Draupadī in the Gambling Hall:

A Comparative Study of Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* and

B. R. Films' TV *Mahabharat* (1988-1990)

Sanjay Kumar

School of Religious Studies

McGill University, Montreal

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Abstract

Taking the Mahābhārata as an important cultural touchstone for interpreting the evolving history of social and gender behavior, this study compares the gambling episode as depicted in two major versions of the epic: Vyāsa's Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* (2nd century BCE to 1st century CE) and a Hindi TV Series *Mahabharat* (1988–1990). The discussion focuses on what is arguably the great epic's most widely known and heartbreaking episode, in which Yudhiṣṭhira, a powerful emperor, stakes and loses his wife, the queen Draupadī, in a gambling match against Śakuni, a maternal uncle of the Kauravas.

Several major contributions are made to Mahābhārata studies. With reference to the gambling episode in Vyāsa's Sanskrit text, the study sheds fresh light on such questions as (1) who is responsible for setting the gambling match in motion; (2) why Yudhiṣṭhira, the wise and resolutely righteous king, decides to engage in an evil game of dice; (3) how Yudhiṣṭhira's decision to stake Draupadī is perceived; and (4) why no one in the gambling hall could effectively protect her against public humiliation. Particular attention is paid to how Draupadī handles the serious abuse she suffers in the gambling hall in the presence of many powerful dignitaries, and how she challenges her enslavement with a penetrating knowledge of the legal system and powerful emotional resilience.

These aspects are compared with the TV Series. With reference to the character of Draupadī, the research shows that the TV Series' interpretation of Draupadī's character has departed radically from Vyāsa's account. It demonstrates that even though part of their ambition was to contemporize the story by stressing women's issues, the producers/directors and writers

missed an opportunity to contextualize the importance of Vyāsa's portrayal of Draupadī as a highly intelligent, courageous woman, who is an agent in her own right despite the patriarchal norms of her society. With the comparison of these two epics in mind, the dissertation examines the intervening evolution in the portrayal of Draupadī across multiple tellings of the epic.

This dissertation also examines the methodology underlying the most recent trend in Mahābhārata studies, which can be identified as the "Many Mahābhāratas" approach. In doing so, the thesis notes some ambiguities, if not contradictions. It proposes that the "Many Mahābhāratas" approach could be refined by initial phenomenological and philological methods and knowledge of the epic's history. It studies how the general narratorial and characterological traits in Vyāsa's epic were passed down over the centuries and came to constitute a tradition, adaptations to adjust to new contexts notwithstanding. This is especially relevant because the TV Series claims to have used the Critical Edition of Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* as its "basic source" and yet has departed dramatically in its portrayal of Draupadī's character. The dissertation supports the idea of the importance of the root source and the continuity of its key narrative and characters by considering contemporary theories of what constitutes a genre, a tradition, or a language as well as what constitutes legitimate and illegitimate literary adaption.

Résumé

Prenant le Mahābhārata comme une pierre d'assise culturelle importante pour interpréter l'évolution de l'histoire du comportement social et de genres, cette étude compare l'épisode de jeu tel qu'il est décrit dans deux versions majeures de l'épopée: le Mahābhārata sanskrit de Vyāsa (2e BCE à 1er CE) et une série télévisée en hindi, Mahabharat (1988–1990). La discussion se concentre sur ce qui est sans doute l'épisode le plus connu et le plus déchirant de la grande épopée, dans lequel Yudhiṣṭhira, un puissant empereur, mise et perd son épouse, la reine Draupadī, dans un match de jeu de dés contre son mesquin cousin Duryodhana.

Plusieurs contributions majeures sont apportées aux études du Mahābhārata. En référence à l'épisode de jeu dans le texte sanskrit de Vyāsa, l'étude jette un nouvel éclairage sur des questions telles que (1) qui est responsable de la mise en marche du match de jeu; (2) pourquoi Yudhiṣṭhira, le roi sage et résolument juste, décide de se lancer dans un diabolique jeu de dés; (3) comment la décision de Yudhiṣṭhira de miser Draupadī est perçue; et (4) pourquoi personne dans la salle de jeu ne pouvait la protéger efficacement contre l'humiliation publique. Une attention particulière est accordée à la façon dont Draupadī gère les graves abus qu'elle subit dans la salle de jeu en présence de nombreux dignitaires puissants, et comment elle défie son asservissement avec une connaissance pénétrante du système juridique et une puissante résilience émotionnelle.

Ces aspects sont comparés à la série télévisée. En ce qui concerne le personnage de Draupadī, la recherche montre que l'interprétation du personnage de Draupadī de la série télévisée s'est radicalement éloignée du récit de Vyāsa. Cela démontre que même si une partie de leur ambition était de moderniser l'histoire en mettant l'accent sur les problèmes des femmes, les producteurs/réalisateurs et scénaristes ont raté une occasion de contextualiser l'importance de la

représentation de Draupadī par Vyāsa comme une femme très intelligente et courageuse, qui est un agent dans son propre droit malgré les normes patriarcales de sa société. Avec la comparaison de ces deux épopées à l'esprit, la thèse examine l'évolution intervenue dans la représentation de Draupadī à travers plusieurs récits de l'épopée.

Cette thèse examine également la méthodologie sous-jacente à la tendance la plus récente dans les études Mahābhārata, qui peut être identifiée comme l'approche «Plusieurs Mahābhāratas». Ce faisant, la thèse relève quelques ambiguïtés, voire des contradictions. Il propose que l'approche «Plusieurs Mahābhāratas» puisse être affinée par des méthodes phénoménologiques et philologiques initiales et la connaissance de l'histoire de l'épopée. Il étudie comment les traits narratifs et caractérologiques généraux de l'épopée de Vyāsa se sont transmis au fil des siècles et en sont venus à constituer une tradition, malgré les adaptations pour s'ajuster à de nouveaux contextes. Ceci est particulièrement pertinent parce que la série télévisée prétend avoir utilisé l'édition critique du Mahābhārata de Vyāsa comme sa «source de base» et a pourtant radicalement changé sa représentation du personnage de Draupadī. La thèse soutient cette idée de l'importance de la source racine et de la continuité de son récit et de ses personnages clés en considérant les théories contemporaines de ce qui constitue un genre, une tradition ou une langue, ainsi que ce qui constitue une adaptation littéraire légitime et illégitime.

Acknowledgments

Conventions

In this thesis, the *Mahābhārata* (italicized) primarily refers to Vyāsa's text as constituted in its Critical Edition. In accordance with standard conventions, other works titled as *Mahābhārata* are also italicized, such as the Vulgate and Southern recension of Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* and Sabalasiṃha Cauhāna's *Mahābhārata*. I have maintained a distinction between these *Mahābhārata*s by specifying the text under discussion. When not italicized, the Mahābhārata refers to the Mahābhārata narrative. Non-English titles are spelled in accordance with the standard practice of Sanskrit transliteration, i.e., महाभारत as Mahābhārata. If a title alternatively includes Roman spellings of titles and authors, I supply them as such, i.e., महाभारत की संरचना by बच्चन सिंह as *Mahabharat ki Sanrachna* by Bachchan Singh, and not *Mahābhārata kī Saṃracanā* by Baccana Siṃha. Similarly, the TV Series महाभारत is spelled as *Mahabharat* as displayed on the screen. The terms TV Series and Series (capitalized) specifically applies to the 1988-1990 Hindi *Mahabharat* series. In addition, I defer to the recognized Roman spellings of publishers even if a particular title does not include Roman letters, i.e., गीता प्रेस as Gita Press, and not as Gītā Praisa.

References to the Critical Edition, the Vulgate, and the South Indian recension of the *Mahābhārata* follow the book, chapter, and stanza numbers, i.e., 2.56.25. References to other Sanskrit works also comply with their standard numbering patterns, for example, *Manusmṛti* as 10.15 (chapter and stanza), but *Brahmasūtra* as 2.1.11 (book, chapter, and *sūtra*). Where numbering patterns are not fixed, I cite the page numbers. References to the TV Series cite episode numbers followed by minutes; for instance, 48:37 points to a reference that occurs in episode 48 at 37th-minute. Movie references allude to hour and minutes, i.e., 1:45.

The Critical Edition of the *Mahābhārata* always punctuates the text with "।" and "॥," which I substituted with commas (,) and periods (.) respectively. The same applies to the stanzas from other sources, including the Dharmaśāstra literature. In prose, "।" represents period (.). In all other cases, I followed the printed versions. Punctuations in Hindi and Marathi excerpts also comply with the printed works. I added punctuations to the excerpts from the TV Series in accordance with the standard Hindi conventions.

Notes on transliteration

The script used for Hindi and Marathi is Devanagari. It is also predominantly used for Sanskrit. To maintain uniformity, I followed Sanskrit transliteration conventions. The following letters are found in Hindi and Marathi excerpts only.

ḳa	ḳha	ṛa	ṛha	fa	ḷa	za
क़	ख़	ड़	ढ़	फ़	ळ	ज़

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Chapter One

Introduction

The earliest extant text of India's great epic, the *Mahābhārata* (understood here as the

Critical Edition,[1] which I also refer to as "Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*" and "Vyāsa's text"), was

composed and expanded between approximately the 2nd century BCE and the 2nd century CE.[2]

In its evolution over the past two millennia, the story has undergone extensive changes. On

October 2 of 1988, Doordarshan,[3] India's national television channel, began weekly broadcast of

a series avowedly based on Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*. The *Mahabharat* series consisted of 94

episodes; the last episode was aired on June 24 of 1990. The Series was immensely popular.

Infused with powerful dialogues, it not only revitalized the Mahābhārata story in modern times,

but it also sought to contemporize[4] Vyāsa's story for modern audiences. Caste and gender

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[1] The first verifiable effort to edit the text based on manuscripts took place in the 17th century, when Nīlakaṇṭha Caturdhara, a Sanskrit scholar who wrote an expansive commentary on the *Mahābhārata*, edited a version of the epic which is now known as the Vulgate edition. In the early 20th century, Vishnu S. Sukthankar began working on a Critical Edition of the *Mahābhārata*, published in 24 volumes by the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Pune, India, between 1933 and 1970. The main difference between the two is that the former adopted an inclusive approach and the latter exclusive, relegating a large amount of material to appendixes.

[2] This is a generally accepted timeline for the composition and growth of the *Mahābhārata*. According to Vishnu S. Sukthankar, the text of the Critical Edition includes stanzas from the 2nd century BCE to the 2nd century CE (1933, CIII). Other scholars, notably Hiltebeitel (2019, 178) and Fitzgerald (2004a, xvi, note 2), favor the 2nd century BCE to the 1st century CE. Accordingly, it is reasonable to believe that the Vulgate version and the Southern recension include text composed in later centuries. The Southern recension refers to Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* as it evolved in South India.

[3] The *Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary* records the following meanings of *doordarshan* (*dūradarśana* in Sanskrit): far-sightedness, long-sightedness, foresight, and television. The term *dūra* is a Sanskrit word of unknown etymology meaning distance and *darśana*, a verbal noun from Sanskrit *dṛś* with the suffix *lyuṭ*, can denote both "the act of viewing" and "a channel of viewing." Consequently, "Doordarshan," a literal Hindi/Sanskrit translation of the English technological term television.

[4] See the last section of Appendix II.

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hierarchies were two critical issues that captured the attention of the Series' directors, producers, and writers. Naturally, contemporization involved substantial interpretation. This dissertation consists of a comparative study of the pivotal gambling match in the Dyūtaparva of Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* (Sabhāparva, chapters 43–65) and the "reconstructed screen play"[5] of five fifty-five-minute-long episodes (44 to 48) of the *Mahabharat*, the 1988-1990 series.

A comparative study of the gambling episode opens windows into several influential issues that shaped the societies of Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* and the Series. It is in the gambling episode that these issues become most accentuated. The characters, too, are at their best and worst. While Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* allows us to study the issues and characters in the earliest known story, the Series offers a contemporary fusion of various elements derived from multiple sources.

As Vyāsa reports, the Kuru dynasty was the most powerful royal house of what is now known as northern India. The dynasty frequently struggles to secure heirs to the crown. By the time of the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas (the two groups of cousins, the sons of Pāṇḍu and Dhṛtarāṣṭra respectively), the situation takes a turn for the worse. The question of heirship becomes vexed because Dhṛtarāṣṭra, as the elder brother, is the rightful heir but is bypassed on account of his congenital blindness. So, his younger brother Pāṇḍu is crowned as king. Pāṇḍu excels at expanding the boundaries of his kingdom, but he incurs a curse from a dying sage/deer whom he shot while he was mating: Pāṇḍu's own engagement in sex would end in his death. Fearful that he might fall prey to lust if he lived a life of royal luxuries, he hands over the kingdom to his blind brother and goes to the forest. While in the forest, Pāṇḍu begets five sons

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[5] See the section in this chapter on methodology for my definition of "reconstructed screen play."

on his two wives through *niyoga*, a custom that allowed a childless wife or a widow to procreate through regulated extramarital relationships. His first son Yudhiṣṭhira is born just before Duryodhana, the eldest son of Dhṛtarāṣṭra. After a few years of his sons' births, Pāṇḍu succumbs to lust and dies, and his family returns to the royal house. The ground is ready for all sorts of scandals and intrigues. Duryodhana, along with his crafty uncle Śakuni and loyal friend Karṇa, tries his best to oust, and even kill, the Pāṇḍavas, but to no avail. After foiling Duryodhana's attempt to burn them alive in an extremely combustible palace, they attend the marriage ceremony of Draupadī, the fire-born daughter of a neighboring king, and all five brothers enter into a polyandrous matrimony with her. Finally, the kingdom of the Kurus is divided in two parts, and the Pāṇḍavas immediately launch military expeditions to conquer the neighboring countries. They establish a powerful empire, and Yudhiṣṭhira formally installs himself as the emperor of the region.

This thesis concentrates on how Duryodhana's jealousy toward Yudhiṣṭhira's rise to power leads to one of the most disgraceful incidents in the Mahābhārata: how a righteous king is compelled to gamble, how a noble lady is physically and sexually humiliated in an assembly full of powerful royal dignitaries who afford her no protection, and how she maintains intellectual and emotional firmness with which she confronts her abusers. I delve into implications of such questions as: who was responsible for bringing about the gambling match; did Draupadī provoke Duryodhana to gamble; what compels the most virtuous, peaceful, and all-loving man (Yudhiṣṭhira) to engage in gambling, which was, by his own account, an evil and inherently conflictual game; did Yudhiṣṭhira have a right to stake Draupadī; what did her husbands and other powerful dignitaries do when she was being abused by the Kauravas; and what role does Draupadī play in restoring the Pāṇḍavas to their pre-game standing?

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The gambling episode is the turning point, the critical sequence that sets the disastrous events of the rest of the epic in motion. As David Shulman concludes, "all roads lead to and from the pivotal moment of the dice game (*dyūta*)" (1992, 350). There is virtually no other incident as puzzling as Draupadī's status as a free woman or slave of Duryodhana after Yudhiṣṭhira loses her in the bet. It is true that such matters as Yudhiṣṭhira's indulgence in gambling, Arjuna's reluctance to fight the final war, Kṛṣṇa's use of trickery, and Yudhiṣṭhira's lie to clear the way for Droṇa's assassination have received scholarly attention, but none of these cases remains unresolved in the *Mahābhārata*. Those who agree or disagree with these actions are clear about their views, and the law and conventions postulate no indefinite uncertainty. To my knowledge, Draupadī's status as a free woman or slave is the only question that remains unresolved, which makes it for me the most intriguing point. As such, a detailed discussion on this theme is one of the most notable features of this dissertation.

In the last two millennia, there seems to have been no time when the Mahābhārata story was not told and retold in different contexts by authors and performers of diverse backgrounds. In modern times, the television series beginning in 1988 in Hindi called *Mahabharat* (here also referred to as the Series) enthralled the television viewers in India. B. R. Chopra and his son Ravi Chopra produced and directed the Series, and Dr. Rahi Masoom Reza,[6] a noted Hindi-Urdu author, began writing the script under the guidance of Pandit Narendra Sharma, another scholar-poet of Hindi. I collectively refer to them as the creators of the Series. Pivotal to the nation's interest was the gambling episode.[7] Although the majority of those in the audiences knew the gambling story quite well, it still beset them deeply. Was the nation's fretful fascination just

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[6] Raza is the most prevalent spelling of his name, but the TV Series spells it as Reza.

[7] Mankekar 1999, 224–56; Bandlamudi 2012, 175–214.

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because the central event in the epic itself was this gambling scene or was there something new at stake related to the position of women that gripped the nation? I seek to address this question by comparing the gambling episode as portrayed in the Series and in Vyāsa's version. The dissertation is part of the most recent scholarly approach to studying the Mahābhārata, namely, the "Many Mahābhāratas" approach.

1.1 Contribution to Mahābhārata studies

Why a comparative study? There have been many tellings of the Mahābhārata throughout its long history but almost no scholarly comparisons of the gambling episode as depicted in two or more tellings.[8] What does comparison allow us to see? First, because each text (as informed by its contexts) must be studied carefully on its own before comparison is made, we might learn something new about each work individually. Second, a comparative study helps us to grasp the distinctiveness of each telling and appreciate each text in greater depth by being cognizant of similarities and differences. Third, awareness of similarities and differences call for explanations. For example, how true was the claim that the Series used the Critical Edition as its "basic source"? Were the creators of the Series rather drawing from other sources, more proximate ones, and what were these sources? Fourth, comparison of tellings and explanation of changes from different points in time help us to understand the history of the Mahābhārata tellings, and how context might have influenced the author and the text. Fifth, comparison of a text at the beginning and end of a historical continuum helps us understand why texts belong to a tradition rather than being discrete, creative works, and what the boundaries of the tradition might be.

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[8] Hiltebeitel's comparison of Vyāsa's account with the Tamil Mahābhārata tradition appears to be the only comparative analysis of the gambling episode: "The Two Sabhās: 'The Rājasūya Sacrifice' and 'Dice Match and Disrobing'" (1988, 224–81).

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Sixth, Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* is claimed by every *Mahābhārata* in its premodern history as well as in the Series to be the source and authority of the present telling. We need to understand through comparison how other tellings complicate this because they reveal differences and raise questions about authority, scholarship, conventional/popular understandings, views of history, religious identities, politicized interpretations and so forth.

Why a comparison of these two tellings of the gambling episode in particular? There are still many problems with existing scholarship on the gambling episode in Vyāsa's text. Yes, scholars have examined aspects of the gambling episode, especially Yudhiṣṭhira's decision to gamble, the complexities of Draupadī's bet, and her humiliation in the assembly hall. But such studies to date have often ignored some details that appear to be minor but in fact shed light, in my view, on key points. On occasion, some key stanzas have lost force because of superficial interpretations. This comprehensive analysis of the episode in Vyāsa's text fills that gap and offers fresh conclusions on many key points. I investigate the circumstances that brought about the disastrous gambling match. I probe into why Duryodhana was so inexorable in his demand to play a dicing game against Yudhiṣṭhira—was he too jealous of the Pāṇḍavas's rise to political supremacy and their riches and wanted to seize it all for himself in a game of gamble? Or could it be that he wanted to avenge his humiliation in Yudhiṣṭhira's palace? An understanding of why Duryodhana was hellbent on having a dice match against Yudhiṣṭhira is crucial for analyzing the differences between Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* and the Chopras' *Mahabharat*. Even more consequential in this connection is to pinpoint the individual/s who humiliated Duryodhana— was it Draupadī? Or was it someone else? Equally significant is the question of whether the game could be avoided after Yudhiṣṭhira had been challenged. If so, who could prevent its occurrence?

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A question that has frequently baffled readers and scholars alike, especially in modern times, is why Yudhiṣṭhira, the most virtuous man in the epic, engaged in a game that he and others considered evil? Was Yudhiṣṭhira's decision to accept the challenge a moral failure, and his justifications for it merely the excuses of a man under the compulsion to gamble? If not, what do his justifications tell us about him and his society? No less bewildering are Yudhiṣṭhira's excessive stakes, which sent shock waves in the gambling hall. Still more important is to understand the apparently irresolvable ethical and legal problem it entails; namely that, when Yudhiṣṭhira staked Draupadī, he had already staked and lost himself. More precisely, one might ask: did Vyāsa's epic's warrior community believe that a man, who had already become a slave of those against whom he was playing, could stake his *free* wife? The complexity of this last question confounds the assemblymen, as it has readers and audiences for centuries. Some individuals in the assembly hall do register their responses, but those responses have been assessed by later generations in accordance with the socio-cultural practices and moral sensitivities of their own times, which, in my view, have led to serious misunderstandings of Vyāsa's epic story and its characters. Three prominent scholars of the *Mahābhārata*— Madhukar Anant Mehendale (1985, 179–94), Alf Hiltebeitel (2001, 240–77), and Brian Black (2021, 115–47) have carefully analyzed Draupadī's question, but their research does not underscore the persuasive force and broader implications of her arguments. Black's analysis definitely delves deeper into Draupadī's contentions, but I still found it limited. Often it is such complex issues that generate diverse responses and thereby persuade readers to reimagine the narrative and its characters. Sometimes the narrative is changed to maintain characters' images as good or bad, and other times characters' attributes are altered to make sense of the narrative. Not only is this important to understand Vyāsa's narrative, but it is also crucial for discerning the nature of

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changes in later tellings. Through this study, I seek to make a major contribution to the

Mahābhārata studies through a thorough evaluation of scholarly expositions of the above-

mentioned issues. By focusing on both the characters and their actions as depicted by Vyāsa, I

demonstrate that the narratorial and characterological inconsistencies that earlier scholars have

noted are caused by misconceptions about either the characters or their actions.

In short, I reopen the gambling episode case as it appears in Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*

and analyze it afresh in its own socio-political context. The results are surprising and

challenge us to understand what changed, and when, and why, over the course of the epic's

history. Moreover, if the gambling episode is the most pivotal turning point in the story, as

most scholars indeed believe, a fresh understanding of it offers grounds for the rereading of

subsequent events as well.

The story and characters of the Mahābhārata are known to almost every section of the

Indian community today. Most people know it not through Vyāsa's text but through vernacular

versions often communicated via oral and visual performances, literary books, comic books,

movies, TV serials, or at best abridged versions of it. All these often introduce changes to relate

the story to the contemporary context. At the same time, it is common for things learned through

these sources to become attributed to Vyāsa, for the Mahābhārata tellings and Vyāsa's text are

traditionally fused together in the minds of many Indian people.[9] I think it is important to revisit

what people believe to be the source telling for two reasons: (1) it helps to define the boundaries

of the narrative, and (2) it can help identify the differences that developed in the course of time

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[9] It resembles Vālmīki's relationship with the Rāmāyaṇa: "For traditional readers and listeners, however, Vālmīki's authorship is ideological; they do not base their statement on empirical textual evidence. They believe that Vālmīki wrote *the* Rāmāyaṇa, *any* Rāmāyaṇa, and *every* Rāmāyaṇa" (Narayana Rao 2016, 274).

for various reasons such as simplification of complex socio-cultural issues for easy

communication and contextualization. Through this study, I seek to make a more substantive

contribution to Mahābhārata studies by assessing the merits and shortcomings of the "Many

Mahābhāratas" approach in light of theories of adaptation and appropriation, which I employ in

comparing Vyāsa's text with the Series.

1.2 Methodology

As already mentioned, this dissertation is focused on a text written in classical Sanskrit,

Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* (as represented by the Critical Edition), and the *Mahabharat*, a modern

Hindi TV series written by Reza. While the popularity and influence of these tellings justify their

selection, I also chose these works in part because I have competence in the languages involved.

I was educated in a Sanskrit medium school from childhood and earned Master of Arts and

Master of Philosophy degrees in Sanskrit. I was a researcher in a Sanskrit research institute

before moving to Canada. As for language competency to deal with the Series, Hindi is my

mother tongue, I have read widely in its literature, and I have been immersed in Hindi cinema

throughout my studies. In addition, I have some competency in Marathi and Gujrati, which have

proved useful in my research. Even though many of the resources I consulted are available in

English translations,[10] I have preferred to supply my own translations of Sanskrit, Hindi, and

Marathi sources (unless otherwise noted), as I could not always agree with the published ones.

