to obscure myriad other writings and literary traditions that circulate in India. Orsini, for instance, urges scholars to embrace the multi-lingual landscape of India in all its plurality instead of fixating on singular texts or traditions as representative of a homogenized Indian culture ("India in the Mirror of World Fiction"). Following her directive, I use the Sanskrit epic as a point of convergence for multiple literary traditions. I chart a history of literary and cultural transactions between both India and Britain and among numerous vernacular, classical, and Anglophone traditions within India. This study of epic adaptations shows how the relationships between English/ Anglophone, classical Sanskrit, and vernacular languages such as Hindi and Bengali have been transformed in the last two centuries. At the end, it shows how in spite of the dying out of written and spoken Sanskrit, Sanskritic knowledge is chiefly being preserved and repeated in English.

In studying both the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and its many contemporary mutations, I have been repeatedly struck by the wide disjuncture between the scholarly, close reading understanding of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and the popular understanding of the Mahabharata. Contemporary epic adaptations are often far more conservative about social mores such as gender roles and family values than the epic itself. Despite the original epic's instability and plurality, it provides many occasions to subvert dominant hierarchies and question Hindu beliefs. Once again, this is not a problem for which we must take the contemporary adaptations to task. Instead, I contemplate the motivations behind these disjunctures and departures. Popular Mahabharatas are more impactful in contemporary politics: they are used to mobilize, critique, and confirm dominant modes of thinking about Indian culture. For this reason, I have paid close attention to their narrative decisions, mechanics, and marketing. But perhaps the greatest reason why this inherently unstable but expansive epic remains current is the immense power of storytelling itself. Although the media of storytelling practices may have changed in the digital age, narratives continue to hold recipients in thrall. Even though readers, listeners, and viewers may see these stories as removed from their present reality, their narratives can easily be used to influence reality.

CHAPTER ONE:

MYTHS OF THE NATION

> My country! In thy days of glory past
> A beauteous halo circled round thy brow
> and worshipped as a deity thou wast—
> Where is thy glory, where the reverence now...
> Well—let me dive into the depths of time
> And bring from out the ages, that have rolled
> A few small fragments of these wrecks sublime
> Which human eye may never more behold
> And let the guerdon of my labour be,
> My fallen country! One kind wish for thee!
> - Henry L.V. Derozio, *To India My Native Land*

> Only this blessing grant me before you leave:
> may greed for victory, for fame, or for a kingdom
> never deflect me from a hero's path and salvation.
> - Rabindranath Tagore, *Karna Kunti Sambad*[2]

Collective Heroism, Past Glories

At the turn of the twentieth century, the nascent Indian nation and its narratives were

being negotiated in multiple cultural and political centers. In North India, the Hindi language was

being strongly proposed as a new lingua franca, its separation from Urdu being violently cleaved

on religious grounds. The use of Hindi was often yoked to an allegiance to Hindustan, a nation of

the Hindus: as Bharatendu Harischandra famously declared in Ballia, Uttar Pradesh in 1884,

"Whoever lives in Hindustan, whatever his colour or caste, is a Hindu…Bengalis, Marathas,

Panjabis, Madrasis [*sic*], Vaidiks, Jains, Brahmos, Mussalmans" (qtd. in Pandey *Routine*

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[2] Translation from Bengali by Ketaki Kushari Dyson

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Violence 110). Harischandra suggests here that regional languages and identities were to be subsumed into the larger cause of nation making, so much so that to be part of the new nation was to be automatically Hindu and Hindi-speaking. In the East of India, specifically Bengal with the colonial administrative capital Calcutta at its center, the so-called Bengal Renaissance would reach its zenith under Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, was a key figure in reconfiguring Bengali poetic and philosophical traditions to speak effectively for a new brand of Indian modernity. Writing in both English and Bengali, Tagore was the quintessential bilingual-elite voice of those who were privileged enough to both absorb European thought and diction while denouncing colonial political control. Tagore was one of many writers who also re-oriented the Mahabharata towards the nationalist cause. As the epigraph drawn from one such text indicates, it was an exciting but challenging time of preparation, where personal greed and power were to be discarded in favor of collective heroism for the sake of salvation. These multiple political efforts, which were also keenly personalized through the culling of rousing emotions, were to catalyze the ultimate liberation: the realization of nationhood.

In this chapter, I discuss how the mythological past, specifically drawn from the Mahabharata, was woven into the project of Indian nation making in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To understand how it came to be so, it is important to turn to several cultural developments during this time that would shape the contours of the Indian national imaginary. First, I discuss the politics of Indian languages, where I show how Sanskrit interacted and indeed still interacts with English, Hindi, and Bengali. These cultural transactions are not only essential in the study of epic adaptations, but also show the multi-lingual character of India itself. Next, I discuss the continuing lives of the epic texts both in the pre-modern and colonial periods. I draw

on the work of recent scholars such as Lothspeich and Hegarty to show that the epic has had a long-standing and complex relationship with the public and national imagination in South Asia, due to the themes in the Sanskrit text itself. Next, I turn to the narration of nation and the importance of imaginative literature in creating a shared time, space, and history for its peoples. I discuss the overlapping growth of mythic and realistic literature in multiple Indian literary traditions. Following this, I discuss the work of British Orientalists, who while contributing substantially to the revival of Hinduism, not only altered texts through translation but also reorganized Hinduism. Finally, I discuss how the epic complicates negotiations with modernity and particularly, the ways in which the past and spirituality are always a component of the same in India.

In many ways, this chapter is concerned with the colonial understanding of the epic past, chiefly because the present appears to be eager to keep the epic past alive. Further, it problematizes the notion that the impact of colonialism has faded away. Instead, many colonial ideas continue to inform the character of modern Hinduism, Indian literature, and nationalism even though their origins have been increasingly forgotten. However, the purpose of laying out this history is neither to pay obeisance to the colonial rulers nor to exact what Leela Gandhi calls "postcolonial revenge" (qtd in Chakrabarty 16). It is to show that there has been a continuum of ideas about myth, nation, and history that has led us to both contemporary Hindu nationalism and the strengthening of Hindu identity in the transnational sphere. It is also an attempt, as Makarand Paranjape advises, to show how modern Indian literature is in a continuum with older literary practices (81). In this sense, the following is both a history of Indian literature and a meditation on why and how myth is understood and underlined as history.

Politics of Languages

While the epics were originally written in Sanskrit,[3] this dissertation draws its primary

texts from Hindi, English, and Bengali traditions. This is not to say that the epics have only been

adapted in these languages. Scholars such as A.K. Ramanujan have shown us that the epics have

circulated in several Indian languages, especially in South India. The South Indian adaptations of

the epics have been particularly robust, whether it is medieval Tamil poet Kampar's

Irāmāvatāram from around the twelfth century CE or more recent adaptations of the

Mahābhārata such as *Randamoozham* (1984) by Malayali writer M.T. Vasudevan Nair and

Kannada author S.L. Bhyrappa's magnum opus *Parva* (1979)*. Their exclusion from this project

is only because of my own lack of conversance with the Dravidian languages. It becomes

important, then, to qualify why Hindi, Bengali, and English and their allied literary traditions

have been drawn together in my work beyond personal scholarly and linguistic ability. I argue

that they speak to one another in a unique political capacity in modern India. To summarize

briefly, Hindi was Sanskritized, Bengali had a Renaissance, and Sanskrit was Anglicized and

finally, globalized.

Within this work, the Sanskrit epics and the Indian national imagination is the point of

convergence for these languages. To begin with if the *Mahābhārata* is a Sanskrit epic that is

ironically rarely known in Sanskrit, the corollary would be that the epic text today is remembered

and repeated chiefly in other languages, particularly English and Hindi (Hegarty 2). This should

come as no surprise, both languages have official status in India and boast the largest numbers of

speakers. The 2011 Census revealed that Hindi is spoken by approximately 551 million persons

whereas English has 125 million speakers (Census 2011). These two languages are closely

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[3] For a comprehensive history of Sanskrit in pre-modern South Asia, see Pollock, Sheldon. *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2006.

followed by Bengali, which has 91 million speakers. However, the number of speakers of a language do not simply and causally relate to literary production, which is determined by several economic and political factors. Although to write extensively about the relationships between English, Hindi, Bengali, and Sanskrit would be beyond the scope of this project, it is pertinent to discuss first, what roles these modern languages played in the nation-making project and next, what affiliations they formed with Sanskrit.

Modern Bengali evolved from what was spoken in the Nadia region in contemporary West Bengal, approximately 26 miles from Calcutta (now Kolkata), the British capital from 1756 to 1911. Due to their proximity with the colonial administration, many Bengali speakers from this period went on to become the bilingual-elite who would claim the reigns of national power. Further, Bengali had a cultural renaissance, popularly known as the "Bengal Renaissance" in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which produced several literary works that showcased creative talents of bilingual-elite Bengalis such as Romesh Chandra Dutt, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, and Rabindranath Tagore. Priyamvada Gopal points out that this renaissance was premised on an Orientalist idea, that South Asia had a beautiful and distinguished ancient culture that had degenerated (17). She writes:

> [T]he intelligentsia of Bengal, the 'Renaissance' inaugurated a search for cultural and, eventually, national identity, a place from where they could articulate a sense of individual and collective selfhood. In this quest, thinkers and reformers such as Raja Rammohun Roy, attempted to reinterpret Hindu tradition to align it with their own understanding of the meaning of modernity and progress. This entailed a rewriting of Indian history that argued that an 'original' monotheistic Hinduism had been corrupted into polytheistic idolatry and superstition. (18)

Indian history and tradition, then, needed to be revived but also re-formulated. Where the British Orientalists believed they ought to be the ones to undertake this project, the Bengalis were as keen to continue or even take over this endeavor entirely. For instance, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, whose sonnet "To India My Native Land" forms an epigraph for this chapter, was another important figure in the Bengal Renaissance. An assistant headmaster of Hindu College in Calcutta in the early nineteenth century, Anglo-Indian Derozio would later be expelled for his radical ideas. He wrote prolifically before his early death at the age of 22, which added to his heroic aura. "To India my Native Land" poetically articulates the Orientalist idea which Gopal suggested undergirded the Bengal renaissance. In a style recalling William Wordsworth's poem "London" (1802), Derozio addresses India as a feminized "deity", who was "worshipped" earlier but now languishes as a chained eagle. To rescue her from this terrible abjection, it was up to people like Derozio "to dive into the depths of time" and recover "fragments" of a celebrated history of cultural greatness. The re-discovery of this antiquity would lead the deity India back to power and glory. This poem highlights the importance of both the recovery of ancient history and of worshipping the nation in a quasi-religious manner. Figures like Derozio and Tagore, then made it clear through their works that they would create a new cultural supremacy that would elevate, celebrate, but also modernize what already existed in pre-modern Indian traditions. Bengal, then was to be a center from where culture and politics would emanate to the rest of the country. Even if Hindi was the language of nation making, Bengali was the other language spoken by the Anglophone elites who claimed to be the arbiters of national culture through their extensive literary pursuits.

The region of Bengal, then, has been an important center for cultural ferment for the last two centuries, though by no means the only one. Today, West Bengal's intellectual clout has also

spread beyond national borders. Many diasporic elite South Asian academics like Dipesh

Chakrabarty and Partha Chatterjee hail from this region. Although their work has certainly been

useful in my own project, its limitations must also be acknowledged. Gopal, for instance, writes

"Subalternist work on Indian nationalism often makes unproblematized general claims for

nationalism or community based on readings of select Bengali texts, often literary works by elite

men" (155). Although he doesn't specifically discuss Bengalis, Arif Dirlik has also written that

postcolonial criticism is problematically organized around diasporic Indian academics. He

suggests that postcolonial criticism began not because colonial domination was crucial to unpack

but "when Third World intellectuals arrived in First World academe" (329). There is

undoubtedly a Bengali elite dominance that marks South Asian studies. This, to a large extent, is

connected to Bengal's cultural hegemony in India and the economic privilege afforded by

Bengali Brahmins who have now been able to cross national borders to make an intellectual and

personal life in the United States. I have explained in the acknowledgements my own

background is also similar: I too hail from an elite Bengali, Brahmin family. In many ways, this

project is a sustained quarrel with my own upbringing; an engagement with and a contestation of

the Brahmin patriarchy, albeit not only from Bengal. As the Mahabharata demonstrates, the most

compelling and troublesome enemies are intimate and familial.

In this work, I have focused on a larger cross-section of literatures and cultures from

across India which both confirm and resist Brahmin hegemony. Bengali literature is not central

to this project's arguments in any way. Even though I am indebted to the work of Bengali

subaltern historians such as Chatterjee and Chakrabarty, their voices are not the only ones that

guide this project. Mahasweta Devi, the Bengali writer whose work I discuss specifically resists

the cultural clout set up during and after the Bengal renaissance. A Marxist activist who spend

her life fighting for the rights of marginalized tribal persons, Mahasweta[4] resists the Bengali Brahmin patriarchy with undeniable vigor. Mahasweta is certainly not the only Bengali Marxist writer, but she has been long considered an especially strong voice against Brahmin and upper class elitism by scholars and readers alike. In working from within the epic text in the stories I have selected, she demonstrates how cultural hegemony can be resisted from within and often with its own narrative tools.

Modern Hindi has had its own dealings with cultural hegemony within the context of nationalism. It first came into being as a modern language at the Fort William College around 1800, as distinct from Urdu or other dialect forms such as Awadh, Braj and Khari Boli. Over the next century, it was politicized as a new lingua franca for a future, united India. It was consciously consolidated with nationalistic aims by separating from the Islamic influences of Urdu and actively infusing it with Sanskrit. Francesca Orsini's monograph *Hindi Public Sphere* (1997) shows the way in which Hindi was consolidated through its proliferation in varied literary and public spaces, such as poetry readings and political agitations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hindi and Bengali, which have distinctly different scripts and grammar, certainly share Sanskrit as an ancestor in the Indo-Aryan language family like several other Indian languages such as as Gujarati, Marathi, Punjabi, and Nepali. Nevertheless, they are popularly considered culturally antagonistic to one another, primarily because of their intertwined and fraught political histories. Today, speakers of Bengali are often disdainful of Hindi speakers, claiming that the language's cultural heritage and literary production does not equal that of Bengali's.

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[4] Devi is a Bengali honorific given to a respected woman and not her last name. She is also referred to as Mahasweta by translators and critics like Gayatri Spivak, Anjum Katyal and Radha Chakravarty. In the interest of consistency, I will also call her Mahasweta.

The anti-Hindi sentiment is certainly not limited to Bengalis. Many Indians beyond the

north Indian belt argue against Hindi as an imposition on their cultural freedoms and have

contested its institutionalization as a lingua franca. Many South Indians see the

institutionalization of Hindi as a move to subordinate their heritage: Tamil, Kannada, and Telugu

form a part of the Dravidian language family rather than the Indo-Aryan. It is notable that Tamil

politician C. Rajagopalachari, himself a well-known adaptor of the epics for young persons, was

pro-Hindi. Nevertheless, there have been several agitations in the twentieth century against Hindi

by South Indian political groups, especially in Tamil Nadu. For instance, in 1938 A.T.

Pannirselvam and the Justice Party opposed the compulsory teaching of Hindi in secondary

schools and succeeded in making it optional. The agitators succeeded and Hindi was made

optional in schools again. Between 1946-1950, the Dravidar Kazagham party was instrumental in

protesting Hindi. India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, recognized the concerns of

Anti-Hindi protestors. Even though Hindi was meant to replace English as the language of

governance by 1965, the passing of The Official Languages Act in 1963 ensured that English

could continue to be used in addition to Hindi in governmental work. However, the power

struggle to install Hindi as a compulsory language has continued, with more agitations over the

last fifty years from Tamil Nadu and beyond. Recent controversies include the Home Ministry's

directive asking government officials to primarily use Hindi on social media in 2014. Once again

this was opposed by many political entities in Tamil Nadu. The *Economic Times* reported that

the then Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayaram Jayalalitha Tamil Nadu wrote a letter to Prime

Minister Narendra Modi opposing the same. ("Ensure That English Is Used on Social Media:

Jaya to Modi.") In 2015, a popular internet campaign, the Stop Hindi Imposition hashtag united

social media users who were opposed to Hindi. *CNN News 18* reported that many users shared

their thoughts on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, marking them with #stophindiimposition and #locallangpolicy ("Indians Tweet up for Linguistic Equality and against Hindi Imposition"). There is thus, a continued opposition to Hindi's perceived violence against other linguistic heritages.

Today, the Indian Constitution declares no national language but designates Hindi and English as official languages. Twenty-two others, including Bengali, Marathi, Tamil, and Telugu, are considered recognized languages. In different states, governmental work is carried out in English, Hindi, as well as the language of state, such as Marathi in Maharashtra and Oriya in Odisha. Nevertheless, Hindi's association with Hindu nationalism continues pronounced because a Hindi-speaking elite has continued their campaign to make Hindi the national language, through which to convey an essentialized Hindu identity. Alok Rai argues that Hindi has been in a permanently embattled situation, from its violent separation from Urdu in the colonial period, to its competition with English in the present day. Rai highlights that Hindi and English have reluctantly agreed to co-exist and share a co-elite status (9). Today, Hindi claims political clout as the language surrounding New Delhi, the capital of the country, and is used extensively by political parties like the Bhartiya Janata Party and pressure groups like the Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh.

Beyond politics and the native speakers of Hindi from the north, Hindi's usage varies. Even though Bollywood, the Hindi film industry, continues to be wildly popular, not every Indian who has learnt Hindi in schools prefers to use it. Some do not speak Hindi unless they are dealing with the nitty-gritties of civic life, such speaking to traffic policemen and government officials. Further, being able to speak English distinctly remains a class marker. In *English Heart, Hindi Heartland* (2012), Rashmi Sadana writes that English, which she calls a "global

attribute" continues to be the aspirational language of modernity, whereas vernacular languages like Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, and Tamil are considered unsuitable for the same (25, 22). She also shows how the increased circulation of the English language and its literature has squashed other literary traditions. She argues that English is not just a "postcolonial" language but one that has been made India's own, so much so that it is English, rather than Hindi, that is considered a neutral and mediator language (26, 14).

Even though English has now been absorbed into India's undoubtedly multi-glossic cultural landscape, the colonial history of the establishment of English in India noteworthy. Among the colonial officials, Lord Macaulay is best remembered for his famous proclamation on English-language learning in 1835:

> It is impossible for us with our limited means to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be the interpreters between us and the millions we govern—a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population. (178)

These words were said to have birthed the Indian middle class, who would later use their new bilingual-elite powers to drive the British out. Ironically, the initial project of installing English language in India always had its fair share of indigenous supporters. Raja Rammohan Roy's Letter to Lord Amherst in 1823 is especially noteworthy because he strongly suggested that English replace Sanskrit as the language of essential learning and knowledge production. Roy, a

social reformer and educator born into a Bengali Brahmin family, wrote a letter in reaction to the opening of a new Sanskrit school in Calcutta by the British Government. He argued in this document that the learning of Sanskrit not only required years of arduous study to master its difficult grammar, but also led the student to a body of knowledge that did not meet the needs of the present. Thus, he argued against the Sanskrit way of learning, writing that it would "keep (this) country in the darkness". Instead, he requested a more "liberal and enlightened system of education" in English (qtd. in Trevelyan 70-71). Here, Roy posits Sanskrit as the language of the darker antiquity, whereas English is the language of an illuminated modernity. Broadly, Roy was suggesting the need of the hour was spoken English, rather than scriptural Sanskrit.

Macaulay's brother-in-law Charles Trevelyan, who would later become the Governor of Madras, argued similarly in his 1838 work *On the Education of People in India*. He too wished to create an Indian middle-class through English language education that would, in turn, educate the masses. He suggested that to learn classical languages such as Sanskrit and Arabic took an inordinate length of time to master. He writes, for instance, that it took nine years to master Sanskrit philology whereas English could be learned much faster (121). He also believed that English language learning would infuse scientific character into popular Indian languages and by extension beliefs (123). He goes on to uphold Rammohan Roy as an example of how the learning of English would greatly benefit Indians, quoting his letter in its entirety (65-71). However, he also made a case for English civil servants to make themselves proficient in vernacular languages, since as officers it would benefit them greatly in conducting their public duties. This is not to say that all colonial officers were equally in favor of promoting vernacular language learning. During this time, there were disagreements between the Anglicists, who believed in the superiority of English-based education for the natives, and the Orientalists, who believed that

ancient Indian traditions should be revived and revisited. Nevertheless, the project to install

English and further, English literary education was successful during the colonial rule. Scholars

like Gauri Viswanathan have written about how English literature was used to control,

subordinate and re-educate Indians. Where English literature was to teach Indians the right

manners and morals, the English language speaking Indians were supposed to help the British to

continue their domination.

Although Anderson, Chatterjee and other scholars have discussed how English language

learning became consolidating means for the bilingual-elite to overthrow the British, English's

symbolic rule continues in India. A popular phrase in Hindi highlights the irony of English's

predominance in India "*Angrez cale gaye, Angrezī chod gaye* (The English left, but left English

behind)". In India today, English is the language of globalization and upward mobility and here

to stay. Getting ahead in urbanizing India is often predicated on English language learning. On

the other hand, English has also been transformed and Indian-ized. It has several hybrid forms,

including urban youth creolizations like Hinglish (Hindi-English) and Tamlish (Tamil-English).

But English's power and privileges remain.

Further, Sanskrit and English are still strange bedfellows. Recent scholarship, such as

Manisha Basu's *The Rhetoric of Hindu India* (2016), shows a re-valorization of a Sanskritic

heritage through the medium of English. Basu writes that Hindu nationalism transformed itself

into a new kind of "pan-Indian, urban project" she calls "metropolitan Hindutva" which she says

was "greatly enhanced by its adoption of English in a type of globally cybernetic form to an

increasingly Sanskritized national culture". Her argument is that English, the language of a

digitally savvy technocratic middle-class in India, has been the tool with which "heterogeneity

based on class, caste, language, region" in the nation is being written over to promote a group of

persons who will now represent a new, homogeneous Sanskritized-Hindu India (ix). Srinivas

Aravamudan has made a similar argument in *Guru English* (2005), where Sanskritic, Hindu

knowledge is now flowing into transnational spaces through the medium of English. Despite

Hindi and Bengali's best cultural and linguistic efforts, it appears that English is Sanskrit's most

successful heir in India and beyond. It is unsurprising then, that English language epic

adaptations both deepen and profit from this connection.

Lives of the Texts

While specific relationships between English and vernacular epic adaptations, global

economy, and Sanskrit antiquity have not been explored in detail before, previous scholarship

has certainly considered the connections between the epic adaptation and the nation or the

political and social impact of collectively imagining the epic more broadly. Like Hindus who are

reborn many times, the epics have lived many lives on the subcontinent. The pre-modern

Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* has invited the consideration of many scholars, so much so that they form

a distinctive cohort within the disciplines of South Asian/ Religious Studies. William Hegarty's

2011 book on past and place in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* has been useful to this project because

it theorizes the epic within a larger public imagination in pre-modern South Asia.[5] Although

Hegarty speaks of the text within a pre-modern context, many of his observations are pertinent

today. For instance, he writes that the *Mahābhārata* had both philosophical and political

functions:

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[5] Philip Lutgendorf's *The Life of a Text* (1991), which has inspired the title of this subsection, charts a similar
history of the changing text of the Ramayana, focusing chiefly on its sixteenth century adaptation *Śrī
Rāmacaritamānasa* by the poet Tulsidas.

[It] played a key role in both the legitimation and transformation of elites…its emphasis on dilemmas and the vagaries of human existence…provided a means for the expression of dissatisfaction both with the immediate aspects of early South Asian historical experience, with political structures and with the limits of human existence more generally. (14)

Such an observation resonates with contemporary epic adaptations as well. Throughout this dissertation, I demonstrate how contemporary epic adaptations similarly express dissatisfaction with both the existing political order, whether in opposition to Brahmin elitism or in support of the same, and the anguish of individual human existence, by chronicling emotions of love, loss, and despair. Hegarty also emphasizes how compelling narrative itself has been in transforming and transmitting socio-political conditions South Asia but also as "a universal form of human expression" (15). Such a sentiment has been echoed by Arti Dhand, who notes that narrative is an insidious and therefore ultimately successful vehicle for ideology, particularly when it comes to gender (200). The narrative of the Mahabharata, an undoubtedly grand and pervasive one, transmits both its ideologies and the discontent with the same, gathering traction every time it is repeated.

A more direct precursor of this project is Pamela Lothspeich's 2009 monograph *Epic Nation.* A book that works specifically on epic adaptations within the context of Indian nationalism, it considers the frequent deployment of the Mahabharata imaginary in early twentieth century Hindi literature, particularly during the anti-colonial, early nationalist movement. In her work, Lothspeich argues that for nationalist thinkers, the categories of myth and history were intertwined and often substitutable with one another (29). Further, many Hindus believed and indeed still believe that the epics were based on real events, which gives the epics

extended power over contemporary political realities. Lothspeich argues that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, retellings of the Mahabharata were complicit in revivalist nationalist historiography, where the Hindu past was to be reaffirmed and glorified before being rightfully reclaimed from an intimate other, in this case the British (34). The content of the epics were also especially pertinent: where the *Rāmāyaṇa* was believed to chiefly be a story about a king reclaiming a lost queen, the *Mahābhārata* was about reclaiming a land that has been wrongly usurped (4). Other scholars such as V. Naryana Rao and J.A.B. van Buitenen have similarly remarked that the text emphasizes the ownership of land and genealogy. Lothspeich argues that the Mahabharata was more impactful for the nationalist project than the Ramayana because the former is a text explicitly about establishing righteous rule.

Since literature was a key tool with which to consolidate a new national identity, mythological retellings, which Lothespeich calls "pauranik literature", were an integral part of the same. Lothpeich emphasizes that she has drawn the term from Hindi, Bengali and Marathi literary criticism, which uses the term "adjectively to refer to modern literature and other cultural production…based on traditional Hindu lore (primarily narratives from the Mahābhārata, the Rāmāyaṇa, and Puranas)" (7). "Pauranik" is a reference to the Sanskrit word for legendary or mythological: "*purāṇa*" is variously defined as old, mythological, and of antiquity. It is also connected to the Purānas, a body of ancient works from the fourth century CE containing Hindu legends and folklore. Although the words "*purāṇā*" and "*purōṇō*" are often used in colloquial Hindi and Bengali to indicate an undesirable oldness, in a Sanskritic register it signifies "the wisdom of the ages". The Mahabharata is certainly the wisdom of the ages, but also a literary genre unto itself. It is hailed as an *itihāsa*, a Sanskrit compound word that literally means "as it has been said". David Shulman notes that the former has also been called an *itihāsapurāṇa*,

which amalgamates the two concepts. He explains that itihāsa is often used to refers to both myth and history, where the epic presents itself "not as a work of art but a reality itself" (26). This notion of the epic events as real/history has been critical in emboldening the claims of Hindu nationalism in the late twentieth century. Every adaptation strengthens the conception of myth as history: history, as we know, has a way of repeating itself.

Lothspeich also notes how early nationalist-mythological literature diverged from two well known theories about the novel and nationalism. Building on the work of Anthony D. Smith and Geeta Kapur, Lothspeich shows us how Indian nationalism was characterized both by "an epistemic break from the past", especially the colonial one, but also a need to recuperate something of the past (12). Smith writes that ethnic groups return to myths at times of crisis. Where in Lothspeich's work, the crisis is colonialization, in my work, the crisis begins with the failure of secularism after the Indian National Emergency. In both instances, Hindu mythology and its narratives emerged the most triumphant of the past myths. In a sense, this is something of a departure from Benedict Anderson's model of the nation as an imagined community, where the new national imagining constituted a dissociation with older ideas about religious modes of thought. In the case of Indian nationalism, a revival of Hinduism was a constitutive element of the same. If other nationalisms discarded the notion that they were held together by a sacred language and religion to move towards a secular rationalism, in India there was a doubling down on the sacrality of Hinduism as well as a repurposing of English to support these aims. Earlier in this chapter, I have shown how and why religious ideas continue to proliferate through English, affirming a problematically Hindu hegemony. "Pauranik" literature has long provided substance for such national solidarities. In the nascent nationalist period that Lothspeich studies, it created pride in an authentic past and mobilized anti-colonial movements. In the twenty-first century, I

have found that pauranik literature serves a similar function with new means and aims and in doing so, emboldens the Hindu consumer subject's claim to the global economy.

Although Lothspeich argues specifically about mythological literature, she is not alone in suggesting that Indian nationalism both borrowed from and remained ambivalent towards from its colonial and pre-colonial pasts. Lothspeich cites Chatterjee's discussion of the spiritual and material aspects of Indian nationalism, affirming the anticolonial movement was waged at the level of culture, which functioned within the spiritual realm in India (14). An essentialized Hindu identity was first constructed to organize the peoples around so that they may disavow the British control. Finally, in her larger argument, Lothspeich confirms that the predominance of epic adaptations confimed a largely Hindu and upper-caste nationalist identity. Even though Lothspeich makes these arguments about the early twentieth century, this project will show how this affirming of the epic through the novel form continues to be true and is even further emboldened in the late twentieth century, particularly after economic liberalization emboldened a new Hindu consumer subjecthood.

Lothspeich not only makes useful points about the history of the Mahabharata, but also the history of the Indian novel form itself. One such argument is in resistance to Mikhail Bakthin's well-known writing about the epic and the novel. In the essay in *The Dialogic Imagination* Bakhtin says that the early novel mimicked the epic form and parodied it: he calls the novel anti-canonical and the epic, pious (324-330). Lothspeich rightly suggests that the epic and Indian mythology function quite differently (221-22). The novelized adaptations of the epics often uphold the epic as canonical and emphasizes its own piety. Rather than subverting established hierarchies, such as in the "carnivalesque" works of Rabelais and Cervantes, many of the epic adaptations and novels in India double down on established hierarchies of caste, gender,

and religion. By doing so, pauranik literature affirms cultural homogeniety and Hindu hegemony in service of nationalism. Lothspeich notes that while early writers of pauranik literature did not have malicious intentions, they contributed to a Hindu-centric national imagining which certainly fueled communalism (220). The epic adaptations in Lothspeich's study are looking to build a nation in resistance to colonial knowledge and domination and to a large extent, succeed.

Lothspeich is certainly right to point out that the novel doesn't parody the epic in India. In fact, the non-parodic, hybrid novelized epic has come to be a genre unto itself in the Indian subcontinent. Further, when satirical adaptations of the epic are written, they are vehemently censored by Hindu pressure groups and political parties. There are very brief moments of the parodiac or the farcical in the epic adaptations produced between 1970-2016. Even then, the epic parody remains an exception and not the rule in Indian literary and popular discourse. One example of epic parody is Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel,* which like Rushdie's famous work *Midnight's Children* deliberately satirizes the nation and its discontents. In this case, I believe the desire for satire and parody comes from an interest in connecting a new Indian novel to a larger Anglophone literary traditions of postmodern writing and irreverent satire. Tharoor's book, which was written with an undeniably elite audience in mind, was not protested against because it did not circulate as far. As we see in the case of the televised Hindi epic adaptations, wider circulation is better positioned to support the establishment. Possibly the most wide-reaching of all the epic adaptations thus far, these adaptations were watched by millions of viewers all over the country. They were a watershed moment in the life of the epics on the subcontinent because they served the dual purpose of establishing a new hegemonic version of the text as well as reorienting the texts in service of a Hindu nation. Although not in a simple causal way, these shows affirmed the sacrality of the epics and discouraged other interpretations

of the same, thereby suppressing the parodic impulse. Since these shows, there has been

increasing political insistence on the sacrality of the epics beyond the literary sphere: adaptations

by Nina Paley and Akshat Verma have been explicitly censored by right-wing pressure groups

because their tones and styles were deemed irreverent. Unsurprisingly then, many epic

adaptations in my study affirm cultural practices and treat the epics somberly. Even the epic

adaptations which are specifically written to resist hegemonic ideas, such as Chitra Banerjee

Divakaruni or Mahasweta Devi's works, continue to underline the gravity of the epics and the

consequences of adhering to their ideologies. Nevertheless, few authors disagree that the project

at stake in epic adaptations, whether to dismantle or erect, is that of the nation and its dominant

Hindu culture.

Narrating the Nation

Hegarty's work shows that the epic imagination has been integral in aiding a sense of

community over the many centuries it has been in existence. Next, Lothspeich shows that by the

nineteenth century, epic reimaginings came together in the Indian subcontinent to support the

establishment of nation in resistance to colonial domination. Although the epics had existed in

oral and written forms for many centuries, they received a new lease on life in the nineteenth

century due to establishment of what Benedict Anderson has called "print capitalism": the

proliferation of written materials including novels, periodicals, and newspapers. Anderson writes

that print-capitalism arose as an "interaction between a system of production and productive

relations (capitalism), a technology of communications (print), and the fatality of human

linguistic diversity" (43). He writes that print capitalism worked in three ways to form the basis

of the national consciousness, first, it "created unified fields of exchange and communication

below [the classical language] and above spoken vernacular". In India, this would mean that many persons who were now reading in languages such as Hindi and English "became capable of comprehending one another via print and paper", which in turn helped them imagine one another as a part of the same community Second, it helped give "fixity to language, which in the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation" (44). In the Indian case, the image of antiquity was based both on being able to read the pauranik texts in Sanskrit themselves and their adaptations in languages other than Sanskrit. Finally, print-capitalism created "languages of power" which in India are English, Hindi, and Bengali. The development of print capitalism ensured that epic adaptations in written form would circulate further than ever in nineteenth century India. The act of reading these texts helped many persons who were geographically apart imagine themselves as a part of a singular endeavor: a nation with a common history that deserved political sovereignty. These adaptations were in a variety of vernacular languages, such as Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Kannada, and Tamil, as well as English, rather than Sanskrit, which was a language restricted to upper-caste Hindus.

Undoubtedly, the stars of print capitalism were the newspaper, which Anderson calls "one-day bestsellers" and the novel (35). Gopal, whose historiography of the Indian English novel draws on Anderson's ideas, explains that "The novel [was] the paradigmatic site for the 'imagining' of national foundations and futures…[which] the key media for ''re-presenting'' the kind of imagined community that is the nation (6). She writes that it is not just that the novel narrated the nation, but the theme of nation was its "most persistent thematic preoccupation", particularly during the anti-colonial struggle (7). However, she explains the relative newness of nationhood did not mean the nation-imagining novelists saw themselves as disconnected from antiquity:

> [D]espite their relative newness as political entities, they see themselves as
> possessed of great antiquity, as looming out of an 'immemorial past' which
> constituted national history. Nation-statehood, however, was not a status that all
> could aspire to. In order to be admitted to the club of nations in the early
> nineteenth century, it was necessary to have a History and not all cultures or
> civilizations were deemed to possess one. (13)

In this case, the quest for a history led the novelists to mythic literatures: as discussed previously history and myth were interchangeable for many Hindus and the *Mahābhārata* being an *itihāsa*, was both. The epic itself was about staking claim to land while resisting an intimate enemy and establishing moral righteousness. Thus, the epic in this case, gave the novel not something to depart from or challenge, but provided it antiquity that could be infused into the national imagining.

The relationship of the novel with the nation, particularly those that were formed in resistance to colonialism, has invited many discussants in postcolonial studies. One such discussant is Homi Bhabha, who in the introduction to *Nation and Narration*, writes that the nation itself is a discursive narrative force and a cultural elaboration:

> [T]he nation, as a form of cultural elaboration (in the Gramscian sense), is an
> agency of ambivalent narration that holds culture at its most productive position,
> as a force for subordination, fracturing, diffusing, reproducing as much as
> producing, creating, forcing, guiding (3-4).

Here, Bhabha suggests that the nation is an unstable entity, which is always in a state of performing, revising, and altering itself. Timothy Brennan, who writes an essay in the same volume, argues that literature has a key role in the imagining and re-imagining of nation,

"Nations…are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role" ("National Longing for Form" 49). In the case of India, imaginative literature has two overlapping trends which played such a decisive role: "pauranik" literature, which emphasized that the nation had antiquity and history and realist literature, which helped the nation imagine simultaneity.

Anderson argues that formal realism helped persons of the nation imagine themselves as part of the same chronological time. By reading realist novels that demonstrated the "meanwhile", readers could conceive of individuals doing different things in varied locations simultaneously, even if they were not aware of each other. Borrowing from Walter Benjamin's ideas, Anderson talks about realism helping persons recognize that they share "homogeneous empty time" which can also be "measured by clock and calendar" (24). However, like the form of the novel itself, realist literature in India was not simply borrowed from the British. Ulka Anjaria reminds us that: "realism [in twentieth century India] is a mode of engagement, innovation and imagination within writing under colonialism, rather than . . . [a] colonial leftover" (29). Realist writers were not simply borrowing the form from the British but radicalizing it to protest against colonialism. Further, mythic or pauranik literature derived from pre-colonial sources consistently flourished alongside and in conversation with realistic literature. Realism was particularly useful in working out social problems in the interest of the nation's future. Anjaria writes that Hindi writer Munshi Premchand's socialist realism was dedicated to the uplift of the under-privileged (39). However, realism was not sufficient to inviting devotion to the Indian nationalist project by itself. As I have explained in the introduction, the categories of imagination and devotion came together to generate powerful collective emotions to support large-scale allegiances. In fact, realistic writing often maintained

intertextual connections with mythic literature to promote a confidence in India's own antiquity while constructing a new kind of fiction suited to the needs of the new nation.

Meenakshi Mukherjee has written that the realist tradition in Indian literatures has always engaged with myth and mythic literature. She writes that this has been the case in both the Indian English and what she classifies as "Bhasha literatures". *Bhāṣa* translates to spoken language in Sanskrit. Mukherjee uses this term to distinguish literature in Indian languages such as Malayalam, Bengali, Hindi, and Marathi from that in Indian English. Writing on the development of the novel form in early nineteenth century Indian literatures, she finds the predominance of a "mythic imagination" that both contested and infused the realist one. Like Lothspeich, she classifies the many writings infused by myth as "puranic". She writes that while the influence of the European novel and indeed, the idea of historical time as a "linear and sequential progression of events" was felt by early Indian novels, the conception of mythic time was also rejuvenated in the same writings:

> [T]he unconscious influence of these [ancient] works, of the puranic tradition, of oral narratives, of memory episodes from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* on which the imagination of most writers was sustained cannot be ignored… (9).

For this reason, she argues that the proto-Indian novel has a different engagement with realism, mainly because "it was based on a different view of reality". Rather than focusing on descriptions of realistic setting like European novelists such as Defoe and Fielding, Indian novelists remained concerned with poetic descriptions of the beauty of nature and persons (10). Later, she gives the example of the first Malayalam novel of manners *Indulekha* (1888) by O. Chandu Menon which is decidedly Jane Austen-like in its presentation of a wilful young woman who chooses her own partner. Mukherjee writes that even though Menon consciously wished to

adopt the European realist conventions and emphasized the same in the introduction, the novel's ending returns to the oral recitation style reminiscient of "puranic" literature: "All characters mentioned…have reached the summit of human happiness, and now may God bless us and all who read this tale." (qtd. in Mukherjee 15). Thus, the mythic imagination and style often intruded upon even deliberate realist convention.

It is notable that *Indulekha*'s content forms an intertextual relationship with mythic literature itself. In the text, the romance between the protagonists Indulekha and Madhavan is furthered when they converse about Sanskrit poet Kalidasa's *Abhijñānaśākuntala* (Chandumenon 13). Written between the first century BCE and fourth century CE, this earlier text itself is a reimagining of one of the events of the *Mahābhārata*, where the union, parting and reunion of the parents of the King Bharata is discussed (MhB 1.7.62-69). Chandumenon's intertextual moves, in addition to his stylistic similarities with "puranic" literary texts, show how deeply embedded earlier literary imaginaries were in new efforts to craft even the Indian realist novel.

The growing interest in creating a novel form in Indian languages, whether Bengali, Marathi, Malayalam, Hindi, certainly included both British elements, both literary sensibilities and the English language itself. However, the new realist novel form was decidedly hybrid in combining pre-existing, indigenous literary traditions with the same. Even though it took certain elements from the British literature, such as the novel of manners or realism, it never severed stylistic and content-related ties from legends, oral narrratives, and epic texts. Other critics like Alex Tickell have written about the predominance of an "epic historical consciousness" that pervaded early twentieth century writing in India: not only was the fledgeling realist novel infused with a mythic imagination, but also there was a rise in historical fictional narratives

(240). Examples of these historical fictional texts that highlighted legends or even directly borrowed epic imaginaries abound, from K.K. Sinha's *Sanjogita* (1903), M.V. Naidu's *The Princess Kamala* (1904), Sarath Kumar Ghosh's *The Prince of Destiny: The New Krishna* (1909). Beyond the novel, there were also poetic efforts such as Romesh Chandra Dutt's abridged English versions of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* (1899) and Tagore's Bengali poem *Karna Kunti Sambad* (1900). Many of these texts were invested in a combination of individual heroism and a glorious collective antiquity. Both these elements were well-suited to serve the needs of the nationalist movement and in doing so, helping Indians imagine the nation into existence but with a predominantly Hindu antiquity.

Orientalism and Hinduism

When modern Indian literary traditions were on the rise, there was also another important cultural development that gave impetus to popularity of the mythological novel and the idea of a Hindu past more broadly. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Orientalist scholars took a deep interest in reading and translating texts from the Indian subcontinent, particularly those that were broadly related to Hinduism. The legacy of Orientalism is by now, infamous, chiefly due to Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978)*.* He wrote that Orientalism was not merely a large-scale intellectual endeavor but also an exercise in political domination: colonial scholars deployed their knowledge of the colonized culture to subordinate it. He writes that what the Orientalist scholars effectively invented and essentialized the so-called Orient as "a simulacrum… [which was] reproduced in the West, for the West" (5). Orientalism ensured that Othered cultures were considered unchanging abstractions that were inferior to western cultures (8). For instance, the Oriental culture and its people were emphasized to be marked with mysticism, spirituality,

irrationality "untiring sexuality, unlimited desires" while the West is rational, scientific and decorous (188). Said is not necessarily dismissing and trivializing the work of Orientalists because they perpetuated falsehoods. Instead he shows the great extent of the scholarship itself and consequently, the vast impact of this work within the context of imperialist politics. In the twenty-first century, a binaristic understanding of the "Mystical East" and the "Rational West" persists and has in fact been strengthened by global consumer culture. Orientalism gave persons from the west an imperfect way of seeing an Othered culture, which at worst could be considered backwards on an imperial narrative of progress, and at best, so exotic that it must be possessed.

Further, Orientalism did not only impact the way the British understood India, but also how Indians understood themselves. For the purposes of this project, the chief contribution of British Orientalism was the revival and the reframing of Hinduism through religious and literary texts. In Richard King's book *Orientalism and Religion* (1999), he argues that before the nineteenth century, Hinduism was an amorphous entity composed of numerous texts and daily practices. Colonial thinkers and administrators in fact, homogenized Hinduism into a single world religion by the twentieth century. Other scholars like Sharada Sugirtharajah argue similarly about the role of colonial translators like William Jones and Max Mueller in aiding the reorganization of Hinduism, even when they read it as a perpetual Other of Christianity. Although Sugirtharajah did not write much on the complicit or argumentative responses of native thinkers to these presentations of Hinduism, she follows up in her book's conclusion about the persistence of colonial discourse and its contination as neo-imperialism, which critically shapes Hinduism's new place in the global world order.

A substantial amount of British Orientalist scholarship circulated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, at the same time as the development of several new literary traditions in

India. This inevitably led to wide-spread intertextual engagement and intellectual cross-pollination. Further, colonial knowledge production had common sites where British intellectuals and indigenous writers collaborated and interacted. One such example is the Fort William College. Founded in 1800 in Calcutta by Lord Wellesley, this college was primarily meant to be a center for young British civil servants to learn about the Indian culture so that they could rule the land. Initially, it was an Indian language training institute for the British. After a mandate was issued in 1798, British men had to be proficient in languages such as Persian, Bengali and Hindustani to be eligible for public office.

Fort William also became the center of a new set of cultural and intellectual developments for both the British and indigenous scholars. The college became an active arena of Orientalist scholarship and would contribute, as scholars such as Sisirkumar Das argue, to the consolidation and rejuvenation of several Indian languages. Englishmen such as H.T. Colebrooke, the professor of Sanskrit, and John Gilchrist, the professor of Hindustanee, took up most of the teaching positions in the college. Gilchrist would earn infamy for separating the Hindi and Urdu scripts. Several Indians were also appointed to subordinate positions at Fort William College to assist the British professors in the teaching of languages. Lallu Lal, for instance, was a "Bhasha Munshi" (language contractor) who was hired to help Gilchrist understand and teach a distinct style of Hindustani, the north Indian dialect of 'Braj Bhasha'. Under the aegis of the college, Lal notably wrote a book called *Śrī Premasāgara* between 1804 and 1810, which is widely believed to be the first work of modern Hindi literature. As a retelling of the life of Kṛṣna based on the tenth book of the Sanskrit *Bhagvata Purāna* and *Vishnu Purāna,* it is a pauranik literary adaptation in the most literal sense.

Das writes that the Fort William College ran until Lord Dalhousie officially dissolved it in 1854, even though it had ceased to function two years earlier. During the five decades of its functioning, it not only altered the cultural trajectory for many vernacular languages in colonial India but also published 132 books. Some of the titles include *The Grammatical Sutra or Aphorism of Panini* (1810), Gilchrist's *The Stranger's East India Guide to the Hindustanee* (1802), and notably, prose translations of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in three volumes (1806, 1808, 1810). The history of the Fort William College shows how Orientalists often relied on literary texts to both support their understanding of and further their reframing of Indian culture. Further, it is evident that centers like the College deployed print capitalism for their own colonial administrative purposes but also made several new literary works available to a larger indigenous public, who by then were reading both in English and native languages.

Orientalist translation also had an important role in reshaping Hinduism and Indian literature. The work of Welsh philologist and translator William Jones is especially noteworthy. Tejaswini Niranjana writes that Jones was drawn to translation for three reasons:

> the need for translation by the European, since natives are unreliable interpreters
> of their own laws and culture…the desire to be a lawgiver, to give the Indians
> their "own" laws…the desire to "purify" Indian culture and speak on its behalf.
> (13)

With these aims, Jones translated and prepared new versions of several texts, such as Kalidas' *Abhijñānashākuntalam* (1789)*,* Jayadeva's *Gīta-Goviṇda* (1792) and *Manusmṛti* (1794). On one hand, it cannot be denied Jones was reviving certain Hindu texts with the intent to celebrate them. But on the other hand, these texts also circulated among those who read them with specific political biases. For instance, well known Utilitarian and historian James Mill referred to Jones'

Abhijñānashākuntalam extensively while remarking on Indian culture. Gauri Viswanathan writes that Mill read the text ahistorically and derived a monolithic understanding of Indian culture from it, "[he] read the lyricism and sentiment in the Indian drama as a mark of a self-indulgent society" (122) Even though Mill had never actually visited India, the text's availability and presentation of what he believed to be core Hindu beliefs were enough for him to pronounce a judgement. Mill and Jones were not alone in believing that to access Hindu texts was to access Hindu culture. Lata Mani writes that British colonial officials also understood Hinduism to be a textual rather than a lived culture. In fact, the very notion that Hinduism had a body of writings known as the scriptures was consolidated by the British and then later, further by the bilingual indigenous elite who received a colonial education. Mani argues that in the early colonial period, a vast range of religious literature was homogeneously collated as "the scriptures". The British and the indigenous elite alike became consumed with the idea of a purely "textual" India that simplistically conflated religion with texts, and texts with culture (69, 105).

Further, the British Orientalist translations themselves were certainly not conducted in an apolitical vaccum. Many such translations were not simply moving textual materials between languages but also attempting to 'fix' the Oriental/colonized subject. The translations show a distinct need to frame the Hindu subject in an unchanging, exotic position while also moving to reorganize Hinduism to suit Christian sensibilities. An example of such a cultural reframing-as-translation would be Jones' translation of Jayadeva's *Gīta-Goviṇda*. A twelfth century poetic work, this text details the youth of the Hindu God Kṛṣṇa, also a key spiritual figure in the Mahabharata. The text is a pastoral work whose narrative highlights the flute-playing Kṛṣṇa's dalliances and flirtations with cowherd girls (gopis) from his village, often going into poetic sexual details. This text was first translated by Jones in 1792 and again by Edwin Arnold in

1875. In his translation, Jones notably removed certain passages because he considered them too erotic. In the original text, Kṛṣṇa's relationship with his consorts shows little distinction between sexual rapture and devotional rapture. Jones' translation removed these passages because they were "too luxuriant and too bold for an EUROPEAN taste" (qtd. in Sugirtharajah 14). In doing so, Jones makes a move to not only make the text available for European consumption but also "purifies" the same based on his understanding of European and Christian morality. This text and others like it had a significant impact on how Kṛṣṇa worship was reimagined thereafter. In later literary renditions of the life and youth of Kṛṣṇa, such as Lallu Lal's *Śrī Premasāgara* one sees a similar suppression of the erotic.

It is important to see the function of Oriental translation in the colonial context as a cultural intervention, where texts written in the language of the colonized are translated with a colonial agenda by the Orientalists. Such a move serves, as Said writes, to "domesticate the Orient and thereby turn it into a province of European learning" (78). Further, this created a fixed idea of the Other culture while also giving a reconfigured native culture "back" to the colonized. Tejaswini Niranjani points out that Jones was responsible for creating a certain fixed ideal of Hindu civilization and knowledge by translating ancient Sanskrit texts into English. She writes:

> [H]e contributes to the historical, teleological model of civilization, that coupled with a notion of translation presupposing transparency of representation, helps construct a powerful version of the 'Hindu' that later writers of different philosophical and political persuasions incorporated into their texts in an almost seamless fashion. (13)

Niranjana suggests Jones' translations continued to project Indians as an irrational people who were chiefly ruled by the supernatural and magical. In translating certain texts, he played up

Hindu mythology as a dominant worldview for all Indians, which in turn, he attempts to decode and fix through translation. She suggests that such translations were also re-interpreted and written in a manner that was in keeping with western literary tenets, such as that of the classical notions of coherence and unity. I would extend this argument to suggest there is another level of "fixing" in the text. Such a translation attempted not only to fix meanings and implications of the text formally, but also imbued it with a distinctly puritanical strain in filtering the erotic content. The altered versions of many such canonical religious documents became crucial to the indigenous elite's understanding of their own traditions, particularly in the context of religio-national identity.

However, this is not to suggest that Orientalist translation and scholarship was a wholly sinister enterprise. While it was conducted within a specific framework of political dominance, it also added to a vast body of knowledge while providing new ways of thinking about ancient texts. The epics themselves invited the analysis of many Orientalist scholars in the nineteenth century, especially from Britain and Germany. Dhand gives several examples of nineteenth century scholars who attempted to understand the design, both stylistic and moral, of the *Mahābhārata*. For instance, she writes that German philologist Frank Bopp was the first to edit the text in 1829 and suggested that the *Mahābhārata* was not all written at the same time, since the manuscript showed many different linguistic conventions from varied periods (83-84). Other scholars generally agreed with this view, although it was contested in 1895 by Joseph Dahlmann, who "offered a synchronic interpretation of the text, arguing that the present text is the unified, organic work of a single author" (89-91). The works of scholars such as Dahlmann and Bopp have an important legacy in current epic scholarship, whether in India or around the globe.

Much of this scholarship also rightly highlighted that India's literary and cultural heritage should be celebrated. However, the work of Jones and other Orientalists also continued to emphasize that Indian themselves were neither capable of accurately re-presenting the work in English nor curating and preserving it more broadly. Further, it also emphasized that India's greatness was in its antiquity and past and that too had to be trimmed, purified, and fixed before Indians could be prepared to receive the Western colonizer's greatest gift to the colonized—modernity.

Modernity and the Epics

In tracing this history of epic adaptations, I found that at both ends of the life of the Indian nation, whether at the beginning of the nationalist period or during the global-transnational Hindu present, an increased focus on re-readings and re-presentations of an imagined, pre-modern Hindu past. What then, does this indicate about the epic's relationship with modernity? At first, it may be worth considering how the idea of modernity came to be formulated in India as an essential aim of the colonial project. Sudipta Kaviraj writes that the state of being modern was thought of, and indeed still might be, "[as] a process that expands from the west to other parts of the world" (497). Broadly such an idea is in keeping with an imperial narrative of progress, where European thought indicates to colonized Others that they should mainly look towards a future, away from irrationality and superstitions of the past. In this sense, modernity is brought to or more accurately, imposed upon, the colonized Other by the colonizer as the right and only worldview. However, herein lies the complication: Kaviraj explains that not only was modernity not a uniform occurrence in a monolithic "West", but also changed irretrievably as it expanded:

> [T]he more modernity expands and spreads to different parts of the world the
> more it becomes differentiated and plural…although its origins were certainly
> European, modernity's subsequent global expansion forces it to increasingly leave
> behind and forget its origins. (504)

Kaviraj helpfully provides us with two ideas. First, that modernity mutates in different spaces and second, that its movements are in the service of a global homogeniety. Further, even if we concede that it was initially received from Europe, modernity is rarely uncritically accepted and evenly installed in colonized cultures. Other theorists, such as Partha Chatterjee, have also similarly argued that the project of Indian modernity was carefully crafted to be different from the British imposition. He provides the example of the role of modern Indian women who were certainly not supposed to be like British women, but also not uneducated like Indian women. Instead, a new role for Indian women was crafted by a new patriarchy, who paradoxically drew from ancient Hindu sources and texts to show how education could be beneficial for women, and by extension society (124). In this manner, the conscious construction of modern Indian culture drew as much from its so-called origins, here British, as from selective readings of pre-modern texts. In this way, Indian modernity both looked forward and looked backward. The enlivening and re-framing of ancient texts was an integral part of this exercise, except the older texts would now be reworked in support of new goals.

As I have explained earlier, "pauranik" literatures were co-opted into modern Indian literatures. In doing so, writers consciously took multiple literary traditions, such as some aspects of the British novel form from their colonial present, while also rejuvenating specific pre-modern indigenous mythologies, such as Sanskrit literature. Both these came together to frame a

nationalistic future and gained circulation due to the new material conditions of print capitalism.

Kaviraj notes:

> [even as] conditions of artistic production are revolutionized, modern artistic
> practice often works upon narrative and artistic material drawn from pre-existing
> conditions…the newness of modern practices is worked upon the materials and
> memories of the old. (517)

Epic narratives are especially strongly linked to memories. The epic texts form a part of a body of Hindu texts called Smṛti, or literally "what is remembered" in Sanskrit. Wendy Doniger writes that even though Smṛti texts were written down initially, they survive through repetition and variant re-readings, which includes major revisions, additions, and subtractions ("Textual Sources for the Study of Hinduism" 2). The memories of the old have then, been instrumental to the construction of the modern Indian nation and its culture both because they are constituent elements of Hinduism and were furthered by modern methods of production.

The past has remained integral to the working out of both the methods and the contents of the future. Throughout the twentieth century, writings in English and other Indian languages have grappled with and repurposed pre-modern literary practices to create modern works. Echoes of oral narration and garrulity can be found in works such as Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938). Another of the author's novels, *The Serpent and The Rope* (1960), is influenced by Vedantic philosophy. By the 1980s, postmodern, magical realist works like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth Pouring Rain* (1987) were drawing on Hindu mythology to create colorful pastiches. Beyond the novel form, modern Indian drama has also had a deep intertextual relationship with Hindu mythology: notable examples of such plays include Dharmveer Bharati's *Andha Yug* (1954) and Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala* (1990). The

move to create a nationalized theatrical form within a global world has been discussed in detail by scholars such as Vasudha Dalmia and Aparna Dharwadker in *Poetics, Plays, Performances* (2006) and *Theatres of Independence* (2005) respectively.

Further, this persisting interest in Hindu mythology in modern Indian writing certainly has to do with the author's backgrounds. Makarand Paranjape writes that many of the Indian English novelists come from Brahmin backgrounds (55). He suggests that although some of them have distanced themselves from their Brahmin backgrounds and aligned themselves with narratives of social change, caste-related critique and commentary is curiously lacking in their works (56, 62). I do not disagree with Paranjape: Indian writers like Premchand and Mulk Raj Anand have made groundbreaking social interventions through works like *Godaan (*1936) and *Untouchable* (1935) respectively. However, I would argue that the caste privilege of writers appears insidiously within the contents of contemporary literary works and specifically in epic adaptations.

Today, global market forces and the Indian economic liberalization have given even more impetus for epics to be remembered and therefore, emboldened the Hindu Brahmin reader, writer, and consumer. As Appadurai writes, in transnational and globalized spheres there is a radically new relationship between "wanting, remembering, being and buying" (84). The twenty-first century epic proliferates actively on Twitter and Facebook where its new readers and discussants now convene. This is where the second idea Kaviraj provides us with is helpful, that modernity's movements today are catalyzed by or in service of global homogeniety rather than its colonial origins. If the pre-modern epic was re-imagined for nation building in the colonial period, its twenty-first century future is distinctly transnational and translocal. Instead of engaging European literary models and ideas, it makes its way to the global literary market

whose center is undoubtedly the United States. In fact, many new epic adaptations, such as Divakaruni's, actively announce themselves as Asian-American. These persons are global citizens capitalizing on their new elite position in a world with increasingly porous national boundaries. Further, Pauranik literature, including epic adaptations, have continually challenged the idea that the modern necessitates a radical break from the past. Arjun Appadurai has argued that there is no singular moment where modernity is born that radically separates the past from the present. Instead, modernity is "decisively at large, irregularly self-conscious and unevenly experienced" (3). Epic adaptations ensure that the past stays in constant dialogue with both the present and the future.

In this project, I am only tracing a very short period in the very long life of an ancient epic, which has circulated in South Asia for over two thousand years. In the last two hundred years, the epic has grappled with colonialism's epistemic violences and revitalizations, seen the development and failure of secular nationalism, emerging more strongly than ever within a postcolonial, Hindu nationalist present. In a broader sense, the path charted by the epic shows how literature, especially that which is a confluence of traditional and modern form and content, continues to be a socially, politically and historically compelling force.

CHAPTER TWO:

CRISIS AND REINVENTION

The Emerging Nation and an Emergency

In *Provincializing Europe,* Dipesh Chakrabarty contends that when British colonizers indicated to Indians that they were "not yet" ready to rule themselves, anti-colonial agitators responded by "harp[ing] insistently on a 'now' as the temporal horizon of action" (8). When India became independent in August 15, 1947, the "now" had finally and joyfully come to fruition. However, it quickly became apparent that not everyone would get equal control of this "now." Other subaltern studies scholars, including Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey, have detailed how power had largely changed hands from white male colonial hands to bilingual-elite brown male hands, leaving marginalized groups such as women, peasants, and lower caste persons as destitute, if not more, than before. Until Independence, the Mahabharata had easily been recruited to support demand for the "now" of self-rule. Given that the central event of the epic is a war to establish the righteous ownership of land, it was the ideal text with which to whip up nationalist and anti-colonial fervor. In the wake of these post-colonial disappointments, the impulse to adapt the epic did not disappear. Instead, the epic was reoriented in tone and trajectory to critique and resist the current iterations of nationalism, particularly when more conflicts threatened to derail faith in the same.

When the Pāṇḍavas won the Kurukṣetra war in the *Mahābhārata*, their victory rang hollow because they found themselves ruling over a ruined land filled with orphans and widows (MhB 11).[6] For the newly sovereign Indians, earning Independence after a challenging anti-colonial struggle brought similarly contradictory feelings. Even though political autonomy had been achieved and celebrated, the young nation immediately began to stumble over large-scale economic deprivation, social instability and communal tension. At this time, the Mahabharata's impressive breadth, dramatic irony, potential for tragedy, and philosophical complexities were re-generated to contemplate new realities.

In this chapter, I show how the epic and the nation renewed the terms of their dialogue in in the 1980s. I suggest that the epic functions as a critical lens through which anxieties about the "now" are both expressed and addressed. I argue that in this decade, a very specific post-colonial concern is addressed by epic adapations—the political crises brought on by declaration of Emergency rule between 1975-77. First, I consider how Shashi Tharoor's English language text *The Great Indian Novel* (1988) re-writes an alternative, satirical version of Indian national history, beginning in the colonial period and ending with The Emergency. I contend that Tharoor employs the garrulous narrative framework of the *Mahābhārata* to highlight the instability of the national project. In doing so, Tharoor exposes that nationalism in India is not unlike an inherently flawed and untidy mythology that demands quasi-religious devotion. I also frame Tharoor's work in the light of key debates about postcolonial and Anglophone literature.

In the next part of the chapter, I examine two Hindi-language television adaptations of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, which appeared between 1987-1990 on state-controlled, national television. I suggest that the televised epics, like Tharoor's novel, also arise because of

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[6] The eleventh book of the epic, *Strī Parva* (The Book of Women), specifically focusses on the grief of the women affected by the war.

anxieties about the present state of the nation, particularly after the Emergency signified the failure of secular nationalism. However, even though the televised adaptations and Tharoor's novel arise from the same moment of crisis, they react to it in startlingly different ways. Where *The Great Indian Novel* uses the more recent past to underline that nationalism is an unstable mythology, the televised epics valorize and insist on a distant but stable mythological past. These shows re-deploy the epic narratives to insist on a return to Hindu values as a remedy to present social and political ills. I demonstrate how the shows position themselves as authoritative retellings of the epic narratives that explicitly invite the audience's reverence. In doing so, they suggest that all could be well if a glorious, pre-colonial history can be re-instated. In comparison, Tharoor's novel is clearly irreverent, remaining comically pessimistic about the future precisely because the nation's muddled history will repeat itself. In analysing these two sets of texts together, I show how epic re-imaginings function in multiple media and textual traditions, remaining a fascinating site for the contestation and re-organization of the national project.

Situating Great Indian Texts

The Great Indian Novel by Shashi Tharoor was published in 1988. This was the writer's first book of fiction; he would go on to publish several other works, both fiction and non-fiction. Tharoor's background is undeniably erudite. Born in London in an elite Malayali family, he grew up in India, obtaining a BA in History at St. Stephens College in New Delhi in the early 70s. After this, he moved to the United States to pursue a PhD in Diplomacy and Law at Tufts University, Boston. He worked for the United Nations for nearly three decades until he left to join Indian politics. In March 2009, he contested and won the Indian General election as a candidate for the Congress in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. Since then, he has been Minister of

State in the Government of India for External Affairs (2009–2010) and Human Resource Development (2012–2014). Although the book was written when he was still working at the UN, Tharoor's interest in history and extensive experience in the field of international politics made him uniquely qualified to recount and comment on Indian political history.

In *The Great Indian Novel,* Tharoor employs the framework of the *Mahābhārata* to parodically retell the story of the modern Indian nation. It begins in the late colonial era and ends around the declaration of Emergency rule in 1975 while borrowing and repurposing many of the epic's devices and styles. Like the epic's eighteen volumes, *The Great Indian Novel* has eighteen chapters. The novel's playfulness is noteworthy. The original epic's multiple narrators are adapted as an almost ridiculously unreliable and cynical narrator named V.V. The book is consistently humorous, often supplementing its prose with doggerel and ditties which mock sombre epic/national events. In the novel, the altered narrative of the *Mahābhārata* functions as a destabilizing force that challenges the grand narratives that helped erect and support a homogenized nationalism. In this work, the epic is employed as a formal device but is not its subject: the novel's chief concern is the Indian nation. Through the novel, one learns more about what might lurk in the nooks and crannies of India's history. The novel retells the story of the Indian nation state so transparently that it is barely an allegory, but a thinly-veiled, highly satirical roman-a-clef.

Both the content and context of the novel demand a comparison with another famous work that has come to represent Indian Anglophone literature in the world literary market: Salman Rushdie's Booker Prize winning novel *Midnight's Children* (1981). *The Great Indian Novel* even makes a comical reference to Rushdie's novel by naming its eighth chapter "Midnight's Parents" (149). Written seven years apart, the two novels appear to have a lot in

common: a garrulous unreliable narrator with a skeptical listener, fallible historical personages, the importance of both Indian Independence and the Emergency in the plot. In comparison to Tharoor's work, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is also more squarely the kind of "third-world" novel that Frederic Jameson made his notorious claim about, where the protagonist's private destiny reflects the situation of the public (69). Timothy Brennan, one of the earliest to critique Rushdie and the hallowed place afforded to him in the World literary market, notes about the writer's use of national allegory: "Rushdie cleverly made his hero's self-realization depend on the whole history of India: the teleology of the one and many fused at the point of independence" (*Salman Rushdie and the Third World* 83). In comparison, *The Great Indian Novel* is explicitly about the public situation of the country and its culture. Although the private lives of public figures are exposed, it is for satirical rather than allegorical purposes.

In some ways, Tharoor's use of satire also recalls Rushdie's more controversial novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988). Published a year before Tharoor's, Rushdie's unflinching satire on the life of Prophet Muhammed drew the ire of many Muslims, who protested against the book and the author. While Shia leader Ruhollah Khomeini called for all Muslims to kill Rushdie and his publishers, several British Members of Parliament condemned him and supported the ban of the book. *The Great Indian Novel,* in comparison, generated no controversy of the kind even though it paints an unflattering picture of its subjects—the Indian nation and its politicians. Theorizing the political and stylistic work of postcolonial satire in *The Satanic Verses,* Srinivas Aravamudan writes:

> Satire's persistent auto-criticism, along with a deliberate flouting of generic and
> discursive protocols makes it akin to…deconstruction…As a parasite,
> postcolonial satire corrupts and destroys its host's pretentions of autonomy and

self sufficiency…Satire undermines the host's immunity even as it colonizes parts

of the host to look like itself. (202-3)

Aravamudan's contentions are useful in analyzing Tharoor's work, once a crucial difference

between *The Great Indian Novel* and *Satanic Verses* is noted—the "host" text that is satirized is

not the epic or Hinduism, but the Indian nation. Tharoor undermines the sancitity of Indian

nation by exposing its makers as distinctly unheroic and terribly selfish. In doing so, he

deconstructs the project of nationalism and the ideologies that uphold it. To a large extent, the

novel was not seen as blasphemous because it satirizes nationalism rather than the epic text,

which is consider sacred by many Indians. Further, the satire was welcome at a time when

secular nationalism and its past had been deemed questionable because of the Emergency.

However, even though the epic and the nation appear to have a long-standing relationship

in India, the existence of works like Tharoor and Rushdie's novels does not immediately confirm

Frederic Jameson's 1986 claim: that all third world texts are national allegories. Although it was

a "sweeping hypothesis" by his own admission, he still insists that "[in third world texts] the

story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of third-

world culture and society" (69). Some scholars, such as Imre Szeman have defended Jameson by

suggesting that he was simply trying to include the so-called third world texts in "global or

translational literary criticism" by employing the category of the nation as a universally known

"socio-political problematic" (805). Others, such as Indian critic Aijaz Ahmad, have been less

than sympathetic to Jameson. Ahmad took umbrage at Jameson's use of the problematic three

worlds theory and argued that the experience of "nation" varied widely among the decolonized

based on class, gender, caste or even geographical location. He critizes Jameson for reducing "all

ideological complexity…to a single ideological formation and all narratives…[to] local

expressions of a metatext" (22).

In the case of the Indian epic adaptation, it seems like the national allegory would be an

obvious literary move given the similarity in scale of both the national and epic projects.

However, few epic re-imaginings allegorize the nation. Tharoor's work certainly addresses and

contemplates the nation but also specifically undermines any deeper meaning that typically

constituted in allegores. Other texts, such as the televised adaptations of the epics, look far

beyond the imperial past to emphasize a pre-colonial, indigenous cultural center to re-organize

the national project around. Yet other re-imaginings, such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The

Palace of Illusions* or Mahasweta Devi's numerous writings on tribal women, articulate the

problems of individuals whose personal struggles broadly fall within the geographical and social

parameters of the post-colonial nation, but engage more immediately with a different sense of

collectivity. As Ahmad notes:

> [O]ne may indeed connect one's personal experience to a "collectivity"—in terms
>
> of class, gender, caste, religious community, trade union, political party, village,
>
> prison—combining the private and the public, and in some sense "allegorizing"
>
> the individual experience, without involving the category of "the nation" or
>
> necessarily referring back to the "experience of colonialism and imperialism."
>
> (15)

For this reason, then, many contemporary re-imaginings of the epic present a range of

experiences that highlight the multitude of collectivities and often, the disjunctures among them.

To understand the importance of epic re-imaginings in the Indian context, it may be

necessary to admit the limitations of Jameson's model for two reasons. First, surely western

literary criticism can aspire to move beyond testing Other texts for entry into the hallowed canon or where one reads "third-world" texts "to remind us of outmoded stages of our own first world cultural development" (Jameson 65). Studying texts within a relational paradigm is limited because it confirms what is already believed about West and essentializes the Other, reinstating binaries such as developed/developing, rational/irrational. Instead, reading a so-called Other text to learn about that culture itself can open up rather than foreclose polyphonic conversations between the histories, aesthetics, and literary traditions. Secondly, I would argue that the category of the nation itself is fraught. For instance, the very event of Independence paradoxically united and divided South Asians from its inception. It was marred by the trauma of the partition of India and Pakistan, which violently cleaved communities based on religion. Ahmad rightly describes the feelings of the Partition as "a nationalism of mourning" (22). Further, the declaration of Democracy in India promised that Indians would now march to the beat of a unified, secular nationalism that they had wrested from the hands of the British. Unfortunately, new, indigenous political problems emerged in India that threatened to destabilize such a unified national project. I suggest that many postcolonial Indian texts, including the televised epics, Tharoor and Rushdie's novels, are not just re-presenting national concerns in the light of an imperial past. They are equally, if not more, concerned with the failure of an older model of Indian nationalism demonstrated by a specific indigenous context—the Emergency.