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[10] Unless otherwise noted, the translations of all Sanskrit, Hindi, and Marathi texts that appear in this dissertation are my own. Regarding Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*, I have consulted mainly the translation of the Critical Edition of the *Mahābhārata* into English by Jacob van Buitenen (who translated books 1–5) and by James L. Fitzgerald (who resumed van Buitenen's project and translated books 11–12, though the latter remains incomplete, both translations published by the University of Chicago Press. This long-drawn-out translation project is still in process, with books 6–10 and 12–18 yet to be published. I also consulted John D. Smith's abridged one-volume translation. I have quoted their translations where I perceived them to be close to my understanding of the verses. Another partial

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My approach in textual studies follows the discipline of philology. As Jan Ziolkowski (1990, 5–6) and Sheldon Pollock (2015, 1–24) show, there has been no universally acceptable definition of philology, and its applications have been appreciated variedly in different times and disciplines. Naturally, any criticism of philology is nearly always limited to its certain definitions and features. In the context of this study, I accept Ziolkowski's description:

> [P]hilology is not just a grand etymological or lexicographic enterprise. It also involves restoring to words as much of their original life and nuances as we can manage. To read the written records of bygone civilizations correctly requires knowledge of cultural history in a broad sense: of folklore, legend, laws, and customs. Philology also encompasses the forms in which texts express their messages, and thus it includes stylistics, metrics, and similar studies. (1990, 7)

As per this characterization, a philological reading of Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* is not limited to attempting to discern the original text through comparisons of its manuscripts. It requires an understanding of the linguistic and cultural contexts in which it was created. The elements which would have been apparent to those who lived in that cultural context are not always explicit in the text and must be discovered by becoming cognizant of its larger cultural history. This is true about both Vyāsa's text and the Series.

Because I am a textualist by training, I have focused on the Series primarily through its narrative and dialogues[11] to allow for a comparative study of two texts. Although the Hindi screenplay has never been published and has not been available to me, it has been published in

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English translation of what appears to be the Vulgate is published by now defunct Clay Sanskrit Library (CSL) in conjunction with New York University Press and JJC Foundation (2006–2009), which I consulted on rare occasions only. Most recently (2022), Wendy Doniger has translated parts of the last three books of Vyāsa's text.

[11] This study does not purport to be an analysis using the methods of film studies such as semiotic analysis of formal properties—mise-en-scene, color, music, space and time, camera angles, costumes and so forth —which might reveal other aspects of the portrayal of the gambling scene in the TV Series, though my analysis of the dialogue and dramatis personae (considered formal properties) in the gambling scene will abet that formal analysis, which I leave to experts in that field.

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Marathi and English translations. I have consulted the Marathi translation by S. M. Garge and Dr. Śakuntalā Lāṭakara[12] and the English translation by Satish Bhatnagar and Shashi Magan.[13] I have refrained from using the published English translation for two reasons: it does not always capture the nuances of the Hindi dialogues, and occasionally it omits parts of dialogues. Nevertheless, having the screenplay in Marathi and English book formats allowed me to bookmark the required dialogues and thus expedited the location of them in the audio-video format. Thus, I have mainly used the dialogues as delivered in the Hindi audio-visual media—what I call my "reconstructed Hindi screenplay"—and I have translated them myself.

Because the medium of the *Mahabharat* is a television series, besides my textual study I have paid special attention to various elements of the dramatization to help me understand the interpretation of the dialogues by the team of producers/directors, scriptwriters, actors, and others. Listening to the speaker's tone and expressions and observing the visual portrayal have been enormously helpful in such situations. Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* text and the Series' reconstructed text include various voices: the narrator (Vyāsa and personified Cosmic Time), and the voices of the protagonists and antagonists. My interpretations of these voices are inspired by the phenomenological approach, which encourages an empathetic understanding without superimposing one's views on them. When analyzing these voices, I have tried to capture perspectives expressed in dialogues: I study how Duryodhana himself justifies his proposal to gamble and how Yudhiṣṭhira himself explains his decision to indulge in gambling. In times when the actions of characters apparently display a temperamentally inconsistent behaviour, I examine

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[12] Rāhī Māsūma Razā. *Mahābhārata*. Anuvādaka Sa. Mā. Garge Śakuntalā Lāṭakara. Mumbaī: Paracure-Lāṭakara Prakāśana, 1990.

[13] Rahi Masoom Reza. *The Mahabharata TV Film Script*. Translated from the Hindi of Rahi Masoom Reza into English by Satish Bhatnagar & Shashi Magan (10 vols). Calcutta, India: Writers Workshop, 1991.

such conflicting behaviour within the context of the narrative as a whole and in light of the

narrator's voice. For example, the "respected" individuals in Vyāsa's epic and the Series

consistently denounce gambling for its vicious and treacherous nature. But Yudhiṣṭhira,

consistently praised for his absolute commitment to peace and honesty, engages in it. When

discussing Yudhiṣṭhira's reasons that convinced him to participate in gambling, I suspend the

voices of the "respected" figures and pay attention to that of Yudhiṣṭhira and assess his decision

from his own perspective. In other words, I try not to impose others' "voices," including mine,

on those who speak. It is only after analyzing the individual voices that I evaluate them in the

broader context of the narrative, for the individual voices are presumably parts of the whole.

To enhance my understanding of the key points in both "texts" (*Mahābhārata* and

Mahabharat), I surveyed further sources in Sanskrit, Hindi, and Marathi. For example, to

understand the context of Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*, I consulted works related to social, political,

and family laws such as the law codes of Manu, Yājñavalkya, and Nārada, all dated sometime

between the 1st century BCE and the 5th century CE. My search for explanations of why some

elements in the Series differ from Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* took me to later tellings of the narrative

(8th century–20th century), including the major known recensions of the epic, namely, the

Southern recension ("earliest formation going back into the Cankam period" (c. 300 BCE to 300

CE); "no later than third century"; Hiltebeitel 2022, 22, 85), the Nīlakaṇṭha edition (17th

century) with his expansive Sanskrit commentary *Bhāratabhāvadīpa*, and the Gita Press edition

with Hindi translation (first published in 1955). I extensively reviewed English translations and

interpretative studies of the primary sources of the thesis. Regardless of my agreement or

disagreement with previous translations and interpretations, their influence on this study is

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unequivocally pronounced: I have used them to sharpen and strengthen the arguments presented herein with additional textual evidence.

A few words to introduce my interpretive methodology are in order. While working on this dissertation, one thing that consistently perplexed me was what I would call excessive liberties taken in interpreting Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*. For example, in some cases, textual readings have been disregarded in favour of imaginative interpretations. I have followed the maxim of Patañjali, one of the foremost authorities on Sanskrit grammar: "Word is the authority for us; whatever the word says, that is authentic for us."[14] A similar approach is advanced by Śaṅkara in his commentary on the *Brahmasūtra*s, a foundational text of Vedānta philosophy: "For this reason too, one should not contradict through logic alone something that is knowable through the text, or tradition, because logics that are based on one's sheer imagination and are divorced from the text remain unsettled, for [the range of] imagination is unrestricted."[15] According to this view, how Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* and the Series narrate the story and its characters can be best understood by taking Vyāsa's narrative and the portrayal and dialogues of the Series seriously. Logic and secondary sources are only means of expanding the scope of one's understanding of them. Ultimately it is the text that is the authority. So, the validity of a logic depends on its cogent relationship with the text. Such a relationship restrains one from disregarding what is stated in the text and from imagining what is not in the text (*śrutahāni* and *aśrutakalpanā*, *dṛṣṭahāni* and *adṛṣṭakalpanā*). In addition, I heeded Bhartṛhari's advice in terms of the factors that determine the meanings of a text (Bhartṛhari 1980, 2.314–16). For,

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[14] *śabdapramāṇakā vayam, yac chabda āha tad asmākaṃ pramāṇam* (Patañjali 1999, 66).

[15] *itaś ca nāgamagamye 'rthe kevalena tarkeṇa pratyavasthātavyam, yasmān nirāgamāḥ puruṣōtprekṣāmātranibandhanās tarkā apratiṣṭhitā bhavanti, utprekṣāyā niraṅkuśatvāt* (Śaṅkara on *Brahmasūtra* 2.1.11).

interpretation and logic if not substantiated by relevant material cannot be sufficient to prove or

disprove an interpretation (Bhartṛhari 1963, 1.30–34). Therefore, my approach is adherence to

the text to the degree possible.

The authority of the text is of great consequence in connection with how I treat Vyāsa's

text. Sometimes the text contains conflicting accounts of the same episode. In such cases, I relied

on the philological approach to discern layers of textual evolution. Indeed, the Critical Edition is

a singular text, and some scholars (Hiltebeitel, for example) believe it to have been composed

largely as such. But even Sukthankar confessed that the Critical Edition represents an

amalgamation of old and new texts. The Critical Edition mentions that Vyāsa composed his story

and taught it to his five disciples, who in turn, wrote their own versions (1.57.74–75). Vyāsa

seems to have preferred Vaiśaṃpāyana's version, whom he authorizes to tell the story to

Janamejaya, the great grandson of Arjuna (1.1.18). Ugraśravas Sūta heard it from Vaiśaṃpāyana

and retold it to a gathering of sages (1.1.1–19). Even though Vyāsa's version cannot be singled

out from the present text, the text has retained some, even if very little, distinction between

Vaiśaṃpāyana's and Sūta's texts. Accordingly, I believe Vaiśaṃpāyana's text is older, which

Sūta expands. Hence, in cases of conflicting versions, my analysis emphasizes the differences in

textual layers.

My interpretations of the Series are dialogue-centered. I carefully examined the entire

Series to determine the contextual accuracy of my interpretation. To infer the probable intentions

of the directors and screenwriters, I explored the personal and social background of B. R.

Chopra, the leading director and producer, and Rahi Masoom Reza, the script and dialogue

writer. I also studied movies and literature produced by them.[16] Both Chopra and Reza were

known for producing socially relevant material. I explored essays and novels by Reza and poems

by Narendra Sharma, the intellectual backbone of the Series. Moreover, because the Series

incorporates ideas from several sources, I examined literary and critical works that I suspected

might have influenced its storyline. Also, I had personal conversations with three actors of the

Series—Mukesh Khanna (Bhīṣma), Pankaj Dheer (Karṇa), and Puneet Issar (Duryodhana)—and

Lavanya Shah, daughter of Sharma, to gain an understanding of the making of the Series.

I must also mention some of the limitations of my interpretative perspectives. Much of

modern scholarship on the *Mahābhārata* delves into its philosophical and mythological

backgrounds. I have mostly overlooked such interpretations because of their irrelevance for this

comparative study. The Series views the Mahābhārata story as a description of historical

accounts and never implies philosophical nuances in ordinary situations; it advances its

interpretations with a belief in the historicity of the Mahābhārata story and focusses primarily on

legal, down-to-earth implications of socio-political themes.

Both Vyāsa's text (1.1.60) and the TV Series (episode 1, opening remarks) view the story

of the Mahābhārata as a conflict between good and evil forces,[17] represented by the Pāṇḍavas and

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[16] Some examples include B. R. Chopra's *Naya Daur* (1957), *Dhool Ka Phool* (1959), *Dharamputra* (1961), *Gumrah* (1963), *Karm* (1977), *Insaaf Ka Tarazu* (1980), *Nikaah* (1982); and Razā's *Karz* (1980), *Hum Paanch* (1980), *Parampara* (1992). Novels and essays by Reza include *1857: Kranti-katha* (1965), *Adha Gaon* (1966), *Topi Shukla* (1969), *Os Ki Boond* (1970), *Scene No. 75* (1977), and *Lagta Hai Bekar Gaye Ham* (1999).

[17] In the *Mahābhārata*, Vyāsa narrated the "greatness of Vāsudeva [Kṛṣṇa], the truthfulness of the Pāṇḍavas, and the evildoing of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sons" (*vāsudevasya māhātmyaṃ pāṇḍavānāṃ ca satyatām, durvṛttaṃ dhārtarāṣṭrāṇām uktavān bhagavān ṛṣiḥ*) (1.1.60). The opening remarks of Cosmic Time, the narrator of the TV Series, include: "This Mahābhārata is not a plain and simple war saga of the Bharata dynasty only. This story is about the rise and fall of Indian culture; this story is about a great battle between truth and dishonesty; this is a story of the light that contends against darkness" (*ye mahābhārata kevala bharatavaṃśa kī koī sīdhī sādī yuddhakathā nahīṃ hai; ye kathā hai bhāratīya saṃskṛti ke utāra-caṛhāva kī, ye kathā hai satya aura asatya ke mahāyuddha kī, ye kathā hai andhere se jūjhane vāle ujāle kī.*) (episode 1).

the Kauravas, respectively. At the same time, both the narratives and the reception history of
these sources complicate the interpretation of various characters, including four main characters
who dominate the subject of this dissertation: Yudhiṣṭhira, Draupadī, Duryodhana, and Karṇa.
As far as their modern portrayals are concerned, the diversity and complexity of their characters
make it impossible to group them into good versus bad camps. This study does not examine their
overall personas across the tradition. Instead, I focus on how Vyāsa and the creators of the TV
Series depict them. Inasmuch as the very first existing source of our knowledge about these
characters is Vyāsa's epic, and it is the primary source of my discussion about them, I am left
with their images as Vyāsa has described them. It is true that Vyāsa's version presents different
shades in their characters, and it would be unfair to categorically view them as unconditionally
good or bad, but it cannot be denied that their overall images painted by Vyāsa are well defined.
One can say with confidence that Vyāsa's Yudhiṣṭhira and Draupadī belong to the good camp,
and Duryodhana and Karṇa lead the evil side. When I portray them as such, I yield to Vyāsa's
authority. But the picture becomes more complicated in the TV Series. A long tradition of
Mahābhārata stories preceded it, and we have access to much of it. While I acknowledge the
complex evolution of their characters, my description of them here is based on the authors of my
primary sources and is limited to these contexts.

Similarly, this comparative study focuses on one single episode of the Mahābhārata, and
the analysis presented herein does not apply to the TV Series in every respect. Even though it
incorporates considerable material relevant to various modern socio-political themes in Indian
context, the TV Series is an admirable example of adaptation. And I am in complete agreement
with Robert Goldman that it captures the "essence" of the Mahābhārata. In the context of
contemporary understanding of the gambling episode, the TV Series' portrayal of it undisputedly

falls within the tradition. But this study takes two points into consideration: the TV Series' claim that its "basic source" is the Critical Edition of Vyāsa's epic, and its creators' declaration that they aimed to stress the issues related to gender and caste. Thus, I assess the Series' presentation in two respects: what are the differences between the two texts, and can those differences be viewed as reasonable in accordance with the principles of adaptation and the above-mentioned goal of the Series' creators.

1.3 Literature review

There is an extensive body of secondary literature on the Mahābhārata tradition, one that corresponds to the size and influence of this tradition itself. Yet there is a critical lacuna within this scholarship. In the review of literature that follows, I focus on the scholarship most relevant to the central focus of this study, namely, the gambling episode as depicted in the Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* and the Series.

Given the Mahābhārata's ubiquitous influence in India—poetry, drama, performative arts, politics, television, cinema—the Mahābhārata has been, along with the Rāmāyaṇa, identified as a tradition. On the diversity of the Mahābhārata tradition, Nell Shapiro Hawley and Sohini Sarah Pillai released an edited volume in 2021. Titled "Many Mahābhāratas," it includes analysis of the epic in as diverse traditions as Vyāsa's telling, classical Sanskrit poetry, contemporary Indian stage drama, politics, regional works, religious tellings, Hindi literature, and even how it is incorporated in cinema's science-fiction genre. My comparative examination of the gambling episode in two major works will contribute to the "Many Mahābhāratas" model to scholarship on the epic, because the approach takes a stance on some important theoretical and methodological issues. This dissertation will also contribute to critical reflections on this

approach, which was first formulated in studies of the Rāmāyana. I provided a detailed analysis

of the development of the "Many Rāmāyanas" method in Chapter Two.

Despite scholars' acknowledgment of the significance of the gambling episode in the

story and the manner in which audiences of the Series, especially women, who saw their own

vulnerabilities in those of Draupadī, reacted to it, there is little research on the gambling episode

in the Series, aside from some attention by scholars active in media and social studies. Lakshmi

Bandlamudi, for example, studies the impact of Draupadī's treatment in the gambling hall on the

audience watching the Series. It is an excellent treasury of information on the audience's reaction

to Draupadī's treatment. Purnima Mankekar's study of Draupadī's disrobing focuses on how

nationalists in the fight for Indian independence imaged women in service of the nation and

society (1999, 224–56).

To avoid redundancy, I here give an overview of scholarship related to the incidents that

take place in the gambling episode only: how the gambling match came about, Yudhiṣṭhira's

decision to participate in it, which results in the Pāṇḍavas' enslavement to Duryodhana, and the

wager of Draupadī and her challenge to the wager. I also review some writings that analyze the

Mahabharat series. Inasmuch as the *Mahabharat* indisputably displays strong influence of

popular writings and performances, I cite a few names of what I believe must have had an impact

on the storyline and interpretations of the *Mahabharat*. Although I do assess the arguments and

conclusions put forward in independent journal articles in the main body of the dissertation, I

only mention some of them in this review section.

Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee published a two-volume collection of Alf

Hiltebeitel's essays. The second volume—*When the Goddess Was a Woman: Mahābhārata*

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Ethnographies— Essays by Alf Hiltebeitel (2011b)—is arranged thematically. The first part is dedicated to Hiltebeitel's fascinating study of Draupadī's treatment in the Sanskrit epic as well as in folklore and literature. In the first chapter, Hiltebeitel surveys the theme of Draupadī's hair from its earliest adaptation *Veṇīsaṃhāra* by a North Indian Sanskrit dramatist Bhaṭṭa Nārāyaṇa (675–725 CE) to the 20th-century adaptations in South India. The essay discusses Draupadī's disheveled hair in the broader context of notions of purity and impurity (especially menstrual blood),[18] and rejects the perception that Draupadī's vow to keep her hair unbraided until her humiliation has been avenged was unknown to Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*. The chapter closes with a mythological interpretation of the incident—Draupadī is symbolic of Earth—which Hiltebeitel further elaborates in the subsequent chapter with the suggestion that the disrobing scene and Draupadī's covering with miraculously appearing garments symbolizes the Earth's "regeneration and rebirth" (2011b, 48–51). In chapter four, Hiltebeitel uses the episode of Draupadī's violation in the dicing scene, with a focus on hair and garments as "primary symbols," to illustrate further the concept of purity/auspiciousness versus impurity/inauspiciousness in the epic. In addition to the above-mentioned chapters that explore the subject through intensive examination of the Sanskrit text, Hiltebeitel also examines the theme of Draupadī's hair and garment as it is perceived in folklore and texts such as the Tamil *Pāratam* (15th century), which informs, in differing degrees, the major South Indian theatrical performances of the epic.

Hiltebeitel's analysis of what is known as "Draupadī's question" in *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King* (2001) is an outstanding study of the subject. While I reservedly agree with his assertion that "it is the question's

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[18] Hiltebeitel further explores this in his fourth chapter, titled "Purity and Auspiciousness in the Sanskrit Epics" (2011b, 83–99).

insolubility and the impasses it opens that provoke the two violent scenes of Draupadī's hair-pulling and disrobing" (241), I critique in the dissertation his interpretations of some scenes and arguments. That said, I find Hiltebeitel's works on the cult of Draupadī highly informative, especially his comparative study of the gambling episode as described in Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* and the Tamil *Villipāratam*, "The Two Sabhās: 'Rājasūya Sacrifice' and 'Dice Match and Disrobing'" (1988, 224–81).

Yudhiṣṭhira's decision to gamble is examined in Emily Hudson's literary evaluation of the epic, *Disorienting Dharma: Ethics and the Aesthetics of Suffering in the Mahābhārata* (2013). Her notion of "aesthetic suffering" involves two theories. First, she asserts that the "central characters in the *Mahābhārata* are flawed human beings, torn by conflict and confused by reality; their frailties and confusions often lead them into various predicaments that are marked by sorrow and grief" (29). To illustrate her point, she frequently cites Yudhiṣṭhira's "bad" decision to gamble. The second theory of the "conceptual categories" highlights the epic's strategy to keep the sensitive reader/audience absorbed in the narrative by outlining the nature of such categories as heaven, hell, gods, fate, human agency, and *dharma* (socio-religious and moral obligations), and then by complicating them, which leads to assertions such as *dharma* is subtle. Again, it is Yudhiṣṭhira's struggle to gamble or not to gamble that provides a good example. The reader feels drawn to Yudhiṣṭhira for his commitment to *dharma* but alienated from him for his participation in an *adharmic* game. Hudson argues that this narrative strategy of "orienting" and "disorienting" is used to reorient the reader "to a deeper understanding of *dharma*, one that is divested of all self-oriented pretenses"; that is, *dharma* should be performed "for the sake of nothing" (32).

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A noteworthy addition to the psycho-philosophical analysis of the epic characters is *Exploring Agency in the Mahābhārata: Ethical and Political Dimensions of Dharma* (2018). Edited by Sibesh Chandra Bhattacharya, Vrinda Dalmiya, and Gangeya Mukherji, the book opens with an illuminating introduction by the latter two editors. Amita Chatterjee quotes Donald Davidson: "A person is an agent of an event if and only if there is a description of what he did that makes true a sentence that says he did it intentionally" (47) and that "[a]n agent's will is weak if he acts, acts intentionally, counter to his own best judgment" (50). Chatterjee applies this approach to assessing Yudhiṣṭhira's agency in making the decision to engage in gambling: Yudhiṣṭhira thought through the morality and decisively disastrous consequences of gambling against Śakuni, but "he ignored this judgment and, contrary to his best reason, acted in accordance with his preference" (ibid.). Hence, she sees Yudhiṣṭhira as an agent, who is guilty of intentionally engaging in an act that he should have avoided.

Kevin McGrath's *Strī: Women in Epic Mahābhārata* (2009) provides a textually rigorous analysis of women with special attention to their roles as wife, daughter-in-law, and mother in the heroic (*Kṣatriya*) culture of the epic. McGrath's study of the epic's female characters focuses mainly on two dimensions: the notion of femininity and the effective power of women's speech. Even though McGrath's textual analysis offers a remarkably lucid account of the major epic heroines, both themes—the concept of femininity and the efficacy of women's speech—remain vague, underdeveloped, and even erroneous. For example, he corroborates his description of women as speakers of truth in times of dharmic disharmony with a quote: "a woman, in the presence of her parents-in-law, instructs the servants, and having summoned the husband, talking, rebukes him" (2009, 154, note 1). As a matter of fact, the epic cites this as an example of woman's indecorous, adharmic action. The best example to demonstrate a woman's ability to

speak "truth" when even influential men fail to articulate it would have been Draupadī's bold

challenge to her status as a slave of the Kurus, of which McGrath is fully aware (ibid. 124–25).

In *Rāja Yudhiṣṭhira* (2017), McGrath oversimplifies the most contentious issue of the

gambling episode, that is, whether Draupadī was won by the Kauravas, or not. In order to

demonstrate that the gambling proceedings were in conformity to what he views as "the culture

and protocol of kingship and court life," and that "[t]here is consensus as to conventional

behaviour concerning conduct in a *sabhā* where Draupadī was won *dharmeṇa* 'by right'"

(2.60.20) (67), he maintains that the transgression of this propriety happens only "when Draupadī

is treated contemptuously and improperly and made abject when she was *rajasvalā*

'menstruant'" (ibid.). Regrettably, the quote is from Duḥśāsana, an accomplice of the "winning"

party, whom Draupadī challenges vehemently, and it remains, according to most scholars, except

Mehendale, unresolved until the very end of the first game, namely, the next four chapters (2.60–

64).

Simon Brodbeck's *The Mahābhārata Patriline: Gender, Culture and the Royal

Hereditary* (2009) discusses women's roles strictly in the context of the lineages as portrayed in

the Critical Edition. Interestingly, he suggests that the destruction of Śaṃtanu's descendants was

unleashed on account of the menstruating Draupadī's involvement in a man's ritual, the dicing

match, because "menstruating women may not attend" it (33, note 10). This is a highly

speculative extrapolation of the scriptural pronouncement that a menstruating woman should not

attend a ritual. He asserts the unconventional nature of his interpretive methods and seems to

express his apprehension that they might not be welcomed by Mahābhārata scholars. This

ambitious study is without doubt an impressive display of erudite scholarship, but occasionally

its more speculative interpretations distort the narrative itself, as in the example of Draupadī's

role in the destruction of the Kurus.