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* re-write India's history as a metatext. In both, the story has two bookends: the anti-colonial struggle and the Emergency. The declaration of the Indian Emergency lasted twenty-one months between 1975-

1977. It was orchestrated chiefly by Indira Gandhi[7], then the Prime Minister of India and the central figure of the Indian National Congress Party. Indira's favorability was on the decline following number of social, economic and political crises, including but not limited to a case of election malpractice filed against her and the rise of her son Sanjay as a dictatorial figure. To maintain power, she recommended to the President, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmad, that a State of Emergency be declared in the country, granting her rule of decree. During the Emergency, civil liberties were suspended, curfew was applied, and leaders of the opposition were arrested. Both Tharoor and Rushdie's novels rightly lambast Indira for orchestrating this chaos: where Tharoor re-imagines her as a feminine version of the epic hero Duryodhana, Rushdie scathingly presents her as the grotesque figure of The Widow in both *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses.*

However, even though Rushdie's and Tharoor's novels agree on Indira's villainy and the idea that the Emergency caused irreparable damage to Indian democracy, there is a marked difference in mood. *Midnight's Children* tragically ends with a rather violent death for protagonist Saleem, who symbolizes the hopeful young nation that was born in 1947. *The Great Indian Novel* ends comically, with India muddling through the twenty-first century with "computers and corruption, myths and politicians", after which the narrator returns to the beginning of his story (418). The beginning and end of the story are marked by the same words, "They tell me that India is an underdeveloped country" (17, 418). This repetition signifies that the story, much like the project of nationalism, is constructed, frequently rehearsed but still laughably unreliable.

Although Tharoor's novel was nominated for the Commonwealth Book Prize in 1990 and reviewed favorably by numerous American and British news publications such as *The*

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[7] I will call her Indira hereafter, to avoid confusion with M.K. Gandhi.

Washington Post, The Times Literary Supplement and the *Chicago Tribune*, it did not generate as much discussion as Rushdie's work did in the sphere of literary criticism. The few critical works that addressed it gave it the same treatment as Rushdie's novel. It was seen chiefly as a response to the imposition of Western literary modes and historiography, but rarely as a critique of the ideologies within the country. The few responses to it in western academia, such as Kanishka Chowdhury's piece in 1995 and Sneharika Roy's piece in 2009, looked to Ashcroft, Griffin and Tiffin's *Empire Writes Back* model of literary criticism to analyze the novel. For instance, Chowdhury writes:

> [Tharoor's] appropriation of the great Indian epic, the Mahabharata in order to rewrite Indian history and to restore groups to their historical being is what Homi Bhabha would perhaps call "sly civility," where the "native refuses to satisfy the colonizer's narrative demand" (78). (42)

Chowdhury thus sees Tharoor's engagement with history as a corrective gesture that contests the epistemic violence of colonial historiography imposed on a colonized people. He argues, however, that this is not quite possible because he uses the "master's language" and does not alter the course of the history itself. Since Chowdhury made these claims, however, scholars such as Rashmi Sadana have elaborated on how English is far from being "the master's language" and has been transformed into an Indian vernacular. Sadana writes that to see Indian English as a mere consequence of the condition of postcoloniality would be to flatten wide-ranging socio-political and linguistic interchanges that have taken place over nearly seven decades (26). Further, to continue to imply that English is still the master's language, then, is to condemn India to being the eternal periphery of England as the center. This in turn, would suggest that cultural hierarchies set up during colonial times are unchangeable.

71

After Chowdhury's work, the most significant scholarship on Tharoor's novel is Sneharika Roy's 2009 piece on the novel as a postcolonial epic. She writes that the novel is a move against the Hindu-right's use of the Mahabharata to support fundamentalist ideologies as it "seeks to counter these ethnocentric forces by anglicizing, globalizing and updating the Mahabharata" (59). However, the novel's intention is not necessarily to make the epic palatable for a global audience; the epic is widely celebrated worldwide as a part of Indo-European mythology. *The Great Indian Novel* employs the epic for a different purpose: as a lens through which to re-view the story of the Indian nation. In doing so, the novelist stays quite true to the characters and the narratives of the Mahabharata, but provides a counter-narrative to the history of modern India. Further, it is simplistic to assume that the merely the act of rewriting the epic in English can counter other dominant narratives of the same that are reinforced from other sources, such as the vernacular telemedia and the rhetoric of the Hindu right. The interplay between texts and contemporary Hindu right-wing politics ought to be accompanied by a discussion of the politics of Indian languages and popular discourse, which I have attempted in this dissertation.

However, some of Roy's contentions regarding the novel's genre are useful. For instance, she writes that the novel attempts to resolve postcolonial anxieties regarding cultural hybridity by employing the epic genre:

> It is the interrelationship between cultures and epochs that prompts [Tharoor] to use parallel narratives of epic and history to continuously cross-cut between past and present, so that each informs, deforms, and re-forms the other. Far from being monuments frozen in time, historical and mythic narratives become interpenetrable gateways. (59)

In this manner, old histories and historical narratives become the tools with which to unpack the present and its immediate past. However, in her conclusion, Roy is committed to the notion that the novel is one of many that wish to move beyond and outside their national contexts, "[novels like Tharoor's] emphasize the need to reframe the past in the terms of the present and re-place the national in the context of the transnational" (59) It appears here that Roy contends that by writing in English, a work of literature immediately becomes potentially transnational. This would be an oversimplification, giving the considerable political and linguistic variations of worldwide Englishes as well as multi-dimensional flows of transnational imaginaries that scholars like Arjun Appadurai and Srinivas Aravamudan have addressed in detail.

Even though both Chowdhury and Roy suggest that he does, Tharoor does not actually restore a corrected version of Indian history in his novel in response to colonial epistemic violence. Instead, I contend that he exposes and de-mythologizes the contents of national history for his own people by exposing its creators and characters as inherently flawed and comical. He draws together the imaginary of the Mahabharata with the standardized nationalist history taught in Indian schools to create a satirical counter-history. The novel is peppered with a host of caricatures of personages from British-Indian and later Indian history and literature. The influence of British culture and literature on the Indian literary imagination is conveyed through characters such as a British Resident equerry named Heaslop and a Colonel Rudyard, hailing Forster and Kipling respectively. Indian political figures such as Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Priyadarshini Gandhi are re-imagined as the blind Fabian socialist King Dhristarashtra and Priya Duryodhani.

A reworked epic certainly runs the risk of being an uncritical fetishization of the pre-colonial past. Frantz Fanon had cautioned bilingual-elite writers of decolonized nation-states

against employing older textual forms like the epic to erect an uncritical, monolithic vision of the past that glosses over the complexities of oppression and difference. However, it may be argued that Tharoor's satirical novel does valorize the Mahabharata as the glorious past, but repurposes it to critique and unsettle the present. By doing this, he does what Fanon urged, "[to write] for his people…to use the past with the intention of opening the future, as an invitation to action" (180). Fanon cautions thinkers against the fetishization of the mythic past in the construction of nationalism, urging them instead to use the past as an incisive tool with which to carve out an equitable future. Although Tharoor's novel gives no specific directives about the future, it uses the past as an extended inside joke that exposes how national culture is constructed. In seeing this artifice, his readers may be compelled to consider ways in which the nation's present and future may be improved.

The novel draws on many references to indigenous literary and popular discourse, including but not limited to the Sankrit epic literature. Since most of these would only be fully recognizable to an elite Indian audience, one may argue that the book is not quite written for western audiences in the erstwhile Empire. Nevertheless, since he sets about to tell the story of the Indian nation, the question of representation remains an important one. For this reason, it might be more productive to ask who speaks about India to other Indians rather than who tells the World about India. Here, it appears that the author's elite status is certainly a limitation. Chowdhury rightly critiques Tharoor for being a "westernized, middle- class Hindu [who] is unable to get beyond the habitual preoccupations of his class" (43). As much as *The Great Indian Novel* challenges history and its creators, its characters are a select group of British colonial figures and native bilingual elite government officials, who are not altogether different from the author himself. There is no attempt to recover or present subaltern histories that also

helped in the Indian freedom struggle and form the nation; Subaltern Studies historians have warned that narratives of history are incomplete without the stories and voices of marginalized groups. A possible motivation for leaving subaltern histories out of this narrative could be that Tharoor comes to bury his characters, not to praise them; to critique and mock subaltern histories would be cruelly elitist. But whatever his reasons, Tharoor ends up re-telling the story of elite persons through the lens of the Mahabharata. The epic text has its own complex relationship with caste hierarchies and marginalities that cannot be fully resolved, which I revisit this in detail in the next two chapters.

Other critics such as Orsini, Huggan, Brennan, and Jani have similarly questioned the problematics of taking educated, Hindu and often diasporic writers like Rushdie and Tharoor as spokespersons for a monolithic Indian culture and extended this to critique the discipline of postcolonial studies itself. Pranav Jani writes, for instance, that Rushdie needs to be decentered from his position as a representative Indian writer. Jani also points out that postcolonial studies, especially with respect to Indian writing, has a problematic Anglophone bias that sidelines writing in other Indian languages:

> Indeed, literary texts and criticism in the vernacular languages are given no real status in Anglo-American Postcolonial studies; preposterously, we can become scholars of non-Western literature without knowing or studying non-Western languages. (3)

To a certain extent, paying attention to work like Tharoor's can bring another Indian language and literary tradition, here Sanskrit, into the conversation. Mahabharata adaptations, even if in English, show how contemporary Indian literature converses with its own literary history. It can be used to discuss what should be well known: that Indian literature was not invented by Salman

Rushdie in 1981 and not merely to flatter the notions of Western audiences and literary critics. However, Sanskrit's own position as an elite language and its fraught history with English in the colonial period are important considerations. Nevertheless, Sanskrit epic literature has numerous oral, vernacular, and regional iterations in India. Tharoor's work should be seen as an attempt to join in this polyphonic indigenous practice of retelling the epic. In this sense, analysing works like *The Great Indian Novel* can and should lead to a greater exploration of what lies within, rather than merely outside, the corpus of Indian literature.

Worshipping History, Worshipping Gandhi

At one point in *The Great Indian Novel,* Shashi Tharoor's unreliable narrator V.V. self-reflexively remarks on the "the instinctive Indian sense that nothing begins and nothing ends." He continues:

> [W]e are all living in an eternal present in which what was and what will be is contained in what is. Or, to put it in a more contemporary idiom, life is a series of sequels to history. (163)

This appears to be reductive rendering of the notion of the eternal present: all that matters is the present. This stretches the current time, along with its beliefs and modes of thinking, into eternity. However, Tharoor takes up the cause of the "eternal" in the phrase, identifying rightly that Indian, especially Hindu, thought is cyclical and therefore perpetually connected or returning to what is considered the past. Tharoor's own cyclical novel perpetually returns to the past to show how intimately it is connected to the present. On the other hand, it may be a circular, pseudo-mystical phrase that sounds more meaningful than it is; signifying nothing or merely repeating what is already commonly known. This quotation also sums up Tharoor's project in

the novel to a large extent. A playful and deliberately obfuscatory re-alignment of Indian history, the novel shows how nationalism in India demands a religious fervour. This is further reinforced by narrativized mythologies of specific persons and institutions who have been elevated to godlike stature in popular discourse. Through his novel Tharoor affirms that nationalism in India is not only affirmed through religious mythologies, but is also performed as a mythology.

However, the narrative voice of the novel also deliberately alienates the reader with its constant humorous digressions that underline that neither nationalism nor mythology should be taken seriously. For this reason it is hard to identify what the narrator V.V's ideological position is, let alone what truths about history or politics can be extrapolated from it. Chowdhury ascribes Tharoor's unreliable narrator's views to Tharoor himself:

> His nostalgia for the past...is juxtaposed against his distaste for post independence
>
> failures. Tharoor's longing for a return to past glories, however, is based on a
>
> created, static notion of "tradition." (44)

While it is possible that V.V indeed echoes many of Tharoor's views, V.V's own digressions and preoccupations throughout the text indicate that neither the teller nor the tale should be trusted[8]. The meandering narrative voice is like those in other (post)modern novels that employ formal devices to highlight the artificiality and constructed-ness of politics, history, and even language. For instance, Edward Said writes about similar unreliable narration in *A Heart of Darkness:*

> Conrad's self-consciously circular narrative forms draw attention to themselves
>
> as artificial constructions… He alternates between garrulity and stunning

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[8] This contradicts D.H. Lawrence's famous dictum: "Never trust the artist. Trust the tale" (14).

eloquence, and rarely resists making peculiar things seem more peculiar by

surprisingly misstating them, or rendering them vague and contradictory. (28-29)

The Great Indian Novel's narrator is also strategically unreliable. He contradicts himself

throughout the novel, especially when it comes to the idea of a glorious mythological Indian

past. If at the beginning V.V. says, "[India is] a highly developed country in an advanced state of

decay", towards the end he says "we soothe ourselves with lullabies of our ancient history, our

remarkable culture, our ancient mythology" (17, 411). V.V. thus deliberately remains unclear on

whether the past is glorious or if the nostalgia for the same is justified, to draw attention to the

fact that history is constructed and re-constructed based on the needs of the present. These

mythical/historical constructions, wrought to further the nationalist cause, are exposed as

unreliable and insufficiently placatory.

Like any mythological narrative, Tharoor's epic too has its flawed but heroic semi-

divinities. By semi-divinities, I mean that personages who are considered mortal but only a few

degrees removed from godliness owing to their praiseworthy or even superhuman behaviors[9]. In

Tharoor's work, the most prominent semi-divinity is a caricature of Mohandas Karamchand

Gandhi named Ganga Datta. Later in the novel he is simply known as Gangaji, just as Gandhi

was called Gandhiji by his followers, where "ji" in an honorific. Gangaji's dominance over the

novel's narrative is not unlike Gandhi's undying influence in India and beyond. Gandhi's

methods of passive resistance and non-violence have made him such a recognizable entity the

world over that his name has become a signifier for goodness, truth, and triumph against

adversity. For instance, some American undergraduates in my classroom, who know only

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[9] In the epics, while Rāma and Kṛṣṇa are reincarnated gods, some other characters like Sītā and Bhīṣma are presented to be admired, if not worshipped. Doniger also uses the term semi-divinity to describe Sītā in *Women, Androgynes and Other Mythical Beasts* (92).

vaguely about Gandhi's influence on Martin Luther King Jr., conjure him up as an all-perfect, heroic, or even God-like figure. In India, Gandhi is called "Bapu", the symbolic "Father of the Nation" who inspires a kind of loyalty that blurs the lines between the spiritual and the political. The honorific "Mahatma", Sanskrit for great spirit, was bestowed on Gandhi by Bengali writer Rabindranath Tagore in 1915: Gandhi himself disliked this title. Nevertheless, the title has now become so inseparable from his image that many mistakenly assume it to be his first name. As Shahid Amin writes, "'Mahatma' as an 'idea' was thought out and reworked in popular imagination" in which Gandhi's natural charisma inspired a spiritual following (289). He adds:

> At this level, there is no significant difference between the religiosity informing the peasants and the attitude [patriotic writer Dasrath] Dwivedi wants the intelligentsia to adopt towards Gandhi; the language of belief seems to be the same in both instances with merely some variations in tone and accent. (306)

Amin explains, thus, that the allegiance to Gandhi was organized around a quasi-religious notion of "belief", with thousands gathering for his "darshan" or sighting with gestures, writings, songs, and poems that belied their reverence to him as a deity. The peoples' excitement at the sighting of Gandhi has also been depicted in films and literary texts; for instance, it is driving force in R.K. Narayan's 1955 English novel *Waiting for the Mahatma.*

In Tharoor's novel, however, Gangaji is far from a saint but inspires tremendous devotion. Gangaji is presented a grand and wise martyr who is well-known for his benevolence and symbolic leadership of the nation. Ganga is modeled after Bhīṣma of the *Mahābhārata* whose ideal behavior and sacrifice are often admired. In the epic, crown prince Devarāta is the son of Śaṃtanu and the river goddess Gangā. Devarāta gives up his right to the throne and vows to be celibate to facilitate Śaṃtanu's marriage to Satyvatī, allowing their descendants to rule the

kingdom instead of him. His tremendous personal and political sacrifice is commended by the gods, earning him the name Bhīṣma, which means "the Tremendous One" (MhB 1.7). Gangaji, as Bhīṣma, is a dutiful son who upholds familial duty at the cost of personal, especially sexual, fulfillment. His eschewing of traditional family life is considered both peculiar and laudatory. It adds to his charismatic, otherworldly aura, earning him the admiration of both his family and the people. Further, his legendary status allows him to remain an authoritative political voice even though he does not officially rule over the land. Further, in rejecting an official royal title, Ganga is also able to live a seemingly ordinary life that convinces the masses that he was one of them:

> [T]he third class train carriages he always insisted on traveling in were filled with the elegantly sacrificing elite of his followers, rather than the sweat stained poor…Ganga D would always have a penchant for making his most dramatic gestures before a sizeable audience. One day he was even to die in front of a crowd. (23)

Gangaji becomes known for his involvement in the Quit India movement in the novel. He organizes the Mango March, an allusion to Gandhi's Salt March of 1930. He initially draws attention by commenting on the Bibigarh Massacre, a stand-in for the Jallianwallah Bagh massacre of 1919, where the British General Dwyer's troops fatally shot over a thousand non-violent protesters. In the novel, Colonel Rudyard is at the helm of this massacre. The strategically named character highlights the link between epistemic violence of British literary education and the physical violence during colonialism (83). Gangaji's condemnation of this event establishes him as a key player in the anti-colonial movement.

Gangaji transforms into a political-spiritual leader over the course of *The Great Indian Novel.* His charisma is so unmistakeable that the narrator self reflexively remarks, "he keeps

taking over the story" (109). In fact, Gangaji is more prominent in the story than the Kṛṣṇa figure. Modelled after the communist leader A.K. Gopalan, Krishna only appears in the fifteenth chapter of the eighteen in the novel. In comparison to Krishna, the legacy of Gandhi is more overwhelming. Whether as a real or mythical figure, Gandhi symbolizes India for many people within and outside India, in the same way that the story of the nation in the novel is initially the story of Gangaji. Like the real Gandhi, Gangaji is the ironically celibate and non-biological Father of the Nation, a significant paternal figure in the lives of his wards, the politicians-in-training Dhritarashtra/Nehru and Pandu/Subhash Chandra Bose. Gangaji's spectre lurks over their political careers and those of politicians after them—like in modern India where pictures of Gandhi hang over politicians' desks or smile benevolently back from most rupee notes.

The narrator writes that the mythology of Gangaji, like that of the real Gandhi, becomes bigger than the man himself. It is created and perpetuated by the education system, the product of both the British colonial heritage and the motions of performing nationalism. Like the aforementioned American undergraduates, schoolboys in the novel ascribe various heroic and fictional narratives to Gangaji:

> "Gangaji is important because…he is the father of the Prime Minister…Gangaji is an old saint…who looked after cows…Gangaji was a character in the *Mahabharata*…" It is easy…to get schoolchildren to come up with howlers, especially those whose minds are filled in with the bastard education system, but the innocent ignorance of those schoolboys pointed to a larger truth…He might as well have been a character from the *Mahabharata*…so completely had they confined him to the mists and myths of historical legend. (45)

Imagining Gandhi/Ganga as a mythological hero is certainly effective in building a community that professes a quasi-religious devotion to the nation-state. The nation here functions as and because of its pantheon figures who need to be appeased and celebrated constantly in a manner that distinctly recalls certain Hindu modes of worship. This functions as what Louis Althusser had classified as the Ideological State Apparatus in his 1970 work ""Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)." Althusser writes that even entities that are not controlled by the state, including private schools, families, repeat and impose the ideology of the dominant class. The novel shows how dominant ideology percolates through the education system and popular discourse so that conformist grand narratives of the nation are repeated at the expense of truth, self-critique and original thinking. In many ways, Tharoor's own novel is an anti-textbook which challenges the homogenized, uncritical, too heroic narrative of nationalism by satirizing the State and exposing the ways in which it maintains dominance.

This is not to say that the novel's narrator is entirely critical of Ganga or opposed to philosophies. At one point, he remarks that the problem lies with Ganga's followers, not Ganga himself, "he might just abandon his entire crusade on the grounds that his followers were not worthy of him" (100). Immediately after, the narrator provides commentary on Gangaji's most famous lines, uttered in reality in 1947 by Gandhi, "Fasting is my business":

> *Fasting* is my business; fasting is *my* business; fasting is my *business;* or even (why not) fasting *is* my business. And even those who actually heard him utter the words cannot agree on where the Great Man himself placed the emphasis. It does not matter. Perhaps, in some mysterious way, he conveyed all four meanings and many nuances beyond, in his delivery of that classic phrase. Today it has passed into history, a slogan, a caption, worn by over-use, cheapened by imitation. (100)

This passage takes a dig at Gandhi for being somewhat self-centered in creating an occupation based around his fasting. There is also a satirical reminder that the repetition of historical and mythological narratives renders them almost nonsensical and self-defeating. Similarly, in another part of the book the narrator says that even India as a concept was both comically and problematically open to revision, "It was constantly being rethought, reformed and reshaped" (246). As in the Sanskrit epic itself, how and why narratives are proliferated is determined by the motivations and cadences of both the speaker and listener.

Many of these dominant narratives about important personages or even the nation itself, are preserved and reinforced with religious fervour. When any unflattering counter-narratives or less-than-obsequious biographies surface, they are widely condemned and criticized by the public and the press alike. Even moderate responses include a return to the deification of M.K. Gandhi. For instance, when Khushwant Singh[10] reviewed Jad Adams' sensational and controversial biography of Gandhi he said, "Adams goes out of his way to repress nothing but ends up as a fervent admirer of Gandhi" (Outlook India). A thread of Gandhi's life that has invited considerable controversy was his complex relationship with sexuality. A year before *The Great Indian Novel* was published, Sudhir Kakar had written at length on this subject. Drawing from Gandhi's autobiography, Kakar suggests that Gandhi experienced lifelong guilt at not being at his dying father's bedside because he was having sexual intercourse with his wife at the time. This led Gandhi to reject sexual desire as deviant and sinful. His adoption of celibacy and his experiments with young girls to "test" his sexual desires are controversial but well-known. *The Great Indian Novel* describes these sexual experiments with irreverence:

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[10] Singh is also the inspiration behind the character of Khushkismat Singh, the defense minister in *The Great Indian Novel*.

It was to many downright indecent, the thought of their saintly sage wrapped

around the commodious pink-flesh of the formidable Sarah-Behn was more than

most of his followers could bear…There was no consensus on the matter but there

was rapid agreement on one thing, the matter was to be kept from the press. A

tight blanket of loyal self-censorship descended on us, covering our discomfort

and our leader's nakedness. (228)

Instead of letting the press, the cornerstone of democracy, function with freedom and honesty,

the decision to keep Gandhi/Gangaji's image sacrosanct was based on collective discomfort.

Kakar writes that even though Gandhi was quite candid about his failings and ethical

struggles in his autobiography, he continues to be framed as a hero in popular discourse:

Gandhi is the foremost cultural-hero of modern India. For an Indian child, the

faces of Gandhi and other heroes like Nehru and Vivekananda are identical, with

masks crafted by the culture in order to provide ideals for emulation and

identification. Every child in India has been exposed to stock narratives that

celebrate their genius and greatness, the portraits utterly devoid of any normal

human blemish such as envy, anger, lust, ordinariness, pettiness, or stupidity.

(85-86)

Notably, Kakar explains that mythology was integral to Gandhi's rhetoric, especially given his

interest in the Ramayana and the *Bhagavadgītā*. More recently, Simona Sawhney has argued that

Gandhi himself was an innovative re-reader of the *Bhagavadgītā*, and by extension the

Mahābhārata, as he was able to derive a message of non-violence from a text that explicitly

spells out the need for war. Sawhney argues that he saw the epic text less as an accurate

representation of history and more as a complex allegory of "the eternal duel going on within

ourselves" (qtd. in Sawhney 111). Despite his resistant reading of mythology and personal candor, it is ironic then that Gandhi himself is uncritically and simplistically mythologized as a flawless super-human figure.

Tharoor's repurposing of mythology to humanize and unpack the figure of Gandhi is a strategic literary gesture because it critiques how loyalty to nationalism is produced and performed in India. However, it is not just Gandhi who bears the brunt of Tharoor's humanizing satire. Other caricatures include Vyabhichar Singh, the Maharaja of Manimar (Kashmir) who is being fellated under a silk blanket by a Frenchwoman and is thus distracted while crucial discussions about the accession of his state occur. Some characters, who have a shorter storyline, have names that leave little doubt about what the narrator or even the author thinks of them: Zaleel Shah Jhoota, whose name literally translates Humiliated Shah Liar in Urdu, is apparently modelled on Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who would go on to become the ninth Prime Minister of Pakistan in 1973. Tharoor thus deliberately undermines the mythologies that support the nation state and exposes its deities as inherently human.

Sisterly Rivalry: Democracy and Villainy

The first half of the novel is populated with male figures; although this is more a function of the patriarchal nationalist project than the author's choices. Initially, women are companions or foils to important male figures. For instance, the narrator spends some time discussing Gandhi's friendship with an Englishwoman named Sarah Moore[11]. Moore is likely based on

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[11] Ketu Katrak contends that although Gandhi encouraged women to participate in the national liberation movement, he continued to legitimize traditional gender roles for them. See Katrak, Ketu H. "Indian Nationalism, Gandhian 'Satyagraha,' and Representations of Female Sexuality." *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, edited by Andrew Parker, Doris Summer, and Patricia Year. New Routledge, 2002, pp. 395-406.

Madeline Slade, the daughter of a British Admiral who left her home to work with Gandhi and the Indian freedom movement. In the novel, Sarah is dubbed Sarah-behn by Gangaji just as Mira was called Mira-behn[12], where "behn" is the respectful Gujarati term for sister. Moore functions as a metaphor for the West and the exotic feminine Other. Through his experiments to lie naked with her without being aroused, Ganga shows that he can overcoming the temptations of the Other, even though his impotence/celibacy continues to be ridiculed (226-9).

In comparison, Dhritarashtra/Nehru succumbs to the pleasures offered by the exotic, white feminine Other epitomized by Georgina Drewpad. This results in the birth of Democracy as the character Draupadi Mokrasi. Georgina Drewpad is based on Edwina Mountbatten, the wife of Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India. Edwina's friendship with Nehru has been fodder for gossip for decades. In Tharoor's novel, Georgina and her husband have an anglicized version of epic heroine Draupadī's father's name, Drupada, as their last name. When they appear in the novel for the first time, Georgina is portrayed as sexually potent and alluring:

> There she stood…as Britannia had first come to us: naked, with outstretched hands, about to place our crown on her head. Drewpad took her elegant fingers in his own: "How I wish I could present you to all India like this," he said. "My jewel, in a crown." (215)

Georgina's name is also a feminized version of the name of George VI, the last emperor of India. She comes to stands for Britain in the novel and even more during her intercourse, sexual and social, with Dhristarashtra. Dhristarashtra/Nehru is a blind king: where in the epic he is blind

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[12] Gandhi drew her name from the famous Mirabai, a sixteenth century devotee of Lord Krishna who has been considered a part of the Bhakti tradition.

because of an error committed by his mother[13], in the novel, it is because of his political idealism. The narrator remarks on this, drawing on Nehru's real educational and ideological background:

> [He] devoted himself to another kind of vision and became, successively, a formidable debater, a Bachelor of Arts, [from Kings College, Cambridge] and a Fabian Socialist. I often wonder what might have happened had he been able to see the world around him as the rest of us can. Might India's history have been different today? (41)

The blind Dhristarashtra and flamboyant Georgina are drawn to each other and begin to find solace in each others' arms. It appears that they do so with the blessings of her Viceroy husband, with whom she is in an open marriage. The result of this relationship is the birth of Democracy, who is personified as Draupadi. She is born prematurely on 26 January 1950, the actual date on which the Indian Constitution came into force to establish nation as a Republic. The novel, in fact, playfully capitalizes on the fear that the colonizers were right because the actions of the Indian politicians, such as the Emergency, suggest that they were truly not ready to be democratic. Fittingly, Miss D. Mokrasi is the bastard child of the union between her Indian father Dhritarashtra and English mother Georgina. Such a contention also undermines the valorization of democracy as the outcome of the sacrifices of the masses that participated in the freedom movement—a narrative instrumental in encouraging an allegiance to nationalism. Instead, it is demonstrated that democracy was produced privately and almost exclusively for the pleasure of two specific and powerful parties, bilingual elite politician Dhristarashtra Nehru and Britain,

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[13] Dhṛitarāṣṭra's mother closed her eyes during his conception because she found his father sage Vyāsa's appearance terrifying. Vyāsa is disappointed by this and determines that the child will be born blind (MhB 1.7.100).

personified by Georgina. It is suggested that like the parents of Miss D. Mokrasi would rather it not be known how she was produced:

> The infant girl, bearing the indeterminate pink and brown colouring of mixed parentage, a tiny frail creature with strong lungs, used frequently and well…was to be adopted; neither of her natural parents could openly acknowledge the intimacy that produced her. [She] was called Draupadi, a subtle Indianization of her mother's family name, and she took the uncouth patronymic of her adoptive father, Mokrasi. Draupadi Mokrasi. (244)

It is clear that democracy, arguably is one of the most valorized outcomes of colonialism, is admired by the narrator and others in the novel. Just like in the epic, D. Mokrasi's beauty is celebrated for various political and aesthetic reasons, Tharoor's Miss D. Mokrasi is admired for her virtues and the political beliefs they represent:

> [O]urs was an inevitably darker democracy, all the more to be cherished for the Indianness of her coloring…Draupadi's beauty attracted both men and women, both young and old. All sought to be a part of her beauty; no man presumed to attempt its submission…[She] was a flame in the brass lamp in a sacred temple of the people. Imagine, a flame nourished by a ceaseless stream of sanctified oil and the energy of a million voices raised in chanting adoration. (309)

Tharoor shows how democracy and Indian nationalism do not arise at the "dusk of religious modes of thought" as Benedict Anderson suggests is the case in Southeast Asia and other colonial nations (51). Instead, in India, the components of nationalism are reproduced as new religious modes of thought that flourish alongside majority religion, sometimes so closely that they appear indistinguishable. For this reason, in the novel, Miss D. Mokrasi is celebrated with

acts and objects associated with Hindu prayer: chanting, sanctified oils, and brass lamps in temples.

When it is time for Miss Mokrasi to wed, the five Pandava brothers marry her together.[14] It is explained that Miss D. Mokrasi ends up with five husbands because she was somehwhat overzealously secular in praying to five different religious entities: Shiva, Jehovah, the Virgin Mother, Allah and the Archbishop of Canterbury (316). Further, each husband stands for the institutions that protect democracy and the narrator spells this out transparently: Yudhishtira is a lawyer and a career politician, Bhim is the army, Arjuna is a journalist/the press, Nakul the diplomatic services, Sahdev is the administration/civil services (320). Even though Arjuna is the one who wins Draupadi's hand and consequently, heart first, he is compelled to share her with these others. In a sense, this is a self-conscious reflection on the role of the free press, including literature, in preserving Democracy. Under ideal circumstances, they could have had a mutually pleasing and productive union, but other institutions come in the way of their monogamous romance.

Curiously, in the novel and the history it re-presents, it is another woman who poses the greatest threat to Miss D. Mokrasi: Priya Duryodhani/Indira Gandhi. The two women are cleverly portrayed as half-sisters in the book, as they share Dhristarashtra/Nehru as a father. Miss D. Mokrasi is born and raised by an adoptive family while Dhristarashtra "quietly devoted a discreet eye…and an equally discreet chequebook to her welfare" (261). Nevertheless, she grows up well, with numerous qualities such as "a willingness to play with all the children in the

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[14] Arjuna is initially the only one to win Draupadī in marriage. He is the third of the five Pāṇḍava brothers, the heroes of the Mahābhārata. When Arjuna takes Draupadī home to meet his mother Kuntī, she orders the brothers should share whatever they have brought home without realizing it is a woman. The brothers obey their mother's directive by each marrying Draupadī (MhB 1.199).

neighborhood, irrespective of caste, creed or culture" (262). In contrast, Dhristarashta raises Priya Duryodhani with loving attention, even though he is initially disappointed that she was not the son he hoped for. In the novel, the narrator is enamored of Draupadi while barely concealing his dislike of Duryodhani:

> [Duryodhani] was a slight frail girl…with a long thin tapering face like the kernel of a mango and dark eyebrows that nearly joined together over a high bridged nose, giving her the look of a dessicated schoolteacher when she was barely old enough to enroll in school (151)

Although the narrator concedes shortly afterwards that Duryodhani could have been described as "plain" had it not been for her lustrous eyes; it is clear that she will grow up to be a leader.

The writer draws this from various discussions of Indira Gandhi's appearance and personality in the media in the 1970s and 1980s, where cartoonists such as R. K. Laxman[15] portrayed her by emphasizing her hooked nose and showing her with an unsmiling, stern expression. There have been several theories that link Indira's quest for power with her inconsistent feminine behavior. Sandra Wagner-Wright for instance argues that Indira was viewed as something other than human: "[she] qualifies as a cyborg, a female leader who transcended strict Hindu gender expectations to stand alone," (9). On the other hand, Dagmar Hellman-Rajanaygam points out that Indira was often not taken seriously because she was a woman and a mother: she was considered emotional and unreliable for loving her despotic son

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[15] Ritu Khanduri writes on how R.K. Lakshman depicted and critiqued the Indian nation and Indian politicians in his cartoons. See Khanduri, Ritu Gairola. "Picturing India: Nation, Development and The Common Man." *Visual Anthropology* vol.25 no.4, 2012, pp. 303-323.

Sanjay to a dangerous extent[16] (45). She demonstrates that Indira's image earned her a complicated relationship with Hindu femininity. On one hand, Atal Behari Vajaypee[17] of the BJP hailed her as the Hindu feminine force, Goddess Durga (40). On the other, that a widow was ruling the country was considered ominous (52). Finally, she was both ridiculed and lauded for being the only "man" in her all-male cabinet (56).

In this novel, appropriate feminine behavior and its consequences are reinforced through a comparison: Indira's ugliness, the luster of her eyes notwithstanding, stands out in sharp contrast against Miss D. Mokrasi's beauty. An abstract political idea, here Democracy, is celebrated at the expense of a real woman's alleged failure to conform to standards of beauty. Miss D. Mokrasi is beautiful, but has no will of her own. In keeping with the extended metaphor, she must be nurtured by her husbands or she deteriorates. As the nation's condition takes a turn for the worse, she slowly becomes less physically attractive. The narrator indicates that she gains weight and begins to age, "Draupadi Mokrasi, still beautiful, began to appear plump, her instinctive smile creasing the flesh of her face in the slightest hint of a double chin", "sagging flesh [began] to mask her inner beauty" (342, 374) Here, it seems that the narrator indicates Miss Mokrasi's departure from beauty and femininity is as much of a catastrophe as the failure of democracy or in Duryodhani's case, what motivates a female politician like Indira to become the chief threat to democracy.

The denigration of Duryodhani to this extent in the novel is drawn more from the historical context rather than the epic. Duryodhani's male counterpart has in fact been lauded in

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[16] One of Sanjay Gandhi's most controversial moves was a forced sterilization program for population control in 1976. He was also his mother's chief advisor during the Emergency.

[17] A.B. Vajpayee would become the Prime Minister of India in 1996 and 1998-2004.

the *Mahābhārata* and its adaptations as the very embodiment of warrior masculinity. [18] David

Gitomer writes that even while Duryodhana is a "super kshatriya", it is his inability to believe in

Krishna's divinity that leads to his downfall (223-4). He writes that Duryodhana is a physically

impressive and dazzling character who possesses "sri, that absolutely indispensable quality

which affirms the legitimacy of sovereignty, that quality which the epic understands to be

embodied in Draupadi" (226). In *The Great Indian Novel* Duryodhani will be bad not in spite of

being attractive, but because of it. Even if satirical, this directly proportional relationship

between beauty and goodness is disappointingly misogynistic in the otherwise sophisticated and

politically astute novel.

This is not to say that Indira is lampooned without any fault of her own: her role in the

traumatic Indian Emergency is far from fictitious. In *The Great Indian Novel,* the Emergency is

called the Siege and occurs as a result of the Game of Dice[19], where Draupadi is wagered by

Yudhishthira. It is described as a horrific time where millions suffer under Duryodhani's

dictatorial rule:

> The Siege had become a license for the police to do as they pleased, settling
>
> scores, locking up suspects, enemies, and sometimes creditors sometimes without
>
> due process and above all picking up young men…to have their vasa cut off in
>
> fulfilment of arbitrary sterilization quotas. (384)

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[18] Gitomer shows that several ancient texts celebrate Duryodhana's warrior persona, including second
century Sanskrit playwright Bhāsa's dramas *Dūtavākyam* and *Urubhagam*, eighth century author Bhatta Narayana's
Venīsaṃhāra. Today, Duryodhana is also worshipped as a God in the Poruvazhy Peruviruthy Malanda Temple in
Kerala.

[19] Yudhiṣṭhira, the eldest of Draupadī's five husbands, plays a game of dice against his enemy cousins. He bets and
loses all his royal property. Eventually, he begins wagering members of his family. After losing each of his brothers,
who are also Draupadi's other husbands, he loses himself. Finally, he bets and loses Draupadī (MhB 2.27).

Although the narrator clearly disapproves of The Siege, he is also quick to emphasize that Duryodhani has a change of heart shortly after. For reasons that are unclear – her associates or the public – she ends The Siege and declares a general election in 1977, which she loses. However, she returns to power again in 1980 and remains the Prime Minister until her death in 1984. At this point, the narrator draws the story to a close:

> I have portrayed the nation in struggle but omitted its struggles against itself and ignored the regionalists and the autonomists and the separatists and the secessionists who even today are trying to tear the country apart…An India where a Priya Duryodhani can be re-elected because seven hundred million people cannot produce anyone better, and where her immortality can be guaranteed by her greatest failure (412).

The nation, despite its struggles, emerges damaged but alive. The narrator reflects on the irony that Duryodhani, despite her faults and calling The Siege, might have been a better politician than many others who might explicitly have destroyed the nation. In this way, Duryodhani is redeemed the way Duryodhana is in the epic, ultimately because both do their jobs as king/politician, even if their methods are suspect. Nevertheless, Tharoor's work doesn't gratuitously target only female politicians like Indira. The novel critiques men as much as, if not more, than women as it moves demythologize the very idea of a glorious national narrative unpunctured by the folly of individuals. Tharoor's principal project is re-telling the story of the nation with comical irreverence. He is easily able to employ a grand narrative, here the Mahabharata, to satirize the grand narrative of the nationalism, because they are similar in scale and import.

The Reverent Nation as Audience

Around the time Tharoor published his novel, two Hindi-language, serialized adaptations of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata appeared on national television. These shows were originally telecast between 1987-90 on Doordarshan, the national public service broadcaster. Even though these serials retold the epics, they had a markedly different approach to both the epic texts and their new context. For Tharoor, the nation's history is the principal narrative while epic's style helps further his satirical intentions. In the television shows, the epics are a serious, central subject—the producers assiduously maintained that these shows did not deviate from their original moral and political message of the original epics. For this reason, the national audience was invited to view the shows with reverence, so that they could re-familiarize themselves with the true origins of their culture.

Even though Tharoor's text's publication was contemporaneous with the shows, it could not compete with its reach. Where English language novels had, and indeed still have, a limited circulation, the shows had the potential to reach to a larger audience since they were both in a widely-understood official language and on national television. Further, Doordarshan was virtually the only channel on television until that time, since private channels would not make an appearance until 1992. Doordarshan's monopoly on the media market ensured that the mythological series would become highly sought after. When the shows aired on Sundays, millions of Indian families tuned in together to experience their beloved semi-divinities in technicolor. The shows' producers, who were Bollywood stalwarts, concocted a winning combination: they expertly melded Bollywood melodrama and attractive costumes with commonly known religious iconography and meditative practices. They strategically placed halos around the semi-divine protagonists' heads and used chants in Sanskrit to begin each

episode. There was little doubt that watching the show was meant to be a supplement to, or even a substitute for, prayer. The shows reappeared at an opportune time, when the persons of the country were especially receptive to its messages. The Emergency had recently and violently demonstrated the failure of secularism. The televised semi-divinities seemed to assure the public that all could be well again if there was a return to the values of a pre-secular past. To a large extent, this mission was successful. Scholars like Purnima Mankekar and Arvind Rajagopal have demonstrated how these two televised adaptations catalysed the rise of Hindu nationalism. I build on their work to argue that the televised epics were so influential that they became new master texts that radically reorganized the way epic narratives are interpreted in popular and literary discourse in twenty-first century India. It is noteworthy that many Indians continue to dogmatically refer to these televised adaptations as the dominant interpretation of both the epic narratives and in turn Hindu values.

The series based on the Ramayana, spelled *Ramayan*, was directed and produced by Ramananda Sagar under the banner of his company Sagar Arts. It appeared first between 25 January 1987 and 31 July 1988. Sagar, who graduated with a degree in Sanskrit from the University of Punjab in 1942, was an established writer and director in Bollywood by the time the series aired. Sagar Arts' website notes that the show became an instant hit and has been considered the "the most viewed mythological serial ever" by the Indian annual publication the Limca Book of World Records. The show went on to air on several channels in other countries in Asia, Africa, North and South America, reaching out to a wide-spread diasporic audience. A few months after *Ramayan* ended, a serialized Hindi Mahabharata, spelled *Mahabharat,* adaptation began its run on Doordarshan. The show was mainly put together by a father-son team who were also well established in Bollywood: Baldev Raj (B.R.) Chopra produced the show while his son

Ravi Chopra directed it. The show aired soon after the *Ramayan* ended and ran between 2 October 1988 and 24 June 1990. *Mahabharat* was also broadcast on BBC2 in England in 1991 and later dubbed into Telugu and Tamil. Even though both serials are mentioned in the same breath, the producers prescribed different uses for these ancient histories and philosophies in the present day. Where *Ramayan* presented a rosy picture of "our culture" by recalling the rule of Rāma, *Mahabharat* presented the epic concerned as relevant text with which to unpack the sorry state of "our times". However, since the *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* serials and indeed, the epics themselves, are spoken of together as a common cultural heritage of the Hindus, it is necessary to comment on the adaptations as a unit.

In constructing *Ramayan*, Sagar drew both from the *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa*, Awadh poet Tulsidas' sixteenth century poetic adaptation of the Ramayana and the earlier *Rāmāyaṇa* written between the second centuries BCE and CE attributed to a sage named Vālmīki. Sagar frequently appeared in-person in the serial, underlining his authority over the text and the veracity of his interpretations. As a sage-like figure, he frequently provided on-screen editorial commentary, giving the viewers not only a vision of a glorious past but also ways in which to interpret it in current times. Here, even though the representation of the epic on the televised platform was innovative, the social commentary was unusually retrograde. Heidi Pauwels writes that the televised version of the Ramayana was deliberately more conservative in terms of gender roles, family politics, and social mores than either Tulsidas or Vālmīki's. She contends that through the editorial commentary and the mis-en-scene, the show emphasized monogamy, lauded the subservience of wives, and valorized the joys of the multi-generational joint family (170, 206). The context and setting of the epic was used to validate these didactic messages. Audiences assumed them to be the wisdom of the ages when they were in fact, a response to more recent

crises in society, such as the change in women's roles in the public and private spheres and the growing rise in nuclear families.

The televised Ramayana also downplayed the immense personal tragedies that mark the both the Vālmīki and Tulsidas versions. The *Rāmāyaṇa* was written around the second century CE by the sage Vālmīki in Sanskrit while the Tulsidas wrote the *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa* in Awadhi in the sixteenth century. Outside of linguistic differences, the two versions' endings differ significantly. Tulsi's *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa* ends with Rama reigning in his kingdom while Vālmīki's text delves into another set of tragedies, including a permanent separation between the lead pair. However, in both texts moral righteousness often comes at a great personal loss. Sagar downplayed these tragic overtones, preferring to romanticize the era of Rama's rule. In doing so, he ushered audiences into a magnificent unlived past where those with strong religious and moral values would triumph. Purnima Mankekar notes:

> Ramayan serial evoked images of a pristine Hindu culture and enabled the popular imagination of the Hindu rashtra through its portrayal of the utopian ideal of Ram Rajya, and of Ram and Sita as icons of ideal Hindu manhood and womanhood. The Ramayan conflated "national culture" with "Hindu culture" and constructed a "prehistory" of the Hindu rashtra sought by Hindu nationalists. (180)

Sagar was idealizing a singular narrative of Indian culture as definitively Hindu. As Mankekar reminds us, the nostalgia about Rāma's rule was not of Sagar's invention. It is also most significantly linked to Gandhi. He used the term *Rāmrāj* (the rule of Rāma) to refer to a just and democratic state where the citizens get equal rights as the aim of the Indian nation. Philip Lutgendorf argues that Gandhi's re-presentation of this term was a "startlingly unorthodox

interpretation" because his reading transformed "epic's vision of a divine autocracy [into] a populist democracy" (254). He notes that *Rāmāyaṇa* itself exhibits "an apparent dissonance between the letter and spirit of the epic that has allowed for its appropriation…" (255). Sagar's *Ramayan* similarly appropriated and altered the epic for its conservative nationalist purposes. In doing so, provided the Indian imagination with a new means through which to return to this alleged, idealized *Rāmrāj*. Audiences could now actively visually experience such a political utopia and collectively work towards a future where it could be re-staged. The televisation of the epics then, had far reaching, transformative consequences for Hindu Indian audiences which extended to the realm of politics, economics, religion, and literature. These shows were not remarkable for providing new information but for their re-purposing of the old towards new political and social ends.

Both the shows were also an easily digestible supplement to oral re-tellings of the epic texts in countless homes because their visual and serial form lent itself well to ritualization. Mankekar writes of middle-class Indian families who bathed and purified themselves before the serial came on, suggesting that the viewing of the serial itself was considered an act of worship. She notes that the relatively new visual medium of television recreated the Hindu ideal of "darshan", which "involves both seeing and being beheld by the deity". She continues:

> The viewers I worked with engaged the Ramayan with the same reverence they
> would have accorded a religious ritual: seeing Lord Rama on television became a
> form of darshan for them… For them, there was little difference between reading
> the Ramayana and watching it on TV. (200)

It may also be added that the televisation made it possible for those who could not or did not read the epics to engage with them more frequently. The shows were also in Hindi, a language which

by then was well-established lingua franca in the subcontinent. This made them popularly accessible even before they were dubbed into other Indian languages. The combination of a common language, national telecasting, and Bollywood style mis-en-scene helped these elaborate and confident interpretations of the already known narrative of the epics go even further than before. It helped that Sagar and Chopras' renditions of the epic stories were considered authoritative by their audiences. Mankekar found among the viewers she interviewed in her study, few doubted the "authenticity" of the epic's re-presentation in the television show (200, 223). The shows fortified the notion that epics were the dominant text through which to access a singular narrative of Hindu values, which in turn was conflated problematically with a monolithic Indian culture.

The impact of the epic serials on daily life was powerful and obvious. Actors who starred in them became highly recognized as mythological figures they played all over the country and were frequently treated as if they were divine in public. For instance, Sagar Arts' website proudly claims that the actors who played Rāma and Sītā in their serial were often greeted like deities themselves by fans when they visited temples. Other actors, such as Nitish Bhardwaj, Gajendra Chauhan and Mukesh Khanna who played Kṛṣṇa, Yudhiṣṭhir, and Bhīṣma in the *Mahabharat* respectively, capitalized on the quasi-religious devotion they inspired by entering the political sphere as conservative, right-wing candidates.

Even though the two epic shows ran back to back, the producers carefully designed them to have different resonances in contemporary times. While *Ramayan* fueled nostalgia for a felicitous Hindu past, *Mahabharat* focused on the fractures and tensions in the epic text to relate it to the dire state of politics in the present day. The makers believed that each epic had different moral and political messages. For instance, when Mankekar interviewed producer B.R. Chopra,

he told her "the Ramayan was about the ideal manhood of Lord Ram (maryada purushottam) [but] the Mahabharat was about the pervasiveness of politics in 'every aspect of life'" (qtd. in Mankekar 227). This was furthered by deliberately mining the tensions in the epic to yoke it to present times: the show rendered events of the war, assaults, and familial enmities in melodramatic detail.

While the television epics' producers did not invent an essential difference between the epics, they certainly played them up to suit what they believed to be the needs of the times. The classical *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* have always been considered to have different formulations that many scholars, including David Shulman and Narayana Rao, have discussed. Shulman for instance writes that where the *Mahābhārata* is "unbalanced…stubbornly reluctant to come to terms with the world…and…its familiar culture order", the *Rāmāyaṇa* "offers…a somewhat tragic portrait of cultural ideals in the near stillness of presumed perfection" (39). The television adaptations simply took these differences a little further: where an edited, idyllic version of Ramayana was deployed by Sagar and coopted by the Hindu-right to re-imagine an ideal past and encourage dreams for the future, the Chopras' *Mahabharat* was successful in making the right equivalences between the epic's events and the ugliness of the present.

The *Mahābhārata*, a text about numerous political conflicts that lead up to a tremendous and horrific war, provided many events that could be linked to topical concerns. William Hegarty, for instance, has written about how the Chopra serial painstakingly spelled out the epic's links to nation and national culture. He argues that the show interpellated the audience as homogeneously Hindu and strongly suggested that its vision of the past was uncontestable (194-195). It was not altogether different from the way in which Sagar presented the Ramayana on his show—as a sacrosanct text about the singular past of a unified people.

Curiously, the audience did not respond to the show exactly its creators planned. The audiences' responses showed both that the inherent plurality and universality of the text has remained appealing and that other recent adaptations have shaped the current perception of the text. In fact, Mankekar writes that the *Mahabharat* invited the viewership of a more diverse audience of non-Hindu Indians than Sagar's *Ramayan*. Further, some of the Hindu viewers she interviewed were occasionally hostile to Chopras' interpretation of certain events in the epic, believing it to have diluted the Hindu message. She writes, for instance, that certain viewers took umbrage to the presentation of Krishna as a Machiavellan figure (226). Ironically, this is not really an interpretation but largely true to Kṛṣṇa's character in the original epic—he regularly encourages his devotees to break the rules of war to win it. Some of the show's re-presentations, however, hit as close to home as the makers desired. For instance, Mankekar writes that the *Mahabharat*'s presentation of Draupadi's disrobing had a profound impact on a range of female viewers, including those who were not Hindus:

> Muslim and Sikh women, along with their Hindu counterparts, were extremely moved by Draupadi's disrobing: temporarily abstracting this episode from the rest of the televisual text, they saw it as yet another gripping tale of the injustices (zulm) perpetrated on women. (228)

Viewers, including myself, have vivid memories of first seeing this violent moment on television. It was particularly incongruous because it appeared in what had been otherwise deemed a family-friendly show. The assault of women was an expected and regular occurrence in sleazy Bollywood films but not in sanitized state-controlled programming. Mankekar notes that many female viewers she interviewed discussed how violence depicted in the episode came uncomfortably close to their daily experiences of harassment or assault (245). Further, Chopras'

Draupadi, like the epic Draupadī, responded to her mistreatment visibly and vocally. The show also capitalized on the common belief that Draupadī is more likely to resist her circumstances than other female characters. To a large extent this is true in the epic texts as well, where Draupadī is more vocal in critiquing her husbands, Sītā worships her husband as a god. Nevertheless, the Chopra *Mahabharat* provided compelling new visuals for already memorable epic events, including but certainly not limited to, Draupadī's disrobing.

The core narrative of Mahabharata was confirmed by the Chopras as the incisive tool with which to dissect the scourge of the times. In a way, the Chopras mobilized the epic the way Tharoor does but significantly differed by doubling down on the text's solemnity and veracity. Further, the notion that Mahabharata anticipates the problems of the present day was more palatable to non-Hindu viewers too: it is far easier to bemoan the common present than agree on a glorious past that does not include one's social group. Where Sagar's *Ramayan* was viewed an epic "about our (Hindu) culture", Chopras' *Mahabharat* was an epic "for our times". In fact, the two epics complemented each other. They suggested to audiences that the failure to establish a Ramayana-like ideal kingdom has led to Mahabharata-like chaos and corruption. Together, these two widely accessible televised adaptations ensured that the epics were more relevant by the last decade of the twentieth century than ever before.

The Eternal Past

In comparison to *The Great Indian Novel,* which exhorted the reader be irreverent towards national history, the televised epic adaptations of the two epics functioned specifically to encourage reverence towards the epics, and by extention Hinduism, for the sake of the nation. In a sense, Tharoor's novel and the televised adaptations propose different ways to look at the same

socio-political problem. After the Emergency, Tharoor suggests that it would be most productive to come to terms with the fact that nationalism cannot be taken seriously because it is as unworthy of worship as the fallible human beings who constructed it. On the other hand, the televised adaptations imply that even though the current state of the nation is undesirable, it can be redeemed and made worthy of worship again by reconnecting it with a specifically Hindu past.

In *The Modernity of Sanskrit,* Simona Sawhney argues that Benedict Anderson's theory of the emergence of nationalism presents the pre-nationalist past and modern nationalism as "two distinct and homogeneous worldviews". She finds that this is not necessarily the case in India:

> Cultural modernity itself becomes what it is by way of a confrontation with
> tradition—that is to say with various contesting narratives about
> tradition…[Many] modern texts explicitly position themselves as readings or
> rewritings of early texts, thus exposing the complex relationship between the two.
> (14)

Similarly, the constant resurfacing of the epic in literary productions shows that what is old, historical, or "traditional" does not simply vanish from the conceptions of the contemporary nation and its texts. Post-colonial texts in India and elsewhere often reveal that Independence and the official conferral of nationhood did not simply guarantee stability. Epic adaptations often emerge during moments of heightened national instability and show how thinkers attempt to grapple with new problems by both mobilizing and contesting pre-modern socio-political ideas. This demonstrates how Indian national culture is in always in a state of re-negotiation, constantly moving between interpretations of multiple pasts and presents.

The reach of the Mahabharata in modern day India is expansive, compelling, and powerful. The original text is filled with philosophical complexity and numerous intertwined stories that have a sustained life in the imagination of its readers and writers. Broadly, epic re-imaginings ensure that Indian literature continues a dialogue with its own past, whether literary, mythic, or the historical past of the nation and its communities. The past is often revisited, remembered or repurposed in intriguing ways that provide fascinating insights into new realities and imaginaries.

CHAPTER THREE:

HEROINE

India's Daughter

At 9 pm on December 16, 2012, a 23-year-old woman named Jyoti Singh Pandey and her

male friend Awindra Pratap Pandey[20] boarded a private bus in Munirka, New Delhi. Unknown to

them, the bus was occupied by a group of men who were looking to make trouble, having

already robbed a previous passenger. Over the next few hours, these men brutally beat the two

friends, taunting them for being unmarried and out together at night. As the bus moved through

the city, the men knocked Awindra unconscious and gang-raped Pandey. The horrific assault

included one of the rapists, then a juvenile, inserting an iron rod into Pandey's body and ripping

out her intestines. After this, Pandey and her friend were left bleeding on the side of the road.

They lay ignored for several hours, until some passers-by finally took them to a hospital. As

Pandey fought for her life over the next two weeks, she remained communicative about her will

to survive and her desire to see her assaulters punished. As her condition worsened, her story

became a matter of national concern. Mass protests in her support raged in metropolitan areas

and prominent politicians became involved. On December 26, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh

chaired a meeting where it was decided that she would be flown to Mount Elizabeth Hospital in

Singapore for a multi-organ transplant. News outlets such as *NDTV* questioned the necessity of

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[20] Although the two shared a last name, they were not famially related. I will refer to Awindra by first name and
Jyoti Singh as Pandey hereafter.

this move, speculating that Pandey was sent abroad because the government was concerned that the protests would intensify if she died within the country ("Delhi Gang-rape: The Debate over Moving the Student to Singapore"). Pandey died at 4:45 am Singapore Standard Time on December 29, 2012. She was cremated the next day in New Delhi under stringent government organized police security.

The event captured special attention because of the ghastliness of the attack, which was described in unflinching detail in newspapers. The public discourse that grew around this tragedy was simultaneously problematic and illuminating. The discussion catalyzed much-needed changes regarding the definition of rape within the Indian legal system: the Verma Commission, formed in response to this event in 2013, made several changes to the Indian Penal Code's laws on sexual assault. Further, it made evident how women are imagined and framed in the scheme of religio-national politics in modern India. During and after Pandey's demise, the public's response against the assaulters and the event was tremendous, especially in the major Indian metropolises. Candlelight vigils were held in Pandey's honor and thousands took to the streets to protest. Although Pandey's family later revealed her name[21] to the public to empower other victims of sexual assault, the victim's name could not be intially revealed in keeping with Indian law. For this reason, newspapers gave her various pseudonyms that celebrated her seemingly superhuman courage.

The most widely circulated nickname was the national daily *Times of India*'s coinage "Nirbhaya" (the fearless). The victim was quickly coopted into a familial relationship with the Indian nation state when she was dubbed "India's Daughter". An aspiring physiotherapist of modest means, she was seen to be working hard to make a life in the nation's capital. Her

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[21] Incidentally, the parents revealed their daughter's name at the urging of Shashi Tharoor, then the Minister of State for Human Resource Development.

respectable background made it easy for many protesters to think of her as "one of us". As Krupa Shandilya notes in a recent essay:

> [R]epresentations of Pandey's body re/produce her simultaneously as 'everywoman' and as a middle-class, upper-caste, Hindu woman. This is not to say that all the diverse placards, signs and news features surrounding the rape participated in this signification, but that a large number of symbols across diverse media relied on Hindu upper-caste signifiers, pivoting the protest movement around the body of a normative symbol of Indian womanhood. (465)

To attack this woman was to attack the nation, or at the very least, a respectable group of persons believed to constitute the nation. To make matters worse, the five assaulters – among them a bus driver, a gym instructor and a fruit-seller – were from the working class. This very tragic happening was rendered in spectacular terms through the extensive media coverage, aided by a class-specific narrative where the victim was as easy to identify with as the assaulters were not. Newspapers often incorrectly revealed details about Pandey that would allow the middle-class reader to believe that she was a "respectable" woman. For instance, an earlier report in *The Hindu* suggested that Pandey and her male friend were informally engaged and planning a wedding, which granted a measure of social legitimacy to them being out together on the evening of the rape ("Friends Recall Wedding Plans of Gang-rape Victim"). *The Times of India* reported that the family insisted that the couple was not engaged ("Delhi Gang-rape Case: Grieving Family Says Marriage Report 'baseless'"). Pandey's parents, Asha Devi and Badri Nath Singh, also came forward to provide details about her life and remain committed to honoring her memory and courage.

Regardless, it was underscored that Pandey was a very worthy and sympathetic victim. Much was said of her career aspirations and her parents, who encouraged her to pursue higher education despite strained finances. It was also asserted that she fought back during and after the assault. Compared with stories of other rape victims who may not have fought back or may not have been deemed respectable, Pandey's narrative was heroic and therefore, easily celebrated. The presentation of her story in these terms and framing her as a national symbol was "complicit in over-determining the narrative trajectory of her rape and recreating it as a narrative of struggle and hope rather than one of pain and violence" (Shandilya 469). Even though the discussion of this rape rightly highlighted the perils of being a woman in India, the woman under discussion became specifically urban and middle class. Further, the discourse slowly moved away from the subject herself. Pandey became the grounds on which varied positions on feminism and class politics could be debated. The discussion was often inaccurately representing a person who could no longer speak for herself. The story of Jyoti Singh Pandey's life was adapted and imagined anew as superhuman figure who was revered specifically for her heroism. In this narrative, she was simultaneously framed as more than herself – a national emblem – and less than herself – a mere site for the discussion[22].

The politically conservative responses to this event also demonstrated that religion and religio-nationalism were important players in the discussion. Self-declared spiritual leader Asaram Bapu remarked that Pandey was as responsible for the rape as the assaulters. Specifically, he said that if she prayed and called her assaulters her "religious brothers", the incident could have been avoided ("Delhi Gang-rape Victim Equally Responsible, Suggests

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[22] This formulation is drawn from Lata Mani's argument in *Contentious Traditions* (1998)*.* She writes on colonial debates on *sati* or widow self-immolation: "[W]omen are neither subjects nor objects but, rather, the grounds of the discourse... analysis of the arguments of participants very quickly indicates that women themselves are marginal to the debate" (79).

Asaram Bapu"). It is unsurprising that Asaram questioned the strength of Pandey's moral character based on the notion that divine intervention is within the reach of the truly righteous and pious woman. Although he does not cite specific texts, it may be noted that both the epic heroines Sītā and Draupadī prevent their respective personal indignities from escalating to a graver bodily assault by affirming a connection with a divine power, which will be revisited in detail later in this chapter.

Another politician, Kailash Vijayvargiya, was more explicit in making a connection to the epic texts while blaming the victim. Vijayvargiya, the Industry Minister of Madhya Pradesh and a member of the Bharatiya Janata Party, said:

> There is only one phrase for this and that is 'moral limit'; there is a *lakshman rekha*[23] (Lakṣmaṇa's line) for every person, when it's crossed then the demon-king Raavan will abduct Goddess Sita…One has to abide by certain moral limits. If you cross this limit you deserve to be punished. Just like Sita was abducted by Ravana". (qtd. from Brown and Agarwal 6)

It is of significance that Vijayvargia brings up the Ramayana's Sītā rather than Draupadī of the Mahabharata as a less-than-ideal woman. As Sally Sutherland has noted in her study on feminine role models from the epics, Sītā is considered a far more ideal woman and wife than Draupadī in India (63). In any case, Vijayvargia's statement suggests that all women, whether as goddesses or mortals, must adhere to patriarchally prescribed boundaries for their own good or expect to be punished by men.

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[23] Vijayvargiya is refering to an incident that is described in some but not all versions of the Ramayana. Bfore leaving her alone at home, Sītā's brother-in-law Lakṣmaṇa drew an actual line outside their home and told her not to cross it. It is implied that Rāvaṇa abducts Sītā because she trangresses this boundary.

Other politicians such as Mohan Bhagwat, the chief of the Hindu right-wing group the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, made comments that suggested that the problem lay in the encroachment of the mythical "West" into the a fixed and monolithic "Indian culture". He said, "Where 'Bharat' becomes 'India' with the influence of western culture, these type of incidents (sic) happen" ("Rapes Occur in 'India', Not in 'Bharat': RSS Chief."). Here, Bharat is imagined as a wholly Hindu, rural entity whereas India is an urban, hybrid, secular entity that was created through its interaction with the West during and after colonialism. Similarly, *India Today* reported that Ashok Singhal, another leader of a prominent Hindu organization, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, said that Western culture brought by the British, was to be blamed for these incidents. He referred to an abstract pre-colonial past when female virginity was prized until the British arrived but argued that "the purity has been disturbed (sic)" in the present ("Now, VHP Blames Western Lifestyle for Incidents of Rape"). Even though these remarks were widely condemned by secular and religious groups alike, the rhetoric is particularly worth noting: national and cultural boundaries are consistently reinscribed based on idealized feminine behavior.

The discussion surrounding this incident shows how women are compared to or presented alongside Hindu goddesses in daily, local, and national discussions of feminine honor and propriety. This process is certainly not new. As Partha Chatterjee notes in *Nation and Its Fragments,* Indian nationalism, like many others, was an inherently patriarchal project from its very inception, which assigned a submissive role to women. They became the spiritual emblems of nationhood and its home/private sphere. The woman-as-nation or the woman-as-and-of-the home is an object to protect rather than a subject who can speak for her own needs. Even when the women do speak, he writes that "their personal "struggle [is] encapsulated completely in the

project to produce the nation" (151). Chatterjee explains further that when the fathers of Indian nationalism were constructing a role for Indian women, they had specific aims in mind. The modern Indian woman was to be different from the traditional Indian woman who was invisible and illiterate, but also not like a modern western woman, who was thought to be disagreeable, wilful and of questionable morality. This new Indian woman was to be educated, but only so that she may nurture future, ideally male, citizens for the new nation state. She was to be both the spiritual center of the home and the guardian of the spiritual/private realm, as opposed to the material/public realm of work and statecraft (Chatterjee 127-134). The nationalists drew on a range of literary and historical sources, including the two Sanskrit epics, to construct and reinforce ideals of a role for women.

Since the narratives of the Ramayana and Mahabharata have continued to travel well through oral, written and later, televised versions, they have borne these ideas about gender roles within them. In this chapter, I focus chiefly on Indian-American writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's English novel *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) and Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" (1978) which was originally published in Bengali and translated later into English by Spivak. The two texts not only have different audiences because of the languages of their publication, but also differ in their framing of the heroine's own context. Where one pushes her Draupadī outwards, into a transnational feminist context, the other brings Dopdi, a multiply marginalized tribal woman into the epic text that would have been inaccessible to her. By analyzing these texts, I aim to show how the epic texts have continued to provide a wide range of models for feminine social, spiritual, and political behavior well into the twenty-first century.

Can the Goddess Speak?

The recent need to reimagine epic heroines in contemporary literature is intimately connected to the idealization of everywoman like Pandey alongside semi-divinities and goddess figures in popular and political discourse. Adopting these exceptional women, whether real or literary, to further the nationalist agenda reduces them to symbols that are static and ahistorical. Further, elevating epic women to models for contemporary Indian women to aspire to advances a singular narrative of femininity. It can also offer a reductive reading of their characters, which flattens the complexity of the roles they play in the epics. Therefore, there is a contemporary literary interest in giving voice to these heroines to push back against these singular narratives. While the tradition of literary re-imagining the epics is not a new one in Indian literature, the rewriting the epic from the perspectives of female characters has acquired a political urgency because of contemporary debates surrounding women.

Sītā of the Ramayana and Draupadī of the Mahabharata are considered to have different, if not opposed personalities. This has a significant impact on the way in which their stories are re-imagined in contemporary Indian literature. Sītā is believed to be a more agreeable figure than Draupadī and therefore, a better model for patriarchally approved feminine behavior in religio-national discourse. Pamela Lothspeich has noted that goddesses or semi-divinities such as Sītā inspired M.K. Gandhi, who believed her to be an ideal wife. That Sītā is an ideal for female behavior persists well into modern day India. Sutherland's study revealed that men in North India see Sītā as an ideal partner because of her "submissive acquiescence" and lifelong loyalty to her husband (63). She is believed to be the perfect woman whose life is marked by tragedy that she ultimately accepts as a martyr.

Scholars of the epic texts have also pointed out that Sītā is often a more submissive wife than Draupadī. Although both women are consistently depicted as *pativratās*, those who adhere to the feminine Hindu spiritual calling of being an ideal wife and companion, Sītā is frequently seen to blame herself for the couple's misfortunes whereas Draupadī blames her husbands for theirs. Kinsley, for instance, notes that Sītā's sexual and spiritual devotion is depicted at several points in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, underlining that an ideal wife worships her husband as god (70-71). Narayana Rao also writes that each epic heroine's behavior furthers the core economic and political stakes of the individual texts. He provides an ecology for the representation of women in Sanskrit texts based on cultural systems such as the pastoral, the mercantile and the agricultural; the *Rāmāyaṇa* is broadly landed and agricultural while the *Mahābhārata* is not landed and pastoral. In the former, Sītā's fidelity must be established at all costs because it is a guarantee that the rightful heirs will inherit the land. In the pastoral *Mahābhārata*, whether the ownership of the land is established by hook or by crook, individualism and heroism is celebrated (236-238). Thus, Draupadī is believed to be more individualistic than Sītā, whose life must be in service of the agricultural community's needs. However, Rao remarks that Sītā still demonstrates both independence and heroism several times over the course of the text but this is not typically recognized by readers (226). Instead, the popular understanding of Sītā is built on a valorization of her motherhood and martyrdom for the sake of her husband and her community, often at the expense of her intelligence and individual agency.

On the other hand, Draupadī, the heroine of the *Mahābhārata*, is considered "aggressive and outspoken", particularly against her five husbands, the Pāṇḍava brothers (Sutherland 79). While Sītā is known for "her relentless pursuit of fidelity and dependence on her husband", Draupadī doesn't hesitate to exert control over situations (Rao 238). That she has five husbands

also makes her sexually questionable, although the epic is conflicted over whether polyandry was her own choice. Several explanations for the polyandrous marriage are provided throughout the epic text, such as it being socially problematic for a younger brother to be married before his older brothers or that the Pāṇḍavas are the incarnations of five gods called Indras, who have a common wife (MhB 12.159; 1.189). Alternatively, it also stated Draupadi herself had prayed five times for a perfect husband in a previous life and Śiva had playfully granted her five husbands in her current life. (MhB 1.189) Although the *Mahābhārata* often demonstrates that Draupadī is also an ideal wife to her husbands, it is her memorable anger that often prevents her from being idealized in the paternalistic nationalist scheme. However, it is this mercurial anger and ambivalence that enables writers to re-imagine her with complexity, especially since she believed to the heroine more likely to register her protest in her own words.