No other reading offers as close an examination of part of my subject as Brian Black's *In Dialogue with the Mahābhārata* (2020). The third chapter "Duryodhana's despair/Yudhiṣṭhira's decision" discusses the events that lead Duryodhana to challenge Yudhiṣṭhira to the gambling match and the latter's decision to accept the challenge in light of the limitations that fate apparently imposes on human agency. Black's exhaustive probe into Y's justifications—which number, according to him, six in all—is outstanding. His investigation compelled me to modify my reading and address certain issues. In addition, I appreciated how in his chapter on Draupadī's question he rightly draws attention to her intellectual abilities that she displays not only through the question she poses to challenge her enslavement but also through her further counterarguments as the discussion unfolds. I especially acknowledge his reference to how Draupadī emerges victorious—she clears the way for her husbands' emancipation and her own autonomy.[19]

Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black's (eds.) *Gender and Narrative in the Mahābhārata* (2007) is a collection of eleven marvelous essays on a wide variety of gender issues, but the issues specifically connected with the gambling episode are rarely discussed. Of particular interest is the essay by Laurie Patton, who explores the implications of Draupadī's dialogues

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[19] Approximately a year after I submitted parts of my dissertation to my thesis supervisors, Brian Black's *In Dialogue with the Mahābhārata* (2020) was published. Two chapters of the book discuss two major themes that I explore in the third and fourth chapters of this dissertation. Given that we both deal with Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* with closely related questions, our analyses and conclusions are similar. Even if much of the content of my dissertation remains unaltered, Black's work directed my attention to some alternative interpretations and thus helped me finetune my arguments. Moreover, the dissertation expounds many key points in considerably greater details than Black's work.

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with two other women—Satyabhāmā and Sudeṣṇā, the wives of Kṛṣṇa and Virāṭa respectively. In her dialogue with Satyabhāmā, Draupadī extols the virtues of a devoted wife, and yet she employs her keen awareness of the power dynamics between her and her husbands to exercise strength and authority. Looking at different aspects of Draupadī's character thus allows Patton to see her beyond the singular category of woman. She is a multifaceted character, who alternates "between fierceness and meekness, savvy and servitude, authority and submission" (ibid. 104). Nancy Falk explores similar contradictory aspects of Draupadī in her essay titled "Draupadī and the Dharma" (1977, 89–114). Falk's broad, multifaceted hermeneutical approach to Draupadī's complex character is based on different aspects of her character that emerge in different contexts.

Beyond these books, some aspects of the gambling episode have been discussed by several other scholars in independent essays. These include, for example, Mary Brockington (2001, 2009), Sally Sutherland (1989), and Mehendale (1985, 1997). I have given them due consideration in my analysis.

Soon after Draupadī's wager, she becomes a central focal point of Vyāsa's epic. Many modern readers have interpreted the gambling episode in terms of women's rights within the patriarchal framework of the epic's Kṣatriya community. But the gambling episode is much more than that. As I see it, the gambling incident establishes, for the very first time, Yudhiṣṭhira as the hero of Vyāsa's epic and highlights Draupadī's intellectual acuteness and psychological strength. Therefore, my study is not exclusively about women's position and rights; rather, it is primarily about the conventional Kṣatriya obligations, Yudhiṣṭhira's decision to gamble, the Kauravas' envy and cruelty, slavery, and Draupadī's interrogation of the underlying moral and legal issue in the gambling episode. Nevertheless, I should like to mention a few works that I consulted in this regard: *Moral Dilemmas in the Mahābhārata* by Bimal Krishna Matilal (ed.) (1989); *Faces of*

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the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India by Mandakranta Bose (ed.) (2000);

Destiny and Human Initiative in the Mahābhārata by Julian Woods (2001); *Jewels of Authority:*

Women and Textual Tradition in Hindu India by Laurie Patton (ed.) (2002); *Slavery and South*

Asian History by Indrani Chatterjee and Richard Eaton (eds.) (2006); *Woman as Fire, Woman as*

Sage by Arti Dhand (2008); *Women in Dharmaśāstras* by Chandrakala Padia (ed.) (2009); and

Women in the Hindu Tradition: Rules, Roles and Exceptions by Mandakranta Bose (2010).

With regards to the depiction of the gambling episode in the Series, Bhattacharya

analyzes it and offers comparisons with Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*. But it is a perfunctory

comparison of Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*—the English translation of five fifty-five-minute-long TV

episodes covers just over a hundred pages (vol. 5, 52–153), but its analysis by Bhattacharya is

limited to seven pages (vol. 10, 149–55). It fails to scratch the surface of the many issues that

make this short episode the central event of the narrative. Not a single word is spent on the

incident of Duryodhana's mockery by Draupadī, which is, according to the Series, the major

cause of the gambling match. Two studies particularly deserve acknowledgement: Purnima

Mankekar's essay "Television Tales, National Narratives, and a Woman's Rage: Multiple

Interpretations of Draupadi's 'Disrobing'" (1999, 224–56) and Bandlamudi's *Dialogics of Self,*

the Mahabharata and Culture: The History of Understanding and Understanding of History

(2012). While the former offers reliable insights into the viewpoints of the Series' creative

team—mainly B. R. Chopra and Reza—as well as audiences' responses to it, the latter applies

Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas on the nature of the relations between a text and its readers, art and lived

experience, past and present, and so forth. I use them both as excellent resources to understand

the narrative as depicted in the *Mahabharat*. Suddhabrata Sen Gupta, an artist and writer, wrote a

short analysis of the Series' portrayal of Draupadī's humiliation in the gambling hall and did

allude to Vyāsa's text. In "Sexual Politics of Television Mythology" (1991), Gupta insists that Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayana* and the Chopras' *Mahabharat* constituted "the material for a popular culture of Hindu fascism" and "were faithful to the gender bias of sources of their ideological inspiration" (2559). In this environment, "the articulation of the new cult of male gods" resulted in "the complete and total subversion of any dissenting voice within the female characters, be it Gandhari's lament or Sita's anger or even the agony of someone as rebellious as Draupadi" (ibid.). But for Janaky, such a view is based on a "fallacious" presumption, "that there is an 'original' dynamic Draupadi who has been cut down to 'passive' size by B R [*sic*] Chopra" (Janaky 1992, 1998). As I argue, the character of Draupadī cannot be limited to these two strictly defined types. Sanjoy Majumder barely touches on Draupadī's humiliation in his review essay "From Ritual Drama to National Prime Time: *Mahabharata*, India's Televisual Obsession" (1996), nor does Marie Gillespie in "Sacred serials, devotional viewing, and domestic worship: A case-study in the interpretation of two TV versions of *The Mahabharata* in a Hindu family in west London" (1995a).

The *Mahabharat* series garnered relatively more attention in the field of media studies, which focuses on the socio-political implications of the Series' broadcasting on the government-sponsored national television channel. Some notable works that remark on the *Mahabharat*'s influence on India's socio-political and religious discourses and identities are Anand Mitra's *Television and Popular Culture: A Study of the Mahabharat* (1993), K. Moti Gokulsing's *Soft-Soaping India: The World of Indian Televised Soap Operas* (2004), Arvind Rajgopal's *Politics After Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public* (2001), Shanti Kumar's *Gandhi Meets Primetime: Globalization and Nationalism in Indian Television* (2006), Krishna Chaitanya's "The Mahabharata and its Filmic Transposition" (1990), Barbara Stoler

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Miller's "Contending Narratives: The Political Life of the Indian Epics" (1991), and Sujala

Singh's "The Epic (On) Tube: Plumbing the Depths of History: A Paradigm for Viewing the TV

Serialization of the Mahabharata" (1998). Heidi Pauwels' *The Goddess as Role Model: Sītā and*

Rādhā in Scripture and on Screen (2008) presents a survey of how the images of Sītā and Rādhā

undergo changes in matters of love, wifehood, devotion, and womanhood. The book does not

specifically speak of Draupadī but the *Mahabharat* series' elaborate treatment of Rādhā's

romantic relationship with Kṛṣṇa, which does not occur in the Critical Edition, allows Pauwels to

incorporate the Series' viewpoints.

In sum, one finds an intriguing but patchwork body of scholarship on the gambling scene

in the Sanskrit epic and the Series. Vyāsa's description of Draupadī's forceful contention to

Yudhiṣṭhira's right to stake her and her enslavement has attracted considerable scholarly

attention. Most recently Black has analyzed how Duryodhana's experience of Yudhiṣṭhira's

political supremacy and unmatched prosperity triggers unbearable jealousy in Duryodhana's

heart which leads him to challenge Yudhiṣṭhira to play a gambling match. He also thoroughly

analyzed Yudhiṣṭhira's justifications to accept the challenge. But no scholarly comparison of

Vyāsa's description of the gambling episode with any modern retelling of the same exists. In a

time when investigations into the multiplicity of the Mahābhārata have acquired greater

academic drive, this comparative study fills that gap.

1.4 Chapter map

In the second chapter, I set the context of this study by analyzing the methodological approach of the "Many Mahābhāratas."[20] This approach evolves from A. K. Ramanujan's forceful idea that the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata are not singular texts but rather diverse traditions, and that these have constantly been influential in the evolution of India's heterogenous culture. He rejects, and rightly so, the idea that one can fully appreciate Indian civilization based only on what are often labelled as "original" texts. This chapter highlights the many benefits of this approach in the study of the Mahābhārata and the contributions that have been made in recent scholarship. It seeks to build on this progress by clarifying both the strengths and weaknesses of this approach, and specifically how greater attention to narratorial boundaries leads to a more nuanced appreciation for the dynamics of the Mahābhārata tradition.

The next three chapters (Chapters 3, 4 and 5) are organized chronologically. The themes that emerge in these chapters are discussed in the sequence in which they appear within the narrative. This allows me to follow the story closely and address major similarities and differences as informed by their context. The sixth chapter focuses on what has often been recognized as "Draupadī's question" to the assembly. As she is humiliated and assaulted in the Sabhā, Draupadī resiliently challenges the validity of the bet. In each of these chapters, I first summarize and analyze the story as described in Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* represented by the Critical Edition. Each summary and analysis of Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* is followed by a summary of the same episode as portrayed in the *Mahabharat* series. I bring together my findings

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[20] The terms method, approach, a framework, and theory in this case are pertinent to a most recent subfield of the Mahābhārata studies, which is guided by the "Many Rāmāyaṇas" studies.

regarding the similarities and differences in the conclusion of each chapter and interpret their larger significance.

Chapter 3 documents Duryodhana's experiences in Yudhiṣṭhira's palace in Indraprastha, which was known to have deceptively ultrarealistic appearances. There Duryodhana suffers many mishaps and is made fun of. This chapter serves as a foundation for all subsequent chapters because herein I deliberate on the nature of events and actions of characters that lead to the gambling match. It is also in this chapter that the narratorial and characterological differences between Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* and the Series are so radical that their presence is constantly felt at almost every step of the remaining chapters. The focus on Duryodhana's jealousy of Yudhiṣṭhira's riches and political ascendancy and the former's humiliation by certain individuals are two notable features that set Vyāsa's text and the Series apart.

The fourth chapter deals mainly with two points. Why did Duryodhana want to challenge Yudhiṣṭhira to a game of dice, and why did Yudhiṣṭhira accept it? The events surveyed in the third chapter play a decisive role in bringing about the gambling match, and the differences between Vyāsa's text and the Series seem to undermine the creators' objective to stress the issues of women in modern India. I suggest that deficiencies in earlier scholarly interpretations of Vyāsa's depiction and changes in the Series drastically alter our perceptions of Draupadī, Yudhiṣṭhira, Duryodhana, and Karṇa.

The fifth chapter reflects on the two most troubling parts of the story: Yudhiṣṭhira's staking of Draupadī and her resulting humiliation. I explore such issues as how people in the assembly hall react to Yudhiṣṭhira's wagering of Draupadī; who supports Draupadī when she

challenges the bet; and how it is that no one, including her husbands and the powerful monarchs present in the assembly hall, protect her against public humiliation.

The sixth chapter deals with what is known as Draupadī's question. No one has, as far as I know, provided sustained analysis of Draupadī's arguments,[21] which she delivers with great intellectual sensibility. Even though the epic has preserved her contribution, later authors and critics generally do not take note of her own statements. This chapter sheds new light on how Draupadī becomes the lifesaving boat that sails her husbands across the ocean of gambling (a metaphor used by Karṇa in Vyāsa's text).

The concluding chapter places this comparative study in the larger context of the "Many Mahābhāratas" methodological approach and offers my assessment of the benefits and limits of such an approach. It also summarizes the main contributions of the thesis.

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[21] Even though Hiltebeitel writes a chapter on Draupadī's question (2001, 240–77), he, too, does not offer an in-depth analysis of Draupadī's arguments. See also Black 2021, 128–31.

Chapter Two

The "Many Mahābhāratas" Model: An Appraisal

Recent scholarship on the Mahābhārata has adopted a new approach.[1] In some ways, it is not so new because it extends what can be called the "Many Rāmāyaṇas" model, promoted in recent decades by several scholars. Because my work falls into this category, given its comparison of two Mahābhāratas, it is important to examine this approach to clarify my perspectives on it.

2.1 "Many Rāmāyaṇas": the origins

The idea of "Many Rāmāyaṇas" was proposed at a time when the discipline of Indian studies was dominated by Sanskritists, and India's cultural history was generally believed to have been best preserved in the Sanskrit literary tradition. Because this led to the neglect of vernacular traditions, folk literature, and performance traditions, it was timely to appreciate India's multifaceted culture. Scholars such as A. K. Ramanujan, Paula Richman, Philip Lutgendorf, and V. Narayana Rao have been leading figures in this field. This led to an important shift in the study of Indian literature and culture to open the field to include the study of post-classical retellings in regional languages and diverse performance genres.

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[1] The diversity of the Mahābhārata narrative has been discussed in a few books: *The Mahabharata in the Tribal and Folk Traditions of India* by K.S. Singh (1994), *Essays on the Mahābhārata* by Arvind Sharma (editor) (1991), *Bhīloṃ kā Bhāratha (Bhili Mahabharat)* by Bhagwandas Patel and Mrudula Pareek (2000), *Bhārata meṃ Mahābhārata* (The Mahābhārata in India) by Prabhakar Shrotriya (2014), and *Great Indian Epics: International Perspectives* by Udayanath Sahoo and Shobha Rani Dash (editors) (2022).

"Many Mahābhāratas": An Appraisal

The pioneer of this approach was Ramanujan (1929–1993). Born in a Tamil Brahmin family in Karnataka, South India, he was a renowned poet, translator, linguist, folklorist, and cultural anthropologist.[2] Proficient in Tamil, Kannada, and English, he earned a doctoral degree in linguistics from Indiana University and then joined the University of Chicago in 1962. Wendy Doniger has commented that this was at "a time when Indian literature meant Sanskrit, and Sanskrit meant Greek and Latin" (Doniger 1999, 3). Moreover, "[l]ong before it was politically respectable, let alone politically correct, to study the works of women, or of 'illiterate' peasants, Raman valued their poetry and their stories" (ibid.), leading to the view that "the study of South Asia is inseparable from the study of its folklore" (Blackburn and Dundes 1999, 348). He has been applauded for his many scholarly contributions to Indological studies:

> A. K. Ramanujan was one of those thinkers, like Freud (whom he greatly, though not uncritically, admired), who so transform our way of looking at a subject that we are in danger of undervaluing their contribution, since we have come to take for granted precisely what they taught us, as we view the subject through their eyes. […][3] He gave us so many new paradigms that no Indologist can now think about India without thinking through his thoughts. (Doniger 1999, 3)

Through his keen, culturally sensitive anthropological interest, Ramanujan brought folk narratives to prominence. He opens his essay "Three Hundred *Rāmāyaṇas*: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation" (1991) with a question: "How many *Rāmāyaṇas*? Three hundred? Three thousand?" He points out that the story has been divergently retold in different formats and styles (epics, Purāṇas, poetry, plays, dance-dramas, and other performances, paintings, sculptures and so forth) in all South Asian and some Southeast Asian regions and

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[2] Ramanujan's major works, including translations and co-authored titles, are: *The Striders* (1966), *The Interior Landscape* (1967), *Relations* (1971), *Speaking of Śiva* (1973), *The Literatures of India*, edited with Edwin Gerow (1974), *Selected Poems* (1976), *Samskara* (1976), *Hymns for the Drowning* (1981), *Poems of Love and War* (1985), *Second Sight* (1986), *Folktales from India* (1991), and *When God Is a Customer* (1994).

[3] Because some excerpts include … in the original, […] indicates that I omitted parts of the citation.

languages, including Balinese, Cambodian, Chinese, Javanese, Kashmiri, Khotanese, Malaysian, and Thai.

Ramanujan explains that he prefers "the word *tellings* to the usual terms *versions* or *variants* because the latter terms can and typically do imply that there is an invariant, an original or *Ur*-text—usually Vālmīki's Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa*, the earliest and most prestigious of them all," which does not usually manifest in different "tellings" (Ramanujan 1991, 24–25). He distinguishes between the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Rāmakathā* (Rāma's story). The former is an epithet of Vālmīki's telling which in many cases is applied to other very similar retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, even though these retellings may not label themselves thus. But Ramanujan thinks it more appropriate to consider them as Rāma stories. This distinction between the two allows him to hold them as two different genres, which guide the expectations and reasons for engaging with them.

Ramanujan's emphasis on valuing both the classical textual tradition and oral and written regional narratives springs from the fact that the culture of South Asia is nurtured on both and therefore cannot be fully appreciated by focusing on one only:

> Stereotypes, foreign views, and native self-images on the part of some groups all tend to regard one part (say, the brahmanical texts or folklore) as the original, and the rest as variations, derivatives, aberrations, so we tend to get monolithic conceptions. But the civilisation, if it can be described at all, has to be described in terms of all these dynamic interrelations between different traditions, their texts, ideologies, social arrangements, and so forth. Reflexivities are crucial to the understanding of both the order and diversity, the openness and the closures, of this civilisation. (Ramanujan 1999, 9)

In the context of the Rāmāyaṇa tradition, Ramanujan is referring to Vālmīki's Sanskrit narrative against which the merits of later Rāma stories were compared by the Sanskrit philologists. But Sanskrit has mainly been a language of the educated elite, and it was beyond the reach of

common people. Therefore, ordinary Indians primarily learned, and continue to learn, about the epic narratives through the language they speak or understand. An aspiration to bring the Sanskrit narratives to common people might have been the main motive for the innumerable productions in all major vernacular languages. The all-pervading nature of the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata narratives led Ramanujan to declare, "No Hindu ever reads the *Mahābhārata* for the first time. And when he does get to read it, he doesn't usually read it in Sanskrit. As one such native, I know the Hindu epics, not as a Sanskritist (which I am not), but through Kannada and Tamil, mostly through the oral traditions" (1991b, 419).

Ramanujan introduces three kinds of relationship between a text/story and its tellings. *Iconic*, *indexical*, and *symbolic.* Faithful representations of the source text such as translations and abridged tellings in different styles and formats represent *iconic* relationship. *Indexical* relationship includes tellings that are faithful to the source text but also introduce "local detail, folklore, poetic traditions, imagery, and so forth," which make it relatable to audiences living in different socio-cultural and environmental settings than those of the source text. A telling that bears a s*ymbolic* relationship with the source story uses "the plot and characters and names of Text 1 [the source] minimally and uses them to say entirely new things, often in an effort to subvert the predecessor by producing a countertext" (1991a, 45). These three kinds of tellings are not, however, exclusive by nature. Even though a single telling may contain elements of all three relationships—*iconic*, *indexical*, and *symbolic*, its classification is determined by the predominance of one or the other. Also significant in this context is the nature of the relationship between tellings. Kampan's *Rāmāyaṇa* (*Īrāmāvatāram*) bears direct relationship with that of Vālmīki, but it is not an *iconic* text—neither a translation nor a faithful reproduction of Vālmīki's version. It is *indexical* because it is a creatively localized and contemporized version.

The subsequent versions based on Kampan's *Rāmāyaṇa* are not as closely related to Vālmīki's version as to Kampan's. Thus, a series of reproductions of a reproduction continues, and in the process, the narrative undergoes changes, especially in folk versions. Therefore, it is undesirable to consider that folk narratives are based on Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, for their content, as well as form and shape, are usually conceived based on some other source, even several sources.

In addition to the abovementioned three relationships between the source and its tellings, Ramanujan also considered a fourth type, which he compared with Aristotle's jack knife—even though both handle and blade had been replaced several times, the knife was still called by its original name. Ramanujan abandons this approach as "too extreme." So, he proposes a fifth, less extreme approach, which "covers more adequately the differences between the texts and their relations to each other," "as a series of translations clustering around one or another in a family of texts: a number of them cluster around Vālmīki, another set around the Jain Vimalasūri, and so on" (1991a, 44). I think the point that Ramanujan is trying to highlight here is that even if Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* is the earliest extant telling, later tellings, including those belonging to Buddhist and Jaina traditions, should not be judged based on that of Vālmīki, unless they claim to have a relationship with Vālmīki's telling (or such a relationship can be inferred). The story has evolved in different directions. These tellings cluster around not Vālmīki, but around what might be called the Rāmakathā.

A scholar who has popularized the "Many Rāmāyaṇas" model is Paula Richman. In her introductory essay to *Many Rāmāyaṇas*: *The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (1991), which includes Ramanujan's abovementioned essay, Richman describes the five assumptions that the contributors to the volume share: (1) "all the incidents connected with the story of Rāma and Sītā [are] equally worthy of our attention," (2) "we accept the idea of many

Rāmāyaṇas and place Vālmīki's text within that framework," and "abandon the notion of

Vālmīki as the *Ur*-text from which all the other *Rāmāyaṇas* descended," (3) "in part to offset the

prevalent attitude toward Vālmīki, the contributors seek to foreground non-Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*

texts in order to set out the key assumptions informing different tellings of the story," (4) "in

addition to analyzing textual diversity, we want to emphasize the diversity and significance of

renderings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in other genres," and (5) "we seek to demonstrate that the telling of

the *Rāmāyaṇa* in India has included stories that conflict with one another" (all excerpts from

Richman 1991a, 8–9). The contributors to her next edited volume on the Rāmāyaṇa tradition,

Questioning Ramayanas,[4] "take multiplicity as a starting point for their inquiry into ways that

various tellings reflect, subvert, legitimate, undermine, or reject certain relations of power and

religious claims" (Richman 2001, 2). The intention behind the advocacy for equality of all Rāma

narratives is to show the Rāmāyaṇa's "multiplicity and its ability to accommodate questioning

within its boundaries" (ibid.). It is reflected in the regional retellings' consonance "with religious

affiliation, region, language, historical period, literary conventions, and the teller's social

location and experiences" (ibid. 5).

Richman compares the approach of "Many Rāmāyaṇas" to the philological model, which

attempts to trace the "original" and its "derivations."[5] She argues that most philologists believe

that Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* is the source of all later versions of the Rāmāyaṇa. Richman

acknowledges some advantages of the philological approach. It

> rightly recognizes the status of Valmiki's poem as the oldest extant rendition of Rama's
> story in a highly ornate literary genre (*kāvya*). The model also takes into account the
> text's long history of transmission, primarily by Brahmin literati. Most significant, this

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[4] In this volume, Richman abandons the conventional diacritical marks when not referring to a title. Examples include: Valmiki, Tulsidas, Rama, Ramlila, Ramayana, and so forth.

[5] Also see Lutgendorf 2004, 149–50.

view accurately reflects the extent to which Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa* has influenced the many tellings of Rama's story that developed over the centuries. (2001, 3)

Having described the benefits of the philological approach, she shows some shortcomings of it. If the earliest version is to be considered the source of later variations, she argues, then Vālmīki's version meets at least two potential contenders, the Buddhist Dasaratha Jātaka and the Rāmopākhyāna, a concise story of Rāma presented in the third book of the Mahābhārata (2001, 4). Moreover, the philological approach "creates a hierarchy of tellings that tends to induce comparison of all others to Valmiki's text," and "privileges a telling that excludes the majority of Hindus" (ibid.), because most Hindus do not read Vālmīki's Sanskrit composition. Viewing Vālmīki's version as the authentic and original also throws cold water on regional retellings of the story that "testify to the diversity of Indian culture, indicating that throughout history multiple voices were heard within the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition" (Richman 1991a, 9).

I think that to some degree, the "Many Rāmāyaṇas" approach shares similarities with the phenomenological method in the study of religion, which, despite its many variations (Sharma 2001, 9–10), is based on three dictums: back to the things themselves (*Zu den Sachen*), empathy (*Einfühlung*), and bracketing out presuppositions to the degree that one can be conscious of them (*Epoché*) in order to develop rich description and avoid reductionism. Reductionism can include reducing a complex tradition to its origins, which sometimes occurred in the early days of philology. The "Many Rāmāyaṇas" approach has been an important methodological addition to the study of Indian literatures and cultures, and I support it. But a closer analysis demonstrates that some aspects of the "Many Rāmāyaṇas" approach are problematic.

I introduced the notion of Aristotle's jack knife above, which Ramanujan considers too extreme, i.e., too open-ended. This is the first glimpse into Ramanujan's perception of limitations

on one's freedom to recreate a Rāma story. I will deal with his less extreme fifth approach

shortly, but first I should investigate what the later scholarship has to say about the idea of

limitations on creativity.