Draupadī is an already resistant figure in the epic, who comes across as sharp-tongued, ambitious, and even terrifying. Whether it is her virulent critique of her own husband's right to her body after he has been enslaved himself or vowing wash her hair in the blood of the man that assaulted her, she certainly espouses all that is needed for a proto-feminist heroine (MhB 2.27). Scholarship on Draupadī in the epic presents her as a powerful figure who has extensive political knowledge that she wields against her husbands and other men (Bennett; Sutherland; Malinar). Therefore, Draupadī occupies a key position in the epic imaginairy; a woman of questionable moral character and political agency, her inner thoughts and motivations readers have speculated on for centuries. Some writers, therefore, chose to expand on these speculations in the form of epic adaptations that retell some events of the epic from Draupadī's perspective. Recent adaptations of Draupadī's story include Krishnan Rangaraju's novel *The Importance of Being Draupadi* (2013), Saraswati Nagpal's graphic novel *Draupadi: Fire Born Princess* (2013),

Padma Shenoy's *Draupadi* (2010). Several of these adaptations, including two I discuss in this chapter, portray the heroine in a generally positive and sympathetic light while using her as a spokesperson of both her own struggles and larger issues concerning women in modern and ancient India.

These adaptations are usually engaged in projects of both representation and re-presentation. In "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Spivak outlines the politics of representation as the interplay of the German words *vertreten* (to speak for) and *darstellen* (to present again) (70). When authors reimagine what life was like for Draupadī, they are both speaking for her and presenting her story anew. In terms of *darstellen* then, the project to retell the story of Draupadī is affected by the ideological aims and the socio-political context of the author and their rewritten text. With the politics of representation in mind, I turn to the problematics of adapting the epic texts from Draupadī's perspective. I consider the socio-political ideas of gender in the original epic as well as the adapted texts, particularly how ideals of femininity and celebrations of female heroism impact discussions of gender in the contemporary context. I aim to demonstrate that while these adapted feminist epic texts can certainly provide a feminist insight that connects to the larger realities of oppression experienced by Indian women today, they can also double down on dominant and uncritical modes of thinking about women and femininity.

Draupadi the Exotic

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian-American writer based in Houston, Texas. She is best known for her second book *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), which was adapted into a Hollywood film of the same name in 2006. The media-savvy author has a large Internet fan base that she regularly interacts with on her Facebook page. On September 30, 2015, she conducted

an informal poll on her page asking her readers which of her books they liked the best and an overwhelming majority of them responded that it was *The Palace of Illusions,* which was published in 2008. Some commented that it was rare in giving a female epic character a voice, which suggests that these fans are not very familiar with several other feminist epic rewritings in English or other Indian languages. The fans, who were Indians and Indian-Americans, also expressed enthusiasm when the author announced that the book had been optioned for a film in January 2016 ("Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni Facebook Fan Page"). *The Palace of Illusions,* an adaptation of the Mahabharata from Draupadī's perspective, attempts to raise questions in Draupadī's voice about many contemporary feminist issues, including the neglect of female education and insistence on women putting their families' honors before their own needs and desires. While the book is right to generate these discussions, it has not necessarily been successful for its political message but because of the way in which it is marketed to please the neo-liberal reader, whether upper-class Hindu Indian, diasporic Indian, or Western.

Divakaruni's books are often marketed in a strategic manner that highlight her work's exotic qualities. For instance, a quote from the *Houston Chronicle* on the front cover of *The Palace of Illusions* announces that the book is a "radiant entrée into an ancient mythology virtually unknown to the Western world…" The judiciously chosen word "entrée" invites the figure of the Western reader to both literally consume this product and to embark on a journey into an exotic world. The language is reminiscent of the colonial rhetoric that advertises the consumption of Otherness through food and geographical exploration which has been discussed variously by scholars such as McClintock and Susan Zlotnick. Further, the notion that the Mahabharata is an unknown mythology in the "West" of the *Houston Chronicle*'s hailing is

curious, since excludes both diasporic Indian readers who reside in the West and scores of scholars and enthusiasts of Indo-European mythology in America.

The back of the book similarly extols the mystical/mythical qualities of Divakaruni's writing as "half-history, half-myth and wholly magical". This description capitalizes on the narrative's exotic difference to invite its readers to affirm their own beliefs about an imagined Other world. As Edward Said notes in *Orientalism,* the non-western world was and indeed still is framed as ahistorical, marked with mysticism, spirituality, irrationality "untiring sexuality, unlimited desires" (188). This irrational, mysterious Orient is posited as the feminized Other of the masculine, rational, empirical West. In *The Palace of Illusions,* a feminine narrator in a spectacular, mythic space functions well within the discourses of Orientalism, which now extends into the rhetoric of global consumerism and boutique multiculturalism[24]. Ultimately this serves to market the book product that meets the needs of the reader-as-consumer, whether in India or elsewhere.

The Palace of Illusions, a text teeming with exotic objects, warriors and magic, allows the author to capitalize on existing notions about India within global commodity culture. As Graham Huggan has written in *The Postcolonial Exotic,* postcolonial writing and criticism, in its quest to highlight marginality, often ends up reinscribing it. He calls this "staged marginality" defining it as "the process by which marginalised individuals or minority groups dramatise their 'subordinate' status for the imagined benefit of a majority audience" (xii). This reiterates the

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[24] Stanley Fish defines boutique multiculturalism as "the multiculturalism of ethnic restaurants, weekend festival… [it has a] superficial or cosmetic relationship to the objects of its affection. Boutique multiculturalists admire or appreciate or enjoy or sympathize with…the traditions of cultures other than their own; but…will always stop short of approving other cultures at a point where some value at their center generates an act that offends against the canons of civilized decency…" (378)

centrality of the Western reader as the consumer of the text that is both an exotic object and about exotic objects:

> For the exotic is not, as is often supposed, an inherent *quality* to be found 'in'
> certain people, distinctive objects, or specific places; exoticism describes, rather, a
> particular mode of aesthetic *perception*—one which renders people, objects and
> places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures
> otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery. (13)

In *The Palace of Illusions,* Divakaruni's writing revels in making strange the people, places and objects that represent India in a manner that is recognizable to the non-Indian reader. The Western reader, whom the book cover seems more eager to entice than the Indian reader, can also continue to imagine Indian culture as a mystical, hyperreal entity, marked by its spices and fabrics and ultimately, its difference from their world. Further, Divakaruni's Draupadī is an exotically beautiful, anguished victim of patriarchy. Spivak has cautioned against romanticizing the distress of non-white women and in this case, it is a neo-imperialist variation of "saving brown women from brown men" ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 92). Even though the book's first-person-narrative style has Draupadī ostensibly speaking for herself, the author is playing into ideas that a Western reader may have about perils of being an Indian woman. Readers are likely to gloss over the fact that the Indian woman is not a monolith who can be represented by a fictional Draupadī from an unspecific historical time.

However, Orientalist ideas are often held not only by Divakaruni's Western readers, but also modern urban or diasporic bilingual elite Indian readers. For the Indian reader, whether diasporic or local, the book's mythical backdrop may aid in imagining and affirming a common past that is unlived. Arjun Appadurai notes how the global flows of capital, migration and the

worldwide media boom have enabled cultures to transcend the boundaries of national space. He

notes that media is instrumental in shaping and re-shaping shared cultural beliefs of a

community, in this case India. Further, the media profits from creating a false nostalgia about

this culture and its imagined history, feeding the consumer's "memory of a loss he or she has

never suffered" (78). Epic adaptations glorify a seemingly authentic Indian past. The false but

pleasing nostalgia for such a past can confirm not only religio-nationalist beliefs but also, help to

market books in local and diasporic economies.

The Palace of Illusions is not Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's first book that creates visions

of the feminized exotic for diasporic and non-Indian readers. So far, the limited literary

scholarship on her work largely sees her exoticism as strategic but ignores the global literary

market and assumed audience (Krishna; Sailaja, Ramakrishna and Sarma; Khushu-Lahiri and

Chakravarty). In many ways, the tone and style of Divakaruni's best known work, The Mistress

of Spices, is similar to The Palace of Illusions. The Mistress of Spices, written in a magic realist

style, is the story of a woman named Tilo. The character is named after Tilotamma, a celestial

nymph who is incidentally also described in the Mahābhārata (MhB 1.15). In the book, Tilo

hails from a mystic land where select women are trained to unlock and employ the magical

powers of Indian spices. Tilo is then sent back to the mortal world to operate a spice shop in

Oakland, California, where she interacts with several Indian-American and other immigrant

patrons. A conflict arises when Tilo falls in love with Raven, a man with Native-American

ancestry but the conditions of her magical training forbid her from marrying. Ultimately, Tilo

manages to transcend the rules of her magical background and chooses to marry Raven.

The books share concerns and narrative strategies even though they are adapted

differently. In The Mistress of Spices, the author creates an original myth, only taking Tilo's

name from the epic imaginary. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi's story is derived and adapted from an open and often "dangerously expansive" (Shulman 39) mythology. Divakaruni's Draupadi is a princess, brought up by parents who clearly favor the intellectual and political education of her brother Dhristhyadhyumna. Like Tilo, she is only trained for a limited role in a grand patriarchal scheme. Both heroines are described to have learnt about the otherworldly power of cooking so they can survive in difficult times. Draupadi also learns the art of seduction from a sorceress to please the five warrior husbands she will acquire over the course of the book. Although Divakaruni's narrator bemoans her lack of education and control over her destiny, she ultimately finds her salvation, quite literally, in the hands of another man, Karna. Like Raven, Karna is also the dark, brooding object of the heroine's desire, who cannot be obtained until she breaks free of the patriarchal ties that bind her. However, contemporary Tilo finds love in a mortal life while ancient Draupadi must wait until the afterlife.

In both novels, Divakaruni is liberal with metaphors related to Indian food and clothing, objects that have come to be India's primary signifiers in global commodity culture. Tilo is an active participant in global commodity culture herself because she sells Indian spices to American customers. Draupadi facilitates consumption for Divakaruni's readers more obliquely when Draupadi's cooking talents are described in detail several times over the course of the book. In *The Mistress of Spices*, the narrative was explicitly driven by Indian spices. Each chapter began with a description of ingredients such as turmeric and red chillies. *The Palace of Illusions* continues this practice as well. Although not all the chapters are named after food, some have names such as "Brinjal", "Milk", "Fish" while others have names like "Sorceress", "Sari", "Lotus" (105, 13, 54, 8, 187, 211). Together, these chapter names read like a list of exotic objects to be consumed and collected.

Divakaruni's Draupadi also speaks extensively of the meals she cooks, such as when she prepares brinjals "[coated with] a rich paste of poppy and cinnamon" (110-1). The description is an extension of an event that occurs in the epic, where the God-figure Kṛṣṇa gives Draupadī the power to conjure meals under economically difficult circumstances (MhB 3:41). However, whereas the epic puts forward this event to establish Kṛṣṇa's divinity, Divakaruni's focus is on the exotic food itself. Spices and unusual vegetables make the story palatable to an audience whose primary exposure to Indian culture is through food served in the odd local Indian restaurant in their city.

The narrative voice continues to reference food under unrelated circumstances, using peculiar similes such as "buttocks…were flat as chapatis", "impatient as mustard seeds sputtering in oil" and "[t]he years passed like molasses, suffocating and formless" (3, 216). Scholars like Rajyashree Khushu-Lahiri and Urjani Chakravarty have considered the use of food in Divakaruni's work as cultural markers that are "purveyors of meaning…[and] a process by which memories are shared" (30). However, they fail to note that consumption of food and spices as well as the making of memories is politically and economically loaded. Further, inviting the reader in on their own terms can fail to correct any cultural essentialisms.

Divakaruni description of Draupadi's body, toilette, daily activities and cooking is notably different from the epic text owing to the author's interest in reiterating and framing Indian culture as necessarily exotic. *Mahābhārata* itself certainly has aesthetically beautiful descriptions of Draupadī's physical attributes and qualities but these descriptions also gesture towards her social or political role in the text. For instance, when Yudhiṣṭhira wagers Draupadī at the Game of Dice, he describes her, "Her waist is shaped like an altar, hair long, eyes the color of copper, not too much body hair…such is the woman…the beautiful Draupadī!" (MhB

2.27.58). This moment in the epic has been noteworthy for feminist readings of the text since

Yudhiṣṭhira wagers Draupadī explicity as an object and for her body. She later questions whether

a husband can claim ownership over a woman if he is enslaved himself (MhB 2.27.60). At

another instance in the epic text, Draupadī gives advice to her friend Satyabhāmā on how to be

an ideal wife; she suggests that she maintain a spotless home, don appropriate attire and avoid

displaying emotional excesses (MhB 3.38). This advice is as prescriptive for the listener within

the epic text as it is for the reader outside it. However, it is also an ironic moment because

Draupadī rarely has the circumstances to facilitate ideal wifehood, since she spends much of her

life in exile without a stable home.

Divakaruni focuses on Draupadi's body for different reasons. Sometimes, it is to

highlight Draupadi as the heroine of a romance, such as when Karna reminisces erotically about

"how her breast rose and fell with passion" (276). At most other times, Divakaruni describes

Draupadi's royal accoutrements in detail, focusing on her saris and jewelry. This makes her

relatable to her readers who may be dazzled by luxurious and fashionable lives they believed are

led by princesses. This is not to say that fashion itself is frivolous because of its ephemerality and

association with women[25]. However, when Divakaruni's Draupadi describes her friend

Bhanumati "fidget[ing] with heavy brocade…jingling her bangles, showing [Draupadi] her new

silver toe rings" it is merely exotic portraiture: like the heavy-handed use of food metaphors, it

reproduces consumerist images familiar to the reader (183).

Divakaruni also tries to engage modern readers by giving Draupadī problems that

contemporary Indian women might face. In one instance, Draupadī worries about her dark skin

tanning in the sun and repairing this with home remedies such as a facepack made of yoghurt and

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[25] In *A Room of One's Own,* Woolf writes, "Yet it is the masculine values that prevail. Speaking crudely, football and sport are 'important'; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes 'trivial'" (76).

turmeric (53). The idealization of fair skin as something to aspire to is a complex social phenomenon, one that is given further impetus by the modern Indian beauty industry. Scholars of contemporary social practices have argued that fair skin is erroneously considered to be a mark of Aryan racial purity or upper-caste status (Vaid; Parmeswaran and Cardoza). However, Draupadi's worry about her dark skin as undesirable in this book is decidedly anachronistic. The epic text itself celebrates Draupadī's dark skin, particularly because it favorably connects her with Kṛṣṇa, whose dark complexion is a unique marker of his godliness. Other Hindu texts have a complex view of the symbolism or desirability of darker complexions. For instance, David Kinsley writes that in the *Vāmana-Purāna* the goddess Pārvati endeavors to lose her dark complexion when her husband Śiva comments on it. The dark-skinned goddess Kāli is considered the embodiment of Pārvati's negative attributes, such as fury and vengefulness. However, this darker form also emerges to confront and destroy evil that the milder form of the goddess cannot (119). Several parallels may be darkness of vengeful Kalī and angry Draupadī, both of whom bring about the necessary destruction of evil. Later in this chapter, I discuss how Mahasweta's Dopdi who unleashes her dark body as an act of vengeance and defiance, mirroring Kāli.

However, *The Palace of Illusions* not only writes over the symbolic importance of Draupadī's darkness as a marker of her connection with a god-figure, but also downplays the darker aspects of her personality. The text rarely addresses the fact that Draupadī's anger is within reason. Instead, Draupadi is specifically reframed as a gentle candidate for contemporary feminine sympathies. Thus, when Draupadi complains about tanning, it reaches out to the modern reader who has experienced complexion-based prejudices, assuming they would find it more likely to relate to her feelings of rejection rather than her vengefulness or outrage. The

book chiefly underlines the heroine's vulnerability to social strictures at the expense of the justified outrage for which epic Draupadī's is known and often disliked. The result is a Draupadi who is imminently respectable. As in the case of Pandey, Divakaruni exhorts the reader to be on Draupadi's side by eliminating her departures from normative, socially accepted patterns of contemporary feminine behavior.

Gods, Lovers, and Brothers

Although Divakaruni's complicity in marketing Indian culture is problematic, it may be unfair to dismiss the novel's feminist aims entirely. By giving voice to Draupadī through a first-person narrative and an interior monologue, the author attempts to grapple with many concerns that link the problems of contemporary Indian women to ideals that are socially enforced through mythological narratives. Two interlinked issues are especially prominent in the novel. The first is the questioning of the heroine's agency, especially given the epic reflects the Hindu notion that every human action is pre-destined. The second is Divakaruni's Draupadi's questioning of socially determined modes of propriety and behavior for women, although the author's decision to stay within the narrative framework of the epic itself rules out any radical transgression for the character. Divakaruni thus presents how Draupadi suffers because she is paradoxically held responsible for causing a war, even while it is clear that her behavior is mandated by divine, social and political forces that are beyond her control.

From the beginning of *The Palace of Illusions,* it is established that Draupadi will "change the course of history" (5). In some popular interpretations of the Mahabharata, Draupadī is considered a negative force that primarily causes the war that will end both sides of Draupadi's marital family. Irawati Karve has noted that the readings of female figures in the Sanskrit epic

texts took a more misogynistic turn after the Jain Puranas. A verse one of texts asserts that

women were kṛityās, a demonic and destructive female force, in every epoch:

> In the Kritayuga Renuka was Kritya
>
> In the Satyayuga Sita was Kritya
>
> In the Dvaparayuga Draupadi was Kritya
>
> And in the Kaliyuga there are Krityas in every house. (qtd. Karve 92)

Divakaruni's novel, on the other hand, is committed to establishing Draupadi as a positive force

that invites the reader's empathy. In *The Palace of Illusions,* child Draupadi feels that she is both

inferior to and somehow more dangerous than her brother Dhristadhyumna, who was born at the

same time as her and specifically to kill their father's enemy.[26] Growing up thus, Divakaruni's

Draupadi agonizes over her role in the events that culminate in the war and several characters

complicate her fears. A sorceress, who is not in the original epic, says that women contribute to

many of the world's problems and Draupadi, being more powerful than ordinary women, could

cause even more of them. She therefore advises Draupadi not to get "swept away by passion",

suggesting that it is feminine emotional excesses that cause the world's great problems

(Divakaruni 66). However, the sorceress emphasizes the imminent need for the war, so that the

earth can renew itself and the epoch can come to an end, hinting that Draupadi has a higher

spiritual goal that is pre-ordained. Later in the novel, Bheeshma, Draupadi's grandfather-in-law

and a character who is in the original epic, has a conversation with her. He tells her that she is

capable of either destroying their clan or "lighting [their] way to fame" (Divakaruni 136). Both

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[26] Before her birth, Draupadi's father King Drupada performed a sacrificial prayer to obtain a son who would help him kill enemy Droṇa. The son Dhṛṣtadyumna appears but is unexpectedly followed by Draupadī. Since she was born unnaturally from a Yājña or ceremonial fire, Draupadī is also known Yājñasenī, the fire born warrior princess. Drupada is also known as Yājñasena (MhB 1.11)

these conversations emphasize that while her spiritual and other-worldly powers are immense, she should still be engaged in appropriate feminine behavior in her everyday life. What emerges here is that Draupadī is caught between having too much pre-ordained and uncontrollable semi-divine power and very little social and political agency. Later feminist readings underline that even epic Draupadi did not, in fact, have much to control over the events of the war. Spivak writes that epic Draupadī "is used to demonstrate male glory…[she] provides the occasion for a violent transaction between men, the efficient cause of battle" ("Draupadi" 387). Divakaruni's Draupadi mulling over her personal role in the war makes this irony evident to modern readers.

The most important feminist critiques the novel makes is that of policing feminine behavior and the tremendous force of social conditioning during Draupadi's childhood. From the beginning, Divakaruni's Draupadi protests about being schooled separately from her brother. At one instance, he dismisses her smugly by generalizing that she, like many women, has "a short memory…[and] an impulsive nature" (24). During such times, Draupadi's primary caregiver, a servant whom she calls Dhai Ma, tries to placate her, but continues to train her in the conduct expected of princesses. This ranges from advice on how to control her temper, introductions to sorceresses who train her in the art of seduction, and social cues in comprador patriarchy: "Dhai Ma herself taught me the rules of comportment—how to walk, talk, sit in the company of men; how to do the same when only women are present; how to show respect to queens who are more important; how to subtly snub lesser princesses; how to intimidate the other wives of my husband" (30). Draupadi appears to resist and question a lot of this training and advice in her interior monologue but rarely has the courage to voice them in public spaces. She is unhappy with the limitations of being a princess and restrictions this places on her desires and will. Moreover, it seems that all of her troubles stem from being a woman rather than a man. These

thoughts are given further impetus when Draupadi meets her half-sibling, Sikhandi who transitions from female to male.

Sikhandi, also a character who appears in the original epic, is born as Draupadi's half-sister but realizes that she has scores to settle with Bheeshma, who had dishonored her in a previous life[27]. Since Bheeshma is an extremely powerful warrior, she is unable to find any man who will fight him on her behalf. Sikhandi then vows and prays to became a man so he may take revenge. Sikhandi returns to Draupadi's father's court as a man and his appearance is noted in detail by young Draupadī, who is fascinated by his story and transformation.

When he first appears, Draupadi is taken by Sikhandi's physical strength and independence. During the short time that they spend together, he appears to plant the seeds of dissent in her. He tells her that she has powers that might make her as able or capable as the men around her. Draupadi then wonders, "Wasn't power singular and simple? In the world that I knew, men just happened to have more of it" (52). After Sikhandi leaves, Divakaruni imagines that their father considers Sikhandi such great threat to Draupadi's femininity that he doubles down on her princess training (53). Although Divakaruni stresses on Draupadi's oppression throughout the novel, the Sikhandi interlude offers a glimpse of possibility in terms of contemplating the problems of inhabiting a non-binary gender identity or showing the importance of feminist revenge. Further, it hints at a possible solidarity between two marginalized groups, here women and transmen. However, this does not quite come to fruition since Sikhandi chief function is to highlight Draupadi's oppression.

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[27] Síkhaṇḍin was a princess named Ambā in his previous birth. Bhīṣma abducted her to make her the bride of his step-brother but she said she was in love with another king named Śalya. Bhīṣma then sends her back to Śalya, who rejects her and suggests that she was now the property of Bhīṣma. Ambā returns to Bhīṣma and begs him to marry her. As Bhīṣma had taken a vow of chastity, he refused. A heartbroken Ambā then committs suicide. She is reborn as Drupada's daughter in her next life. (MhB 5.170-193)

Sikhandi does return later in the novel for another brief interlude, when he wishes to kill Bheeshma. However, he does not get the revenge that he been working towards for two lifetimes:

> Sikhandi was stationed in front of Arjun's chariot, his unbound hair blowing in the wind. He challenged Bheeshma to battle and Bheeshma laid down his bow, saying Amba, you know I will not fight you. He did not take up his weapons again, even as a weeping Arjun shot arrow after arrow that went through him, and Sikhandi, also weeping, covered his face in his hands. (271)

Divakaruni's narrator Draupadi does not analyse or comment on this event after narrating it. Scholars of the original epic have noted that this moment is a crucial one. Bhīṣma's humiliation of Síkhaṇḍi is biologically essentialist; by not fighting him as a man he insists Síkhaṇḍin's gender is definitively female and transcends lifetimes (Custodi 216; Doniger "Myths of Transsexual Masquerades" 141) Custodi remarks that in the Síkhaṇḍin episode "her/his story come together in a delightfully intriguing interweaving of themes surrounding masculinity, its construction *and* deconstruction as such, its juxtaposition to femininity, and the transformations, disavowals…" (216). Divakaruni's Draupadi does not debate these complexities, but remains caught up in the pathos of her own suffering.

Another instance of non-binary gender identity in the epic is when Arjuna, one of Draupadi's husbands, spends a year incognito as a eunuch[28]. Custodi writes that while it is

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[28] After losing the Game of Dice, the Pāṇḍāvas are ordered to serve a thirteen-year-exile (MhB 2.28). In the last year of this exile, they are also supposed to remain incognito. At this point, Arjuna recalls a curse he had received previously, which would enable him to become or at least dress as a woman. In doing so, he assumes the identity of a dance tutor named Bṛhannadā (MhB 4.36).

unclear if Arjuna is simply cross-dressing or physiologically transformed in the epic text, it is an instance of humor and wry-commentary on gender politics (211-14). In Divakaruni's story, however, Draupadi sees this episode in a manner that reinstates that gender is inherently binary and must be mourned if deviated from or "lost". When Arjuna begins to present himself as a woman, she says, "I would have to curb my emotions at the sight of his lost manhood, at the jibes to which, as a eunuch, he was bound to be subjected." (Divakaruni 224). Here, Draupadi is simply overwhelmed by Arjuna's departure from warrior masculinity.

Divakaruni's novel, which begins with some feminist promise, also significantly changes tone and trajectory when the author interpolates a love story between Draupadi and another marginalized character, Karna. As the novel progresses, the Karna-Draupadi romance becomes the chief focus and culminates in a proverbial happy ending. The way the romance and its principal characters are framed recalls narratives in paperback romances and the newer chick-lit genre. Draupadi is a sensitive, misunderstood, but ultimately conventionally feminine heroine who secretly loves Karna, a brooding and mysterious man, who is socially inaccessible to her. It seems like her feelings for him are one-sided until the end of the novel. Further, the romance is ill-fated because Karṇa is a member of the Kaurava faction, the best friend of Draupadi's husband's chief enemy Duryodhana, with a tragic backstory of his own. In the epic, Karṇa was born to Kuntī, the mother of the Pāṇḍavas, when she was unmarried. Unable to keep the child for fear of dishonor, she abandons him by setting him afloat in a river (MhB 1.7). A lower-caste man named Adhiratha finds Karṇa and raises him without the knowledge of this true parentage. Several twentieth and twenty-first century adaptations focus on Karṇa's abandonment and the tragedy of his birth; including Rabindranath Tagore's Bengali dramatic poem "Karna Kunti Sambad" (1900), Ramdhari Singh Dinkar's Hindi epic poem "Rashmirathi" (1952) and Shivaji

Sawant's Marathi novel *Mrityunjaya* (1967). Pamela Lothspeich notes that the focus on the tragic nature of Karṇa's life and character is a relatively new phenomenon in the history of epic re-reading. She traces this interest germinated in the Orientalist readings of the *Mahābhārata* and translations of Vishnu Sitaram Sukthankar in the late nineteenth century (74). Karṇa's story is also a productive site for the discussion of caste-related privileges and lack thereof, which have been pertinent issues in contemporary Indian politics.

Divakaruni does not make any caste-related comments. Instead, she re-writes Karna as a character whose tragic life and suffering mirrors Draupadi's. In the novel, they are presented as ideal partners who cannot unite until their mortal lives end. In the original epic, Draupadī and Karṇa are not romantically involved at all but in fact, rather antagonistic towards each other. For instance, in the epic text Draupadī rejects Karṇa as a suitor because of his caste while Karṇa calls Draupadī a prostitute in an open court for being married to five men (MhB 1:12; 2:27). In Divakaruni's novels, these instances are carefully re-written or omitted. Draupadi's rejection of Karna is portrayed to arise from her loyalty to her brother rather than mean-spiritedness and elitism. The heroine even provides some metanarrative commentary at this juncture, saying that this decision will be interpreted by later bards and readers as caste prejudice (95-96). Similarly, Karṇa's humiliation of Draupadī is also re-imagined to make the character more sympathetic. When called upon to comment on Draupadi's assault in an open court, Divakaruni's Karna agrees with her disrobing, but does not remark on her alleged promiscuity. He simply says "Why should Draupadi be treated any differently [from the others who have been enslaved]? Take her clothes too" (192). Divakaruni's Karna does not maliciously participate in Draupadi's humiliation as the epic Karna does, but appears to consent to it somewhat mildly. Divakaruni writes out a lot of the anger and meanness that both Draupadi and Karna demonstrate to establish

them as likeable and respectable enough to be in a love story.

The Karna-Draupadi love story is presented in a manner that is not altogether different from romances in Divakaruni's other novels. Divakaruni's heroines are often torn between the seemingly autonomous choice to be with the men they love and submitting to oppressive social expectations at the cost of romance. A "love marriage", where the woman chooses her own partner based on romantic love, is shown to be preferable to an "arranged marriage", where matches are preordained by families for economic and social reasons. Arranged marriages are discussed in many of Divakaruni's novels and short stories, such her first collection *Arranged Marriage and Other Stories.* These marriages are portrayed as a permanent impediment to Indian female characters' quests for agency and happiness. In Divakaruni's *Mistress of Spices,* for instance, the heroine Tilo is bound by the rules of her magical training to not marry at all, but eventually becomes empowered by marrying her non-Indian beloved.

Critic Swathi Krishna has questioned this choice as expression of her feminist agency since it ultimately involves a union with a man (14). Although this choice is decidedly more autonomous than an arranged marriage or in Tilo's case, the restrictive rules that come with being a spice goddess, Krishna says, "[Tilo] achieves in the end…what she truly desires and gains not only the autonomy from the control of the spices but also a new and independent Indian American identity." (15) Such a reading simplistically elides over the complexities of female choice as wholly autonomous when the end is a romantic partnership. Romantic choices may be personally empowering but do not occur in a social vacuum; heteronormative conditioning and class politics continue to be determining factors. In this sense, to count the romantic choice as a victory for feminist agency is pre-emptively celebratory.

However, privileging "love marriages" over "arranged marriages" continues to be dominant trend in female *bildungsroman* written in the chick-lit genre for the South Asian diaspora. Desai and Butler write that in these novels: "women's agency is framed simply as personal choice…the South Asian American protagonist is seen as achieving social maturity by securing a "modern" (i.e., not arranged) heterosexual romance and marriage" (18). They point out that such a narrative is pleasing to the neo-liberal reader, who may now be satisfied that the heroine has been assimilated into the standards of Western hegemonic feminism and heteronormativity by making a "choice". Spivak makes a similar comment in her preface to Mahasweta Devi's adaptation of Draupadī's story when she says, "[we] grieve for our Third World sisters; we grieve and rejoice that they must lose themselves and become as much like us as possible to be "free"" ("Draupadi" 381). Divakaruni's novel, in ending with a romantic union, thus falls into a safe trajectory established transnational chick-lit genre where the heroine is finally able to make a romantic choice and become as much like her neo-liberal reader as possible. This is not to say that romantic autonomy is an unimportant attainment, especially in cultures where women's sexual freedoms are severely limited in the interest of patriarchally determined propriety. However, in many contemporary South Asian chick-lit works romantic autonomy, rather than social or economic, appears to be the most prominent if not the only feminist issue. Similarly, Divakaruni's pairing of Draupadi and Karna shows the limitations of re-writing the epic in a popular, transnational genre. Draupadi here is either emblematic of the feminized exotic Other or a chick-lit heroine who suffers and contemplates many injustices in the world, but ultimately wants romantic love. Her other political, philosophical, and spiritual concerns are secondary to the realization of her romantic desires.

While Divakaruni's Karna-Draupadi love-story overwhelms her novel, there is another novel that offers a more nuanced presentation of female desire and its emancipatory potential. Many critics have compared Divakaruni's novel to Pratibha Ray's controversial Oriya novel *Yajnaseni* (1984)*,* arguing that the latter makes a more forceful case for the heroine's agency (Luthra; Larson-Harriss)*.* Also a *bildungsroman* presented in the first-person voice of the heroine, *Yajnaseni* derives its title from Draupadī's other patronymic names, which highlights her unnatural birth from a yajna or sacrificial fire. This book is largely successful in detailing Draupadī's various psychological, social, and spiritual conflicts. Where Divakaruni renders Draupadī as the perfect protagonist for a modern love story, Ray's novel raises crucial questions about the female spiritual path in Hinduism. Ray's Draupadi wishes to eschew *pativratā dharma* for a more direct and meaningful connection with Krishna as friend, God and mentor. Arti Dhand writes that while the *Mahābhārata* provides many insights and possibilities for feminine behavior, its overwhelming focus on *pativratā dharma*, which sees the women as wives and restricted to the private sphere, assigns women a subservient roles in society (180). In many ways, Ray's adaptation attempts a revision of this idea in attempting to grant the female heroine a more direct access to spirituality. In this case, desire is not just the product of a heteronormative romance, nor is its fulfilment an end in itself. Instead, Ray shows how desire can be the means to attaining spiritual agency and ultimately, salvation.

Yajnaseni portrays Draupadi and Krishna as two aspects of the same spiritual power. Ray's Draupadi begins by considering herself immersed in the God she worships; in being named Krishnaa after Krishna, she professes that she has "no separate desire of her own" (9). Draupadi does not differentiate between the spiritual and the sensual when it comes to love of Krishna. The novel's conflict lies in Draupadi's inability and at times, unwillingness to reconcile

her mortal life as a wife with her need for spiritual autonomy. Like Divakaruni's novel, *Yajnaseni* ends with Draupadi getting what she desires: a rapturous monologue suggests that she dissolves herself into Krishna's spirit (399). However, *Yajnaseni* is not just concerned with giving the heroine a voice and a happy ending but in providing a counter-narrative to the Hindu ideal of *pativratā dharma*. Draupadi is less interested in being a companion to the men seeking God and demands a one-on-one relationship with God herself. Her desires are reminiscent of women mystics like Meera Bai, an eleventh-century figure who is considered a part of the Bhakti tradition, a movement that focused on individual rather than communal paths to spiritual fulfilment. In *Yajnaseni,* Draupadi bravely and successfully resists dominant social and spiritual mandates in the pursuit of her personal goals as women like Meera Bai did before her. Critics such as Marwood Larson-Harris writes that Divakaruni's Draupadi is "a mouthpiece for the story and not herself" while Ray's Draupadi is "more thoroughgoing" because she demands and attains more for herself (332). Moreover, Ray's retelling productively connects Draupadi's oppression to that of a larger strain of misogyny in the Sanskrit epic tradition. She makes detailed connections with Ramayana's Sītā's life throughout the novel while also discussing the unfortunate condition of other female characters in the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Ray's criticism of gendered oppression has a broader scope than that of Divakaruni's, which is more interested in reinscribing the centrality of Draupadi within a singular epic.

Ray's adaptation was generally well received and received several literary awards, such as the Sarala Award in 1990 and the Moortidevi Award in 1991. However, when Ray was nominated for the Amrita Keerti award in 2006, an academic and political figure in Ray's home state Odisha named Indulata Das wrote an article in *The Pioneer,* condemning *Yajnaseni* as an immoral work. Surprisingly, Das was not particularly concerned with Ray's indictment of

misogyny in Hinduism. Instead, she is uncomfortable with the detailed re-presentation of

Draupadi's desires, especially where the author erases the distinction between Draupadi's sexual

and spiritual passions. Ironically, this lack of distinction is not Ray's invention, but a mode of

Krishna worship that has been explored in several Indian texts for centuries, including but not

limited to twelfth century poet Jayadeva's *Gīta-Goviṇḍa* and Lallu Lal's *Śrī Premasāgara* in the

colonial period. Das argued that Ray's portrayal of Draupadī's unhappiness with wifehood

would wrongly influence young Hindus. Das believes that the story of Draupadī should remain

unaltered, since the epic is "[one of the] sources of moral inspiration for the righteous and dutiful

mass of this land", suggesting, no doubt, that the best of India actively and homogeneously

practices Hinduism. She was also perturbed by Krishna and Draupadi's ambiguous connection,

which she suggests is illicit. Das says, "On another occasion, she stands by the side of Krishna's

bed when the latter is in Indraprastha. There are many inducement jokes made by Krishna (as

written by Pratibha Ray) which violate the norms of morality as prescribed by Rishis of our

immortal culture" ("Shocking! Pratibha Ray's Yajnaseni Has Dishonoured Draupadi"). Das'

language recalls nineteenth century Orientalist anxieties over sexuality and sacrality being

inseparable in the worship of Krishna. In the first chapter, I have discussed how translators such

as Horace Wilson and William Jones criticized and even altered texts that showed the erotic

relationship between Krishna and his worshippers. That Das would adopt a similar stance shows

how much Orientalist discourse has percolated into the rhetoric of Hindu right, who are

ironically opposed to everything that comes from the so-called West. Curiously, no such

objections were raised against Divakaruni's novel, which similarly details Draupadi's marital

unhappiness and challenges her suitability as a feminine ideal. This suggests that vernacular

literature is held to different standards when it comes to adhering to grand narratives erected and repeated in the interest of a unified national culture.

Dopdi Unbound

Both Divakaruni and Ray's adaptations are committed to humanizing Draupadi and choose to do so by giving the heroine interiority. This is important from a feminist as well as stylistic perspective because the epic does not provide an access to interiority (Sunder Rajan "Draupadi's Disrobing" 336). Accessing these inner thoughts help readers challenge their perception of Draupadi as reactive and vengeful and establish her as a fallible and relatable woman. However, neither of the epic adaptations spend much time on the most uncomfortable moment of Draupadī's life, when she is dragged into court and disrobed before male family elders (2.27). One of the Kaurava brothers, Duḥśāsana, strips Draupadī of her royal garments to signify that she is now a slave. This humiliation is designed to signify not only an economic but also a sexual degradation. Designed as a move to punish Draupadī for her arrogance, it is also a portent for future private sexual humiliations. In performing the disrobing, Kaurava brothers want to make it known to Draupadī and the audience that her body is no longer her own but theirs to use and abuse henceforth. Sunder Rajan writes that even though the episode has the quality of a nightmare for the heroine, "[she] exploits the public space that she has access to through the sexual humiliation" ("Draupadi's Disrobing" 335). When Draupadī is brought to court, she appears "in her one garment, knotted below, weeping and in her courses" (MhB 2.27.59). This suggests that she was unprepared and underdressed to be in public or exposed to the male gaze. Dhand notes that Draupadī's state is significant because while her single garment leaves her physically exposed, the fact that she is menstruating shows that she is a fertile woman.

Appearing in such a state in the court highlights her sexuality before a group of male elders who should never have been able to access her in that manner, which adds to the experience of her violation and humiliation (116). Although the political questions epic Draupadī raises before the disrobing are significant, in the epic and both these adaptations it is ultimately her access to divinity that saves her from further humiliation. She prays to Kṛṣṇa who ensures magically that the single cloth that is being torn away from her body is endless and thus, she is never fully unclothed.

Ray and Divakaruni engage differently with the feminist questions of body and autonomy that this episode raises. Ray shows Draupadi's anger is full force that extends beyond the space of the epic. She delivers a passionate speech where she cites a long tradition of gendered oppression in Hindu tradition. She warns that her humiliation will "demean the entire male sex for all the time" (242). Divakaruni's respectable Draupadi is more subdued than Ray's. She spends time silently contemplating her secret love Karna's inability to help her and prays before she speaks. When she speaks, she restricts her scathing comments to her family by saying this event will lead to the end of the Kuru clan, to which her husbands and their enemy cousins belong. Although Divakaruni does allow Draupadi some anger when she says: "I could not— would not—stop my words", her fieriness quickly passes (194). It makes way for another interior monologue where a hurt, sacrificing Draupadi expresses how disappointed she is in her husbands for not saving her because she "would have thrown [herself] forward to save them". Draupadi then spends the rest of the monologue reflecting on the emotional differences between men and women, and regrets that she is tainted, "with vengeance encoded in my blood" (195).

However, both authors stay true to the narrative of Kṛṣṇa ultimately saving Draupadī. This does nothing to challenge the misogynistic notion that a woman can stop the escalation of

137

her assault by being respectable or praying to the right Gods. Such a sentiment was repeated by conservative figures like Asaram Bapu in the New Delhi gang rape. Further, it underscores that Draupadī has divinity or at the very least, special access to it and therefore is not an everywoman with whom the reader can fully identify. Draupadi, in these two adaptations, remains a figure with significant powers and privileges that save her from situations that contemporary women, especially those marginalized by caste or race, cannot pray away. Staying close to the original epic's events and context thus hinders a comprehensive engagement with contemporary feminist issues. Freeing Draupadī from her own context by moving outside of the framework of the epic narrative itself may therefore be an important point of departure. Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi's short story, "Draupadi" is one of the most compelling examples of a subversive rewriting of the epic that moves the heroine beyond its parameters. The story does the very necessary work of "enunciat[ing] an Indian feminist politics that is conscious of the way that multiple vectors, such as class, caste, and religion, interlock to create the grounds for the oppression and exploitation of women" (Luthra 151). In Mahasweta's work, Draupadī is recast as a tribal woman who is heroically defiant even in the face of unspeakable state-sanctioned oppression.

"Draupadi" was first published in Bengali in a collection entitled *Agnigarbha* or the "Womb of Fire" in 1978. The writer was born Mahasweta Ghatak into a Bengali-middle class family that was well-known for their social and political interests in Kolkata in the early twentieth century. When she passed away on July 26, 2016, she was mourned by many fans all over the country: several politicians, including the Chief Minister of West Bengal Mamta Banerjee recognized her contributions to the landscape of Bengali literature. A committed Marxist, she wrote numerous stories detailing difficulties of tribal persons in North East India. That she speaks for tribals, as a more privileged person, has been noted by both by her translator

and other scholars ("Draupadi", 384; R. Chakravarty 127; Limbale 138) Regardless, the political

necessity of her work cannot be denied.

Mahasweta wrote mainly in Bengali and many of her stories have been translated into

English by Gayatri Spivak. Spivak's English translation of "Draupadi", which appeared in the

journal *Critical Inquiry* in 1981, was accompanied by a translator's preface that is nearly as long

as the story itself. Scholars such as Sujit Mukherjee have joked that Spivak's own fame as a

scholar makes her a rather formidable gatekeeper for the writer's work in western academia,

"[Spivak is] the door to the Third World through which the first can enter, ushered by an

incomparable *dwarpalika* [female keeper of the gate in Sanskrit/Hindi/Bangla]" (qtd. in R.

Chakravarty "Feminism and Contemporary Writing" 94). Other volumes of Mahasweta's stories,

such as the collection entitled *Imaginary Maps,* also contains a similarly lengthy preface and

annotations. Spivak's translation of Mahasweta's work is a tremendous endeavour that demands

an intimate understanding of both the text and its cultural-linguistic politics. Beyond the act of

translation itself there is little that the translator or her author does to make the text and its

context easier for the uninitiated reader to understand. This is in sharp contrast to Divakaruni,

whose work is to consciously render the epic in familiar terms for the modern reader, often to the

detriment of her own project.

Mahasweta's "Draupadi" is not an epic adaptation in the manner of Ray or Divakaruni's

books. In moving away from the plot of the epic, Mahasweta's Draupadi has only a few

similarities with the other writers' epic heroines. Mahasweta's Draupadi shares her name with

the other Draupadis but not their royal lives or semi-divine statuses. She is a poor woman hailing

from the Santal tribe in Northeast India, who is named after the epic heroine by her employer.

The naming itself is ironic gesture, a patronizing move by her employer that underscores her

marginality. Spivak comments on the naming of Dopdi in the preface:

> [A]s a tribal she cannot pronounce her own Sanskrit name (Draupadi)…her name
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> is not on the list of appropriate names for the tribal women…this pious,
>
> domesticated Hindu name was given Dopdi at birth by her mistress, in the usual
>
> mood of benevolence felt by the oppressor's wife towards the tribal servant.
>
> (Spivak "Draupadi" 387)

Dopdi lives a life of hard menial labor and uncertainty, which is exacerbated by her involvement

in the Naxalbari movement, a Marxist peasant uprising against the local authorities that occurred

in West Bengal in the 1970s. The difference between the previous Draupadis and Mahasweta's

Dopdi is the way in which texts arrange the goddess-to-woman narrative trajectory. Both

Divakaruni and Ray's Draupadis go from being semi-divine to being human so modern readers

can identify and empathize with their struggles. Mahasweta's Dopdi, however, refuses to be

contained within any identifiable parameters such as nation, modernity, feminine propriety, and

ideals of beauty. As a tribal persecuted by the government, who speaks/sings her own language,

she is a literally unintelligible, non-modern, anti-national subject.

At the beginning of the story, a conversation between two police officers reveals that

Dopdi Mejhen and her husband Dulna Majhi are on the run after allegedly murdering Surja Sahu,

their former landowning employer. After wondering how a tribal would share a name with an

epic heroine, one of the officers says that she is a "*most notorious* female. *Long wanted in*

many…" Unlike Divakaruni's and Ray's protagonists, who are the queens of the righteous kings

and princes, this Dopdi is not only marginal but also a threat to the governmental authority.

However, where the epic Draupadi is considered morally suspect for having five husbands,

Dopdi has a loving and monogamous relationship with Dulna (Spivak, "Draupadi" 287). Mahasweta's text makes a wry comment that it is actually Arjan Singh, the policeman searching for Draupadi, who suffers from too many husbands, because he has diabetes, "Diabetes has twelve husbands—among them anxiety" (392). It is suggested here then, that it is Singh whose credibility and motives should be questioned.

Throughout the story, the writer continues to highlight that the officers and their mission is catalyzed by bigotry. For instance, they are so ignorant that they cannot even distinguish between the persons they have declared wanted and others because, "all tribals of the Austro-Asiatic Munda tribes appear the same to the Special Forces" (393). Further, the officers are also afraid of being attacked by the tribals, who are said to destroy their property and steal their weapons. On one hand, they think that the tribals cannot use language correctly "since the snatchers are not invariably well educated, they sometimes say "give up your *chambers*" rather than give up your gun." Further, they sometimes sing in a language that the officers do not understand: "They sang jubilantly in a savage tongue, incomprehensible even to the Santals." Their mere presence and "blackness" is so disconcerting to Arjan Singh that he falls into a swoon when confronted with their sights and sounds (393). The tribals, for the officers, are Othered, being primitive, savage, and outside a shared linguistic space.

In this story Arjan is a male authority whose power is distinctly phallic: "[it] explodes through the *male organ* of a gun" (393). Arjan's name is eerily recalls Arjuna, the Pāṇḍava prince who was to be Draupadi's only husband in the original epic before her polyandrous marriage is arranged (MhB 1.99). However, Arjan is not Draupadi's protective husband Arjuna but a predator. Along with other officers, he works to capture and destroy her. She, along with the tribals, are at once marginal and characterized by excess — their too loud and

incomprehensible ululation, and their grotesque black bodies. Even though they are hunting these tribals down, the officers are fearful of them because they do not fit into a familiar narrative. These fears are not unlike the way in which early British colonial explorers were both drawn to and repulsed by the blackness of the natives they encountered (McClintock 44). Except in this case, tribals are both indigenous but also Othered, in that they exist within the nation but need to be eradicated to legitimize power of the same.

The other agent of the state, Senanayak, is a more complex figure than Arjan Singh. His name means Army Chief and he is, as Spivak writes, like the First World intellectual who thinks he is helping the Other through study and knowledge production, but ultimately remains distanced from or even hostile to them. She writes that Senanayak is, "a pluralist aesthetic. In theory [he] can identify with the enemy…but in practice he must destroy the enemy, the menacing other" ("Draupadi" 383). In Mahasweta's text, Senanayak is an intellectual who plays the role that Orientalist scholars did in giving impetus to the exploitative practices of colonialism:

> Thus he understood them by (theoretically) becoming one of them. He hopes to write on all this in the future. He has decided that in his work he will demolish the gentlemen and highlight the message of the harvest workers…He is *Prospero.* (394)

Thus, even though Senayak sympathizes with the tribals, the fact that he will ultimately both represent and re-present them in the manner that Spivak writes about in "Can the Subaltern Speak" (70). Regardless of his intentions, he is complicit in the violence against them, both epistemic and physical because Senanayak and his associates believe that understanding what the tribals mean in their strange songs and ululation will help capture them.

The soldiers are also unethical; an unarmed Dulna is killed when the soldiers unethically shoot him from behind—he cries "Ma—ho" before dying. The Department of Defense sends two specialists to decipher the meaning of these words which could be a "violent slogan in the tribal language" (395). Senanayak is condescending to the specialists and thinks he knows the enemy better. He thinks studying their language is all that is needed to contain them. He declares, "All will come clear…I have almost deciphered Dopdi's song". At this point, it is noted ironically that Senanayak is reading the "*anti-Fascist* paperback copy of *The Deputy*" (395). That Senanayak thinks he is well-meaning and erudite ultimately makes him far more dangerous.

Dopdi is unknowable and therefore evades capture for a long portion of the story. It is also revealed that the villagers who meet the fugitives do not always cooperate with the agents of the state because they do not have faith in their work or the life they lead under the protection of the state (396). Unlike the characters in the original epic who are both subtly and explicitly exorted to good behavior through the Hindu system of *dharma*, the characters in the story do not have a unified belief system.[29] If the belief system is nationalism, this story shows that postcolonial nation state has failed to inspire devotion to the same because it does not protect all its peoples. That the government exploits its peoples is highlighted throughout the story, such as when it is noted the fugitives are being shot at the "taxpayer's expense" (396). Even when God appears in the story in the form of Lord Krishna, he does not restore faith as he does in the epic. Instead, he is as much an artifice as the Bollywood film actor Sanjeev Kumar, who the soldiers watch during their government-allotted leisure time:

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[29] Barbara Holdrege writes that *dharma* is a concept in Hinduism that is difficult to translate into a single English word. She says it can mean but is not limited to: "religion, law, duty, norm, social usage, right conduct, morality, justice or righteousness" (213).

> The battalion is provided with supervised nutrition, arrangements to worship
> according to religion, opportunity to listen to "Bibidha Bharati" and to Sanjeev
> Kumar and Lord Krishna face-to-face in the movie *This is Life.* (396)

The state here is theoretically respectful, letting soldiers practice their religions and listen to the radio program ironically named Bibidha Bharati, which means "diversely Indian". However, it doesn't respect the tribals and their ways of being, since the brutality of their killings suggests otherwise. The narrative voice remarks: "Why do the collarbones shake, why are legs and ribs crushed" (396). Nevertheless, the taxpayers will have to invest their faith in the state and continue paying for a large battalion to be stationed in the area to hunt down the allegedly dangerous tribal persons because: "annihilation at sight of any and all practioners of such [guerilla] warfare is the sacred duty of every soldier" (394). Sacrality here is the allegiance to the nation, rather than to Hindu *dharma*, but the reward is uncertain.

In contrast to the acts of the villainous and unethical officers, it is revealed that Dopdi, Dulna and their compatriots, Lakkhi and Naran, who are also named after Hindu mythological figures Lakshmi and Narayan, killed their crooked employer Surja Sahu. Not only did Sahu keep them from accessing water, but also kept generations of their families as bonded labourers and preyed on women like Dopdi. When Dopdi kills him, she remembers, "His mouth watered as he looked at me…I'll pull out his eyes" (398). Nevertheless, the soldiers consider Dopdi a fugitive and a murderer, who is doubly dangerous because she refuses to be contained linguistically and physically.

In the final unit of the story Dopdi is captured and taken to the officers' camp. The officers do not touch her until Senanayak gives them orders. He says these words casually before his dinner, as if to signify that Dopdi will be consumed for the sake of his mission just as he will

consume his food, "Make her. *Do the needful"*. The "needful" here is a horrific gang-rape in custody. The author minces no words in describing the duration and the degree of the atrocities:

> Then a billion moons pass…trying to move, she feels her arms and legs still tied to four posts. Something sticky under her ass and waist. Her own blood... She senses that her vagina is bleeding. How many came to make her… Her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn. How many? Four-five-six-seven-then Draupadi had passed out…Again the process of making her begins… A compelled spread-eagled still body. Active pistons of flesh rise and fall, rise and fall over it. (401)

To "make" her confess, the soldiers brutally fragment and "unmake" her body to compel her to confess. Here, Dopdi is far more vulnerable than semi-divine epic Draupadī. As Radha Chakravarty underlines, Dopdi's vulnerabilities are also heightened by being non-Hindu:

> Mahasweta [evokes] a remote tribal past that is not only pre-colonial, but also pre-Aryan and pre-Hindu…When Dusshasana in the Mahabharata tries to disrobe Draupadi, she is saved from dishonour by divine intervention. In Mahasweta's story, no god intervenes to protect Dopdi. (128)

Where in the epic Kṛṣṇa used divine powers to expand epic Draupadī's single cloth endlessly to protect her modesty, Dopdi's piece of cloth is "thrown over her body" in a careless gesture by an unqualified person (401). Further, her rape occurs in a private space, where Senanayak does not have to face the reality of his ambiguous orders until he calls her to his tent.

At this climactic juncture of the story, Dopdi acts with extraordinary bravery. She refuses to wear her clothes so that she can appear respectably before Senanayak. She tears her own clothes so that he has no choice but to see her nakedness and the extent of her injuries. When the officers find her tearing her clothes, they are frightened because her behavior is unexpected:

> Seeing such strange behavior, the guard says, She's gone crazy and runs for
> orders. He can lead the prisoner out but doesn't know what to do if the prisoner
> behaves incomprehensibly. So he goes to ask his superior...Senanayak walks out
> surprised and sees Draupadi walking toward him in the bright sunlight with her
> head held high…Draupadi stands before him, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted
> with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds. (402)

Dopdi forces Senanayak to see the consequences of his orders, shaking him out of the comfortable, academic distance he wishes to maintain from the actual violence of his work. Her wounded body becomes her visible act of defiance. She moves closer to Senanayak, laughing at him as he fails to comprehend her nakedness. She speaks directly to him:

> [She] says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting, and sharp as her ululation.
> What's the use of clothes? You can strip me but can you clothe me again? Are
> you a man…Come on, *counter*[30] me…Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two
> mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an
> unarmed target, terribly afraid. (402)

In the last section of the text, Dopdi Mejhen has become as brave as, if not braver than the epic Draupadi. This is also indicated by the author who switches from calling her Dopdi to Draupadi in the last section of the text. Dopdi has no arms or armour, but her defiant and bleeding body becomes a weapon, terrifying Senanayak as much as "the *male organ* of a gun" or any other man-made instrument of power (393). Using her explicitly female body Dopdi addresses and rejects the Senanayak's phallic way of "making" her. The "making" here has a dual meaning; it is not just the confession the officers want to draw out of her through rape and torture but

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[30] Spivak writes that "counter" is short for encounter, to signify encounter killings (391).

paradoxically an unmaking of her humanity. By standing in front of him, Dopdi forces

Senanayak to view her as a real subject and not an abstract object. This closes the distance

between his theory and practice, which has real, violent consequences for her and other tribal

persons. Further, she questions his masculinity by suggesting that it is more challenging to clothe

a woman than to strip and rape her. This asserts that it is harder to find a man who respects

woman's humanity in contemporary times than it was for Kṛṣṇa to clothe epic Draupadī.

The final image, where a terrifying, outraged, laughing, naked, blood-spitting and black

Dopdi stands before a cowering Senanayak recalls the Hindu goddess named Kālī. Kālī is an

iteration of the Hindu female principle and an incarnation of the Goddess Durgā/ Pārvati. She is

commonly depicted in popular iconography with matted hair, reddened eyes, black skin, and an

open mouth with a protruding tongue. Dopdi's final stance recreates this image, which recalls

destructive female power that targets evil. However, it may be noted that such a vision also

overwrites Dopdi's humanity by making her appear as a vengeful and empowered goddess. As

Radha Chakravarty suggests, Dopdi undergoes a "kind of apotheosis" at the end of the story:

> She becomes a larger-than-life image of female self-empowerment, striking
>
> terror into the heart of her beholders. Is this apotheosis a form of 'truth-telling' as
>
> the author would have it, or is it, rather, a kind of myth-making, a glorification of
>
> the fearless, tribal woman that would exhort us to dream of change? I suspect the
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> latter is true. (130)

The fearless Draupadi that emerges at the end of the story is no ordinary woman but in fact, she

has become even more powerful than epic Draupadi because she opposes the terms of her assault

herself, "[she] is what Draupadi—written into the patriarchal and authoritative sacred text as

proof of male power—could not be. She is at once a palimpsest and a contradiction" (Spivak

388). Her function in the text is to be an unforgettable exhortation to the reader to confront and perhaps change the reality of sexual violence and police brutality within and outside of the tribal context. Even though Dopdi has an important ideological and ethical function, to make her to a symbol for a larger cause overwhelms a crucial feminist idea—that all women are human beings of value and should be treated as such.

It may also be crucial to keep in mind that even this story presents a narrative of personal exceptionalism. This is not only true of these texts; the narratives of exceptional women are recurrent in Bollywood cinema as well. For instance, Shekhar Kapoor's 1994 biopic *Bandit Queen* voyeuristically portrays the brutalities experienced by Phoolan Devi, who survives gang rape to become a dacoit leader. At the outset, it cannot be denied that exceptional characters and circumstances are the perfect fodder for engaging literature and film. However, reading Dopdi's final act as an example for other women would be problematic because it puts the onus on the victim to change her own circumstances. This is only a small shift away from the common rhetoric of victim-blaming. It also suggests that only women that visibly fight back are worthy of consideration and redemption. Although the text does not make clear what allows Dopdi to exhibit superhuman strength after the brutality of her assault, it should be noted that very few, if any persons, would be able to behave in the same manner owing to the immense psychological and physical trauma of sexual violence.

Despite these caveats, Dopdi is perhaps the most politically radical of the three Draupadīs analyzed in this chapter. She ultimately speaks for herself within the story and stands alone, no longer protected by marriage or any association with a man, daring her assaulter to "make" her, and suggesting that no one can "make" her but herself. This is vastly different from Ray and Divakaruni's Draupadis. Although they speak for themselves, they wish to be included in male-

centric spiritual and political schemes; an inclusion that both of them are ultimately granted. Even though the fight to be included is an important one, to overthrow the existing order is a far more difficult act. Dopdi rejects the way Senanayak's orders and officers control her body. The text ends with the transference of fear from assaulted to assaulter. Although it is not known if Dopdi will survive her assault, the story ends with power changing hands and resting, even if for a moment, in the hands of the subject who is multiply marginalized by class, modernity, national belonging, and gender.

Persisting Ideologies, Exceptional Women

Writing on the sexual ideology in the *Mahābhārata*, Dhand notes that the Sanskrit epic texts continue to exert a tremendous influence over the construction of gender in Hindu society because ultimately, narrative is compelling. It is easily circulated and absorbed along with its moral and political contents:

> Narrative is a gentle and unthreatening vehicle for ideology, but prodigiously powerful for all its charming traits; through stories skilfully told, the audience receives a moral education that informs and forms its own moral sense, and teaches it to discriminate between contrary values. (200)

For this reason, the epic imaginary has continued to be a key tool in determining and reinforcing ideology, particularly concerning the parameters of feminine behavior in India. The New Delhi gang-rape of 2012 is only one of many instances where the stories of the epic infiltrate the daily realities of Indian women in imaginative but also dangerous ways. An ahistorical and uncritical hailing of the epics to police feminine behavior is problematic because no mortal woman could possibly have the degree of divinely ordained respectability and assistance afforded by epic

heroines. Further, if the epic heroines were still held accountable for their assaults and the resulting events in both the epic texts, it may be said no amount of goodness, heroism, or divinity can prevent women from experiencing violence and oppression.

Further, since narrative is the vehicle for ideology, it seems apt that ideologies are being challenged or reinscribed by altering the narrative itself. Writers who draw from the epic repertoire to contemplate women's issues today can potentially engage in a multivalent, intertextual dialogue with very real and immediate political stakes. The *Mahābhārata*'s length and complexity provides many slippages and opportunities for such imagined literary departures that can address a full spectrum of women's issues, from the availability of personal choices to the realities of sexual violence. However, good intentions do not always translate into the ideal outcomes because the contexts that reinforce gender discrimination in the worlds beyond the epic text also continue to multiply.

While Divakaruni's anglophone adaptation of Draupadi's story makes the epic available to a wider audience, it also demonstrates how both neo-liberal, transnational feminism and global commodity culture may end up reinforcing a singular narrative of feminine aspirations and an exotic feminized Other. Comparatively, Mahasweta's story expands rather than contracts the narrative of the epic and history itself to include groups of persons, such as non-Hindu, tribal Dopdi, who did not have access to the *Mahābhārata*. However, Mahasweta's subject herself is quite different from the author and the small group of literate bourgeois Bengalis who could have read the original Bengali story. Although Spivak's English translation of the story helps increase its readership, it continues to extend the reach of the story upwards into elite circles and not downwards towards the subject and her context. However, it may be said that intervention is needed in both the elite circles where the power lies, and in the sphere of the marginalized. It

must also be understood that any literary adaptation of a Brahminical and elite epic, however ethically sound, should be one of many means for political and ethical interventions in a country.

Using Draupadī to represent all Indian women and their issues is also certain to bring up problems of representation. If Draupadī is a spokesperson for other women and their problems, it would mean that she stands not just for herself but also for an often monolithic idea of the Indian, usually Hindu woman. For this reason, the selection of Draupadī as an unproblematic everywoman is fraught with difficulties. Summarizing Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's article, "Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist?", Rashmi Luthra re-affirms:

> [F]ocusing on archetypical female figures from traditional Hindu texts, whether goddesses, epic heroines like Sita, or *viranganas* (women warriors), is problematic because it excludes women from the minority religious communities, as well as excluding *dalit* (lower-caste) women. In addition, the terrain of the archetypal women figures has been seriously tainted by having been appropriated by Hindu right-wing forces in service of communal projects. (136)

Thus, an author may select Draupadī and the epic text, but can rarely shrug off the baggage of conservative Hindu right-wing ideology that comes with it. Draupadī is an exceptionally powerful female figure in the Mahabharata, while the epic itself is an important tradition for the dominant religious group in the country. In this sense, Draupadī cannot be an everywoman, no matter how sympathetically she is portrayed. Thus, she is even more problematic as a symbolic representative of the problems of women in a nation than Jyoti Singh Pandey, whose life was written over several times in recent public memory.

Finally, as much as there is a need for a dialogue about the real or imagined experiences of women, it must be accompanied by the understanding that continuing to focus on goddesses or

goddess-like women or rendering them as symbols can turn the conversation away from establishing the humanity and value of all women. While celebrations of heroism and empathetic identification can be powerful motivators for changing existing systems of oppression, heroism should not be a condition for any woman's, or indeed any person's, right to safety and dignity.

CHAPTER FOUR:

HEGEMONY: CONFIRMATION, CONTESTATION, DISSEMINATION

Epic Bestsellers

In June 2015, I visited a branch of Crossword, a popular Indian bookstore chain, in

suburban Mumbai. I was not on the lookout for academic books. Crossword is better known for

its collection of popular reading material: biopics of Indian celebrities, cookbooks, self-help

manuals, romances, and other bestsellers. I immediately came across more than a dozen new

books of fiction that hailed Hindu mythology. These books were not limited to Mahabharata

adaptations such as Devdutt Pattanaik's *Jaya* (2010), Kavita Kané's *Karna's Wife* (2013),

Divakaruni's *Palace of Illusions* (2008) or Aditya Iyengar's *Thirteenth Day: A Story of the*

Kurukshetra War (2015). Other mythology-based books, such as Amish Tripathi's popular

trilogy, *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010), *The Secret of the Nagas* (2011), *The Oath of The*

Vayuputras (2013), which reimagine Śiva as an ancient superhero figure, were also prominently

displayed. Many of these books were on a shelf marked "Crossword's Top 10". At the outset,

finding multiple adaptations should not have been suprising to someone whose work specifically

emphasizes the literary and political importance of mythological adaptations in contemporary

India. However, what struck me was the sheer ubiquity of these adaptations. While this certainly

demonstrated the timeliness of my project, it also impressed upon me that I was bound to these

writers by a shared history that brought us to invest deeply, if differently, in new iterations of Hindu mythology at the same time.

Simplistically, it could be said that many of the writers of the epic adaptations, like me, were upper-middle-class Hindu children who came of age watching the televised epics. These televised versions of the epics supplemented oral retellings of the same stories by family elders: in a sense, the constant and varied repetition of these stories were our first encounters with the art of storytelling itself. Many such persons would carry on this legacy of storytelling, sharing these stories through newer, more far-reaching media outlets to reinforce pride in a common cultural heritage. Further, the televised epics themselves catalyzed the rise of India as a growing economic and cultural superpower in the world. Hinduism, or at least a certain understanding of it, would become India's greatest cultural export while also being an overdetermined organizing principle for the modern nation state. As Appadurai writes: "The modern nation state grows less out of natural facts — such as language, blood, soil…and more out of a quintessentially cultural product, the product of the collective imagination" (161). Popular adaptations of epic narrative are a fuel for the collective imagining of the nation and its culture. Further, they also make their way into the postnational sphere where translocal solidarities can be built around them as a common heritage.

In this chapter, I map the recent historical and political context of twenty-first century epic adaptations in India. I begin by investigating the afterlife of the televised epics. These widely popular productions were crucial because they provided a definitive and conservative version of the epics and many viewers bought into their didactic message without resistance. I demonstrate how the shows' impact was felt intimately in the economic and political spheres by discussing how they strengthened language hierarchies and heralded the emergence of a new

Hindu consumer subject. Additionally, I discuss the fraught new legacy of the epic texts: the Babri communal riots in 1992. I suggest that the readers of the epics re-visit them within the context of a recently lived past as well as an unlived mythological past.

However, the renewed and widespread visibility of the epics, and in turn Hinduism, demands a discussion of the machinations of hegemony. Terry Eagleton usefully summarizes Gramsci's hypothesis of the same when he writes:

> To win hegemony, in Gramsci's view, is to establish moral, political and intellectual leadership in social life by diffusing one's own 'world view' throughout the fabric of society as a whole, thus equating one's own interests with the interests of society at large. (116)

Epic adaptations revolve around a specifically Hindu worldview. Even in adaptations that critique dominant trends, the Hindu worldview remains at the center of the discourse. Therefore, I look at the ways in which epic adaptations have critiqued Hindu hegemony from both within and from outside the epic narratives. I discuss the ways in which Hindu dominance has been contested, not only by re-writers, but also by readers who have rejected the texts and their politics. I provide instances of critique from Dalit scholars Kancha Illiah and Sharankumar Limbale, who have rightly seen the proliferation of epic texts as a way of maintaining Hindu, and specifically upper-caste, hegemony. I survey several recent adaptations to show that their contentions are justified—many new re-writings, even if unintentionally, valorize Hindu upper-caste legacies and reproduce conservative ideas derived from the epics. In the next part of the chapter, I discuss if contrapuntal epic adaptations can effectively critique hegemony from within, particularly by bringing lower-caste characters to the center of the narrative. For this, I first return to the work of Mahasweta Devi, whose recent short story collection *After Kurukshetra*

gives voice to lower-caste female characters who were marginalized or even entirely absent in the *Mahābhārata*. Next, I survey the presentation of masculinity in recent epic adaptations, paying special attention to re-imagining of Éklavya, a minor character who was violently wronged in the epic. In doing so, I provide a brief reading of Kiran Nagarkar's play *Bedtime Story*, which attempts to right this mythological wrong. In both Nagarkar and Mahasweta's case, I find that these new resistant narratives are somewhat limited because they imagine the Othered figures as monolithically noble. Further, epic adaptations, especially if reclaimed by minorities or critiquing from within, often contend with the Hindu right staking a claim to the same. I have discussed how Nagarkar, Nina Paley, and Peter Brooks' work has been widely condemned or even censored by more conservative readers/viewers of the text, which underlines that not all adaptations are welcomed equally in public discourse. More broadly, I see this censoring as a result of the rising strength of the Hindu-right; a pushback against anti-secular sentiment and a doubling down on the sacrality of epic texts as a way to protect it for real or perceived cultural outsiders. At the end of the chapter, I return to the idea of the epic's relationship with national culture and suggest its support of Hindu hegemony is now taking flight on the wings of global capitalism. I suggest that the proliferation of Hindu mythological narratives, particularly in English language writing, helps diasporic and indigenous Indian writers to forge translocal solidarities, but often reduces what it means to be Indian to being Hindu.

Seeing is Believing

The televised epics were arguably the most important node in the recent revitalization of Hinduism. Other than Mankekar and Rajagopal, who have specifically written on the impact of the television shows, many scholars who write on modern Hinduism agree that the televised

epics radically altered the relationship between religion, politics and society (Dhand; Sawhney; Sugirtharajah). Dhand, for instance, notes:

> There's no denying…that the television epics have also had an immense impact on Hindu society and politics…the dramatizations have played a critical role in the revival and political self-assertion that has characterized Hinduism in recent years. (16-20)

Similarly, I have discussed the contents and context of the post-emergency televised epics earlier. However, their afterlife deserves further discussion—not only to see how they laid the foundation for later political events and literary adaptations, but also to understand what led them to have such a profound influence.