2.2 Nominal boundaries

The notion of limitations is present in Richman's writings, too. She asserts that the

Rāmāyaṇa tradition has the "ability to accommodate questioning within its boundaries" (2001,

2). The word "boundaries" implies a dividing line, which defines the nature of what might be

considered inside the boundaries and what outside the boundaries. Logically what lies outside the

boundaries cannot be identified with what lies within. So, the question arises: what does

Richman mean by the phrase "within its boundaries"? She explains the phrase towards the end of

the chapter:

> "Within its boundaries" means that multiple and competing tellings continue to be seen
> as part of *Rāmkathā.* Those who have doubts about the telling of Tulsidas continue to be
> seen as lovers of Tulsidas. Women who taunt Sita's father-in-law continue to think of
> Sita as one of them. The Southall Black Sisters chose the Ramlila as a way to express
> their ultimate concerns and affirm their links with their community, even while their
> performance critiqued traditional notions of Sita's relation to Rāma. (2001, 20)[6]

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[6] Richman does not clarify the nature of their critique of the traditional notions of Sītā's relation to Rāma in this
work, but in her 1999 article, she describes: "She [Sītā] hit him in the shoulder with a thump and said, 'I'm good
enough to wear myself out doing all the house-work in our home, but not good enough to go to the forest with you?'
Submissively, Rama replied, 'Whatever you say, my dear.' Since such a response parodies the way a modest and
self-restrained wife is 'supposed' to answer her husband's commands, her reply contradicts expectations of the
audience" (45). Richman's conclusion is misconceived as Sītā of nearly all major versions protests against Rāma's
will to leave her behind. Vālmīki's Sītā is perhaps the greatest and harshest critic of Rāma (Pollock 1986, 2.26–27,
pp. 138–42; see also Sutherland 1989). That a Hindu wife is supposed to submit to her husband uncritically is more
a myth based on certain idealistic statements found in various scriptures than a fact. The myth plays a vital role in
the modern characterization of the ancient Hindu society as stiflingly patriarchal, because it assumes women's total
subordination to men. But Sītā's image as the greatest ideal Hindu wife defies such a stereotype. She resolutely
protests against the proposal of Rāma, also revered as the ideal man (Hess 1999, 2), to leave her behind in the
comforts and security of the palace while he goes to the forest for fourteen years. Her adamance bends him to her

The first sentence does not really define the idea of boundary. So, we might get some help from the three examples that Richman cites in the above quotation as examples of "within its boundaries." All three cases share one feature: questions concerning gender, caste, and racism are raised without dismissing the traditionally received storyline, i.e., the representations indicate the questioners' relations to the story and its characters as insiders. The readers of Tulasīdāsa's description question it but without alienating themselves from either the author or the story; those who taunt Sītā's father identify themselves with Tulasīdāsa's Sītā; and the Southhall performance of the Ramlila aims to demonstrate that "Ravana is killed by Ram so that 'Good wins over evil'" (Richman 1999, 46). Richman then claims that the presenters of the Southall version "self-consciously sought to avoid reaffirming such patriarchal norms, while simultaneously affirming its connection to its community roots" (ibid. 54). Thus, one can assume that questioning "within its boundaries" implies that the questioner relates to the plot and its characters within the general framework of the traditionally received narrative.

This is a reasonable explanation of the idea of boundaries and limitations. There is indeed a long tradition of questioning certain aspects of the Rāmāyaṇa within the Hindu, or even Indian, tradition. Although many Hindus elevated Rāma to the level of divinity, some of his actions did trouble them over the centuries, most notably the killing of Vāli from behind; the killing of Śambūka; Rāma's rejection of Sītā after the war, which leads to her going through a fire ordeal; and finally, her banishment while she is pregnant. Even though Rāma is regarded as *maryādā puruṣottama* (the most eminent paragon of social propriety), even deified, he is not seen as a perfect man. Madhu Kishwar, a feminist scholar, once noted that she had "never heard any man

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will without falling from the summit of an ideal wife. Keep in mind that Draupadī, who bitterly berates her husbands on several occasions, is also a *pativratā*, a wife devoted to her husbands.

unconditionally endorse Ram's behavior toward Sita" (2001, 295). Lutgendorf, too, notes that the abovementioned incidents "indeed present dilemmas to the audience" and "elicited numerous solutions over the course of centuries" (1991, 342; see also Hess 1999, 3). Similarly, Peter Scharf observes: "The literary tradition of the text itself reveals the dissatisfaction various redactors of the story have with these human limitations by the fact that they adapt the story to reconcile them with higher ideals" (2003, 4). That readers and audiences seek to justify Rāma's actions suggests their unease with them.

However, Richman's idea of boundaries seems unnecessarily complicated: "[n]o text is entirely oppositional; if it were, it would lie outside the boundaries of the Ramayana tradition" (2001, 11). This statement requires some dissecting. Does the first part establish the validity of the second part? Or, the second part validates the first part? The second option seems to read it accurately. But because the idea of boundaries is not clear, it might be viewed as an opinion. The issue is further complicated by her assertion that to question the tradition one must divorce oneself from the text altogether: "How can one question fundamental tenets expounded in authoritative tellings within the Ramayana tradition *without divorcing oneself from the text altogether*?" (ibid.; emphasis mine). Thus, all tellings are supposedly "within its boundaries." Does this mean there are no boundaries, for it is not clear from the abovementioned idea of "inside" and "outside" the boundaries which are the sort of tellings that would fall "outside the boundaries"? This also raises an important issue: "[w]ho can ask the questions, and who is allowed to frame the answers?" Richman replies:

> On the one hand, if we adopt the "Valmiki and Others" [philological] model, the only authoritative text is Valmiki; all other questions and answers are "derivative." Yet such a position ignores centuries of generative queries and creative retellings of the story. On the other hand, if we adopt the "Many Ramayanas" model, anyone can legitimately ask questions or respond to questions. Each response would be equally valid. (2001, 8)

I had hoped that this statement would resolve the issue of "inside" and "outside," but Richman leaves the issue unexplained with the term "legitimately." For instance, can there be illegitimate questions and answers? If yes, what will they look like? In addition, one might ask about the criteria of legitimate questions: does the structure of the story and the attributes of its characters define the questions' legitimacy? Or are the questioner's perceptions of the story and its characters sufficient to legitimize one's questions? Can questions based on perceptions that are decidedly inconsistent with the tradition be legitimate? Many such issues are never clear. It is also not clear what Richman means by "equally valid." In the following sections, I grapple with such issues.

In conclusion, let me summarize my questions. If the Rāmāyaṇa tradition has boundaries, as Ramanujan and Richman suggest, what do they look like? Can those boundaries be betrayed? If they can be betrayed, would such betrayals be legitimate, or illegitimate? We might pursue the same question further: who defines, and on what grounds, the idea of legitimacy and illegitimacy? In other words, is there something within the Rāmakathā tradition itself that can help us define those boundaries? Or is it those who identify with the Rāmakathā tradition that determine the limits of boundaries? Or is it those who study it intellectually, without identifying with it, that are in a better position to define them, for their intellectual scrutiny allows them to penetrate the matter more deeply and more objectively? Naturally, answers to the last two questions will be heavily determined by one's subjective viewpoints. In the following section, I will attempt to define the boundaries of a narrative in a neutral way, i.e., what determines the nature and boundaries of the Rāmāyaṇa/Rāmakathā. For this, I have relied on literary and theatrical theories of adaptation and appropriation as discussed in old and modern discourses.

2.3 Real boundaries

Both Ramanujan and Richman opine that the Rāmāyaṇa tradition has its boundaries. While Ramanujan gives us a hint of these boundaries by abandoning the jack knife analogy as too extreme, others complicate it. For example, Erndl treats "all tellings and interpretations of the story as equally valid" (Erndl 1991, 68). Richman, too, seems to hold the same view. She certainly acknowledges difference between authoritative and "oppositional" tellings, the former being more prevalent and influential than the latter (2001, 8–12), but she rejects the philological approach precisely because it "privileges" and "creates a hierarchy of tellings that tends to induce comparison of all others to Valmiki's text" (ibid. 4). She notifies the readers that the contributors to the *Many Rāmāyaṇas* "accept the idea of many *Rāmāyaṇas* and place Vālmīki's text within that framework" (1991, 9). Hence, she appears to appreciate the authoritative tellings as more influential but also declines to give their content more validity than the "oppositional" tellings. She speaks of diversity and multiplicity of the Rāmāyaṇa and sometimes refers to boundaries and sometimes to the "endless refashioning of the story, sometimes in actual opposition to the ways in which the story has previously been told" (ibid.).

In this section I will try to discern what might be considered inside and what outside her and Ramanujan's understandings of the boundaries. Let me begin with Ramanujan's fifth approach, which some scholars found "too extreme." An extreme version of the "Many Rāmāyaṇas" approach is that it so hollows out the concept of this epic that only the names of characters or a skeleton of the plot is virtually all that is left. This problem has been recognized by Philip Lutgendorf:

> Although I too have emphasized the diversity of *Rāmāyaṇa* performance and storytelling traditions, and have even asserted that the epic functions within its culture area as "more

a medium than a message," (Lutgendorf 1991: 170), I am uncomfortable with the last position [Ramanujan's fifth type] stated above, on the grounds that it is too radical and tends to erode the usefulness of the category of *Rāmāyaṇa* and may discourage analysis of the admittedly contested but nonetheless identifiable meanings of the story. For epic transmutations are not, in my view, random or arbitrary and (to return to Ramanujan's own metaphors), "signifiers" undoubtedly have significance, a "code" conveys a message, and a "language" is governed by a system of grammatical rules (even though all of these may be susceptible to modification and disputation). Moreover, one may ask, if the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition is so flexible and open-ended, why are some elaborations much more successful than others, spreading across regions and sectarian divisions? (2004, 150)

Lutgendorf suggests that the "Many Rāmāyaṇas" approach should avoid falling into such an extreme position, for the implications can have serious ramifications for the Rāmāyaṇa tradition: that there is no such thing as a Rāmāyaṇa, let alone the Rāmāyaṇa tradition, and that anything and everything that has come down to us, and is being presented with the names of the characters associated with the Rāma-story, qualifies, as per this view, as a Rāma-story as valid as any other.

This would mean that one can create any story, one's own story, and appropriate the fame and popularity of the epic for one's own purposes. This is exactly what has happened in the case of several 20th-century Rāma stories: "Even writers who openly reject the hierarchical ideals set out in authoritative texts such as Valmiki's *Ramayana* have rewritten Ramkatha in order to harness its power for their own ends" (Richman 2008, 31). This hints at the notion of appropriation, a topic I am about to discuss.

Rāmāyaṇa: a tradition and a language

The idea of the open-ended fluidity of the Rāmāyaṇa stories is mainly justified by arguing that it is an epic dear to nearly all communities of India. Hence, no one community holds an exclusive right to dictate the content and form of the Rāmāyaṇa. Some Hindus, who claim proprietary right to the Rāmāyaṇa tradition, denounce some oppositional tellings of Rāma's

stories precisely because of their extreme departure from what they believe to be the traditional narratorial framework and characterological attributes. The "Many Rāmāyaṇas" model focuses on the diversity and multiplicity of Rāma's stories and does not acknowledge the Hindus' right to the Rāmāyaṇa tradition exclusive of other religious and cultural groups. Consequently, it denounces the abovementioned Hindus' attempts to homogenize the tradition. The following attempts to define the constraints and boundaries of a story are not specific to the Rāmāyaṇa tradition. I do not aim to assess the validity of different groups' claims to the Rāmāyaṇa tradition. Rather, I strive to demonstrate the nature of constraints that a source story—be that religious or secular, traditional or recent—presupposes. In this case, the Rāmāyaṇa tradition does not imply its relation to any specific group; it simply means what has traditionally been passed down as a story belonging to the Rāma narrative.

The above noted dissensus in evaluations of the Rāmāyaṇa tradition relates to a larger argument about the idea of tradition. The *Oxford Dictionary of English* defines tradition as "the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation, or the fact of being passed on in this way" (Stevenson 2010, 1884). Thus, the term tradition implies continuity with the past. Beliefs and customs whose acceptability and authenticity are justified by invoking their connection with past events and persons are understood as traditional: "existing in or as part of a tradition; long-established" and "produced, done, or used in accordance with tradition" (ibid. 1885). If a practice bears no relation with the past, it is not traditional.

The "Many Rāmāyaṇas" model frequently exhibits extreme liberality toward the changes in Rāma's stories. With its emphasis on the diversity and multiplicity of the Rāmāyaṇa tradition, it considers all tellings of the Rāmāyaṇa equally valid. But implicit in the concept of tradition is that its continuity depends on certain characteristics. For, if the characters of a story are named

after the Rāmāyaṇa's characters but the structure and characterological attributes of the story bear no relationship with the Rāmāyaṇa, it cannot claim a place within the Rāmāyaṇa tradition, or Rāma's legend. Ramanujan says that "a text like the *Mahābhārata* is not a text but a tradition" (1991b, 420). Let me illustrate my point by examples of the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata. These are two fundamentally distinct traditions, with considerable narratorial similarities. The question then is: does a narratorial tradition permit infinite changes, or are there some limits that make them two distinct traditions? Despite many narratorial similarities between the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata traditions (Biardeau 1997, 73–119), a reckless replacement of the names of the Mahābhārata characters with those of the Rāmāyaṇa cannot, in my view, possibly turn it into a Rāma's story, and vice versa. If even the stories so alike cannot exchange their individual identities, I doubt that a specific narrative can allow radical changes in a retelling without the latter losing its claim to be accepted within the traditional framework of the story.

I should also address the notion of the Rāmāyaṇa as a language. It comes from Narayana Rao: "The *Rāmāyaṇa* in India is not just a story with a variety of retellings; it is a language with which a host of statements may be made" (2016, 240). That by language Narayana Rao means is the structure of the language is evident from his remark: "To continue the language metaphor, it may be said that there are *Rāmāyaṇas* whose grammar is less conventional" (ibid. 266, endnote 2). By grammar Narayana Rao refers to what he elsewhere calls "the cultural grammar of the Indian narratives" (2016, 210). The metaphor of language clearly implies the limits that the structure of the language imposes on its usage. Everyone has his or her own style of speaking a language, but in order to have a communicative ability and to be accepted as a particular language, the structure of the language must comply with its grammar, correct speech forms. I would walk a step further. Even though everyone has his or her own style of writing, the letters

must be shaped in accordance with the accepted style of writing. One is free to reshape letters as long as the new forms maintain recognizable resemblance to the intended letters. If the Rāmāyaṇa is a tradition and a language, it must possess some basic structure that allows it to be differentiated from other traditions and languages. By overemphasizing the diversity of the Rāmāyaṇa tradition and by assuming that all tellings of it are equally valid, Richman and those of the same opinion seem to advocate an individual's absolute freedom to tell Rāma stories on a whim. This seems to erase the idea of tradition and language and thereby opens doors to what I might call the "Rāmāyaṇa anarchy." A story becomes a tradition only when it is reinterpreted, recreated, and retold to suit different contexts but without radically altering the key characterological attributes and the narratorial structure. It is these key features that Ramanujan refers to, in my view, with the idea of crystallization. This is what I understand from the expressions the Rāmāyaṇa tradition and the Rāmāyaṇa language. I quote Narayana Rao again,

> One significant feature of Indian narrative is retelling. Stories and themes from major narrative traditions have been told—again and again—for centuries. As a result, characters of these narratives take on a life of their own, away from authorial controls, and become as familiar as your next-door neighbors. Poets and writers and tellers and performers enjoy a wide degree of freedom in depicting these well-known characters. At the same time, there are restrictions to this freedom. We know a lot about the variations in the telling of these stories, and the freedom the tellers take. What is not well understood is that there are limits to this freedom. The limits, I suggest, are best understood by exploring the underlying cultural grammar of these narrative traditions. (2016, 235–36)

According to this, one can conclude that those who advocate the freedom of tellers to radically alter the core story and reverse the key attributes of characters either do not know "the underlying cultural grammar of these narrative traditions" or willfully ignore their implications. Before the concluding remarks, I should return to Ramanujan through Lutgendorf's comparison of the Rāmāyaṇa tradition and the tradition of musical *rāga*s. He explains:

To return to my opening question of how best to conceptualize the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition—as a root or as a crystal—I would like to propose a metaphor from classical Indian music. For a rāga is, so to speak, both at once: in its essence, it is a minimal sequence of notes corresponding to Ramanujan's "skeletal set of relations" (though we observe that even in this form it is considered to possess distinctive qualities of atmosphere and emotion). In its development and realization in musical performance, a rāga is capable of extraordinarily wide variation, but always within limits set by formal criteria, as well as by the training of the performer and the expectations of the audience. Great innovation is possible, but if it violates certain limits the performance may fail to evoke the desired mood. [… It permits] luxuriant crystalline growth without sacrificing a sense of rootedness; both of these qualities are highly prized within that creative yet essentially conserving worldview that is generically labeled "Hinduism." (2004, 161)

I share Lutgendorf's concerns. As the limits inherent in the foregoing examples of tradition, language, and *rāga* evince, stories received through a tradition allow freedom but also imply limits on that freedom. Accordingly, a traditional narrative told without observing the minimum limits breaks away from its identity. In short, the idea of the Rāmāyaṇa tradition implies that the diversity and multiplicity of it are governed by a narratorial structure and key characterological attributes that define limits to what can be refashioned.

Vālmīki as the original

A search for the origins of the Rāmāyaṇa tradition has led philologists to Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*. But the "Many Rāmāyaṇas" model pertinaciously, and to a degree disingenuously, continues to reject it, or cast doubts about its originality. For example, nearly forty years ago (in 1984), Goldman convincingly refuted the claim that the Buddhist Dasaratha Jātaka might have predated Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*: "There can be no doubt, however, that on the basis of the best historical and literary evidence available to us, the *Dasaratha Jātaka* is substantially later than the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* and that it is both inspired by and derived from it" (1984, 32). In 1985, Richard Gombrich expressed his thoughts on the topic. He identified the Dasaratha Jātaka and the commentary on it as two separate texts. In the Jātaka, Bharata breaks the news of Daśaratha's

death to Rāma, Sītā, and Lakṣmaṇa. Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa feel deep sorrow, but Rāma remains

composed. He explains the "here today and gone tomorrow" nature of life. The commentary

supplies a brief outline of the Rāmāyana. Gombrich concludes:

> It is important to remember that, as mentioned above, throughout the Jataka book the
> prose as we have it is late, perhaps as late as the 5th century A.D. […] In this case the
> couple are identified with the future Buddha and his wife; the future Buddha would
> certainly never have married his full sister. […] The sibling marriage is just another of
> the absurdities clobbered together by an author intent on treating a revered Hindu story
> with irreverence. (Gombrich 1985, 434–35)

Interestingly, the commentator's statement that Rāma and Sītā were siblings seems to have been

ignored or even rejected even in the Buddhist tellings of the Rāmāyaṇa.

Furthermore, Goldman argues in several pages against the possible antecedence of the

Mahābhārata's Rāmopākhyāna and concludes: "With the elimination of the *Rāmopākhyāna* as

probable source or even a collateral descendent from a common source for the story, we can with

some assurance assert that the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* or at least the text that can be reconstructed

from the manuscripts of its three recensions, is the earliest surviving version of the Rama legend"

(ibid. 39). To my knowledge, Goldman's conclusions still stand unchallenged. And yet, Richman

insists that "scholars have argued that the Buddhist *Dasaratha Jātaka* may have preceded

Valmiki's text chronologically, while others have wondered whether the kernel-like story of

Rama within the *Mahābhārata* might pre-date Valmiki's telling" (2001, 4). But I see no reason

to perpetuate an opinion that has been convincingly refuted by one of the foremost scholars of

the *Rāmāyaṇa*. There have also been speculations that the stories of Rāma might have been

prevalent before Vālmīki, which the "first poet" of Sanskrit composed in a long epic. Even

though such a possibility cannot be absolutely ruled out, this, too, remains nothing but a pure

speculation for now (Goldman 1984, 23, note 30). Linda Hess calls Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* the

"fountainhead to all later *Rāmāyaṇa* textual traditions" (1999, 1). Let me conclude this section

with Pollock's forceful statement:

> One may readily concur that the Rāmāyaṇa can interestingly be viewed not as a fixed text
> but as a "multivoiced entity, encompassing tellings of the Rāma story that vary according
> to historical period, regional literary tradition, religious affiliation, genre, and political
> context" (Richman 1991: 16). But these tellings are always *retellings of a text everyone
> knows*. Moreover, it is hard to find evidence of effectivity in the realm of literary, let
> alone public, discourse of these "many" Rāmāyaṇas in Rajasthan, Gujarat, or the Deccan
> in middle-period India. (This holds true for the highly "oppositional" Jain versions, which
> were something of a local specialty.) In short, the foundational version, the version
> everyone knows in AD 1000–1400 and for the whole millennium preceding this period, is
> that of Vālmīki and his epigones, where the Rāma presented is *kodaṇḍarāma*,
> *dharmabhṛtāṃ varaḥ*, "Rāma with the curved bow, the chief of the righteous," and
> Rāvaṇa is always *lokarāvaṇa*, *sarvalokabhayāvaha*, "He who makes the world weep,
> who fills all the world with terror." (May 1993, 263; emphasis in the original)

Like Goldman, Pollock emphasizes that Vālmīki's is the first story of Rāma and the source of all

later retellings. Pollock also draws attention to what might be considered an essential

characteristic of the *Rāmāyaṇa*: Rāma is virtuous and Rāvaṇa wicked. How do we know this is

Rāma's essential character? Vālmīki's intention to compose his poetry reveals it. He asks Nārada

to tell him about a man who is virtuous, dynamic, knower of *dharma*, grateful, true to his word,

resolute, well-behaved, altruistic, knowledgeable, competent, good-looking, confident, even-

tempered, radiant, free of jealousy, but when angry, terrifies even gods (1.1.2–4). This

encapsulates Vālmīki's Rāma's character. He was an incarnation of god Viṣṇu, born to kill

Rāvaṇa, who relentlessly bullied the virtuous people: "Pluck out this thorn in the side of holy

men and ascetics—this haughty Rāvaṇa, swollen with arrogance and might—for he is the bitter

enemy of Indra, lord of the thirty gods, a terror to ascetics, and a source of lamentation to the

world." (Goldman 1984, 1.1.21; Vālmīki 1.15.33). These are the characterological traits that the

author of the earliest Rāma story envisioned, which should be respected in its adaptations.

Because the "Many Rāmāyaṇas" model takes "multiplicity as a starting point," it is crucial to interrogate if it can incorporate the idea of first telling, variations, derivations, and adaptations. Even though Richman gives the impression that authors in her two edited volumes do not believe in such concepts, they are there. First, Ramanujan clearly states that Vālmīki's Rāmāyaṇa is "the earliest and most prestigious of them all" (1991, 25). I think Ramanujan's preference for "the word *tellings* to the usual terms *versions* or *variants* because the latter terms can and typically do imply that there is an invariant, an original or *Ur-text*—usually Vālmīki's Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa*" (ibid. 24–25) has been misunderstood. First, according to him, Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* is the first telling. He also sees some relation between Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* and other major tellings: "Their relations to the Rāma story as told by Vālmīki also vary" (ibid. 25). His preference to tellings over variants and versions is clarified further: "it is not always Vālmīki's narrative that is carried from one language to another" (ibid.). Apparently, Rāma stories are indeed related to Vālmīki, but many later tellings in different languages are not derived straight from Vālmīki's story. Instead, they are derived from more immediate sources, such as from Kampan's, or Kṛttivāsa's, or Tulasīdāsa's. Thus, those tellings that are not based on Vālmīki are "carried from" other sources. This forms the basis of the Rāmāyaṇa tradition: "These various texts not only relate to prior texts directly, to borrow or refute, but they relate to each other through this common code or common pool" (ibid. 46). Richman is aware of it: "while certain sets of codes structure expression, the fluidity of tradition accounts for the diversity of tellings" (1991, 8). Neither can the idea of original versus adaptation be easily wished away. For example, Kampan, who alludes to three Sanskrit versions of the story, clearly professes Vālmīki as his source:

> Of the three that in the sacred tongue
> Told this story, I shall take

> The earliest master for my source
> To render into Tamil song.
> (Prologue 8, translation by Sundaram)

It is difficult to imagine that Ramanujan would override the authors' admissions that they used Vālmīki as their source. It is my understanding that, according to Ramanujan, several authoritative retellings used Vālmīki's narrative as their source, but those which are based on such derivatives should not be mistaken as derived from Vālmīki, a sort of counter to the traditional tendency to attribute all stories of Rāma to Vālmīki: "They believe that Valmiki wrote *the* Ramayana, *any* Ramayana, and *every* Ramayana" (Narayana Rao 2016, 274, emphasis in the original). Richman is conversant with Kampan's above-mentioned acknowledgement of Vālmīki, and she labels his *Irāmāvatāram* as an adaptation of Vālmīki (2008, 17). Others also refer to the notions of adaptation and variations. Thapar, for example, states that Richman's edited volume *Many Rāmāyaṇas* "added to our awareness of the range of variants and versions" (2001, vi). Referring to the idea of adaptation, she further states that "[t]here is a need to recognize that a range of social groups adapted the story or fragments of the story to express their worldviews. A more subtle argument is implicit in this [2001] volume, raising the question of why the variants were composed" (2001, ix).