The televised epics succeeded because they reproduced a powerful combination of vision and imagination. Mankekar, as previously discussed, has emphasized that the televised epics were in tune with the Hindu devotional practice of "darshan" or "seeing", which involves both beholding and being seen by the deities (200). The practice of "seeing", now enhanced through the medium of television, is not just integral to Hindu worship, but also to the very temper of the Indian national imagining. Scholars such as Dipesh Chakrabarty and Partha Chatterjee have built on Benedict Anderson's ideas of the imagining of the nation to enunciate the specificities of the category of "imagination" in India. Chakrabarty counters Anderson's notion that the realist novel provided a worldview that was coexistent with the imagination of the nation in other contexts and suggests that realism was in fact, insufficient for realizing the whole spectrum of nationalist feelings in India. Although realism had its place mainly in the realm of political critique, it could not stir up the feelings required to bring about patriotic loyalty and devotion. Instead, Chakrabarty argues that poetry and myth were more successful in consolidating patriotic

feelings. He writes that the idea of seeing the divine and experiencing the uncanny is deeply

entrenched in popular understandings of the nation. He provides examples of this phenomenon

when he writes of the way "tradition" here is itself posed[31]:

> [It is] posed as a question of "divine sight," (divyadristhi, darshan) of a
>
> sight…[L]ong before there were the newspaper and the novel, there was the age-
>
> old age-old practice of darshan that came to constitute a critical element in the
>
> "performative" aspect of…nationalism. (Chakrabarty 175, 177-8)

In the case of the televised epics, seeing was quite literally facililating believing bolstered by the

technological innovation of color television. The act of communal television watching was

successfully able to reproduce the conditions of seeing and imagining but loved as well. This in

turn gave the shows the power to support a hegemonic, Hindu nationalist worldview.

The show also had an impact on the continued struggle to establish Sanskritized Hindi as

a national language. As Arvind Rajagopal writes:

> To Sanskritize the language of state, in its legislative acts and pronouncements, its
>
> press releases and school textbooks was one thing; to ensure intelligibility with a
>
> wider public was another. (83)

The shows' writers ensured that the Hindi spoken by the characters was duly enhanced by

Sankritic diction. They attempted to confirm Hindi as Sanskrit's logical heir. Furthering the

problematic idea that Sanskritized Hindi was most suited to convey the Indian cultural past and

therefore justified in being the national language, thus, had been the state's mission for a long

time. The wide reach of television, coupled with the popularity of the epic adaptations, made it

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[31] Incidentally, one of the examples Chakrabarty provides relates to the epics. He discusses an essay by nationalist writer Wajed Ali, whose faith in the continuity of tradition and community, is affirmed by seeing two different persons reading the Rāmāyaṇa to groups of young children, twenty-five years apart. See Ali, S. Wajed, "Bharatbarsha" *Matriculation Bengali Selections.* Calcutta UP. Calcutta. 1938.

far easier to disseminate this ideology.

Additionally, by the end of the 1980s, India was moving towards becoming a key player in the global economy. In the decades following colonialism, the Indian government's economic policies had been protectionist, preferring to promote import substitution and build a large public sector. However, in 1991, the Indian government, headed by the BJP, initiated large-scale economic liberalization that would bring more foreign goods and ideas into country than ever before. The televised epics became the unlikely mutual friend of both ethnocentric Hindu-nationalism and globalizing economic liberalization. Rajagopal suggests that an "opportunistic alliance" between Hindu nationalism and economic liberalization was consolidated by the televisation of the epics. Rajagopal writes that in re-imagining and consuming these epics, its primarily Hindu audience "consume not only the product but the act of consumption itself, when they re-stage it in imagination, and perceive themselves as part of a grander design, proof of a larger intelligence at work than merely their own" (95). The powerful juxtaposition of the imagined past with a desirable future aided both the projects of Hindu nationalism and economic liberalization:

> Audiences then experienced two events traveling in different directions, liberalization, as a portent of things to come, symbolized in the newly visible wealth of consumer goods, and the Ramayan serial, harkening back to a golden age. They were in a sense hinged together by television, as a device that brought past and future together while itself oscillating between time zones in a kind of eternal present. (Rajagopal 74)

The new Indian consumer was thus, empowered by these televised re-presentations of what they conceived of as "our culture". Unfortunately, this new identity was also based on a largely

reductive and problematic understanding of Indian culture as monolithically Hindu.

By the 1990s, the Congress' secular politics and power were increasingly being displaced by the rising right-wing opposition, Janata Party. The Janata Party began as the Bharatiya Jana Sangh in 1955, primarily to provide an alternative to the secular politics of the Indian National Congress.[32] At its inception, it was associated with the Hindu nationalist organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). These groups were key agitators during the Emergency and protested to oppose Indira's policies. The Janata Party won a majority in the elections for the first time in 1977, defeating Indira and the Congress. Although the party has varied its alignment with the Hindu nationalist cause over the years, it is noteworthy that the party was renamed the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 1980. "Bhārat" is considered a Hindu space which is distinct from the secular, anglicized "India." In the classical epic, Bhārata gestures to the text being a story of the descendants of a king named Bharata. In contemporary times, the use of the term "*bhārat*" is significantly linked with conservative Hindu rhetoric, such as when RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat argued in 2012 that women are raped in India but not in "*bhārat*". The fraught history of the word itself reveals that the epics, especially the Mahabharata, cannot be mentioned without recalling contested imaginings of India.

However, of the two epics, the Ramayana more clearly remains in public memory as both a catalyst and by-product of rising Hindu nationalism. The context of the Ramayana grew uglier in 1992, when communal riots, also referred to as the Babri Riots, erupted in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh. The history of the Babri Riots/ Rama Janmabhoomi issue is complex. Noted Sanskritist Sheldon Pollock has commented on it as an important node in the legacy of the Ramayana. He

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[32] For a detailed commentary on the rise of the Hindu nationalist BJP as an alternative Congress' secularism, see Malik, Yogendra K., and V. B. Singh. "Bharatiya Janata Party: An Alternative to the Congress (I)?" *Asian Survey*, vol. 32, no. 4, 1992, pp. 318–336.

suggests that the Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa*'s symbology was successfully redeployed into pre-modern and modern politics because the text itself makes two imaginative instruments available. First, there is the "establishment of a divine-political order". The second is the presence of a "demonised Other", the villain Rāvaṇa, who can be "categorized, counterposed and condemned" (158). As Mankekar and Rajagopal have also noted, the vision of the divine-political order under the rule of Rama was painstakingly re-created by the television *Ramayan* to invoke a culturally specific nostalgia. Scholars such as Linda Hess have also argued that many persons, including but not limited to Hindu nationalists, have selectively adapted and (mis)read the Ramayana to suit their own political agendas. To plainly see such a modified Ramayana on television added strength to the collective imagining of an unlived but magnificient Hindu past.

While a truly detailed discussion of the Babri issue is beyond the scope of this project, a cursory summary is necessary. While the *Rāmāyaṇa* simply states that the hero Rama was born in the city of Ayodhya, many Hindus had been arguing that the Babri Mosque, one of many constructed during the Mughal king Babur's reign in 1528, was the actual site of Rama's birth. Although these claims have been contentious since the eighteenth century, they gathered more traction in the Hindu-nationalist political climate of the 1980s. By April 1984, the Hindu nationalist group Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) had spearheaded a campaign to build a temple in place of the mosque. After nearly a decade of stalled efforts and legislations, a group of Hindu nationalists comprising members of the BJP, VHP and the RSS demolished the mosque on December 6, 1992. This sparked horrific communal riots all over the country, resulting in the death of more than 2,000 people. Even today, the Rama Janmabhoomi (birthplace) issue remains a fraught one for all the parties involved. The BJP repeats its interest in building a Rama temple in the contested area in many of their election manifestoes. For instance, their 2014 election

manifesto emphasizes "BJP reiterates its stand to explore all possibilities within the framework of the constitution to facilitate the construction of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya" (BJP Website). After this event, it was impossible to speak of the Ramayana without remembering both the tremendous stakes of the epic texts and the actual, lived violence that came of at least one of them.

For contemporary writers who adapt the epics, the violence in the Mahabharata is more distant than that which is linked to the Ramayana and can be framed as a fertile ground for abstract political and ethical debates while appearing to remain safely distant from actual politics. As Pollock reminds us:

> The proper and critical task of history here may not be "what really happened" but how people came to believe what happened. The symbolic meaning of a political culture is constructed, and perhaps knowing the processes of construction is a way to control it. (158)

The Ramayana is thus either remembered as sacrosanct and uncontestable, or tainted by communalism by those who are unconvinced by Hindu-nationalism. I understand this to be the reason why far fewer adaptations of the Ramayana than the Mahabharata have appeared since the Babri Riots and Sagar's *Ramayan*. Among the Ramayana adaptations that have appeared, few resist Sagar's flattened narrative of the same: this is especially the case with film adaptations. From loose adaptations such as the Bollywood film *Hum Saath Saath Hain* (1999), to more faithful ones such as Chetan Desai's animated film *Ramayana: The Epic* (2010), many of the new iterations of the Ramayana mimic Sagar's felicitous framing of the epic as the evidence of India's splendid Hindu past and advocate a return to socially conservative gender roles and family values.

More recently, there has been a brief spark of interest in Ramayana adaptations, especially those that highlight Sita's or an Othered character's perspective. Works such as Devdutt Patnaik's *Sita* (2013) and Samhita Arni's *Sita's Ramayana* (2011) have been popular but both valorize the greatness of Indian culture by highlighting the heroine's martyrdom while treading very lightly around Rama's mistreatment of Sita. Othered characters from the epic have also capturing the imagination of new adaptors, especially within the graphic novel genre. Vijeyandra Mohanty's *Ravanayana* (2011) and Vikram Balagopal's graphic novel trilogy *Simian* (2015) are multi-part series which reimagine the villain Rāvana and Hanūman as hypermasculine warriors and super heroes. Most of these adaptations, whether discussing the heroine or Othered male characters, continue to emphasize traditional gender roles. The more virulent critiques of gendered and political hegemonies continue to come from Mahabharata adaptors, especially those who write in languages other than English such as Pratibha Ray and Mahasweta Devi.

The animated film *Sita Sings the Blues* (2008), written by Nina Paley, is a controversial transgressive Ramayana adaptation in recent memory. Paley, an American graphic artist, had a different, deeply personal context that brought her to the epic. In the film, it is shown that she read a version of the Ramayana after she broke up with her husband, an American who worked in India. Rāma's treatment of Sītā during and after their separation was especially interesting to her. Her film retells the story of the Ramayana from Sītā's perspective and she calls the epic "The Greatest Breakup Story Ever Told". The film portrays Rāma as scathing and unfeeling, showing him kicking and literally walking over Sītā. It may be noted that in focusing on Sītā's feelings, Paley ignores the deep pain experienced by Rāma, which is an important trope in the epic. In the epic, Rāma strives to be an ideal king even though it always comes at a great emotional and personal cost. Nevertheless, Paley's focus on Sītā's anger and grief is a necessary

and restorative feminist move.

Unsurprisingly, Paley's graphic depiction of Rāma's mistreatment of Sītā in the film drew condemnation from several Hindu groups, including the Hindu Janajagruti Samiti, which asked for the film to be banned and legal action to be taken against its production and marketing team. On the website of the Hindu Janajagruti Samiti, literally, the Hindu Committee for the People's Enlightenment, an English language article celebrates the success of such a protest while ironically inviting readers to click on a link to "check out revolting scenes from the film." These sceneshots from the film include one in which Rāma walks over a pregnant Sītā and another where Sītā sits on a piano that the monkey God Hanumān plays. Paley is called an "anti-Hindu, American cartoonist [whose] movie denigrates Ramayana and depicts Sri Ram, Goddess Sita and Sri Hanuman in bad light." Further, it is emphasized that the film has been denounced by "a panel of Hindus" who are specifically not named but also "many other devout Hindus." Interestingly, the article's heading is "O Hindus, let us pay gratitude towards God for this success!" It employs the vocative tense and a tone of devotion that would otherwise be found in Hindu narratives, including the epics.

These protests and writing clearly show that protecting the narrative of the Ramayana from mistreatment by a foreign outsider, especially one who is a woman, was akin to protecting "Indian culture" itself. Protests over epic adaptations by foreigners, though more vociferous today, are hardly new. In 1988, there was a similar furore over British director Peter Brooks' 1985 stage play and later, film adaptation of the Mahabharata as well. Indian critics such as Rustom Bharucha, Vijay Mishra, and Pradip Bhattacharya lambasted Brooks for cultural appropriation, each arguing that to re-present an Indian tale outside of its Indian context is problematic. Bharucha is also right to note that Brooks' version downplays the epic's Indianness

in many ways, including casting only a single Indian woman, Mallika Sarabhai, to play Draupadī (1642). He notes that while intercultural exchange should be encouraged, Indians should guard their cultural territory more zealously (1647). Bharucha, like Pankaj Mishra, suggests that Brooks skims over the religio-philosophical import of the epic. Mishra and Bharucha also echo each other in saying that adaptation of the epics is a sacred practice and best done by those who understand their religio-philosophical import — it is questionably implied that such persons are singularly Indians. However it is seen repeatedly in recent adaptations that not all Indian adaptors and readers are in agreement about the sacrality of the epic or immune to the saleability of Orientalism. Further, an increasingly overzealous insistence regarding the sacrality of the epics has been politically divisive within the Indian context as well. In the case of Nagarkar's work, discussed later in this chapter, Hindu right-wing activists have been violently prescriptive about exactly how the epic texts must be remembered and proliferated. Unsurprisingly, these machinations are more influenced by the revised understanding enabled by new versions of the epic texts rather than the pluralistic pre-modern Sanskrit text.

Cultural Boundary Making

Revised by the televised metanarratives and tainted by the fresh wounds of the Babri riots, the ominpresence of the epic narratives has been inescapable in the past three decades. However, the discourse around them is marked by an odd contradiction: it is often repeated that the epics belong to every Indian or, indeed, any reader who is fascinated by the excellent story, but their innate Hindu-ness, and by extension, the indistinguishability of being Hindu from being Indian, is almost immediately reclaimed. When discussions about epic characters and situations proliferate in social situations, they became a way of cultural boundary making.

A friend who grew up in urban India in the 1990s once recalled to me that her after-school Hindi classes ended with informal but heated debates on the particularities of the Mahabharata. She was unable to participate in these discussions because the Sanskrit epics rarely came up in her home since multi-cultural family's discussions drew primarily from her mother's Protestant Christian background. My friend's peers often belittled her, one going so far as to claim that she was "not really Indian" because she was not conversant with the epics. It did not matter that she shared their economic background or their religious affiliation through her Hindu father; it was the ability to participate in epic discourse that made someone Indian. To be Indian then, was to not only be Hindu but also to specifically be an epics-knowing Hindu.

It was further irrelevant that few of these epic discussants had or could read the epics texts in Sanskrit. Knowing the stories from any means, television adaptations or books in English, was enough to stake a claim to them and then use that knowledge to mark one's Indianness. Other than the televised epics and oral retellings of the epic at home, the other popular texts that reinforced the knowledge of epics among current and in some cases, older generations of upper-middle class Indians included C. Rajagopalachari's abridged English versions of the *Mahabharata* (1958) and the *Ramayana* (1957) and comic editions of the epics produced by the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book series. Literally named Undying Picture Tales, *Amar Chitra Katha* underscores that the knowledge of the epics was forever relevant: Nalini Chandra's book *The Classic Popular: Amar Chitra Katha* (2008) outlines the how Hindu-nationalist ideology was put forward by this extremely popular comic book series. In many ways, contemporary adaptations also similarly furthered the knowledge of the epics to many readers, who proliferate it, sometimes uncritically absorbing liberties taken by the adaptation into their understanding of what constitutes the core text. As I have discussed previously, the

understanding of the epic is always shifting through the processes of adaptation rendering the epic especially unstable and contententious when the adaptations are multiplying with greater force.

On one hand, it may not be particularly worrisome if the narrative of the epic texts has changed along the way. After all, the Mahabharata has seen many interpolations and changes over the centuries; adaptations keep the dynamic text moving and current. However, the very act of telling the tale insistently and repeatedly brings up serious concerns about Hindu values being underscored as the hegemonic discourse in India. Even though many of the new adaptations resist some of the values presented, the story's reiterations continue to remind the readers that it is an important, if not the dominant, textual tradition in a majority Hindu nation. As Stuart Hall contends, "No project achieves a position of permanent 'hegemony'. It is a process, not a state of being. No victories are final. Hegemony has constantly to be 'worked on', maintained, renewed and revised" (727). The re-appearance of such a large number Mahabharatas and Ramayanas, especially if updated to meet the needs of the present, is complicit in maintaining hegemonic discourse, even if unwittingly. This is not to say that storytelling should be policed because its work of bolstering solidarities is an important part of democratic discourse. However, it may also be necessary to acknowledge that not all stories can produce or improve commonality but sometimes be reminders of violent unbelonging.

The pervasiveness of the epic narratives has certainly not been uncritically accepted by non-Hindus and particularly, non-Brahmins. For instance, Kancha Illiah's book *Why I am not a Hindu* (1996) reveals how the repetition of epic stories underscored his position as a cultural outsider:

> As we were growing up…the textbooks taught us stories which we had never
>
> heard in our families. The stories of Rama and Krishna, poems from the Puranas,
>
> the names of two epics called *Ramyana* and *Mahabharatha* occurred repeatedly.
>
> Right from early school up to college, our Telugu textbooks were packed with
>
> these Hindu stories. For Brahmin-Baniya students these were their childhood
>
> stories, very familiar not only in the story form but in the form of the Gods that
>
> they worshipped. Whenever they went to temples with their parents they saw the
>
> images of these *devataas.* The boys bore the names of these Gods; the girls the
>
> names of the Goddesses. I distinctly remember how alien all these names
>
> appeared to me. (13)

Illiah is a prominent scholar and activist whose life's work poses a challenge to Brahminical

supremacy. Born into the lower-caste Kuruma Golla community in 1952, he identifies as Dalit[33]

and practices Buddhism. For Illiah, the omnipresence of these stories, whether in state-controlled

textbooks or as highlighted by the names of his classmates, coupled with a lack of similar stories

from his own culture, underscored his marginality. Instead of valorizing a commonly held past,

for Illiah, the presence of the texts insisted not only on the centrality of epics, but also Hinduism

itself. The literary and philosophical content of the epics, no matter how engrossing, were

secondary to Illiah's experience of its context—a religio-social order that had violently excluded

and oppressed his people.

  Another Dalit writer Sharankumar Limbale presents a more moderate stance with respect

to the ubiquity of epic adaptations. Limbale suggests that the repetition of certain narratives is

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[33] The word Dalit literally translates to oppressed or broken. It chiefly functions as an empowering replacement for other derogatory terms that mean 'untouchable' or 'impure'. See Reddy, Sunita Bharati. "'Dalit' A Term Asserting Unity" *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 37, no. 42 Oct. 19-25, 2002, pp. 4339-40

self-affirming for communities because it cements common knowledge and interests. However, it is implied here, and indeed more forcefully advocated in the rest of Limbale's work, that not all communities are allowed the same privileges of re-presenting their cultural legacies. In fact, Dalit narratives have been particularly unwelcome because their contents and contexts highlight challenging histories:

> There are TV serials based on the *Rāmāyaṇa*, books on the *Rāmāyaṇa* continue to pour in…No one says that this is all about the same thing because Rama is an important topic for them…But when Dalits write about themselves, it seems repetitious to these non-Dalits because it is not an important topic for them. (146)

The previous quote is part of an ongoing discussion between Limbale and his interviewer, Alok Mukherjee, about how to teach Dalit texts, especially those that highlight the mistreatment of Dalit persons by higher-caste persons. Mukherjee wonders if teaching literature about oppression encourages binary thinking about the oppressor or the oppressed. Limbale argues that it is important to write and read about lived experiences because it is important to know the tremendous extent of the segregation and Othering of Dalits. Although the practice of "untouchability" was officially outlawed with the establishment of the Indian Constitution in 1950, caste-based discrimination remains a grim reality in modern India. Limbale reminds us of Dalit experiences, "[O]ur touch is considered untouchable. Our colonies have been kept apart. We are expected to wear dirty clothes, and use dirty language. Our culture is regarded as dirty." (140). Limbale asserts that it is perfectly valid for any community to speak of their experiences, lived as in the case of Dalit oppression, or unlived as in the case of epic adaptations. However, every community should have a right to these self-affirming repetitions even if it makes other communities uncomfortable. Such discomfort may be essential to beginning a socially

productive dialogue, where one can celebrate plural perspectives, encourage understanding and empathy, and then work towards the common cause of justice for all. For instance, Limbale mentions and commends Mahasweta Devi, who in spite of being from a higher caste group, remains committed to the upliftment of subjugated tribal persons (138). In fact, Mahasweta bridges the gaps between Brahminical histories and tribal alterities by specifically mining the epics to expose the origins of contemporary inequalities.

Mahasweta Devi is certainly worthy of Limbale's praise. Her vast body of incisive literary writing was fortified with decades of political activism. After her death on July 28, 2016, eulogies poured in from all over the country, highlighting the battles she fought for others. For instance, Sudipta Dutta's tribute in *The Hindu* reminds readers of her campaign to unshackle the statue of noted Birsa Munda, a tribal leader who died in colonial India, in Ranchi, Jharkand. Her 1977 Bengali novel, *Aranyer Adhikar,* was based on his life. Munda was immortalized as a statue based on a *photograph* of him chained. Mahasweta campaigned for the statue's chains to be removed, demanding to know, "*Shaddhin deshe keno shekole bandha*[34] (why is he still in chains when India is free)?" Mahasweta died a month after the Jharkand government decided to remove the shackles from Munda's statue in June 2016. In addition to her campaign for Munda, she also led several agitations against the Communist Party of India (Marxist), specifically fighting for farmer's rights. As Radha Chakravarty notes, Mahasweta's engagement with politics permeated her life and literary work in equal measure: "Her writings about the tribal predicament are inseparable from her activism, for in Mahasweta's fiction, writing itself functions as a form of activism" (126). Mahasweta clearly emerges as a hero within the scholarly community for her activism. She famously earned the praise not only of Chakravarty but also her most famous

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[34] These words are in Bengali and the translations are the journalist Sudipta Dutta's.

translator, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and other critics such as Priyamvada Gopal. Even though she virulently critiques Subaltern Studies historians and even Spivak for using the example of Bengali texts to make claims about India at large, Gopal is unguarded in her praise of Mahasweta, who is also a Bengali writer:

> [T]he insurgent subalterns of Mahasweta Devi's fiction are quite clear that it is their common *humanity* that has been repeatedly denied by a state whose interests masquerade as universal even as it justifies marginalizing them as spirit-worshiping Others. (158)

Mahasweta's story "Draupadi" provides the perfect example of such as "insurgent subaltern". A tribal woman who turns a horrific gang rape in custody into a radical moment of political resistance against the state, Dopdi is also imperfect because she murders her former employer. In refusing to fade into victimhood, she draws admiration for her heroism and exceptional behavior. She is not an essentialized Other than can be conveniently used to understand all Others, but one who claims her own agency and expresses justifiable outrage.

Although "Draupadi" has invited its share of discussants few scholars have discussed her other epic adaptations — a short collection of three stories called *After Kurukshetra,* published in 2005. Jabeen Fatima and Madhu Singh, the two Indian scholars who have written on them, have highlighted the importance of this collection. Fatima writes, "The stories suggest the likelihood of underplayed yet direct *puranic* (ancient textual) links with the tribal and indigenous peoples." However, both Fatima and Singh's work does not make larger connections with the changing epic tradition or the politics of re-presenting alterity.

Translated from Bengali by Anjum Katyal, these stories by Mahasweta present the lives of women after the Kurukṣetra war has ended. The stories make a loose connection with the

171

eleventh book of the epic, the *Strī Parva* (The Book of Women). However, unlike Dopdi, whose

story and crisis are set in contemporary times, these stories remain within the mythical universe

of the Mahabharata. Mahasweta critiques the master text from within, focusing specifically on

the impact of upper-caste patriarchy on the lives of women. The female characters in *After*

Kurukshetra are not only upper-caste queens and princesses but also women from lower caste

and tribal groups. The first and longest story in the volume, "Panchakanya (The Five Women)"

critiques the strictures of widowhood for Kshatriya and Brahmin women. Uttara, a young queen

from the Pandava faction, is mourning her husband Abhimanyu, who died in the war. Her grief is

compounded by having to follow the "rigorous rules of widowhood" that are dictated to them by

the "acharyas" or religious elders (3). When it is learnt that the young queen is possibly pregnant

with the kingdom's next heir, five women are recruited to keep her company. They are from

Kurujangal, a forest area that lies outside the main areas of the kingdom. A deep bond forms

between the young queen and her companions. This setting reveals how women lead far more

oppressive lives in the "rajavritta", (the circle of kings)[35], than their counterparts in the

"janavritta/ lokvritta" (the circle of commoners). The narrative voice reveals that even though the

"janavritta" women and their families suffered losses for a war that they did not endorse or even

participate in — only a few women in this group were wives of foot-soldiers and were also

widowed like Uttara (2). However, from the moment the five women are recruited, it becomes

clear that they are far more empowered than the young queen and express their opinions freely.

Wanting no part in the doings of the rajavritta, they initially refuse to be subservient to

Uttara. They condemn the war in no uncertain terms before the princess and her family, "But

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[35] The translator Anjum Katyal has left some Bengali words untranslated in the text, presumably because the volume was meant for publication only in India. I provide certain translations when necessary.

such a war just for a throne? This, a holy war?! A righteous war?! Just call it a war of greed" (3).

They negotiate the terms of their employment confidently, only agreeing to attend to Uttara if they are treated as "companions" and not "servants". Their companionship soon brings joy to the queen's life, particularly because they are "from a totally different world" (5). As she interacts with them, Uttara becomes fascinated with their social and familial customs, which throw into relief how rajavritta customs are deeply unfair to royal women. In comparison, the forest women have far more freedom and agency — they move about as they please without covering their heads and are allowed to sing songs as loudly as they wish (7,10). At one instance, Uttara marvels at the fact that they are given access to weapons for self-protection: when Uttara muses that spears are a man's weapon, one of the women, named Vitasta, reminds her that they are a "woman's weapon too". Through her exchanges with them, Uttara mourns not just her unfreedoms but how upper-caste rules of widowhood have brought her childhood to a swift and melancholic end.

The climactic moment in the story is when the five women prepare to part ways with Uttara, because they need to return to their own social duties. Uttara is shocked to learn that they are returning to their homes to get married again: in the rajavritta widows are strictly forbidden from re-marrying and have to live their lives in austerity. The women then inform Subhadra, Uttara's mother-in-law, that the customs in their society are vastly different:

> Our widows remarry and are respected by their families. They work alongside
>
> their husband, cultivating the land, working and storing crop. They never deny the
>
> demands of life in order to exist as mere shadowy ghosts…that's only for the
>
> rajavritta (24)

The story ends with the five women returning to their society after they denounce the war and in turn, the ideology of the rajavritta, "This is not our dharmayuddha. Brother kills brother, uncle kills nephew, shishya kills guru. It may be your idea of dharma but it's not ours". The women here emerge from the margins of the epic to critique its dominant ideology. Although there is plenty of tension within the Mahabharata itself about the futility of the war, this re-imagining emphasizes that the text and its ideology are imperfect. In particular, it highlights the effect of upper-caste patriarchy on the lives of upper-caste women. It exhorts the reader to challenge any idealistic notions they have of a Hindu past, by exposing the fissures in the epic and drawing marginalized characters into the conversation.

The next story in *After Kurukshetra* is "Kunti and the Nishadin". In both the original epics, Nishadas are a group of tribals who rule over forests. This story focusses on Kunti, the elderly mother of the Pandavas, and her interaction with a Nishadin woman. Once again, the interaction reveals differences between the lives of women in the rajavritta and lokavritta, underlining how the rajavritta rules leave its women with far less agency and fewer opportunities for happiness. When the story begins, Kunti is living out her voluntary retirement from courtly life in a forest dwelling. Every day, she ventures out to the forest to gather firewood, during which time she takes a moment to reflect and muse aloud about her life's regrets. During this time, she spots a group of Nishadin women. At first, Kunti feels fear and revulsion towards the women, whom she considers Other beings: "Kunti was trembling, terrified. Would they come closer? Their shadows may fall on the firewood for the sacred rites and defile it" (33). Nevertheless, she cannot contain her curiosity about them.

Finally, one of the Nishadin women approaches Kunti and reveals that she has been listening in on her confessions. Kunti is shocked not only at the woman's approach, but also

because the woman speaks her language: earlier in the story, it is noted that Kunti has "never tried to learn the language they speak" (28) perhaps because her life as a queen insulated her from persons from marginalized groups, who were in turn punished for approaching royals. She reveals her surprise to the woman, who responds caustically:

> Yes, I not only understand it but speak it too. Of course, you never thought of us as human, did you? No more more than rocks, trees or animals…It hurts doesn't it, that a Nishadin should call you by name. Yes, I took your name. In the forest you are defenseless, Kunti. They can't send in their soldiers to punish us. (40)

Weary, curious, and aware that the space of the forest suspends traditional hierarchies, Kunti overcomes her resistance to interact with Nishadin woman. They have revelatory dialogue that reveals that many of Kunti's life's troubles, such the shame she experienced for being an unwed mother, come from living in the rajavritta: the Nishadin informs her that instead of being punished, unwed mothers in the lokavritta are celebrated for being in love and bringing new life to the world (41). Further, like in "The Five Women", the suffering of widows is also highlighted as a consequence of the immensely patriarchal ideologies of rajavritta. In the world of the Nishadins, widows have the choice to seek happiness anew: "The Nishadin said with pride, we don't deny the demands of life. If we are widowed, we have the right to remarry. Those who wish can marry again" (43). It is particularly interesting in this case that re-marriage is not compulsory but optional, depending on the wish of the individual woman. The Nishadin leaves Kunti to ponder these contradistinctions, but only for a while. She also reveals that a forest fire

has started and the Nishadins are preparing to flee. Kunti, on the other hand, is restricted to living

out her final moments[36] in her dwelling with only an anagnorisis as comfort.

The last and shortest story in the collection, "Souvali", similarly revolves around a

royalty-commoner interaction but this time, the conversation is between a mother and son. As the

translator's note before the story explains, Souvali is a lower-caste woman who bore an

illegitimate child with King Dhritarashtra when his queen Gandhari was pregnant. In Souvali's

society, the child is known by the matronymic Souvalya. Unfortunately, Souvali was separated

from her son when he was five, when he is sent off to be educated according to rajavritta

customs with the king's other sons, where he is known as Yuyutsu. Yuyutsu is a character that

has been a focus of many non-English adaptations, such as Dharmaveer Bharati's Hindi play

Andha Yug, *Pauranik Abhibadan* by Sudhinchandra Sarkar and *Mahabharata Saranubad* by

Rajsekhar Basu[37].

This story, however, focusses on one of the instances when Souvali's son returns to visit

his mother. It is mandated that servants and the marginalized live on the outskirts of the city,

away from the royals. During the interaction between mother and son, it is revealed that Souvali

is deeply critical in her views of the rajavritta customs, and specifically, the manner in which

they have alienated her from her own son. She feels a growing distance between them: she tells

him "you have been lost to me since childhood" (51). Souvalya, in turn, tries to come to terms

with his "secret grief" wondering if his "mother had forgotten about him" (50). Together they try

to come to terms with the war and its effects on all the persons involved, from both the warring

sides to the innocent civilians.

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[36] Kuntī, along with Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Gandhārī, die in this forest fire in the original epic (MhB 15.1).
[37] Katyal mentions the last two adaptations in her note before the story, but does not provide their publication dates.

Like the other marginalized characters in the collection, Souvali too is portrayed to as assertive and possessed of a more finely tuned understanding of the ways of the world. Widowhood is a focus again, as Souvali defiantly refuses to ritualistically mourn Dhritarashtra, "I am just a dasi (servant). Was I his wedded wife that I should undergo the death rites…Wear white cloth? Fast? Why?" She has heard that Vyasa is going to write the story of the righteous war but "doesn't want a mention of her name anywhere" (53). The author underlines the importance of her work with this statement, reminding the reader that those whose lives were never considered worthy of the epic narrative have been brought back to the center of the story. The story ends with Souvali worrying if her son will ever realize that the rajavritta, whether the Kauravas or the Pandavas, will never accept him as one of their own.

Broadly, these stories are noteworthy for bringing marginalized voices to the forefront. The epic text revolves around the lives of upper-caste characters and this volume of stories performs the necessary work of including the voices of marginalized groups. Further, these individuals are women who reach out across caste boundaries to help the well-known characters—it is clear in every story that the treatment of upper-caste widows is unjust. The presence of the Other women reminds women such as Kunti and Uttara that there is an alternative to their way of life that is perhaps kinder to women.

However, this simplistic cross-caste solidarity is also the collection's greatest limitation. In each story, the Other character's principal role is to impart wisdom to the rajavritta character. In each interaction, the lokavritta lifestyle is presented as the better alternative to the rajavritta worldview. While the critique of the latter is certainly valid, the former is presented uncritically. In fact, the Other culture is consistently more civilized than the royalty. In both the first stories, the women speak for their collective cultures that are in turn, romantically idealized as superior.

Little is known about these women as individuals other than their civilization is better than the royalty's. Many of their assertions, such as the sanctioned remarriage for widows or the celebration of unwed motherhood are certainly important critiques of hegemony from the margins. The characters themselves remain peripheral and individually obscure. In comparison to the women in the first two stories, Souvali from the last story is a sturdier character who clearly exhibits her individual defiance even in the face of squalor. Nevertheless, she too is valorized as the Other who obviously knows better than her rajavritta son.

For this reason, *After Kurukshetra* stories pale in comparison to the author's "Draupadi". Written three decades earlier, the central subject in "Draupadi" imperfect but still presented as a well-rounded individual character. In *After Kurukshetra,* the marginal figures are presented with what Spivak has described as "strategic essentialism", where a group's interests and individual identities may be temporarily essentialized to serve a larger political interest or goal (Spivak "Subaltern Studies" 214). Spivak herself was ambivalent about this move. She said in a later interview that it may continue to feed essentialist readings of Othered persons if used incorrectly, becoming "a union ticket for essentialism" (Danius 35). In the case of Mahasweta's *After Kurukshetra* a monolithic Other is essentialized but for a strategic political intention: to critique hegemony from the margins. However, the marginal figures themselves function merely as instruments of critique rather than a fully realized central subject. It may be important to recognize then, that *After Kurukshetra* cannot be read to glean an accurate representation of lives of marginalized women. The lokvritta women, who come from a mythological universe, are also different from Dopdi Mejhen, whose experience is more realistically analogous to currently marginalized tribal women. Instead, *After Kurukshetra*'s merit lies in unmasking the problems of the hegemonic text and its patriarchal Brahmanical ideology. Further, Mahasweta's move to

make the epic text more inclusive of the voices of the disenfranchised is also important. Her

Bengali language adaptations, in this collection and elsewhere, are far more trenchant in their

critique of hegemonic structures, such as patriarchal, national, and upper-caste worldviews, than

many other adaptations, particularly those in English. This continues to be true even as epic

adaptations proliferate in the contemporary literary market.