That Rāma stories constitute a tradition of adaptations can be unequivocally supported from Richman's own remarks:

> Rather than word-for-word translations, it was adaptations that played the greatest role in South India Ramayana discourse in the pre-colonial period. An "adaptation" retells Ramkatha in light of the context of the literary culture and social world of the target language. Most regional devotional tellings of Ramkatha (discussed in the section above titled "Classifying Ramayanas") are adaptations. Adaptations have exerted great influence on local perceptions of Ramkatha because they allow far more scope for creativity and artfulness than a literal translation. (2008, 16–17)

One thus sees a slow but steady move towards an acceptance of such concepts as variant, version, and adaptation, the terms that the first two major works edited by Richman claimed to have rejected outright. "Retelling" was another term that Richman dismissed in both works, but she adopted the term in her latest edited volume (2021, 3), even though she designates Vālmīki's text as a retelling as well (ibid. 22), for its "origins lie in bardic songs in praise of warriors' valor" (ibid. 4). As noted above, according to Goldman, the notion that the Rāmāyaṇa's origins lie in bardic songs is a "pure speculation."

We have encountered two contending positions. (1) Based on historical and literary evidence, most philologists have concluded that Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* is the first extant version and the source of later retellings, and (2) many who endorse the "Many Rāmāyaṇas" model underscore the epic's multiplicity and imply that each telling is distinct and equal. I will argue that a better approach today is to be open to study each Rāmāyaṇa through its long history with good philological and phenomenological methods but also be willing to study carefully Vālmīki's text and see how it came to define a tradition through continuity of core narrative and characters, adaptations notwithstanding. This means realizing that some tellings or aspects of them are outside the tradition, such as those oppositional tellings that reverse the roles of protagonist (Rāma) and antagonist (Rāvaṇa). Below I explore the concept of limits or boundaries in accordance with the principles of adaptation.

Adaptation versus appropriation[7]

> A few years after the war, he [Georges Clemenceau, prime minister of France during World War I] was discussing the question of which country was responsible for initiating that horrendous, world-shattering, and pointless conflict. Clemenceau was asked what

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[7] As will be clear from the discussion below, by appropriation I do not mean cultural appropriation. Here, appropriation alludes to those works that involve attempts to alter a story to subvert its intent and content.

future historians would conclude. He responded, "This I don't know. But I know for certain that they will not say Belgium invaded Germany." (Schudson 2019, 22)

[F]iction, if well written, doesn't betray history, but opens up its essential nature to inspection. When fiction is turned into theatre, or into a film or TV, the same applies: there is no necessary treason. Each way of telling, each medium for telling, draws a different potential from the original. (Mantel 2017, 2)[8]

If Vālmīki's is indeed the first extant story of Rāma, one can reasonably argue that later tellings adapted his story, directly or indirectly. When defining the boundaries of Rāma's stories, or other tellings based on borrowed stories, the differences between adaptation and appropriation ought to be recognized.

When creating one's own story, an author retains the ultimate authority to shape the storyline and its characters. This is articulated in a popular Sanskrit expression: in the infinite world of poetry, the poet alone is the master—the world manifests as it pleases him.[9] But if the story is borrowed from elsewhere, I would argue—taking clues from the notion of boundaries as hinted at by Ramanujan, Richman, and Lutgendorf—the author has a responsibility to generally follow the story's source. I illustrate my point through a review of some established authorities in such fields as literary criticism and cinematic adaptation. To demonstrate that adaptations have consistently been perceived with the idea of boundaries, I begin with theories of Sanskrit literary criticism and provide examples from modern theories of adaptation.

Ānandavardhana (9th century), arguably the most notable commentator on literary theory in the history of Sanskrit literature, cautions poets against making unwarranted changes in stories

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[8] The audio of and transcript of Mantel's lecture are available from the BBC Radio 4 Reith Lecture webpage. Here I cite page numbers as marked in the transcript for easy access.

[9] *apāre kāvyasaṃsāre kavir ekaḥ prajāpatiḥ, yathāsmai rocate viśvaṃ tathedaṃ parivartate.*

known for their accomplishment of *rasa*, the pleasure readers and audiences experience through

a composition, such as the Rāmāyaṇa: "In the matter of sources of stories, such as the Rāmāyaṇa,

which are renowned for their perfection of *rasa*, one should not resort to one's fancy if it

conflicts with the *rasa* [of the source]. One should not resort to one's fancy in such sources of

stories, for it is said: 'Not even the slightest deviation from the storyline.' Even if one must resort

to one's fancy, it must not contradict the [original] *rasa*" (3.10–14).[10] Abhinavagupta (11th

century), a philosopher and aesthetician, understands "the sources of stories" as histories

(*kathānām āśrayā itihāsāḥ*). He warns against employing one's fancy in historical matters (*tair*

itihāsārthaiḥ). Thus, if one thinks that the source of a narrative is historical, the obligations to

not alter the events are greater. It is true that the historicity of the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata

narratives has been questioned in modern times. But this does not change the fact that Indians

have traditionally viewed them as historical events. The Series, the subject of my study, believes

that the story of the epic is historical. Cosmic Time, the epic's narrator, claims to have seen it as

it happened: "But I am Time, and the modern so-called intellectuals cannot throw dust in my

eyes. I have seen this competition ground glittering like this" (23:35).[11] Even if fiction, the story

is believed to be historical by the creators and audiences of the Series.

 Even if one ventures to retell a fictional narrative, a reteller is obliged to honour its

source for two reasons: just as describing historical events with "false facts" changes the

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[10] *santi siddharasaprakhyā ye ca rāmāyaṇādayaḥ, kathāśrayā na tair yojyā svecchā rasavirodhinī. teṣu hi kathāśrayeṣu tāvat svecchaiva na yojyā, yad uktam – 'kathāmārge na cālpo 'py atikramaḥ.' svecchāpi yadi yojyā tadrasavirodhinī na yojyā.*

[11] *maiṃ to samaya hūṃ; aura āja ke mithyā buddhijīvī merī āṃkhoṃ meṃ dhūla nahīṃ ḍāla sakate. maiṃne to isa raṃgabhūmi ko isī taraha jagara-jagara karate dekhā thā.*

historical record,[12] so too do drastic changes in the source's storyline, especially if they appear uncalled for. This is related to another problem. As Sheldon Pollock reminds us, authorial intention (*vivakṣā* or *vaktur icchā*) is "a constitutive element" of poetry (2006, 76, 106). Despite the elusiveness of authorial intention, an argument can be made in favor of recognizing authorial intentions with the help of epistemologically sound reasoning.[13] Hence, it can be argued that one who retells a narrative is accountable for maintaining reasonable interpretations of the narrative, reasonable ones being within the general boundaries of the original storyline and character portrayal and unreasonable ones being outside its boundaries.

The modern concept of adaptation of a source text into literary or televisual (which applies in the case of my study) productions makes room for necessary changes to suit the style and form of the medium of adaptation but emphasizes that the outcome should responsibly reflect the spirit and integrity of the original. Syd Field, the "guru of all screenwriters," writes in his classic *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*: "It's a general rule that if you're adapting a book or an article to fit the needs of a screenplay, you may have to shift, omit, or add scenes in order to follow the main story line" (2005, 260) but "[t]he hub of adaptation is finding

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[12] It is true that historical events always have two sides, and both deserve equally unbiased considerations. By "false facts" I mean those accounts that cannot be found in historical records and are simply invented to present what is often termed as the "other side."

[13] Even if one cannot definitively claim to have discovered the exact authorial intentions behind a work, it would be dangerous to completely ignore the importance of remaining conscious of possible authorial intentions of an author or speaker. After all, the reasonableness and unreasonableness of an interpretation depends on its relative conformity to the principles of textual interpretations. Relentless efforts are made to observe authorial intentions in the "Many Rāmāyaṇas" approach too: the search for the socio-political, religio-philosophical, cultural, and geographical background of different tellings seems to be precisely for that purpose—what did an author want to say through his or her telling of the story?

a balance between the characters and the situation, yet keeping the integrity of the story" (ibid. 261).[14] Adaptation allows inventions while also "keeping the integrity of the story."

Hilary Mantel, an English author and winner of the Booker Prize whose works on historical fictions have been adapted into TV serials, once claimed that "good drama doesn't have to mean bad history." In the Reith Lecture she delivered on July 11, 2017, she said: "If you are working from a novel, that fiction becomes the canonical text, standing in for history" (5). The difference between historical and fictional narratives is that the former describes past events that happen in the real world and the latter emanate from events that happen in the head of the author. In the first case, a reader remains in a position to challenge the description in accordance with the historical facts. But despite such freedom to disagree, an adaptation of a fiction, or a historical fiction, should abide by its author's intentions. In the second case, the reader is not able to quarrel with the content. In the following question and answer period, Mantel comments:

> [W]hen you adapt from a novel, the novel becomes the canonical text. So, the adapter is not really in a position to quarrel with a novel. So, if the original novelist has got everything wrong, it's then very tough on the adapter, but if he then nips behind the text and starts to tell another history which he might think is more realistic, has more veracity, then in succeeding as a playwright, he may fail as an adapter. (ibid. 11)

In response to how to portray historical characters, i.e., "how can you get into the characters?", Mantel admits:

> You can't, because you are always writing out of your own time and your own sensibility. But you educate yourself towards your characters and that's why it takes such a long time. That's what all the hours, days, years in libraries are about. It's about growing knowledge, knowledge and another sensibility that will stand beside the one you

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[14] Bruce Jay Friedman (April 26, 1930—June 3, 2020), a well-known American novelist, screenwriter, playwright, and actor, uses quite a strong language to describe his experiences of movie adaptations of his writing, "It's a luck of the draw, you know, if you get lucky, you can have impro… I had improvements made in some of my work, and others have been, you know, rape in broad day light" (YouTube "Kurt Vonnegut and others on Adapting Novel to Film (1997)," posted on July 20, 2016, 1:30).

started out with, the one that's native to you. So, in other words, you look to your characters to change you and scrape up to their standard, if you like, get inside their heads and bodies. It's not quickly achieved. […] And it's about listening to the past. I don't say you can hear it, but you can be quiet and listen, and you can look. And you can open yourself to the process. (ibid. 12)

A responsible adapter is expected to educate himself or herself towards the characters of the source, "look to your characters to change *you* and scrape up to *their* standard, if you like, get inside their heads and bodies" (ibid., emphasis mine). Here, I think, is the phenomenological method at work. The merits of creative license become corrupt if the adapter fails to connect to what is known in cinematic theory as the spirit and integrity of the source material.

Nina Paley, an American cartoonist, animator, and "free culture activist," who suffered a backlash from some Hindus who thought that she distorted the images of Rāma and Sītā in her animation movie *Sita Sings the Blues*, engaged in a conversation with Jordan Peterson, a Canadian clinical psychologist and a professor of psychology. He highlighted the role of the ego element which, if it bends an "artistic production to the proximal demand of your ego, then you actually pollute it, you propagandize it, and you reduce it […] to an idol" (52:20).[15] This is a psychological analysis of Mantel's above quoted words that an artist should *scrape himself or herself up to the* standards of the characters, and not vice versa. But more pertinent are the words of Paley. As a "free culture activist," she rejects the idea of originality and copyrighting creative content because it is nothing but partial manifestation of the cultural elements that one lives in. She therefore allows free reproduction, editing, and redistribution of her work. Permissions for reproduction, editing, and redistribution are, however, limited. She invokes the idea of trademark,

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[15] All quotes attributed to Peterson and Paley are from Peterson and Paley 2018.

because trademark has fundamentally something to do with fraud. […] The way I might invoke trademark law is if somebody edited something of mine, […] if they said that the edit and redistribution was mine, I am like, no, the work I did is mine, but you take responsibility for that edit and redistribution. I am not responsible for your edit and redistribution. So, if they add some message to it that is not mine, I don't want that attributed to me. Really all I would do is just go and say, 'hey, I never said that!" (1:10:50).

Two important points to note here are the idea of trademark and message. It is hardly disputable

that Vālmīki owns the trademark for the Rāmāyaṇa. As Narayana Rao states, "Vālmīki's name,

if not his actual narrative, provides the infallible basis for all *Rāmāyaṇa* texts" (2016, 211). And

it *is* imbued with some message. The word "message" here, I would argue, could be applied to

what in cinematic studies is known as the spirit and integrity of the original.

Paley's words help us understand the gravity of misattribution in the case of the

massively popular narratives of the Rāmāyaṇa**.** Even though the narratives have been retold in

countless forms and shapes, what nearly everyone in India believes is that the author of the first

extant well-developed Rāmāyaṇa stories is Vālmīki. When reading, listening, or watching

Rāmāyaṇa stories in performances, audiences unconsciously trust these retellings to be related in

some way to early sources. As Narayana Rao has observed:

> Both traditional Ramayana readers and the leaders of the anti-Ramayana discourse see Valmiki as the author of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Yet there is a difference: the leaders of the anti-Ramayana discourse state this in a factual mode; they base their arguments on nineteenth-century Western textual scholarship and assume that the Valmiki version is empirically verifiable. For traditional readers and listeners, however, Valmiki's authorship is ideological; they do not base their statement on empirical textual evidence. They believe that Valmiki wrote *the* Ramayana, *any* Ramayana, and *every* Ramayana. (2016, 274)

Thus, anything and everything narrated as part of the Rāmāyaṇa is assumed to have been

authored by Vālmīki. If incompatible changes become attributed to Vālmīki, this would,

according to Paley, amount to violation of trademark, and might prompt Vālmīki to cry out, if he could, "Hey, I never said that."

Julie Sanders has articulated differences between an adaptation and an appropriation. Through modifications, adaptation "is frequently involved in offering commentary on a sourcetext" (Sanders 2016, 18); "can also constitute a simpler attempt to make texts 'relevant' or easily comprehensible to new audiences and readerships via the processes of proximation and updating" (ibid. 19); and "it is the very endurance and survival of the source text that enables the ongoing process of juxtaposed readings that are crucial to the cultural operations of adaptation, and the ongoing experiences of pleasure for the reader or spectator in tracing the intertextual relationships" (ibid. 25). The following could be considered a summary of the above points:

> An adaptation signals a relationship with an informing sourcetext or original; a cinematic version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, for example, although clearly reinterpreted by the collaborative efforts of director, scriptwriter, actors, and the generic demands of the movement from stage drama to film, remains ostensibly *Hamlet*, a specific version, albeit achieved in alternative temporal and generic modes, of that seminal cultural text. (ibid. 26)

According to this, only those stories of Rāma can claim a place in the tradition that do not violate its core narrative and character traits. Satyajit Ray, one of the most respected personalities from Indian cinema, also believed that adaptation, which he sometimes called "reshaping," should reveal its relationship with the source text: "When I say 'reshaping', I do not mean reshaping beyond recognition. Obviously, there are elements which remain unaltered or at least are recognizable" (2011, 15). These unaltered or recognizable elements form the basis of what is known as crystallization. When these are altered beyond recognition, it no more qualifies for adaptation. Sanders contrasts appropriation with adaptation:

On the other hand, appropriation frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain. This may or may not involve a generic shift, and it may still require the intellectual juxtaposition of (at least) one text against another that we have suggested is central to the reading and spectating experience of adaptations. But the appropriated text or texts are not always as clearly signalled or acknowledged as in the adaptive process. (2016, 26)

Sanders' idea of appropriation resonates with Richman's statement: "How can one question fundamental tenets expounded in authoritative tellings within the Ramayana tradition without divorcing oneself from the text altogether?" Richman includes such tellings within the boundaries. My understanding of Sanders' viewpoints is as follows: adaptation represents continuity with the source text but appropriation signals discontinuity. By continuity I mean telling a story without upending the story and its characters—let the Rāmāyaṇa be Rāmāyaṇa. By discontinuity I mean introduction of new elements by distorting the story and its characters. In appropriations, identities of the Rāmāyaṇa and its characters are either seriously compromised or lost in the process. I view appropriations outside the boundaries as they "decisively move away" or "divorce [themselves] from the text altogether." Accordingly, I disagree that all retellings of Rāma's stories are legitimate and equally valid when viewed within the Rāmāyaṇa tradition. As noted above, a story is often imbued with a message expressed through the carefully carved images of its characters, as expressed by Mantel: "you look to your characters to change you and scrape up to their standard" (2017, 12). Whereas the Sītā of Vālmīki forgoes the luxuries of the royal palace to be with her husband and compels him to bring her along to the forest, the modern Sītā would accompany her husband in poverty, if he is deprived of his rights to the riches of the family. It is not the exact depiction of actions that matters, it is the actions and key attributes of the characters that establish the story's relationship with its source. To quote Field again: "Good characters are the heart and soul and nervous system of your screenplay. The story is told through your characters" (2006, 82). By good, Field means clearly defined types of characters. I

would argue that the retellings that intentionally smash the "types" of characters of the source and remodel them into incompatible types fall outside the boundaries.[16]

Narayana Rao articulates this sentiment in his essay, "When Does Sītā Cease to be Sītā: Notes Toward a Cultural Grammar of Indian Narratives" (2016, 210–39). To launch his enquiry, he opens the essay with a quote from the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, "Of all the *Rāmāyaṇas* that have been told so far, are there any in which 'Sītā does not go to the forest with Rāma?" And quickly concludes, "If Sītā does not go to the forest, she is not Sītā, nor is the story a *Rāmāyaṇa* story. My question in this essay is simple: how many changes in the narrative does a Sītā character comfortably accept and at what point does a change trigger another character that is no longer Sītā?" (2016, 210). Narayana Rao studies how, despite having undergone many serious changes in traditional narratives, Sītā remains Sītā, the defining feature of her being her chaste loyalty to Rāma. Referring to the violent protests against a reimagined 2000 CE story wherein Sītā throws away her wedding necklace and walks away from Rāma, thereby defying her image of a loyal wife, Narayana Rao holds "the activist nature of militant Hindu groups and the general deterioration of political discourse" responsible, but adds:

> The Sītā represented in this story as well as in Chalam's play and in Pathabhi's poem is not the same character as is presented in Vālmīki's text and that of his followers. She is a distorted Sītā, an anti-Sītā. The crucial boundary that makes her Sītā is her loyalty to Rāma and the moral power that comes from it. Once she has crossed that boundary, even with the symbolic act of throwing her wedding necklace into the fire, she is no longer Sītā. (ibid. 231)

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[16] Because this section explores the idea of retelling a story and not the criticism and support that Paley's movie attracted, I avoided a discussion about it. Those interested can view Sharmila Lodhia's excellent article "Deconstructing Sita's Blues: Questions of Mis/representation, Cultural Property, and Feminist Critique in Nina Paley's *Ramayana*" (2015).

Such tellings are, according to Narayana Rao, examples of tellings that "deliberately changed the well-understood traits of a character so deeply embedded in the popular mind," and violated "its narrative grammar" (ibid.). I agree with Narayan Rao's views. It is the "underlying cultural grammar of these narrative traditions" that defines the boundaries of a particular narrative. The changes conceived within the tradition manipulate a plot to address the needs of new socio-cultural expectations without distorting the original image of the characters, while the changes conceived outside the tradition often manipulate the storyline to shatter the original images. These are known as "oppositional" tellings.

This belaboured discussion about the definitions of adaptation and appropriation is not meant to draw a rigid borderline between adaptation and appropriation. My purpose has been to suggest an alternative view to what I see as an extreme idea that a traditional story can be altered beyond limits and still be considered as part of the tradition. Adaptation and appropriation are two extreme sides of ever-shifting boundaries of a traditionally transmitted narrative. As far as I know, all premodern tellings could be grouped under the category of adaptation or on the borderline (still, tilting more towards adaptation).[17] Even today, there are very few tellings that I would view as appropriations. As the discussion above points out, appropriation involves attempts to subvert the intent and the content of the source story. In modern times, some tellings can be identified as appropriations, or outside the tradition. I provide a few examples below.

Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824–1873) was an extraordinary poet born in a Bengali Brahmin family. Dutt composed a powerful poetical version of the Rāmāyaṇa in Bengali in the

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[17] I remain undecided about how the Rāma story presented in the commentary on the Dasaratha Jātaka should be viewed. If Gombrich's view that the author was "intent on treating a revered Hindu story with irreverence" (1985, 35) has some truth in it, the story might be categorized as an appropriation.

colonial context. Regarded as one of the most powerful counter-*Rāmāyaṇas* to date, Dutt's

Meghanādavadha (*The Slaying of Meghanāda*) is an "oppositional telling" of the conventional

Rāma story and "reflects the complexity of contact between Indian and British culture"

(Richman 1991, 11). True, he was an insider as far as his biological ancestry is concerned. But,

as a man of high ambitions, he hankered after the approval of the colonial officers and went to

great lengths to be part of that group, including converting to Christianity. Clinton Seely quotes

Pramathanath Bisi, a literary scholar and contemporary of Dutt:

> Disgust toward "Ram and his rabble," the sparking of one's imagination at the idea of
> Ravana and Meghanada—these attitudes were not peculiar to Dutt. Many of his
> contemporaries had the very same feelings. What was native seemed despicable; what
> was English, grand and glorious. Such was the general temperament. … Dutt cast
> Ravana's character as representative of the English-educated segment of society. (Seely
> 1991, 150)

This excerpt demonstrates that Dutt had divorced himself from the land that had treasured the

Rāma story for over two thousand years. His fondness for things European was so strong that

after his return from England, he chose to live in the European area of Kolkata (Calcutta). His

"Europeanism went to such ludicrous lengths" that he greeted even great Bengali dignitaries,

such as Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, with European-style embraces and kisses (Bose 1981, 76).

Although his position as a poet of high order remains largely unchallenged, his

Meghanādavadha poetry is, to my mind, "outside the boundary" precisely because he

consciously, and with antipathy towards things Indian, took possession of a traditional account,

distorted it, and presented it in a style that would please those who thought that "the best

examples of Bengali verse were 'defiled by grossness and indecency'" (Seely 1991, 140). That

he composed his poetry in a hateful sentiment is clear from his reaction to those who objected to

his reversal of the spirit of the Rāmāyaṇa: "People here grumble that the sympathy of the Poet in

Meghanad is with the Raksasas [demons]. And that is the real truth. I despise Ram and his rabble, but the idea of Ravan elevates and kindles my imagination; he was a grand fellow" (ibid. 137). It is difficult to ignore the fact that Rāvaṇa was for him, as noted above in the quote of Bisi, a "representative of the English-educated segment of society," an indication that his perceptions were shaped by perspectives that fell outside the Rāmāyaṇa tradition.

Here are more examples of oppositional tellings, appropriations, or anti-Rāmāyaṇas that overstep a legitimate boundary. E.V. Ramasamy (1879–1973), a South Indian admired as the father of the Dravidian movement, "made his *attack* on Rama's story the centerpiece of his anti-Aryan polemic" (Richman 2001, 12, emphasis mine). Similarly, Ramaswamy Choudari (1887–1943) "wrote the Rama story *as he wanted* it to happen [emphasis mine]" "by using the race theories of colonial anthropologists who claimed to have identified Aryan and Dravidian races in the Indian subcontinent. For Ramasvami Chaudari, all Brahmins were Aryan intruders" (Narayana Rao 2016, 286–87). According to Chaudari, Rāma represents Aryans and Rāvaṇa Dravids, thereby reshaping the characters of Rāma and Rāvaṇa as the hostile aggressor and defender of his people respectively.

I am not alone in being critical of certain modern oppositional tellings as "outside the boundaries" of the narrative on account of the Western influence they unmistakeably make plain. As I discussed earlier, Lutgendorf (2004) has raised similar issues. His review of two modern versions of the Rāmāyaṇa—Ramesh Menon's *The Ramayana, A Modern Retelling of the Great Indian Epic* (2003) and Ashok Banker's *Prince of Ayodhya, The Ramayana, Book One* (2003)— is titled as "(Too?) Many *Ramayanas*," indicating that they have perhaps crossed narratorial boundaries, for they "reveal (if not explicitly identify) a whole new set of influences, both cultural and literary, derived from Western literature and story-telling" (2004, 202). He fears an

"unconscious agenda" in these retellings and concludes with a statement of dissatisfaction: "the crowded and interdependent mythological ecosystem maintained by some three millennia of Indian epic story-tellers has, for the moment, succumbed to the simplifying imperatives of an apocalyptic narrative mono-culture—a Force that is, alas, with us all"[18] (211).

In my view, Richman's claim that one can question the fundamental tenets of a narrative by divorcing oneself from the text altogether is not tenable. The tradition proves quite the opposite. The Rāma story has been retold in many forms. As far as I know, they have been retold by maintaining the core narratorial and characterological features, which define the traditional boundaries of them. Goldman observes this aspect of traditional retellings:

> To contrast […] is to understand how radically such a story and its characters can be modified. And yet, to most people for whom one or more of these texts is a cultural heritage, the others are clearly recognizable as *Rāmāyaṇa.* This seems to me to be true even when, as for example in the case of texts such as the Jaina *Pāṇḍava Purāṇa,* the purpose of the work is to debunk what are seen as the fanciful excesses of the original. If this is so, then it must be that these versions, however much they diverge in theme, sequence, characterization, and religious sentiment, are contained within some recognizable areal boundary of acceptable variation. In other words, their surface modifications do not unacceptably compromise what is felt to be the "essence" of the text. (1992, 91)

Notably, Goldman calls attention to the "essence" of the story, which determines what is within the boundaries of a traditional narrative and what is not. It also resonates with Sanders' notion of adaptation: even though significantly altered to accommodate different mediums, such as cinema, a reproduction of *Hamlet* "remains ostensibly *Hamlet*." Similarly, in modern times, Narayana Rao's study of women's Telugu songs (2016, 240–69) and Candrāvatī's Bengali

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[18] Lutgendorf draws attention "to the colonization of the Indian imagination" in connection with the Mahābhārata too (2021, 384).

Rāmāyaṇa show that women articulated their concerns without vilifying Rāma, as did the abovementioned three representations cited by Richman.

Moreover, it is important not to lose sight of the folktale ("What Happens When You Listen") that Ramanujan used to conclude his "Three Hundred *Rāmāyaṇas*" essay. Once a woman forces her "uncultured" husband to go and listen to an all-night long performance of the Rāmāyaṇa. The man falls asleep during the performance, and at the conclusion of the recitation, someone puts sweets in his mouth. When his wife asks about how the recitation was, he replies that it was very sweet. The next night he falls asleep again, and a boy comfortably positions himself on the man's shoulder. When the man wakes up in the morning, he feels aches and pains and tells his wife that the recitation "got heavier and heavier by morning." The next night, he falls asleep again, and a dog pees in his mouth. That day, he informs his wife that the recitation was salty. His wife grows suspicious and joins him in the next night's performance. She keeps him up all night, and he actually listens to the recitation. The recitation included a part in which Hanumān accidentally drops Rāma's signet ring in the ocean. The man immediately dives into the ocean, finds the ring, and gives it to Hanumān. That day he is greeted with great accolades. Implicit in Ramanujan's allusion to "what happens when you listen" is the idea of graded validity. The act of listening presupposes the phenomenological approach: suspending one's voice that intrudes on one's ability to hear the speaker, and one's relationship with the speaker is defined by how well one listens to them. When you don't listen, Rāma stories might sometimes taste "very sweet" and sometimes "very salty," and yet sometimes they might feel "heavier and heavier." But when you listen you elicit exclamations of respect from others, that you are "special, really blessed by Rāma and Hanuman" (1991a, 46–48). Following this, a careful study of the oppositional Rāmakathās might help in understanding if their authors actually listened to

the story. In many cases, carefully listening to an older version can yield proper insights into the actions which involve morally conflicting moments, but which become oversimplified in the course of retellings.

The oppositional tellings that ask questions and offer answers by breaking the boundaries of the narrative can hardly be considered "within" the boundaries. To the extent that Richman suggests that all tellings are equally valid and all questions are legitimate, she opens the door to transgressing the idea of boundaries that define the epic "tradition" and "language," "the underlying cultural grammar of these narrative traditions." This might make her idea of boundaries but a convenient caveat to ward off challenges to her position.

I should like to draw attention to Richman's term "oppositional tellings," which she uses in both *Many Rāmāyaṇas* (1991, 11) and *Questioning Ramayanas* (2001, 8). The term "oppositional tellings" rightly refers to those tellings that violate the boundary of the traditional narrative. Narayana Rao (2016, 211) and Lutgendorf (2004, 151) designate such retellings with the term "anti-*Rāmāyaṇa*." In disagreement with Richman's open-ended idea of the Rāmakathā tradition, I term the "oppositional tellings" as "anti-tradition," if they violate the core traits of the narrative and characters, the crystalized elements of the traditional narrative.[19]

To recapitulate the topic, the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata narratives are living traditions that have undergone tremendous changes. Ramanujan identified three types of relationship between a source and its tellings: those that focus on the fidelity with the source material, those that generally remain faithful to the source but alter the content to adapt it to different settings,

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[19] Here, the term "anti-tradition" is descriptive and not evaluative. In my view, this term is relevant to cases where the author's intent can be reasonably discerned, based on his or her ideological background and the purpose in producing a retelling, as an attempt to subvert the tradition.

and those that use the plot and its characters to say something totally different. On the one hand, Richman opines that Ramanujan's views indicate that both constraints and fluidity are part of this tradition, and she frequently uses the term boundary in connection with constraints; on the other hand, she never clarifies the idea of constraints and boundaries. She also believes that all tellings of the Rāma story are equally valid. This somehow makes the idea of boundaries pointless. Because the stories of Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata originate in the works of Vālmīki and Vyāsa, later tellings might be viewed as adaptations, or adaptations of adaptations. I therefore delved into the theories of adaptation and appropriation. It allowed me to define the boundaries of narratives. Beginning with Ānandavardhana and ending with most recent views of such authorities as Field, Sanders, Mantel, Paley, and Narayana Rao, I demonstrated that the core traits of the narrative and characters ought to be maintained for something to be identified as part of the tradition. The spirit of a work often resides in the struggles, viewpoints, attitudes, and transformations of its characters, which the characters express through their actions: "Action is character" (Field 2006, 83). Sītā ceases to be Sītā if she betrays the notion of marital fidelity. When Sītā ceases to be Sītā, the story cannot claim to be a part of the Rāma story tradition, for it has transgressed the constraints and boundaries of the tradition.

Just as the three types of relationship—*iconic*, *indexical*, and *symbolic*—between a source and its tellings are frequently combined, the phenomenological and philological approaches also are intertwined—there is no pure phenomenological study without philology and there is no philological study without phenomenology. This applies to the "Many Mahābhāratas" approach too. It involves both philological and phenomenological approaches. The difference lies only in the emphasis.

2.4 From "Many Rāmāyaṇas" to "Many Mahābhāratas"

I launch this inquiry with the question Hawley and Pillai ask in their *Many Mahābhāratas*: "Does a composition need to tell this story in order to be considered a Mahābhārata, and does it need to tell only this story?" (2021, 10) Is it the narrative in its various forms that is called Mahābhārata? Or does everything related to the Mahābhārata, including analytical works, count as the Mahābhārata? They cite examples of tellings that either do not bear the title Mahābhārata or are part of larger works not titled as Mahābhārata. Their reply is based on Ramanujan's idea quoted above:

> Sometimes being a Mahābhārata means that a work shares certain motifs (characters, structures, relationships, themes) with the story we have outlined here—a story with which all of the audiences we consider in this book would have been (or are) intimately familiar. Perhaps we can be content with the idea that sometimes being a Mahābhārata means being a work that relates to the central "core" story, or to other Mahābhāratas that embody it. (2021, 12)

The first part of the quote deserves no special comment as I have already reflected on it in the "Many Rāmāyaṇas" section. Before I discuss how the notion of narratorial and characterological boundaries applies in this case, I should mention that Hawley and Pillai go beyond the definitions of Rāmāyaṇa or Rāmakathā as proposed by Ramanujan, Richman and others. According to the latter, Rāmāyaṇa or Rāmakathā was limited to the story part and did not include its analytical explorations. But Hawley and Pillai extend this to even commentaries and analytical works: "we find that the text we nowadays call the 'vulgate' *Mahābhārata*, produced by the seventeenth-century scholar Nīlakaṇṭha, is not just that, but also an exhaustive commentary that he composed to accompany it" (ibid. 16). This seems to originate from the argument that "[t]he important thing isn't whether a composition 'is' a Mahābhārata or calls

itself one, but whether the value of interpreting that work increases as a result of putting it into

conversation with other Mahābhāratas" (ibid. 12).

In connection with the concept of the core narrative and characters I spoke of in the

"Many Rāmāyaṇas" section, Hawley's and Pillai's expression that "a work that relates to the

central 'core' story, or to other Mahābhāratas that embody it" is especially noteworthy. "The

nuclear tale of most well-known Mahābhāratas" (ibid. 7), as they recount it, is the one described

in Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*. One might ask: can Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* be called many

Mahābhāratas? They believe so: "Even the title, 'Mahābhārata,' suggesting a unified body of

text, hides a plural behind its ever-so-gossamer veil. 'Mahābhārata,' after all, means 'the Great

Bhāratas'" (ibid.). While it is true that Vyāsa's text has come down to us in different versions

(ibid. 16–17), which textual philologists assess in terms of original versus interpolation, and it

tells the story of the Bhāratas, its multiplicity cannot be proven on the basis of its title's meaning,

for the title never implies "the Great Bhāratas." It either means "the story of the Bhāratas," which

Hawley and Pillai describe elsewhere as "a single core story of these great Bhāratas" (2021, 7),

or "the Mahābhārata war," the latter being a major incident within the larger story.[20] Also, their

statement above seems to imply that the works that neither relate to this "core" story nor to other

works that "embody it" cannot be considered a Mahābhārata. Like Richman, Hawley and Pillai

seem to complicate the notion of boundaries and constraints by encouraging readers to "leave

aside these formal constraints and experience them first and foremost *as Mahābhāratas*" (ibid.

12, emphasis in the original). They state that "[t]o anyone who insists that the Mahābhārata is

one thing or another, we present the astounding magnitude and heterogeneity of this literary

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[20] *mahābhāratam ākhyānaṃ pāṇḍavānāṃ yaśaskaram* (1.53.32)*, mahābhāratam ākhyānaṃ kurūṇāṃ caritaṃ mahat* (1.56.1)*, bhāratānāṃ mahaj janma mahābhāratam ucyate* (1.56.31)*, brāhmaṇāḥ kathayiṣyanti mahābhāratam āhavam* (5.139.56)*,* and *mahābhāratayuddhe hi koṭiśaḥ kṣatriyā hatāḥ* (12.48.13)*.*

cosmos. If there is 'a' Mahābhārata, it is transhistorical, translinguistic, transmedial; it is a

Mahābhārata that insists on engendering more Mahābhāratas" (ibid.). In my view, there is a core

story that defines what Mahābhārata is. And such notions as transhistorical are applicable in

relation to this core story. A telling ceases to belong to the Mahābhārata tradition if it breaks free

from the key narratorial and characterological traits.

Like Vālmīki's description of Rāma and Rāvaṇa's characters, the key attributes that

Vyāsa envisions in his heroes and anti-heroes define the boundaries for later reasonable

adaptations: "Duryodhana is the great tree of resentment, Karṇa its trunk, Śakuni the branches,

Duḥśāsana the flourishing flower and fruit, and the unwise king Dhṛtarāṣṭra the root. Yudhiṣṭhira

is the great tree of *dharma*, Arjun its trunk, Bhīmasena the branches, sons of Mādrī [Nakula and

Sahadeva] the flourishing flowers and fruits, and Kṛṣṇa, Brahman, and the Brāhmaṇas the root"

(1.1.65–66).[21]

Vyāsa maintains such reputations of these characters throughout his text. Yudhiṣṭhira

finds peace in *dharma*, shies away from wrong actions, is compassionate and so devoted to truth

that all riches of the world cannot deviate him from it. Duryodhana embodies the opposite

attributes—he is hot-tempered, arrogant, jealous, greedy, resentful, and believes in gaining

victory by all means. Karṇa's life is defined by a deep-seated hatred of the Pāṇḍavas, especially

of Arjuna, and loyalty to Duryodhana. He is also the chief provoker of hostilities in

Duryodhana's heart against the Pāṇḍavas. Draupadī, too, is devoted to truth (*satyavratā*), strong-

minded (*manasvinī*), devoted to her husbands (*pativratā*), and wise (*paṇḍitā*). Her wrathful and

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[21] *duryodhano manyumayo mahādrumaḥ skandhaḥ karṇaḥ śakunis tasya śākhāḥ, duḥśāsanaḥ puṣpaphale samṛddhe mūlaṃ rājā dhṛtarāṣṭro 'manīṣī. yudhiṣṭhiro dharmamayo mahādrumaḥ skandho 'rjuno bhīmaseno 'sya śākhāḥ, mādrīsutau puṣpaphale samṛddhe mūlaṃ kṛṣṇo brahma ca brāhmaṇāś ca.* Kṛṣṇa repeats this to Saṃjaya at 5.29.45–46.

furious character is consistent with the prophesy at her birth: she would lead the Kṣatriya community to destruction.

These principal characters display similar attitudes in the gambling episode too. During the Rājasūya, Yudhiṣṭhira treats Duryodhana and others from Hastināpura with honour and sticks to his vow to never turn down a challenge. Draupadī demonstrates an impressive managerial capacity as she oversees the expenses during the Rājasūya ceremony and refuses to accuse Yudhiṣṭhira of any wrongdoing in connection with her bet. Duryodhana refuses to listen to his betters; he remains greedy, arrogant, intolerant, and cruel in his treatment of the Pāṇḍavas. Clinging to his aversion to the Pāṇḍavas, Karṇa misrepresents the events in the gambling hall and attempts to prove Draupadī's enslavement. His savage taunts about the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī are exceptionally cruel.

This summarizes the essential nature of the characters mentioned in the stanzas; any reversal of these attributes and their role in the narrative would amount to violating the boundaries of Vyāsa's narrative. Attempts to paint a character antithetical to Vyāsa's conception by selectively picking an episode of the narrative insinuate the reteller's bias. In my view, such attempts are disingenuous and cannot be endorsed as sufficient to alter the overall character of a person.[22]

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[22] For example, under extreme pressure from Kṛṣṇa and his brothers, Yudhiṣṭhira once tells a half lie to clear the way for Droṇa's elimination. While he can be charged with falsehood in this case, it cannot be a sufficient ground to recast his overall character as a liar. The traditional retellers of the narrative display an awareness of such limits.

Let me illustrate my point from Richman's Foreword to *Many Mahābhāratas*. She briefly describes *Flight from the Mahabharath* (early 1990s), a play by Mutual Naidoo, a South African of South Indian descent. To avoid potential misreading, I extensively quote Richman. In the play,

> Draupadī leads a group of women out of the "Epic." No longer do they intend to remain in a narrative that has locked them into gender roles that impel them to bear and raise sons but deprive them of the ability to prevent their boys from dying in wars provoked by their fathers. Fleeing the Epic, they enter the genre of drama. […] Agreeing to learn self-defense, the women adopt the proposal of Rādhā (Karṇa's foster mother) to rid their drama of heroes and villains, to avoid complicity in the glorification of bloodshed. The drama's director, Draupadī, now announces that they can free themselves from Epic constraints by retelling their stories such that they align with the new identities they have embraced. (Richman 2021, xxi)

As per Richman's summary of the drama, Draupadī's plan to alter her own polyandrous marriage to a monogamous marriage with Arjuna alone does not suffice because she "realizes that the women's stories are interdependent; changing one means changing others" (ibid.). It creates conflict between Draupadī and Bṛhannaḍā's (Arjuna) roles, and the former withdraws from the drama. The story is heavily altered to underscore the issue of same-sex love by showing Bṛhannaḍā and Śikhaṇḍin as lovers. But because such a portrayal of these characters is so out of the Mahābhārata's story, Śikhaṇḍin suspects that it will not be accepted. But "[d]isagreeing, Bṛhannaḍā proposes to make Vyāsa's authority serve their cause. Since the author created characters that depart from heterosexuality, people will realize that 'Vyāsa invented trans-sexuality' and accept it" (ibid. xxii). As the title of the drama *Flight from the Mahabharath* suggests, the story of the drama could not be told by remaining within the boundaries of the epic. Hence, the characters flee the epic and "enter the genre of drama." Even the story of the drama is so diametrically opposed to the Mahābhārata story, that the characters quarrel and Draupadī absents herself from the drama, too. Finally, united in their attempt to escape patriarchy, they come together and use Vyāsa's authority to give prominence to gender and same-sex related

issues. This entire exercise of fleeing the epic and entering into drama demonstrates that the creators and actors of the drama thought that they were transcending the boundaries of the epic, the Mahābhārata story. They thought it appropriate to take a *flight from the Mahābhārata* because the themes they were introducing could not be, according to them, assimilated in the traditional cultural grammar of the story.

Just as Ramanujan underscores the notion of listening to a story carefully, the Mahābhārata tradition, too, anticipates a good listener. Hawley and Pillai begin their Introduction to *Many Mahābhāratas* (2021) with Vyāsa's request to Gaṇeśa to pen down the *Mahābhārata*. Gaṇeśa agrees to write the poem but only if Vyāsa recites it so fluently that Gaṇeśa does not have to stop and wait for him. Hawley and Pillai rightly interpret the anecdote as "Always Wanting These Stories" (1–5), that audiences, and by extension, authors, never feel like they have had enough of these stories. But this is only the first part of Vyāsa and Gaṇeśa's settlement. When Gaṇeśa forces the condition to receive the poem in a constant flow, Vyāsa, too, comes up with a provision: "Do not in any place write without understanding it" (*abuddhvā mā likha kvacit*) (Critical Edition, Ādiparvan, Appendix 1, note 1; Nīlakaṇṭha 1.1.79). Gaṇeśa agrees to the condition. This episode has three parts: Vyāsa requests Gaṇeśa to write down his composition; Gaṇeśa agrees only if Vyāsa would ensure non-stop flow of the material; and Vyāsa agrees to Gaṇeśa's condition if he would write only after understanding it. Hawley and Pillai interpret Gaṇeśa's condition as an example of an insatiable desire to hear and produce Vyāsa's story. Such a popularity of the epic is described elsewhere too. Sūta mentions that Vyāsa's narrative was already popular and was being reproduced in various forms (1.1.24–26). But what Hawley and Pillai interpret as Gaṇeśa's insatiable desire to listen to the story seems to indicate just the opposite. The fact that Gaṇeśa imposes a condition to write it down implies on

his part some reluctance to write it down. Gaṇeśa displays no interest in the story, he agrees to simply write down what Vyāsa would dictate. This might be interpreted as indicative of quick mass reproduction of the Mahābhārata stories, some of which might originate from a lack of understanding of the story, which would result in "either distortion or absurdity."[23] At least that is what Vyāsa appears to fear. So, he stipulates a condition on the mass reproduction of the story: Gaṇeśa must first understand the content, and only then write it down. Could this episode be an attempt to maintain a quality control over large number of substandard reproductions? I think so. Vyāsa's prerequisite that Gaṇeśa understands it before writing seems to imply precisely that. Thus, the dialogue between Vyāsa and Gaṇeśa could have been conceived to discredit distorted retellings, be they on account of one's ignorance or purposefully misconceived to distort the message of the narrative.

I conclude this discussion by turning to some scholars' views related to the Mahābhārata's retellings. One such case is a review of two performances of the Mahābhārata: Peter Brook's theatrical and filmic adaptations *The Mahabharata* (also titled as *Peter Brook's The Mahabharata*) and the Chopras' *Mahabharat* series. In his review of these classics, Goldman denounces Brook's version:

> Somehow Brook's small cast, scant props, drab costumes, and generally Spartan production failed to convince me—just as with its Indian critics—that this is the world conjured up by the poetic imagination of Vyāsa. Then too, the mood of the piece, although it reflects something of the gloom that hovers over the original, seems too monovalent and, with the spareness of the production, gave me the impression of an amateurish amalgam of Greek tragedy, Shakespeare, and Sartre. (1992, 93).

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[23] I borrow this phrase from Goldman's evaluation of Brook's *The Mahabharata* (1992, 94).

Goldman is evidently alluding to what he elsewhere characterizes as the "essence" of the text

(ibid. 91). After describing the shortcomings of Brook's *Mahābhārata*, he contrasts Brook's

version with that of the Chopras and further seems to clarify, albeit indirectly, his idea of

essence:

> Despite a pace that is glacial compared to the American half-hour action-adventure
> series, special effects reminiscent of 1950s science fiction films, and an acting style that
> Westerners will find schmaltzy to say the least, the series does manage to bring to life the
> characters of the *Mahābhārata* and to render accurately several of the poem's complex
> emotional, moral, and ethical dilemmas while providing a level of action adequate to
> sustain most people's interest. (ibid. 95–96)

Here Goldman points to the off-putting aspects of the Series but admits that it succeeds in

bringing "to life the characters of the *Mahābhārata* and to render accurately several of the

poem's complex emotional, moral, and ethical dilemmas." So-Rim Lee, too, echoes Goldman's

views: "Brook and Carrière's adaptation does not 'echo' its original, nor does it stand

autonomous from it; somewhere along the process of adaptation, the *Mahābhārata* disappeared"

(2018, 82). In fact, Lee's entire article is concerned about whether Brook's production is an

example of translation and adaptation or of a cultural appropriation. In an adaptation, Lee

believes that the "cultural and social meaning has to be conveyed and adapted to a new

environment through what Patrice Pavis calls the 'language-body'" (ibid. 85), but Brook's *The

Mahabharata* does not qualify for adaptation "precisely because it appropriates the source text

and, in so doing, misrepresents it. […] It lies within their inherent epistemic violence of treating

the *Mahābhārata* as a natural resource that can be uprooted and processed to cater to the West"

(ibid.). It is rather a case of blatant appropriation, for Brook takes "possession of another's story,

and filtering it, in a sense, through one's own sensibility, interests, and talents'" (ibid.). Bharucha

protests that Brook took "one of our most significant texts and decontextualized it from its

history in order to 'sell' it to audiences in the West" (Bharucha as quoted in Lee 2018, 85). Lee sees a "predatory underlying motive" (ibid. 84): "Brook does not simply dismiss the context of 'Hindu culture' in the *Mahābhārata* for its 'unnecessariness', but more actively rejects it since it proves inimical to establishing his status as a Western researcher" (ibid.). Of course, both Brook and Carrière are outsiders to the Indian culture, which makes it easier to accuse them of appropriating the Mahābhārata.

But one must not ignore the possibilities of insiders' appropriating an idea or text, especially if the narrative has become part of identity politics. As I showed above through examples of Dutt and Ramasamy's attitude to the Rāmāyaṇa and Lutgendorf's views of Menon and Banker's retellings of the Rāmāyaṇa, such appropriations, or crossing of boundaries, can happen by both those who relate to stories as insiders and those who divorce themselves "from the text altogether."

Conclusion

The "Many Rāmāyaṇas" approach encourages us to look seriously at the diversity of the Rāma story, whether a retelling be religious, regional, performative, or folkloric, thereby opening windows into the particulars of the contexts in which such retellings prospered. This is the strength of the phenomenological approach—have empathy and let the subject speak for itself and bracket out one's presuppositions to the degree that one can be conscious of them (*Epoché*) to develop rich description and avoid reductionism. It is also important to acknowledge that sometimes adaptations are so robust that they seem to be new and in turn spawn similar tellings. In such cases, it is important to determine whether they continue the core traits of the narrative

and the characters. If they do, they could still be considered within the epic tradition. If not, these tellings are outside or perhaps on the boundary.

The most significant conclusion of this exercise is the realization that such leading scholars of the "Many Rāmāyaṇas" approach as Ramanujan and Narayana Rao sense that there are boundaries for recreating Rāma stories. Unfortunately, the concept of boundaries is not clearly defined, and some retellings included in the four volumes edited by Richman leave the reader confused about how they can be considered within the boundaries of the traditional narrative. One might ask if it is possible to define the core traits of the Mahābhārata's narrative and characters. I believe so. In Vyāsa's account, Yudhiṣṭhira is kind, peace-loving, honest, and devoted to *dharma* and truth; Duryodhana personifies resentment marked with jealousy, dishonesty, arrogance, and cruelty; Karṇa represents arrogance, hatred of the Pāṇḍavas, and loyalty to the wicked Duryodhana; Draupadī symbolizes resolute and brilliant defiance of immoral and unlawful abuse of a woman in a patriarchal society. Despite the complexity of these characters in Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* and, especially, later tellings, one can identify these characteristics as core features of their characters across the earliest, most influential telling of their story.