Masculinity Matters

Epic adaptations, no matter how well-written, cannot be expected to do all the difficult

political work involved correcting historical disenfranchisement. On one hand writers may have

the ability to effect social change by motivating readers and critics; on the other, it is not enough

that newer adaptations in a variety of media have expanded the access of the epics to multiple

communities. This is because as Illiah writes, not everyone's experience of these myriad

adaptations is positive because it endlessly re-invigorates, even if critically, the same dominant

narratives about Hinduism. Further, as Illiah argues, there are almost no adaptations or re-

productions of non-Hindu religio-cultural stories. This is especially true in the case of Indian

English literature which as I have discussed earlier reproduces and supports older, Sanskritic

cultural hegemony. Re-envisioned Hindu cultural narratives, such as the epics, dominate the

Indian publishing world. Occasionally, Othered characters appear in these narratives, but largely

reproduce dominant ideas about gender and marginality by drawing support from a conservative

reading of Hinduism. The figure of the brave male warrior, for instance, is repeatedly and often

uncritically valorized in contemporary adaptations.

Many new epic adaptations re-orient the epic around a new male warrior hero who

embodies kshatriya ideals such as bravery and tenacity. The warrior ideal is not only celebrated

by re-presenting the story from the perspective of a marginalized male figure, stories are also repeated from the perspective of central characters, such as one of the Pāṇḍava brothers. For instance, Malayalam author M.T Vasudevan Nair's *Randamoozham* (1984) focuses on Bhīma, the third of the Pāṇḍavas and the brother of the more central figure Yudhiṣṭhira. An English translation by Gita Krishnakutty called *Bhima: Lone Warrior* (2013) revived interest in this work, which valories masculine values such as bravery and strength as espoused by the main character. The novel presents its protagonist as an astute warrior, describing in detail his valiance against numerous deadly enemies and his skill in mace fighting. Nair's portrayal of Draupadi is also alarming. In this depiction, she is a blood-thirsty femme fatale who is both sexually aroused by violence and drives her partner, Bhima, to further aggression for her own satisfaction.

A later adaptation, Chindu Sreedharan's *Epic Retold* (2015)*,* also traces its lineage to Nair. The book is also the epic retold from Bhima's perspective. Interestingly, Sreedharan mentions in the introduction to the book that his primary access to the epic was through other recent English and vernacular adaptations rather than the original in Sanskrit. Other than Nair, he mentions being influenced by the works of Tharoor, Divakaruni, and Rajagopalachari. Unsurprisingly then, the adaptation repeats similar tropes about Bhima's masculinity, although it is kinder to women owing to Divakaruni's influence. Sreedharan's use of the Twitter writing format is certainly an innovative stylistic experiment, which demonstrates how new forms of media are expanding the reach of the epic text. The author retold the epic as a series of tweets over a period of four years, until 2014. The book is a compilation of these tweets. However, it hardly breaks new critical or political ground. The author explicates in the introduction of the book that he leans on relatively recent adaptations. This suggests that his work, in many ways, is an adaptation of other adaptations, and is many degrees removed from the Sanskrit epic.

However, what is crucial here is not distance from the original, but how these adaptations of adaptations constantly reproduce the same dominant ideas. Further, what these cumulative, altered but ultimately similar epics wish to stand for in a globalized world is something I return to at the end of this chapter.

Éklavya is another male character who has received some attention in the contemporary adaptations, for his marginality and idealized masculine attributes. In the original epic, Éklavya was a member of the Nishada tribe. Appearing in the first book, Éklavya aspires to be a great archer and secretly watches Droṇa, the teacher of the Pāṇḍavas, giving them lessons in warfare. He also builds a mud statue of Droṇa, and practises under his symbolic tutelage. His exceptional skills are soon discovered by Arjuna, the teacher's favorite pupil, who brings them to the teacher's notice. Droṇa finds that Éklavya is so talented that he could be a significant threat to Arjuna's greatness, so he cruelly demands Éklavya's right thumb as guru-dakṣiṇā or a formal price for his "teaching". Unfazed, Éklavya heroically slices off his right thumb and presents it to Droṇa "with a happy face and unburdened mind" (MhB 1.7.123).

Popular reproductions of Éklavya's story, such as Mahendra Mittal's Hindi comic *Eklavya* (2016), A.K. Lomhor and Jasmine Gray's English novella *Eklavya: The Story of an Archer's Loyalty and Devotion* (2015) typically hold Éklavya's sacrifice up as an example of masculine strength and obeisance. Mittal's comic's cover page announces, "The complete life of brave archer Eklavya, a rare example of guru-bhaktī and guru- dakṣiṇā in itihāsa" (translations mine). This didactically endorses guru-bhaktī/guru-dakṣiṇā while framing itihāsa as both myth and history. In several such retellings Éklavya is praised for suppressing physical pain while privileging Droṇa's demand. Further, his act of self-inflicted violence is subtly put forth as his acquiesance to caste-based hierarchy. Éklavya's story is frequently repeated in school textbooks

and Bollywood films. For instance, in the historical film *Eklavya: The Royal Guard* (2007), the titular character's name underlines his masculine bravery and his devotion to the king/kingdom. In a more recent film, *Chalk n Duster* (2016), students are exhorted to be loyal to their teachers by retelling the story of Éklavya. In these instances, he is framed as an exceptional Other because he is ultimately loyal to his upper-caste teacher. Further, the fact that Éklavya was socially and physically prevented from sharing space with upper-caste members is seldom critiqued.

An epic adaptation that succeeds in avenging Éklavya is Kiran Nagarkar's *Bedtime Story*. Nagarkar, who writes in both Marathi and English, was in the news when the book version of his Mahabharata-oriented play was finally published in 2015, three decades after it was written. His adaptation is not recent and it is noteworthy that the book version was finally released recently. It shows that new audiences are more willing to read contrapuntal adaptations and more interested in the Mahabharata itself. In the darkly farcical play, Nagarkar re-presents epic stories, lambasting important modern persons and institutions like the Indian Army and M.K. Gandhi. The play also invents modern avatars for Mahabharata characters, particularly Draupadī and Éklavya. Nagarkar's reading of Éklavya is far more charitable than those dealing with the heroine. Although Nagarkar does not valorize male characters at Draupadī's expense like Nair, his presentation of Draupadi generally exaggerates the character's polyamory and manipulative streak. For instance, in one of the scenes, an ancient Draupadi vocally chooses to be the mistress of the enemy faction, which she says is preferable to "whoring for five men" (74). In another scene, Draupadī is re-imagined as Rupali, a ruthlessly ambitious modern woman who dupes various family members into signing over their share of the family business (52). A third scene replays the Karna-Draupadi romance common to many contemporary adaptations; except in this case, when Draupadi asks Karna to elope with her, he cruelly rejects her. He compares her to

other "two bit sluts" from Foras Road, a well-known region in Kamathipura, a red-light area in modern day Mumbai (41). As I have noted earlier, this is not in fact an interpretation because Karṇa calls Draupadī a prostitute in open court (MhB 2.27.35). Modern intepretations tend to write over this episode to frame Karṇa as as noble and tragic, often even a romantic foil for the heroine. However, Nagarkar's play heightens the drama of this moment even further. The text indicates that once Karna insults Draupadi in the play, a pre-planted audience member shouts about this interpretation being blasphemous. The scene then ends with one of the members of the play's chorus shooting the dissenting audience member dead. The play contains many such moments where objecting members from the audience are mocked or violently silenced. Such a move provides occasion for farcical meta-commentary, since those who object to the dominant readings of religious texts are also silenced or censored in real life. In the case of Nagarkar's play, the artist gets to have the upper hand, if only on stage.

The episodes that present Éklavya are thought-provoking and charitable to the character itself. The first episode, a re-imagining of the Éklavya-Droṇa interaction, makes a clear connection between Eklavya and modern-day marginalized persons. When Drona confronts Eklavya for seeking his tutelage without permission, he spitefully calls him an untouchable and says "A Bhil, a Mahar, a leper. There's no distinction between untouchables".[38] Initially, Eklavya offers to be his slave and suggests: "Make me do any kind of work. Keep me awake day and night. Make me clean up garbage, leftover, and shit" (19). Eklavya is detailing the menial work that lower-caste persons have been forced to do for centuries: this irony would not be lost on an educated audience. However, in scene that follows up on this episode, Nagarkar's Eklavya

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[38] Bhils are an indigenous people from North West India while Mahars are a marginalized group from Maharashtra. Mahars were radicalized by noted politician and social reformer B.R. Ambedkar, who also led the drafting of the constitution of India. See Junghare, Indira Y. "Dr. Ambedkar: The Hero of the Mahars, Ex-Untouchables of India." *Asian Folklore Studies*, vol. 47, no. 1, 1988, pp. 93–121.

challenges the epic script: when Drona demands his right thumb, Eklavya fashions a thumb out of mud and hands it to him, wryly remarking, "Like guru, like gift." Nagarkar's Eklavya goes against the dominant reading of Eklavya as obedient and subservient; he recognizes Drona's cunning and rewards him in kind. He leaves the scene triumphantly after warning Arjuna of Drona's future treacheries, "Beware the guru who discriminates between one student and another…Beware the guru who will betray you in your hour of direst need and join the enemy against you" (31). By reminding the audience that Drona will indeed join the enemy forces in the future[39], Nagarkar makes it clear that he is far from an ideal teacher.

Another episode in the play re-imagines Éklavya in a modern avatar. Even though this modern Eklavya is ill-fated, this episode also re-positions him as a sympathetic character while exposing a central, upper-caste epic character, this time Arjun, as untrustworthy. In this instance, Eklavya and Arjun are friends and medical students in contemporary India. Arjuna, who transgressed by getting caught having pre-marital sex with his fiancee, Draupadi, is being chased by her brothers and family members. To help get away from the angry mob, Eklavya is planning to hide him in the Mahar colony because, as he says, "nobody will dream of looking for you there" (22). This emphasizes that modern cities are still segregated based on caste.

Here too, as in Mahasweta's stories, Eklavya is a romantically noble Other. He is idealistic and keen to overcome his background. He gives a poignant speech on what inspired him to study medicine:

> In my village, when an old cow or an ox died, someone would come over and
>
> holler to one of us untouchables, "Hey you, come and collect the carcass". I was

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[39] Droṇa fights on the side of the Kauravas in the epic. The eighth book of the epic, the *Droṇa Parva*, is dedicated to Droṇa's commandeering of the Kaurava army. He dies at the hands of Dhṛṣṭadyumna, Draupadī's brother and the commander of the Paṇḍava army (MhB 8.7).

seven when my mother got food poisoning eating such a cow. She vomited for

two days and I settled down patiently, waiting for her to die. Somebody got hold

of a doctor from the Christian mission. She lived. So did the doctor, in my heart.

(23)

Arjuna mocks him, asking him to save this story for his autobiography. This is a larger interxtual

reference to the tradition of autobiographies written by Dalit writers[40]. Arjuna also reminds

Eklavya that his heroism, in this case his attempts to help Arjuna escape, will go unrecognized.

He further warns Eklavya that he will probably end up as collateral damage in the altercation.

Eklavya remains idealistic, "Because without you, your people will remain Draupadi's father and

brother, and without me, my people will remain Mahars. Someone has to start a new generation".

Unfortunately, Arjuna's instincts turn out to be right: the angry mob finds the two young men

and turns on Eklavya. Draupadi's brother accuses him of violating his sister, "You think you can

step off the dunghil on which you were born, come into our town and rape our women?" (24).

Draupadi's father lashes out at Eklavya too, contextualizing his bigoted views within a fraught

history of caste politics and religious conversion in twentieth-century India:

> First it was that Mahatma Gandhi who filled their heads with ideas. Then came
>
> our spineless government, reserving all the best jobs for them. They're Mahars
>
> when it suits them. Otherwise they're Neo-Buddhists…the bastards. (25)

The scene ends with the crowd gagging Eklavya and castrating him. After he is ungagged,

Eklavya calls out to his friend, who shakes his head and leaves with the others.

This episode is particularly powerful because it employs the epic strategically to rub salt

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[40] Critic Sarah Beth Hunt has written that the autobiography has been a way for Dalit writers, such as Omprakash Valmiki and Surajpal Chauhan, to reclaim subjecthood in the literary and public sphere. See Sarah Beth. "Hindi Dalit Autobiography: An Exploration of Identity." *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2007, pp. 545–574.

on fresh wounds. It suggests that the Positive Discrimination measures, the Indian variation of

Affirmative Action for historically disadvantaged groups[41], are creating more problems between

the dominant groups and the oppressed than they are solving. The dominant groups, represented

here by Draupadi's father and brother, see "reservations" or Positive Discrimination as a reverse

discriminatory practice against them, which makes them even more hostile towards Eklavya and

other Dalit persons. In this episode, it is suggested that State measures to combat historical

discrimination have ironically been more divisive and more likely to contribute to violence

against Dalit persons. Scholars such as Rupa Viswanath have written that high-caste critics of the

Dalit movement are in fact using Positive Discrimination as a new way to undermine Dalit self-

determination: high-caste critics insist that Dalits misuse reservations and play up "identity

politics", which takes away from the real intent of Dalit activists — to ensure that the laws are

rightly enforced (257)[42]. In Nagarkar's text, the angry mob makes a similar critique of Eklavya

for taking unfair advantage of the system. However, it is shown that they are violent and bigoted

to begin with and Eklavya is simply a more convenient target than Arjuna.

Oddly, even though Nagarkar employs the epic text for biting and subversive caste

critique, he naively insists in the preface that the epics belongs to everyone in India. He writes,

"[The] Mahabharata is a living epic in the subcontinent. It's in the bloodstream of almost every

Indian—Hindu, Muslim, Christian or Buddhist" (4). Though Nagarkar's "almost" leaves some

room for doubt, he glosses over the fact that though several Eklavyas could be the subjects of his

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[41] Several scholars, including Gyanendra Pandey, have compared the contexts of race in America with caste in India.
See Pandey, Gyanendra. *A History of Prejudice: Race, Caste, and Difference in India and the United States*.
Cambridge UP, 2013.
[42] Viswanath's book provides a detailed overview of State directed welfare measures for Dalits since the early
twentieth century. See Viswanath, Rupa. *The Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion, and the Social in Modern India*.
Columbia UP, 2014.

epic adaptation, they are unlikely to have the same relationship with Nagarkar's texts as upper-caste readers. To claim that the Mahabharata belongs to persons of every major religious denomination in India seems an optimistic oversimplification. Even though Nagarkar and other idealists may want the Mahabharata to course through the veins of every Indian, writers like Illiah and Limbale raise real questions about why its not quite that simple. Further, Hindu right-wing parties stake their claims to epic narratives rather vociferously and violently, which is belied by the play's own publication history.

Nagarkar himself had a difficult time having his play staged and published, precisely because of the epic's ties with Hinduism. He had written the play in 1977, as a political response to the Emergency and a "loss of naivete" that he experienced after finding both journalism and academia lacking in integrity (Nagarkar 3). He writes that even though stage directors such as Shreeram Lagoo had tried to generate interest in a production shortly after, several right-wing pressure groups had prevented their efforts, based on the notion that the play was denigrating Hinduism. Nagarkar wryly notes that "none of these vociferous guardians of our culture had ever read [the play]" (7). Nevertheless, the right-wing groups threatened its writer, producer, director, and actors, bringing any efforts to stage it to a halt. At another time, the play's script was sent to the Maharashtra Censor Board who ordered an untenable seventy-eight cuts. The play was finally staged for the first time after nearly two decades in 1995 by the theatre group Abhivyakti and later at the Edinburgh Fringe festival. It would take another twenty years for it to be released as a publication until 2015, when publishers Fourth Estate took on the project.

The book was generally well received, with critics such as Ankush Arora of *Reuters* praising Nagarkar for "discuss[ing] the problems of caste, patriarchy, religion and war" and particularly for advancing "a scathing critique of India's caste system" through his treatment of

the story of Eklavya ("Mahabharata Retold, with a Twist from Writer Kiran Nagarkar") Another journalist, Salil Tripathi of *Mint*, points out that the controversy over the play's religious critique pre-dated the furore over Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* in the 1980s, which shows unfortunate similarities between the intolerance of Islamic fundamentalists and Hindu right-wingers. He calls it an instance of "competitive intolerance", "if Muslims can get a novel banned, why should Hindus be left behind". Tripathi also rightly notes that *Bedtime Story* is following up on a long-standing tradition of epic adaptations in Marathi literature, including Irawati Karve's *Yugānta* (1968) and Vishnu Sakharam Khandekar's *Yayati* (1978) ("When Kiran Nagarkar Said the Unsayable"). The press bites around the publication suggest that the biggest factor in catalyzing the recent publication is a different generation of readers: those who primarily read in the English language alone and are not likely to be aware of the play's literary precedents in Marathi literature. Further, the political concerns of *Bedtime Story* are not entirely radical. Its critique of modern Indian femininity and caste-related marginality in the epic comes many years after Hindi plays such as Dharmveer Bharati's *Andha Yug* (1954) and Mohan Rakesh's *Adhe Adhure* (1969) brought them to light. In some ways, the publication of the play today indicates there has probably not been a real change in the realities this adaptation interrogates, but that there is now a new generation of Hindu readers hungry for a discussion of their own past, but in English, the language of transnational cosmopolitanism and modernity.

Pasts' Future: The Transnational Epic

Rashmi Sadana writes that English has multivalence in India: it is seen both an aspirational language, something to acquire in the quest for upward mobility, and a neutral mediator language which is suited to presenting the multi-cultural realities of contemporary

Indian life (14). She cautions against seeing English solely as a postcolonial inheritance since it flattens over six decades of history during which time English has been paradoxically adapted into an Indian vernacular within the subcontinent, but also continues to be a "global attribute" (25-26, 42). Instead, she suggests that more attention ought to be paid to the porous boundaries between multiple languages in India (139). Building on her argument, I contend that the very idea of Indian culture, including its pluralities and its contestations, flows constantly through these pervious linguistic and cultural boundaries into a globalized world. English language epic adaptations are especially suited to facilitating multilingual and indeed, multi-literary exchanges. They do not just transfuse literary content and philosophies from Sanskrit to English. As texts such as Chindu Sreedharan's adaptation of adaptations indicate, they also compile re-readings of the epic from other Indian languages for new media outlets and audiences. Further, the global traffic of English gives Anglophone epic re-writings the potential to disseminate and confirm dominant ideas about India beyond the boundaries of the nation.

However, before critiquing epic adaptations for chiefly representing the interests of the hegemonic class in India and beyond, it may be necessary to recognize their political merits too. Anglophone epic adaptations have certainly been one of the many ways which the English language has been claimed as one of India's own. Most Indian literary historiographies reveal that traditional literary form and content has always percolated into modern Indian literature, even during the renaissance of English and non-English language Indian literature during the heydey of colonialism. By the middle of the century, Indian English authors, such as Raja Rao, were openly discussing the need to adopt English while also distancing themselves from its British context. In the preface to his 1938 novel *Kanthapura* Rao writes:

We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as

Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us… I use the word

alien, yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our

intellectual makeup—like Sanskrit or Persian was before—but not of our

emotional makeup. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our

own language and in English (v, vii)

Although Rao's collective claim to "instinctive" bilingualism and Sanskritic intellectual legacy is

undoubtedly elitist, his larger contentions have echoed throughout the twentieth century. Rao,

like Rushdie and others many years after him, have attempted to circumvent the problem of

writing in a partly alien tongue by infusing their literary with the garrulity, rhythms and dictions

of indigenous languages. In the early 1990s, scholar Meenakshi Mukherjee pointed out that

Indian English writers suffered from what she terms the "anxiety of Indianness"—where writing

in English necessarily distanced them from their cultural roots. In many ways, the tremendous

surge of epic adaptations in the 1990s and beyond moved further than the Rushdie-like tweaking

of language and form ever did—it transposed entire cultural worlds specifically connected to the

roots of modern India, into the English language. Further, as Sudipta Kaviraj reminds us, modern

artistic practices never discard their own histories completely, instead they often repurpose what

they remember with the help of newer means of material production (517). The epics are

memorialized in so many ways within and outside literary spheres, whether through oral

narratives, daily religious practices, and festivals. Epics and their adaptations then, are part of an

endless chain of memories that continually bind collective imaginings.

However, as contrapuntal adaptations of the epic texts themselves indicate, there may be

a problem with such a collectivity because it privileges a specifically Hindu, Brahmanical

worldview. Aravamudan notes that the process of making the colonizer's English language

India's own, as a vernacular or a lingua franca, has in fact strengthened Hinduism: "The

circulation of Hinduism through English…continues to be an important vehicle for the religious

discourse of middle-class urban Hindus in search of their 'subjective truths'". He proposes the

concept of "Guru English", a new stage in the history of the English language in the

subcontinent, which follows many decades after the folding Orientalist ideas into the renovation

of Hinduism, which in turn aided ethno-religious nationalism (9). He examines the evolution of

English into a South Asian vernacular which participates in new national and international

exchanges of cultural capital. Named after the globally recognized figure of the mystical Hindu

Guru, he writes that today, Guru English is moving beyond the boundaries about the nation as "a

cosmopolitan and diasporic logic that articulates counter communities and virtual spaces rather

than just replicating the naturalized boundaries of national or regional imaginings" (29). English

language epic adaptations are certainly complicit in Guru English's project since they recall and

re-generate distinctly Hindu worlds for readers—whether they are middle-class Hindu Indians in

the subcontinent or the Indian diaspora in search of homeland-related nostalgia. In a globalized

world, the English language, in the Anglophone epic adaptation, becomes the "sometimes

vehicle and other the fabricator" for the "transnational mediation of supposedly traditional

practices and doctrines" (Aravamudan 29). As with Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, these

epic adaptations that advertise themselves as a meditation on Indian traditions can also serve

western readers looking to confirm their view of India as an exotic Other land, marked by an

ahistorical mysticism.

As Arjun Appadurai writes in his meditation on the futures of patriotism and the nation,

"the journey from the space of the former colony to the space of the postcolony…moves us to

America—a postnational space…marked by its uneasy engagement with diasporic peoples, mobile technologies, and queer nationalities" (159). Despite its uneasy relationship with nation, the epic adaptation has also made this journey: it has travelled from pre-modern South Asia, through British Orientalism and nascent nationalism, via postcolonial discontents, to the American-Indian diaspora. For Indian-American writers like Divakaruni, repurposing the Sanskrit epics and Hindu mythology is a way to stake a claim to cultural capital in an increasingly globalized literary market. Other Indian-American writers, like Vikram Chandra in *Red Earth, Pouring Rain* (1995) and Manil Suri in his trilogy *The Death of Vishnu (2001), The Age of Shiva* (2006) and *The City of Devi* (2013) have also similarly drawn from Hindu mythology. However, as scholars such as Timothy Brennan and Graham Huggan have pointed out, there is an inherent problem with allowing diasporic writers to represent India before the West. Huggan argues:

> [I]t seems worth questioning the neo-imperialist implications of a postcolonial literary/ critical industry centred on, and largely catering to, the West. English is, almost exclusively, the language of this critical industry, reinforcing the view that postcolonialism is a discourse of translation, rerouting cultural products regarded as emanating from the periphery toward audiences who see themselves as coming from the centre. The metropolitan locations of the major publishing houses (London and New York, for example) lend strength to this view… (4)

Hinduism, misunderstood as a cluster of fuzzy mysticisms within Orientalist and neo-Orientalist discourses, is imminently marketable as a cultural product, particularly through the medium of English. When Bharucha, Mishra, and Bhattacharya took Peter Brooks to task for Orientalizing India to serve it up for the West, perhaps they had not foreseen how Indians themselves would

succumb to the same Orientalism: now mobilized by the powerful machinations of global capitalism.

Further, it is not only the diasporic elite who are profiting from these commoditised cultural transactions, but also the indigenous elite. Just as Divakaruni's books have been popular in the United States as well as India, works by India-based writers such as Devdutt Pattanaik and Amish Tripathi have also found favor among American-Indians. These works are sold across platforms such as Amazon.com, where reviewers praise them for telling them more about what they already knew a little about — their culture. Countless pictures of these English language mythological adaptations are posted on Facebook and Instagram as a performance of shared pride in the persistent reproduction of a singular cultural narrative. As I have argued earlier, these English language adaptations are neither more inclusive nor more politically robust than vernacular adaptations. However, their medium allows them to travel the furthest in a global world to reinforce dominant ideas about India. Within national boundaries, epic adaptations are policed when they fail to promote a unified and devoted national culture, while beyond it they are also expected to confirm existing ideas about Hinduism and India as monolithic, often interchangeable, entities.

The epics are Hinduism's primary signifiers in the imagination of people within and outside India: this is in large part due to the pervasiveness of popular epic adaptations that remind readers of Hindu values, even when occasionally resisting them. The dialogue they generate constantly reshapes and is shaped by the popular understanding of Hinduism, even more so than the original epic texts. While access to the original epic text continues to get further restricted, mainly owing to the dying out of Sanskrit as a language, variations of the popular epics proliferate in new media and the transnational spheres. As this project has illuminated,

these popular epics support the project of (post)national loyalties and devotions that have far-reaching social and political consequences, particularly in the realms of gender and upper-caste hegemony. I have attempted to chart the changes in their popular interpretation, mapping the peculiar turns they have taken in both shaping and being shaped by their socio-political contexts.

There are certainly several adaptations that mobilize the epic to include the experiences of marginalized or non-Hindu groups. Many other adaptations are also explicitly aware of the limits of the epics and groups that insist on enforcing them. Unfortunately, it appears that many such resistant adaptations are in Bengali or Marathi or other Indian languages rather than in English. English language adaptations, in fact, are more likely to be complicit in maintaining upper-caste or neo-liberal status quo. This is, of course, not to say that all English epic adaptations are conservative or explicitly supportive of Hindu nationalism while non-English adaptations are uniformly critical of the same. However, the way in which English has been adopted and transformed in the decades after the Emergency, economic liberalization, and the rise of Hindu nationalism makes it more likely for English language epic adaptations to proliferate more conservative public opinions about Hinduism.

Further, given the rapid growth of English language publishing in India today, these conservative English language works are also more likely to be read than contrapuntal works in languages other than English. The problem of censorship gives further impetus to such conservatism: resistant narratives that are in English, such as Nagarkar or Paley's work, are protested and shut away. Therefore, one finds that the circulation of contrapuntal adaptations is limited, either because of the changing politics of language, where vernacularity restricts their reach or prestige, or the rise of Hindu right-wing ideology, which pushes back against cultural counter-narratives. On the other hand, more conservative adaptations are more likely to be

supported. Often, there is a dialogue around them which insists they are doing more politically

challenging or artistically novel work. In fact, many such works more likely to be supportive of

upper-caste hegemony or even feed into Hindu nationalist claims of a stable antiquity.

CONCLUSION

#Mahabharata #Indianculture

This dissertation has attempted to show not only that adapted epics have a long history in the Indian subcontinent, but also why such works have been ubiquitous in the last few decades. Each attempt to retell the epic adds to the politically complicated endeavor of (re)shaping Hindu identity. Today, the mass-market, English language epic is a growing trend in Indian publishing. At the outset, it may be something to celebrate that the epics, which no doubt tell truly fascinating stories, are reaching new places or persons. At the time of finishing this project, several articles in journalistic publications in India and the United States, such as *Scroll.in, The Economist*, and *The Hindu* published articles about trendy new epic adaptations. A November 2016 article in the American publication, *The Economist,* calls epic adaptations: "The latest craze among Indian readers". They rightly note that this has much to do with improved literacy rates and unprecedented growth of mass media:

> Adult literacy [in India] rose from 65% to 74% between 2001 and 2011; the
>
> projection for 2020 is 90%. The annual value of the book market has swollen to
>
> an estimated \$3.9 bn, with 90,000 new titles added each year.

The Economist also sees the epic adaptation "trend" within the larger demands of the international market, arguing that Indian writers have been encouraged by the popularity of epic style international bestsellers such as G.R.R Martin's *Game of Thrones* and J.R.R. Tolkein's *The*

Lord of the Rings. Although the article, which also mentions Divakaruni's novel, does not explicate it, it shows a key difference between the way the publishers and literary theorists see this trend. Where Christopher Senft, a professor at Pune University, is quoted saying that the epic trend asserts Hinduness in the age of Hindutva, the novelists like Ashwin Sanghi believe naively that epic retellings are meant to "entertain, not educate or enlighten". Similarly, publisher Chinki Sarkar cheerily observes that "epics have always been in fashion". The article concludes on this celebratory note, simplistically positing that Indians continue to "fold myth into modernity" without noting that myth-as-history has informed the very character of Indian nationalism since its inception.

An article in *The Hindu* makes similar claims. Written a mere two weeks after *The Economist's* feature, it focusses on the interest in epic adaptations from the female perspective. In doing so, it interviews two contemporay epic adaptors, Ira Mukhoty and Amruta Patil ("An Epic Retelling"). Mukhoty, whose book *Heroines* (2017) is "about two women from mythology and six others from Indian history", including *Mahābhārata*'s Draupadī and Kṛṣṇa's consort Rādhā. Emphasizing her laborious research to find historical Indian women who could be role models for her daughters, she muses: "so little written history in India, even less so for its women". This is curious because women's roles have been derived very carefully from Hindu mythology for centuries and plenty of popular and scholarly discourse indicates the same. Similarly, Patil also attempts to bring women to the center of the story in her graphic novels *Adi Parva* (2012) and *Sauptik* (2016). The article acknowledges that the retelling of epics is not new, but insists that Mukhoty and Patil's treatment is especially innovative. Most of these articles claim the ingenuity of adapting the epic for Indian English writers and rarely mention vernacular writings of the same kind.

Writing in English today, then, imparts a veneer of upwardly mobile fashionability to these epic adaptations. Other articles, such as those in the Indian publication *Scroll.in,* also highlight the trendiness of both writing and reading English language epic adaptations with articles titled "How to write a modern-day Mahabharata" and "When women step out of Indian epics to express real desires and choices in real books", and "Epic Fail: A new webcomic tries to tell the Mahabharata and Ramayana with sass". It is also notable that none of these articles mention the problem of caste and the Brahmanical nature of the epics. Overall, most recent articles insist that each of these contemporary adaptations are doing something inventive— although this may also have to do with underlining currency as a key journalistic endeavor. Nevertheless, both the treatment and the re-reading in many of these adaptations remain similar: either women are given a voice but primarily seek romantic fulfilment, or peripheral characters are granted individuality and emotion.

Further, many, if not most, new epic adaptations treat the Mahabharata with gravitas, highlighting its sacrality if not also its tragedy. Nargarkar's farcical reading of the text may seem like an exception to this rule, but it may be remembered that his play was written in the 1970s, four decades before it would finally be published. In fact, his treatment of the epic characters and politics anticipates Tharoor's postmodern satire, which comes a decade later. I argue that satirical adaptations have faded away because after the televised epics and rise of Hindu nationalism, Indians have become institutionally reinvested in the epics as unchallengeable and hegemonic texts. Today, any irreverence towards the epics is discouraged, if not explicitly censored by right-wing groups. A recent attempt at a satirical re-writing of the Mahabharata met with a similar fate. Akshat Verma, a young Bollywood director, made a sixteen-minute film titled "Mama's Boys" in 2016. Released on YouTube, it featured well known Bollywood and

television actors such as Aditi Rao Hydari, Vivaan Shah, and Neena Gupta. The film presents a

humorous re-reading of Draupadī's polyandrous marriage. In this film, a close female friend

encourages Draupadī to make the most of her marriage by seducing three of her five warrior

husbands. The other two brothers, Nakula and Sahdéva, are depicted to be closeted gay men who

are busy establishing their tailoring business. They readily agree to the marriage because it

would get their mother Kuntī's stop to nagging them. Although the film relies on several lazy

stereotypes, including effeminate gay men as fashion designers and Bhīma as an unintelligent

alpha male, it celebrates Draupadī's sexual agency and ends with the brothers happily

compromising to please their matriarch, Kuntī. Within days of the film being released on

YouTube, the Hindu Sena, a right-wing non-profit group, filed a complaint against the film and

demanded it be taken down. The producers acquiesced, but the film is still being shared by

private internet users. The complaint was very specific in its objections. The wording itself

makes it very clear that religion is at stake:

> Akshat Verma and the team of Mama's boy (sic) have deliberately and
>
> maliciously acted intending to outrage religious feelings of Hindus by insulting its
>
> religion and religious beliefs by making fun of its religious book. The content of
>
> the film may also be made objectionable under article 19(2) of Constitution of
>
> India. ("Mama's Boys in Trouble? Hindu Sena Files Complaint against Delhi
>
> Belly's Director for Hurting Hindu Sentiments")

The group's primary complaint had to do with two characters being re-framed as homosexual.

Even though Nakula and Sahdéva's sexualities are not discussed in the epic, the original text

embraces a range of gender identities, which has been discussed by Andrea Custodi, Wendy

Doniger, and many other scholars. This shows, once again, that the newer, popular understanding

of the epic and by extension Hinduism, is likely to be more conservative than in the epic's pre-modern context.

Why then are these stories being retold repeatedly? Arti Dhand has argued that Hindus have rarely re-visited the epics to be surprised. Instead, they want act of the re-visiting to facilitate a greater immersion in the text and by extension, Hinduism:

> It is of crucial significance that in hearing these tales, Hindus are being taught not about disconnected fictional heroes, but about themselves; both the epics, but particularly the Mahabharata, are rehearsals of Hindu identity. The epics then are fundamentally tools for the creative reflection, crafting, refinement, and ultimate public political assertion of Hindu identity. (257-258)

This trend of rehearsing and reaffirming a Hindu identity continues in the twenty-first century with a notable extension—Hindu identity is now also organized around consumer subjecthood in a global capitalist economy. The retellings of the epics have less to do with how the Hindus were in past and more to do with who and how they wish to be in the present and future. Whether as writers in a global literary market or as agents of political change both within and outside the Indian nation, Hindus are looking to stake their claim to cultural capital in a translocal, post-national world. This new aspiration for cultural capital has also inaugurated a new battle over the sacrality and unchangeability of "Indian culture". A singular understanding of the epic is being downloaded and then debated or claimed in new spaces. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are filled with pictures of adaptations being read, with hashtags that proclaim the newness of Mahabharata adaptations but also marking them as the singular source of Indian culture. Other social media users are expected to respond to these images in solidarity or are shamed for being "anti-national" or not respecting their "own culture". The epics' and indeed India's future is in

these digital spaces, where loyalties and devotions are will be performed in new, wide-ranging, and possibly insidious ways.

The repurposed, popular Mahabharata is a double-edged sword. While the epic can certainly be adapted to function as an instrument of political critique, its continuing domination on the national and now postnational Indian imagination suggests its primacy as a grand narrative. But ultimately, the persistence of the epics in the living culture of India as well as numerous literary traditions shows how theoretically secular India simultaneously contests and confirms Hindu hegemony within and beyond national boundaries.

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