Whereas at one point it was important to shift attention away from too much focus on the sources, Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* and Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*, and the tendency to see later works as secondary in importance, surely that time has based. In my view, the philological and the "Many Rāmāyaṇas" approaches are not mutually exclusive and can be complementary in providing depth of perspective. While the philological approach can be helpful in defining the core narratorial and characterological traits, the "Many Rāmāyaṇas" approach can be useful in understanding adaptations, even extreme ones that have stood the test of time, to be considered

traditional. This does not rule out the possibility that some adaptations seemingly accepted within the tradition might not seem so when careful comparative work within a historical perspective is done. I would argue that to make sense of their relationship with other tellings within the larger tradition, it is important to examine the extant earliest tellings, for they are considered the foundations of the tradition, as Narayana Rao states, "Vālmīki's name […] provides the infallible basis for all *Rāmāyaṇa* texts." Vālmīki holds the trademark to the story, be that in older retellings or more recent retellings. Likewise, Vyāsa's name provides the infallible basis for all Mahābhārata versions. That should be the scholarly mandate if the basic plot, characters, and message are within the general boundaries of the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata traditions.

I have examined in some detail the "Many Rāmāyaṇas" approach not only because it has now been extended to the Mahābhārata with a major publication that includes a Foreword by Richman, but also because it addresses issues that have bearing on this thesis. 1) Why should I choose Vyāsa as an object of comparison? 2) Am I not emphasizing an *Ur* text that most people never read? 3) The Series draws on other sources, not just on Vyāsa's text. 4) Is the Series a new text or an oppositional text? 5) And is it outside the boundaries of the tradition or is it an adaptation or is it on the edge: neither inside nor outside? I return to these questions in passing throughout the chapters ahead, and in detail in the conclusion to this thesis.

Chapter Three

Stirring up the Storm:
From Duryodhana's Jealousy to "Blame the Woman"

In this chapter, I show how, according to Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*, the political rivalry

between the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas prepares the ground for the disastrous gambling match,

and how the Series transforms it into a notably different event. The main question I focus on is:

how do the *Mahābhārata* and the Series depict the reasons why Duryodhana is so inexorable in

his demand to play a dicing game against Yudhiṣṭhira? Is he compelled to seize Yudhiṣṭhira's

property on account of his political jealousy? Could it be that he aims to avenge his humiliation

in Yudhiṣṭhira's palace by defeating him in a game of dice? Or do both these reasons persuade

him to arrange the dicing match? If so, do they carry equal weight or is one of them more

influential than the other? The most relevant issue to my study is: who humiliates Duryodhana—

is it Draupadī? Or is it someone else? Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* and the Series treat these and

related issues in quite different manners. I explore these questions and the events pertinent to

them in both Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* and the Series. I highlight the differences between them and

argue that the Series' presentation of the events leading to the gambling match shifts the focus

from the rivalry of men to Duryodhana's insult by Draupadī. I trace to a limited degree the

history of this transformation by examining literary and performative tellings.[1] I argue that the

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[1] A full study of each of the texts and their contexts that I survey here must await full analysis by Mahābhārata scholars; my purpose here has been just to register the shift in the focus from the rivalry of men to Duryodhana's insult by Draupadī.

Series' recasting of Yudhiṣṭhira's Rājasūya and the gambling episode has drawn from these more proximate retellings.[2]

3.1 Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*: Duryodhana's jealousy

After the partition of Hastināpura, the Pāṇḍavas establish a powerful empire with its capital in Indraprastha. Nārada, a celestial sage, visits the Pāṇḍavas' father Pāṇḍu in heaven, who requests the sage to bring his instructions for Yudhiṣṭhira to perform the Rājasūya ceremony, which would ritually install him as the most powerful king (2.12.36; 2.14.2). All his brothers and ministers welcome the proposition, but Yudhiṣṭhira is not sure. He seeks counsel of Kṛṣṇa, who also strongly favours the ritual but directs that Jarāsaṃdha, the then-current emperor, must first be vanquished. Yudhiṣṭhira prefers peace over more bloodshed but finally gives in. Jarāsaṃdha is killed and the younger four Pāṇḍavas launch a series of successful attacks on the near and distant kingdoms and found the most powerful empire in the region.

In this section, I take a closer look at the aftermath of the Pāṇḍavas' "world-conquest" (*digvijaya*). First, they leave Hastināpura, ruled by their arch-nemesis Duryodhana, untouched,[3] and they prepare for the coronation ceremony (Rājasūya*)* for Yudhiṣṭhira. Yudhiṣṭhira sends Nakula to Hastināpura to invite Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Vidura, Kṛpa and his cousins to the Rājasūya. It is notable that Yudhiṣṭhira shows great consideration for both Duryodhana and Duḥśāsana: he appoints them as supervisors of precious gifts and comestibles respectively. Their

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[2] Once again, all translations of Sanskrit, Hindi, and Marathi excerpts are mine, unless otherwise noted.

[3] Considering how Duryodhana has so far treated the Pāṇḍavas, it is surprising that they did not conquer the Hastināpura kingdom. The reason is clear: Yudhiṣṭhira considers them as family. That he honors them and says that everything that he owns, including his own self, is theirs bears witness to this spirit of him. When the Gandharvas arrest Duryodhana, Yudhiṣṭhira sends his brothers to free him because he is, despite all conflicts, a family member (3.232.2–5). Yudhiṣṭhira does not see Hastināpura as a rival kingdom.

presence was duly honoured. Despite that, it only exacerbates Duryodhana's jealousy—he

cannot swallow his foes' prosperity. It is important to review the details of the Rājasūya

happenings and how they wound Duryodhana's ambitious sensitivities within Vyāsa's

Mahābhārata to understand their representation in the Series.

Yudhiṣṭhira's treatment of Duryodhana

The first point to note in this connection is Yudhiṣṭhira's behaviour toward Duryodhana.

Recently, some scholars have evaluated his conduct in a way that portrays Yudhiṣṭhira as a cruel

partner in humiliating Duryodhana. They view some sinister motives behind Yudhiṣṭhira's

appointment of Duryodhana as the collector of gifts. "It is as if the poets ascribe a certain *hubris*

to Yudhiṣṭhira at this moment in the narrative, and it is as if his essential decorum has fallen"

(McGrath 2017, 62). Such an assessment of Yudhiṣṭhira is expressed in full by Black:

> Duryodhana also tells his father of another provocation: Yudhiṣṭhira addressing him as
> 'elder'. This is an extraordinary and inflammatory remark, because, if taken literally, it
> implies that Yudhiṣṭhira acknowledges Duryodhana as the true heir on the very occasion
> he claims universal sovereignty for himself. Hiltebeitel is probably correct in
> characterising this remark as said 'mockingly' (2001b: 52).[4] Taken this way, it exposes a
> cruel side to Yudhiṣṭhira that is rarely seen. Assuming that Duryodhana is offering an
> accurate account to his father, then his inclusion of this detail further highlights
> Yudhiṣṭhira's role in inducing his sorrow and jealously. By offering both his task as
> receiving the gifts and Yudhiṣṭhira's mocking remark as reasons for his despair,
> Duryodhana portrays his feelings as a response to personal insults, rather than only
> because of resentment for Yudhiṣṭhira's riches and prestige. (2021, 96)

This is not a fair evaluation of Yudhiṣṭhira's character. It stems from a wrong interpretation of

Duryodhana's words. In the text, Yudhiṣṭhira never addresses Duryodhana with these words, nor

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[4] This citation is, according to Black's bibliography, from Hiltebeitel's *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King*. But I could not find such an assessment of Yudhiṣṭhira's character on the cited page or elsewhere in this work. McGrath, however, takes a similar stance (2017, 62), quoted above.

does Duryodhana claim that Yudhiṣṭhira said so. His words in fact suggest Yudhiṣṭhira's humble

attitude. Duryodhana says to Dhṛtarāṣṭra: "Yudhiṣṭhira *deemed me* the elder and his better"

(trans. van Buitenen 1975, 2.46.23, emphasis mine).[5] The phrase "deemed me" evokes a scene in

which Yudhiṣṭhira's behaviour toward Duryodhana was such that the latter felt honoured.

Moreover, it is not only Duryodhana whose presence Yudhiṣṭhira acknowledges respectfully. He

humbly invites to his Rājasūya ceremony Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Vidura, Kṛpa, and all his

"loving cousins" and many more individuals (2.31.5–6).[6] Yudhiṣṭhira honours Bhīṣma and

Droṇa and addresses them, *including* Duryodhana: "At this sacrifice, please cooperate with me.

All this wealth of mine around here is yours, and so am I. Please help me in any way you wish,

you are free" (2.32.2).[7] He then entrusts them all—Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Kṛpa, Duḥśāsana, Saṃjaya,

Aśvatthāmā, and Duryodhana—with the appropriate duties. One might ask: if Yudhiṣṭhira's

behaviour toward Duryodhana was cruel and mocking, was it similarly cruel and mocking

toward others before whom he submits? If not, I see no reason to think that Yudhiṣṭhira intended

to mock Duryodhana. Besides, Yudhiṣṭhira's kindness towards even those who have not been

kind to him demonstrates his friendliness to all, for which he earns the epithet of "ajātaśatru," for

no one hates him (2.12.8). Duryodhana has already mentioned to Śakuni how he and his coterie

tried to harm the Pāṇḍavas. Kṛṣṇa mentions how Yudhiṣṭhira has always acted in good faith

towards Dhṛtarāṣṭra and his sons, the very people who expelled the Pāṇḍavas and tried to burn

them alive. And when the Pāṇḍavas establish the empire of Indraprastha, Yudhiṣṭhira remains

humble toward Dhṛtarāṣṭra and even designates him as the head of the defeated kings (5.93.54–

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[5] *jyeṣṭho 'yam iti māṃ matvā śreṣṭhaś ceti.*

[6] *dhṛtarāṣṭraś ca bhīṣmaś ca viduraś ca mahāmatiḥ, duryodhanapurogāś ca bhrātaraḥ sarva eva te. satkṛtyāmantritāḥ sarve ācāryapramukhā nṛpāḥ.*

[7] *asmin yajñe bhavanto mām anugṛhṇantu sarvaśaḥ, idaṃ vaḥ svam ahaṃ caiva yad ihāsti dhanaṃ mama.*

56). One notable point in this regard is that the Pāṇḍavas have consistently proven their valor. They have defeated many a great king, but they do not attack and seize the kingdom of Hastināpura. It is perhaps because Yudhiṣṭhira could never think of subjugating his own family.

When Duryodhana succeeds in banishing the Pāṇḍavas into the forest after the second gambling match, he camps near the Pāṇḍavas' residence with the evil intention of torturing them by displaying his wealth and power. Unfortunately for him, Duryodhana picks a fight with another king, who takes him captive. Yudhiṣṭhira, despite his brothers' vehement opposition, sends them to free him. Humility is Yudhiṣṭhira's trademark. It seems he remains equably unaffected even after establishing the most powerful empire in the region. Not only does he duly honour Duryodhana and Duḥśāsana by officially granting them authority about gifts and comestibles, but he also orders the servants to supply dry clothes for Duryodhana when the latter falls in the pond. But Duryodhana finds that too mortifying (2.46.31). Even Draupadī, who is angry at Yudhiṣṭhira for his unconditional commitment to *dharma*, praises such a disposition of Yudhiṣṭhira: "You neither disparaged your equals nor your inferiors, let alone your betters; and even after conquering the whole earth you did not grow horns [i.e., become egotistic or aggressive]" (3.31.9).[8] The more Yudhiṣṭhira acts in good faith toward Duryodhana, the more the latter takes offence. Given Yudhiṣṭhira's consistent kindness to Duryodhana before and even after the emasculating humiliation during the gambling match, it is wrong to judge Yudhiṣṭhira's polite remark as hubristic, mocking, or inflammatory. This point is crucial to avoid misunderstanding that Yudhiṣṭhira's treatment provoked Duryodhana.

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[8] *nāvamaṃsthā hi sadṛśān nāvarāñ śreyasaḥ kutaḥ, avāpya pṛthivīṃ kṛtsnāṃ na te śṛṅgam avardhata*.

Stirring up the Storm

Duryodhana's behaviour, however, is not as gracious as Yudhiṣṭhira's. As the officially appointed collector of precious jewels brought as gifts by many kings, Duryodhana has first-hand experience of the splendorous affluence of Yudhiṣṭhira (2.46.23–25). Duryodhana grows insecure and smoulders with vicious jealousy: despite his bitterly determined plots to thwart the Pāṇḍavas at every possible turn, even to kill and destroy them, they instead prosper! Crudely ambitious and quick-tempered, he is filled with vindictive envy, and consummate despair pushes him into depression and suicidal tendencies. His public ridicule by the younger four Pāṇḍavas and palace attendants seems to aggravate him slightly more.

3.1.1 Duryodhana's jealousy and mockery in the Sabhā

At the conclusion of the Rājasūya ritual, all guests, including Kṛṣṇa, return to their homelands, but for some unknown reason, Duryodhana and Śakuni remain behind and leisurely explore the Assembly Hall, the Sabhā.[9] On a few such occasions, the resentful Duryodhana is tricked by the strange spectacle of illusory appearances in the Sabhā, when he suffers notorious humiliation and mockery. A careful study of the Rājasūya events is important because (1) they are fundamental for understanding the precise roles of Draupadī, the Pāṇḍavas, Duryodhana and his uncle Śakuni in triggering the gambling match; and (2) they also set the stage for the reader

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[9] John Smith (note on 2.42.60) draws attention to Śakuni's apparent departure from Indraprastha previously mentioned at 2.42.43 (2009a, 121). Elsewhere he spells out: "It is part of the day-to-day experience of any Sanskritist who reads the *Mahābhārata* to run into puzzling inconsistencies. […] At 2.42.43 Śakuni travels home from Yudhiṣṭhira's Royal Consecration; eighteen *ślokas* later he and Duryodhana are the only guests remaining with Yudhiṣṭhira" (2009b, 101). I think the confusion arises because of the term *sahaputram*, which could mean "along with his son" or "along with his sons." The term could certainly imply Śakuni if he was the only son of Subala. But Subala is said to have had at least four sons with whom he attends Draupadī's marriage ceremony: Śakuni, Bala, Vṛṣaka, and Bṛhadbala (1.177.5). Subala's multiple sons are again mentioned during the final war between the Kaurava and Pāṇḍava armies (6.86.3, 35, 37). At least three sons of Subala were present at Yudhiṣṭhira's Rājasūya ceremony: Śakuni, Acala, and Vṛṣaka (2.31.6–7). Thus, one can plausibly conclude that Subala left Indraprastha with his two sons, Acala and Vṛṣaka, whereas Śakuni extended his stay with Duryodhana in Indraprastha.

to observe the diversity of the narrative within the epic tradition. It is these diverse accounts that provide seeds for subsequent transformations of the events.

Two accounts of Duryodhana's mockery

According to Vyāsa's text, Vyāsa composed the epic and taught it to his five disciples, who included Vaiśaṃpāyana.[10] We hear nothing more about transmission through four of the disciples but do learn that Vaiśaṃpāyana narrates the story two generations later at a ritual performed by Janamejaya, the great-grandson of Arjuna, where Ūgraśravā Sūta hears it. Sūta later recounts the whole narrative in a gathering of sages who know about Vyāsa's composition. I find that whereas it is virtually impossible to distinguish between Vyāsa's and Vaiśaṃpāyana's accounts, Sūta's account is sometimes recognizable. The gambling episode is one such incident. Therefore, it is important to go through the layers of the text, which point to the existence of different tellings even within the Critical Edition. Although the incident of mockery is mentioned several times in the Critical Edition, its details are reported only on two occasions: first, in Vaiśaṃpāyana's account, and the second in Sūta's account. The differences between the two are indicative of how the narrative changed over time.[11]

Vaiśaṃpāyana: the mockery episode

Vaiśaṃpāyana reports Duryodhana's misadventures and the resulting mockery on two occasions. The first one occurs within the storyline, as and when it happens in the main story; the other consists of a description of the same by Duryodhana to Śakuni. According to

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[10] See Appendix 1 for the epic's description of its early evolution.

[11] As I mentioned in the section on the methodology, I am relying on the Critical Edition's description of the textual evolution: Vyāsa taught it to Vaiśaṃpāyana and authorized him to narrate it to Janamejaya. Sūta learned it from Vaiśaṃpāyana and narrated it to the sages.

Stirring up the Storm

Vaiśaṃpāyana, Duryodhana is ridiculed by several individuals as he falls victim to the uncanny architecture of the Rājasūya palace, which produces competing qualities of reality and illusion. During his explorations,

> Dhṛtarāṣṭra's son king Duryodhana came across in the palace a crystal floor, which he suspected to be water and therefore duly held his clothes high. Sour-tempered and sulking, he roamed about the hall. Later, he mistook a pool—filled with water that looked like solid crystal and graced with water-lilies that looked like crystal—for solid ground; all dressed up, he fell into the water. Seeing Duryodhana who had tumbled in the water, the servants laughed boisterously and gave him elegant costumes at the king's behest. Hefty Bhīma, Arjuna, and the twins [Nakula and Sahadeva] saw him in that condition, and they all laughed at him. The outraged Duryodhana, unforgiving by nature, could not stomach their guffaw; even so, he did control his countenance and avoided looking at them. Those individuals giggled again when he pulled up his garments as if he were wading through waters to a higher ground. He even collided with his forehead into a door that looked open but recoiled from an [open] doorway suspecting that it was closed.[12] Thus, having met a variety of mishaps and after receiving Yudhiṣṭhira's permission, king Duryodhana returned to Hastināpura with an unhappy heart because he had seen incredible opulence in the grand Rājasūya ritual. (2.43.3–12)[13]

As per this account, the following individuals made fun of Duryodhana: Bhīma, Arjuna, Nakula, Sahadeva, and several palace attendants. This is the first description of Duryodhana's mockery within the main storyline.

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[12] The description here gives the impression that Duryodhana was the first and the last victim of the illusory semblances of the palace, but it is not so. Nārada compares Yudhiṣṭhira's palace to that of Brahmā (2.11.41), which also could restyle its appearance in just a matter of a moment (2.11.8). Soon after its construction by Maya, many kings fall prey to the illusory semblances of Yudhiṣṭhira's palace and tumble over (2.3.30). It seems then that by the time the Rājasūya took place, many, if not all, guests must have been aware of its illusory nature.

[13] *sa kadā cit sabhāmadhye dhārtarāṣṭro mahīpatiḥ, sphāṭikaṃ talam āsādya jalam ity abhiśaṅkayā. svavastrotkarṣaṇaṃ rājā kṛtavān buddhimohitaḥ, durmanā vimukhaś caiva paricakrāma tāṃ sabhām. tataḥ sphāṭikatoyāṃ vai sphāṭikāmbujaśobhitām, vāpīṃ matvā sthalam iti savāsāḥ prāpataj jale. jale nipatitaṃ dṛṣṭvā kiṃkarā jahasur bhṛśam, vāsāṃsi ca śubhāny asmai pradadū rājaśāsanāt. tathāgataṃ tu taṃ dṛṣṭvā bhīmaseno mahābalaḥ, arjunaś ca yamau cobhau sarve te prāhasaṃs tadā. nāmarṣayat tatas teṣām avahāsam amarṣaṇaḥ, ākāraṃ rakṣamāṇas tu na sa tān samudaikṣata. punar vasanam utkṣipya pratariṣyann iva sthalam, āruroha tataḥ sarve jahasus te punar janāḥ. dvāraṃ ca vivṛtākāraṃ lalāṭena samāhanat, saṃvṛtaṃ ceti manvāno dvāradeśād upāramat. evaṃ pralambhān vividhān prāpya tatra viśāṃ pate, pāṇḍaveyābhyanujñātas tato duryodhano nṛpaḥ. aprahṛṣṭena manasā rājasūye mahākratau, prekṣya tām adbhutām ṛddhiṃ jagāma gajasāhvayam.*

Stirring up the Storm

Vaiśaṃpāyana: Duryodhana's reminiscence of the mockery

Duryodhana, too, describes his misadventures in the Sabhā (assembly hall) and the mockery episode on two occasions. The first one occurs within Vaiśaṃpāyana's narrative and the second in Sūta's account. In this part, I discuss the former. On his way back to Hastināpura, "resentful of the fortunes of the Pāṇḍavas" and singularly preoccupied with the thoughts of the Sabhā and Yudhiṣṭhira's opulence, Duryodhana designs evil plans in his mind (2.43.13). Śakuni notices that Duryodhana is woefully distraught and deadly silent. When pressed to disclose the cause of such a wretched state, Duryodhana rants about Yudhiṣṭhira's unrivalled political supremacy and awesome affluence in fifteen verses. The following few examples show his own perspective on his resentment:

> I saw the whole earth, conquered with the power of the great-spirited Arjuna's (*śvetāśvasya*)[14] weapons, under Yudhiṣṭhira's sway; uncle, I saw also the grand ritual which equalled the magnificent ritual of Indra among gods. Fraught with resentment, I burn day and night and dry away like shallow waters at the arrival of hot weather (2.43.19–21). […] After seeing such a fortune, which virtually glowed through Yudhiṣṭhira, I am overcome with resentment, and I am burning, which I do not deserve. I will either enter into the fire or eat poison, or even drown myself in water—I surely will not be able to live. What man of caliber would not be indignant at seeing his rivals thrive and himself decline? The fact that I am currently tolerating their possession of such a magnificent fortune indicates that I am no one—neither a woman nor a non-woman, neither a man nor a non-man. For what man of my sort would not be racked with anxiety after seeing their control over the earth, impressive opulence, and lavish ritual! (2.43.26–30)[15]

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[14] Arjuna came to be known as Śvetāśva and Śvetavāhana because his horses were white.

[15] *dṛṣṭvemāṃ pṛthivīṃ kṛtsnāṃ yudhiṣṭhiravaśānugām, jitām astrapratāpena śvetāśvasya mahātmanaḥ. taṃ ca yajñaṃ tathābhūtaṃ dṛṣṭvā pārthasya mātula, yathā śakrasya deveṣu tathābhūtaṃ mahādyute. amarṣeṇa susaṃpūrṇo dahyamāno divāniśam, śuciśukrāgame kāle śuṣye toyam ivālpakam. […] śriyaṃ tathāvidhāṃ dṛṣṭvā jvalantīm iva pāṇḍave, amarṣavaśam āpanno dahye 'ham atathocitaḥ. vahnim eva pravekṣyāmi bhakṣayiṣyāmi vā viṣam, apo vāpi pravekṣyāmi na hi śakṣyāmi jīvitum. ko hi nāma pumāṃl loke marṣayiṣyati sattvavān, sapatnān ṛdhyato dṛṣṭvā hānim ātmana eva ca. so 'haṃ na strī na cāpy astrī na pumān nāpumān api, yo 'haṃ tāṃ marṣayāmy adya tādṛśīṃ śriyam āgatām. īśvaratvaṃ pṛthivyāś ca vasumattāṃ ca tādṛśīṃ, yajñaṃ ca tādṛśaṃ dṛṣṭvā mādṛśaḥ ko na saṃjvaret.*

This sample from Duryodhana's grumble demonstrates his mental agony caused by his extreme jealousy. He considers himself outside the conventional framework of gender identity. In the patriarchal warrior community of the epic, tolerating the rival's political ascendancy and riches acquired through military power could be expected of a woman, but Duryodhana is not a woman; although a man, he is tolerating it like a woman—so he is neither. The anxiety generated by the loss of masculine identity makes him suicidal. After articulating his jealousy in detail, he recapitulates the mockery episode only in four (Sanskrit) words: "Having witnessed that splendour [of the Pāṇḍavas] and the magnificent Sabhā; and *having suffered that mockery by the guards* (*rakṣibhiś cāvahāsaṃ taṃ*), I am burning as if with fire!" (2.43.35; my emphasis).[16]

It seems that Śakuni is already familiar with the mockery scene as is indicated not only by the brevity of Duryodhana's description, but also by his usage of the word "that" (*tam*). At the same time, it can be argued that if Śakuni knew about the incident of mockery, he must have been aware of Duryodhana's jealousy too. Śakuni, to his credit, replies that Duryodhana should not begrudge the fortunes of the Pāṇḍavas (2.44.1–11).

A note about Śakuni's character is in order. According to Brian Black, Śakuni's words to Duryodhana "seem to be dripping in sarcasm. […] Rather than try to calm Duryodhana down, as his father will try to do later, Śakuni is winding him up, giving him even more incentive to seek revenge. This short exchange portrays Śakuni as manipulating the course of the conversation towards his own ends" (2021, 90). But this in my view is an unfair characterization of Śakuni, solely based on the malignant character that Śakuni acquired in later retellings. Black does not spell out what Śakuni's "own ends" were and for what Duryodhana should seek "revenge."

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[16] *so 'haṃ śriyaṃ ca tāṃ dṛṣṭvā sabhāṃ tāṃ ca tathāvidhām, rakṣibhiś cāvahāsaṃ taṃ paritapye yathāgninā.*

Śakuni is no doubt consistently seen in the epic as one of the two main provokers of

Duryodhana, the other one being Karṇa, but it is hard to see sarcasm in his voice here. He has on

another occasion shown a reconciliatory attitude toward the Pāṇḍavas. For example, when Karṇa

provokes Duryodhana to further agonize the banished, destitute Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī by

ostentatiously displaying his and his women's luxurious life, Duryodhana and his company

suffer a devastating defeat at the hands of another king. Duryodhana is captured, and it is the

Pāṇḍavas who free him. True to his nature, Duryodhana feels mortified that he was released by

his enemies. He becomes suicidal. Śakuni tells him:

> How can you feel aggrieved about having been treated well [by the Pāṇḍavas] in an
> adverse situation? Do not spoil the good deed of the Pāṇḍavas by resorting to resentment.
> Your [attitude] is odd: you are taking offense at [something] for which you should feel
> happy and appreciate the Pāṇḍavas. Calm down, do not kill yourself; be pleased and
> appreciate the good deed. Give the Pāṇḍavas their kingdom and earn fame and virtue.
> Having acknowledged this favour, you shall not be an ingrate. Earn happiness by
> establishing a good rapport with the Pāṇḍavas, by reinstalling them and returning their
> kingdom to them. (3.239.5–8)[17]

This indicates that although Śakuni wishes to establish his nephew Duryodhana as a powerful

king, he clearly has a sense of appreciation for the Pāṇḍavas' relentless heroic undertakings. I

think that Śakuni's words to Duryodhana after Yudhiṣṭhira's Rājasūya suggest his genuine

efforts to soothe Duryodhana's consuming jealousy. He recommends gambling as a means of

conquering the Pāṇḍavas only because Duryodhana expresses his helplessness to defeat the

Pāṇḍavas in a battle. For a moment Śakuni comforts Duryodhana, saying that he could conquer

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[17] *satkṛtasya hi te śoko viparīte kathaṃ bhavet, mā kṛtaṃ śobhanaṃ pārthaiḥ śokam ālambya nāśaya. yatra harṣas tvayā kāryaḥ satkartavyāś ca pāṇḍavāḥ, tatra śocasi rājendra viparītam idaṃ tava. prasīda mā tyajātmānaṃ tuṣṭaś ca sukṛtaṃ smara, prayaccha rājyaṃ pārthānāṃ yaśo dharmam avāpnuhi. kriyām etāṃ samājñāya kṛtaghno na bhaviṣyasi, saubhrātraṃ pāṇḍavaiḥ kṛtvā samavasthāpya caiva tān, pitryaṃ rājyaṃ prayacchaiṣāṃ tataḥ sukham avāpnuhi.*

the Pāṇḍavas with the help of his Kaurava brothers, Droṇa, Karṇa, Kṛpa, Saumadatti,[18] as well as of Śakuni himself and his brothers. But soon Śakuni realizes that the Pāṇḍavas are invincible and therefore suggests annexing their kingdom in a game of dice against Yudhiṣṭhira, who, although inept, nonetheless loves gambling. Because Śakuni plays a major role as an ally of Duryodhana throughout the Mahābhārata narrative, it is important to take note that he is not always as evil as he has been depicted in later versions, which some scholars tend to backread into Vyāsa's version.

Vaiśaṃpāyana: Duryodhana's jealousy versus mockery

Śakuni explains the situation to Dhṛtarāṣṭra at the behest of Duryodhana, who, in his attempt to persuade his father to arrange a gambling match, acrimoniously spouts off his despair in twenty-four verses. His conversation with Dhṛtarāṣṭra is seamlessly integrated into the narrative beginning from the time of the Rājasūya ceremony to Dhṛtarāṣṭra's commanding of Vidura to bring the challenge for a dice game to Yudhiṣṭhira (2.43–45).

Duryodhana's description of his agony to Dhṛtarāṣṭra consists of plain jealousy that he has already spelled out to Śakuni:

> I eat and dress like a plebeian man; on top of that, I harbour a searing discontent as I brook the turn of time. A man is indeed called a man when he, unforgiving, quells his subjects who lean on his rival and [thus] strives to eliminate the problems caused by the enemy. Conceit and contentment eclipse good fortune, as do pity and fear—possessed by these, no one achieves eminence. Nothing that I eat nourishes me ever since I saw the fortunes of Yudhiṣṭhira, which almost blazed through him, and which makes me pale. After seeing rivals prosper and myself decline and witnessing the prominent fortune of

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[18] Literally Somadatta's son, named Bhūriśravas, a notable powerful ally of Duryodhana in the final battle.

Yudhiṣṭhira—a dreadful sight [for me]—I have become pale, pitiable, wan, and emaciated. (2.45.12–16)[19]

Here Duryodhana describes his resentment over the Pāṇḍavas' ascent to supremacy with a justification that a king who displays pity, fear, contentment, and conceit meets with disasters. So, Duryodhana proposes a dice match against Yudhiṣṭhira and threatens to commit suicide should Dhṛtarāṣṭra fail to carry the proposal through. Frightened, Dhṛtarāṣṭra sends Vidura to Yudhiṣṭhira with a challenge. The two notable features of Duryodhana's conversation with Dhṛtarāṣṭra are: (1) Duryodhana confesses his jealousy of the Pāṇḍavas' rise to prominence and proposes to seize it all through a dice match; and (2) Duryodhana does not even allude to his mockery. Thus, this conversation as reported by Vaiśaṃpāyana concludes without any mention of the mockery episode. His jealousy is the main, if not only, provocation for his insistence on a gambling match.

Sūta: Duryodhana's mockery

The foregoing conversation between Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Duryodhana is substantially expanded by Sūta (2.46–51), who reports that Vaiśaṃpāyana recounted the events at the request of Janamejaya (2.46.1–3). I am not alone in emphasizing the distinct versions of the episode by Vaiśaṃpāyana and Sūta: Franklin Edgerton had already distinguished the differences between the two in 1944 and observed that Vaiśaṃpāyana and Sūta's accounts are two "different and

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[19] *aśnāmy ācchādaye cāhaṃ yathā kupuruṣas tathā, amarṣaṃ dhāraye cograṃ titikṣan kālaparyayam. amarṣaṇaḥ svāḥ prakṛtīr abhibhūya pare sthitāḥ, kleśān mumukṣuḥ parajān sa vai puruṣa ucyate. saṃtoṣo vai śriyaṃ hanti abhimānaś ca bhārata, anukrośabhaye cobhe yair vṛto nāśnute mahat. na mām avati tad bhuktaṃ śriyaṃ dṛṣṭvā yudhiṣṭhire, jvalantīm iva kaunteye vivarṇakaraṇīṃ mama. sapatnān ṛdhyato 'tmānaṃ hīyamānaṃ niśāmya ca, adṛśyām api kaunteye sthitāṃ paśyann ivodyatām, tasmād ahaṃ vivarṇaś ca dīnaś ca hariṇaḥ kṛśaḥ.* Nīlakaṇṭha interprets the term *adṛśyām* as "invisible" because it was hidden (*vyavahitatvāt*) (2.49.16). Van Buitenen follows Nīlakaṇṭha (2.45.16). Smith translates it as "though I cannot bear to see" (2.45.16), which seems more accurate because Duryodhana has evidently seen Yudhiṣṭhira's wealth in all its glory and has been describing it in full detail.

inconsistent accounts of the same events recorded in our text" (1944, xxxii). Van Buitenen also observes the oddity of Sūta's "unexpected appearance" in this context (1975, 815, note 46.1). It is therefore appropriate to acknowledge the differences between both.[20]

It is only in this Sūta's expansive telling that Duryodhana grouses about his humiliation and includes the names of Kṛṣṇa and Draupadī. After a long wailing about how Yudhiṣṭhira's sovereignty and riches make him suicidal, he spends nine verses describing the mockery episode. As he relates it to Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Duryodhana came across a solid crystalline floor with the semblance of real water bejewelled with lotuses.

> Bereft of jewels and stunned by the distinct fortunes of the foe, no sooner did I pull up my clothes, when the wolfish Bhīma laughed at me. If I could, I would have knocked the wolfish Bhīma down right there. That mockery at the hands of the archenemy is burning me. Again, I mistook a very similar pool full of water-lilies to be made of hard-rock floor, but Your Highness, I fell in the water. There Kṛṣṇa along with Arjuna laughed aloud at me, and so did Draupadī, heart-breakingly, with other women. What hurt me even more was the fact that the servants, directed by the king [Yudhiṣṭhira], brought additional clothing for me as I stood there with my clothes drenched in water. Your Highness, listen to yet another delusion as I tell you: I severely injured myself when I bumped with my forehead into a [crystalline] rock semblant of a doorway. There, the handsome twins saw me from afar, and pitying, they together held me up with their arms. Sahadeva—obviously smirking—even ushered me repeatedly, "Prince, this is the door, please enter through here." (2.46.27–34)[21]

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[20] Most recently, Black has given this issue greater attention (2021, 93–99).

[21] *vastram utkarṣati mayi prāhasat sa vṛkodaraḥ, śatror ṛddhiviśeṣeṇa vimūḍhaṃ ratnavarjitam. tatra sma yadi śaktaḥ syāṃ pātayeyaṃ vṛkodaram, sapatnenāvahāso hi sa māṃ dahati bhārata. punaś ca tādṛśīm eva vāpīṃ jalajaśālinīm, matvā śilāsamāṃ toye patito 'smi narādhipa. tatra māṃ prāhasat kṛṣṇaḥ pārthena saha sasvanam, draupadī ca saha strībhir vyathayantī mano mama. klinnavastrasya ca jale kiṃkarā rājacoditāḥ, dadur vāsāṃsi me 'nyāni tac ca duḥkhataraṃ mama. pralambhaṃ ca śṛṇuṣvānyaṃ gadato me narādhipa, advāreṇa vinirgacchan dvārasaṃsthānarūpiṇā, abhihatya śilāṃ bhūyo lalāṭenāsmi vikṣataḥ. tatra māṃ yamajau dūrād ālokya lalitau kila, bāhubhiḥ parigṛhṇītāṃ śocantau sahitāv ubhau. uvāca sahadevas tu tatra māṃ vismayann iva, idaṃ dvāram ito gaccha rājann iti punaḥ punaḥ.*

Stirring up the Storm

This description of the mockery episode by Duryodhana is both similar to and different from the one reported by Vaiśaṃpāyana at 2.43.3–12. It will be helpful to recapitulate a few points from Sūta's description of Duryodhana's tribulations in clear terms here:

1. For Duryodhana, the first and foremost nuisance is the riches of the Pāṇḍavas,

2. The mockery by Bhīma burns him so badly that he would have—if he could—thrashed him on the spot,

3. Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna laugh aloud,

4. the mockery by Draupadī wounds his heart,

5. what hurts him even more is the fact that the palace attendants fetch new dry attire for him, and

6. the twins pity and support him as he is about to collapse onto the ground.

Now contrast these points with Duryodhana's earlier description of the same to Śakuni, where he blames only the guards for making a mockery of him (2.43.35). It is noteworthy that in his first remonstrance to Dhṛtarāṣṭra, that is, in Vaiśaṃpāyana's account, Duryodhana describes his jealousy in twenty-four verses but makes no allusion, explicit or implicit, to the humiliation episode (2.45.12–35). It is only in Sūta's account that he describes it and blames Bhīma, Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna, the twins, and Draupadī along with other women for the mockery. Note that herein Duryodhana adds two major names to the list of mockers—Kṛṣṇa and Draupadī.

I will first deal with Kṛṣṇa's role in the mockery. Kṛṣṇa's name as a participant in the mockery episode comes up twice in Sūta's account. Once Bhīma is said to have mocked Duryodhana in the presence of Kṛṣṇa (1.1.90). Here, Kṛṣṇa seems to have been a passive witness to the mockery. But Duryodhana claims that Kṛṣṇa was, along with Arjuna, guilty of actively

mocking him: "There Kṛṣṇa along with Arjuna laughed aloud at me" (2.46.30). Even if we ignore this discrepancy between the passive and active participation of Kṛṣṇa, we are confronted with yet another textual incongruity, which cannot be reconciled. As soon as Yudhiṣṭhira's Rājasūya ceremony was over, all the guests, *including Kṛṣṇa*, had returned to their homelands (2.42.60). Duryodhana's misadventures and mockery in the Sabhā come about *after* Kṛṣṇa had left Indraprastha. So, the question is: how could Kṛṣṇa mock Duryodhana *in absentia*?[22] I see two probable answers to this question: (1) even if Kṛṣṇa was not there, Duryodhana could have cited his name to offer a more aggravating account of his experience, or (2) one of the two contradictory statements about Kṛṣṇa's departure from as well as presence in Indraprastha is an interpolation. The textual evidence points to the preferability of the second answer. It can be best explained through a more detailed evaluation of Duryodhana's complete statement. For, the main question here is not whether Kṛṣṇa was in Indraprastha or not. My only concern is to work out the believability of Duryodhana's accusation that Draupadī, too, hurt his feelings.

First, viewed within the larger context of Vyāsa's text, Duryodhana's claim that Draupadī mocked him cannot be substantiated. *No one but Duryodhana*, and he, too, *only at this point*, accuses her of laughing at him. Nowhere else in Vyāsa's text is Draupadī's name even hinted at. The conjecture that Draupadī's involvement may be accounted for by the general expression of "other people" in Vaiśṃpāyana's description (2.43.9) seems implausible because these "other individuals" are most likely the same ones mentioned earlier as is suggested by the expression "those individuals laughed again" (*punas te jahasur janāḥ*). Because Duryodhana accuses Kṛṣṇa

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[22] Some would find such a contradiction as an example of minor contradictions in the multi-layered *Mahābhārata* of Vyāsa. Indeed, they are part of the text, but I proceeded with the assumption that contradictory descriptions could not have been part of the earliest description, as Hiltebeitel has argued in connection with Draupadī's prayer to Kṛṣṇa (2001, 250–57).

also—who was not even in Indraprastha, let alone in the Sabhā—should we trust his claim about Draupadī?

Second, there is something odd about this complaint of Duryodhana. Even in the Critical Edition, it is awkwardly placed. In the following, I argue that Duryodhana's description of his mockery was perhaps not a part of even Sūta's account. It seems to have been incongruously forced into Sūta's text. Consider the following: Duryodhana begins his complaint with a long description of his melancholy—his consummate jealousy about the Pāṇḍavas' riches, which he witnessed first-hand because Yudhiṣṭhira had appointed him as the collector of jewels and riches that many kings offered during the Rājasūya celebration. He could neither see the beginning nor the end of them, and his hands, unable to keep up with the accumulation, could not endure the toil of receiving them (2.46.24–25). Suddenly Duryodhana digresses from the topic of jewels and riches and begins to describe his humiliation (2.46.26–34), only to abruptly return to the jewels in the last stanza of the chapter: "I had never even heard the names of the gems that I saw there, and that burns my heart" (2.46.35). Given such a textual and narratorial incongruity, I suspect that even the text of Sūta might not have originally included the account of humiliation.

Third, Duryodhana's discussions with Śakuni and Dhṛtarāṣṭra are singly directed to satisfy Duryodhana's jealous desire to gain control over Indraprastha. It is striking that neither Śakuni nor Dhṛtarāṣṭra feel, ever, any need to console him about the humiliation. Rather, their words of sympathy are positively limited to assuage his aggressive rapacity. Their attempts to convince him that the Pāṇḍavas' journey from pauperdom to kingdom comes to completion because of their relentless efforts and good luck, and that Duryodhana has everything that he

could ask for, remain ineffective.[23] Should Duryodhana have presented the mockery episode as a devastating attack on his pride, one would expect Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Śakuni to address the issue, which they never do.

The reason I consider the discrepancies between Vaiśaṃpāyana and Sūta's account of the episode is that they depict the motivations behind the gambling match in a different light. Whereas Vaiśaṃpāyana thinks that the primary cause of Duryodhana's outrage and provocation to challenge Yudhiṣṭhira in a gambling match is his jealousy, Sūta gives the impression that it is both—his jealousy and the mockery—that spur him to insist on the game. This distinction between the two versions contained within the Critical Edition itself is important for analyzing the Series' presentation of this episode, which is very different.

Other mentions of Duryodhana's mockery

In addition to the above-mentioned accounts, the epic alludes to the mockery episode on five other occasions: twice within Vaiśaṃpāyana's narrative and thrice within that of Sūta.

Vaiśaṃpāyana remarks about how Duryodhana, foolish and black-hearted, coveted Yudhiṣṭhira's Sabhā,[24] because of which he cheats Yudhiṣṭhira in a game of dice:

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[23] Dhṛtarāṣṭra's counsel at this point must have been a morally honorable one, for Bhīṣma relates it with much appreciation to Yudhiṣṭhira (12.124–26).

[24] In van Buitenen's translation, the Hall is viewed as the location of Duryodhana's coveting and not as the object of coveting: "He made him a divine Hall, heaped with all waters of gems [amply decorated with gems and jewels], where the slow-witted Duryodhana of most evil designs had a craving" (1973, 1.55.39). But the Hall as the object of his coveting seems to be more appropriate because the object of coveting is declined in the seventh case: *pāṇḍavārthe hi lubhyantaḥ* is translated by van Buitenen as "Greedy for the Pāṇḍavas' wealth" (1978, 5.128.26); *na lubhyanti tṛṇeṣv api*, meaning "Do not covet even grass" (13.58.22). Even with the noun *lobha* (greed and covetousness), it takes the seventh case. A couple of examples may be cited from the Critical Edition: *lobhaṃ sauvīrake kuryāt* (3.262.38), which van Buitenen translates "will have a taste for jujube juice; and *nyāse lobhaṃ karotu ca,* meaning "let one [commit the crime of] coveting the deposit" (13.96.18). It is important because the palace, which also happens to be the location of Duryodhana's mishaps, is perhaps the most outstanding attraction in

He [Maya] built a divine hall— thoroughly embellished with all sorts of gems—[for Yudhiṣṭhira]; the dull-witted, evil-minded Duryodhana coveted it. Hence, having tricked Yudhiṣṭhira through Subala's son [Śakuni], he banished [the Pāṇḍavas] to the forest for twelve years and one, the thirteenth year, incognito amongst people. (1.55.38–40)[25]

It is interesting that Vaiśaṃpāyana lays the blame on Duryodhana's jealousy and greed in this account—there is no mention of Duryodhana's mockery at all. A similar summary within Vaiśaṃpāyana's narrative is presented when Bhīṣma, the grandsire of the Kuru family, gives his lengthy sermon to Yudhiṣṭhira on a multitude of subjects. At one point, Yudhiṣṭhira seeks to know the key aspects of "good conduct" (*śīla*). Bhīṣma begins by drawing Yudhiṣṭhira's attention to Duryodhana's bad conduct:

O reverent one, in this context (*iha*), listen to everything that was formerly expressed to Dhṛtarāṣṭra by Duryodhana as he was consumed by anger after witnessing in Indraprastha the exceptional riches of you and your brothers, and the mockery in the Sabhā. (12.124.4–5)[26]

Note that in this account, Bhīṣma cites that it was Duryodhana's jealousy as well as his mockery which compelled him to throw a challenge to Yudhiṣṭhira for the game.

In this case, too, Sūta's narratives supply more details than that of Vaiśaṃpāyana. Sūta's accounts plainly report on Duryodhana's anxious jealousy about the Pāṇḍavas' opulence *and* his mockery by Bhīma. In the first instance, Sūta describes:

Then after seeing the Pāṇḍavas' wealth grown to such proportions (*tathā*), he [Duryodhana] was overcome by an acute feeling of resentment kindled by jealousy.

Indraprastha (2.31.3, 2.32.9) and as such is emblematic of the power and wealth of the Pāṇḍavas. It is no surprise then that he is obsessed with the palace (1.1.89; 2.43.16, 35; 2.44.13).

[25] *sa cakāra sabhāṃ divyāṃ sarvaratnasamācitām. tasyāṃ duryodhano mando lobhaṃ cakre sudurmatiḥ, tato 'kṣair vañcayitvā ca saubalena yudhiṣṭhiram. vanaṃ prasthāpayām āsa sapta varṣāṇi pañca ca, ajñātam ekaṃ rāṣṭre ca tathā varṣaṃ trayodaśam.*

[26] *purā duryodhaneneha dhṛtarāṣṭrāya mānada, ākhyātaṃ tapyamānena śriyaṃ dṛṣṭvā tathāgatām. indraprasthe mahārāja tava sabhrātṛkasya ha, sabhāyāṃ cāvahasanaṃ tat sarvaṃ śṛṇu bhārata.*

Moreover, he seethed when he saw the Hall, which Maya had skillfully built in the form of a celestial chariot and had offered it to the Pāṇḍavas. Here (*yatra*), before the very eyes of Kṛṣṇa, Bhīma mocked him like a commoner as he stumbled from discomposure. (1.1.88–90)[27]

This account is inconsistent with Vaiśaṃpāyana's narrative, according to which Kṛṣṇa was not even in Indraprastha at the time when Duryodhana suffers misadventures and mockery in the Sabhā.

The second account in Sūta's narration also mentions Duryodhana's jealousy and mockery by Bhīma but removes Kṛṣṇa from the scene. He lists the contents of the second book, the Sabhāparva:

[It contains] the mockery of Duryodhana—who was already rife with despair and anger at seeing the sumptuousness during the sacrifice—by Bhīma in the Sabhā, the source of his resentment and on account of which he planned gambling. (1.2.100–101)[28]

This account is not much different than that by Vaiśaṃpāyana except that it considers the mockery episode as a factor behind Duryodhana's decision to gamble.

The third description within Sūta's account occurs when Dhṛtarāṣṭra recalls the incident:

Having seen the fortune of the great-spirited Pāṇḍava during the Rājasūya and having suffered the mockery when scaling and seeing the Sabhā, [Duryodhana], resentful but himself unable to vanquish the Pāṇḍavas in battle, and hopeless to acquire the wealth like

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[27] *samṛddhāṃ tāṃ tathā dṛṣṭvā pāṇḍavānāṃ tadā śriyam, īrṣyāsamutthaḥ sumahāṃs tasya manyur ajāyata. vimānapratimāṃ cāpi mayena sukṛtāṃ sabhām, pāṇḍavānām upahṛtāṃ sa dṛṣṭvā paryatapyata. yatrāvahasitaś cāsīt praskandann iva saṃbhramāt, pratyakṣaṃ vāsudevasya bhīmenānabhijātavat.*

[28] *yajñe vibhūtiṃ tāṃ dṛṣṭvā duḥkhāmarṣānvitasya ca, duryodhanasyāvahāso bhīmena ca sabhātale. yatrāsya manyur udbhūto yena dyūtam akārayat.*

a man lacking in Kṣatriya qualities, plotted with the help of the king of Gāndhāra [Śakuni] the game of dice. (1.1.99–100)[29]

This version is very similar to the foregoing one. These discrepancies between the versions of Vaiśaṃpāyana and Sūta make the reader wonder about why it is only in Sūta's account that the mockery episode gains prominence. So far, I have found no evidence to satisfactorily resolve this puzzle. I can only conjecture that at some point, it might have struck a sensitive reader/redactor that Duryodhana's complaint to Dhṛtarāṣṭra omits the mockery episode. Consequently, a set of stanzas with appropriate changes was composed and inserted into the Vyāsa text. The foregoing account of the events in the Sabhā may be concluded as follows:

1. According to Vaiśaṃpāyana, Vyāsa's direct disciple, the primary source of Duryodhana's melancholia is his malicious jealousy—he considers his life not worth living unless he can appropriate the riches of the Pāṇḍavas; the complacent handling of affairs on the part of the Pāṇḍavas makes it worse.

2. The mockery of Duryodhana seems to be a secondary source, and one that is emphasized only in the text attributed to Sūta, who learns it from Vaiśaṃpāyana. The following individuals are associated with making fun of him: according to Vaiśaṃpāyana's account—Bhīma, Arjuna, the twins, the servants, and some other unspecified individuals; according to Sūta's account—Bhīma, Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna, the twins, Draupadī along with other women, and guards.

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[29] *rājasūye śriyaṃ dṛṣṭvā pāṇḍavasya mahaujasaḥ, tac cāvahasanaṃ prāpya sabhārohaṇadarśane. amarṣitaḥ svayaṃ jetum aśaktaḥ pāṇḍavān raṇe, nirutsāhaś ca saṃprāptuṃ śriyam akṣatriyo yathā, gāndhārarājasahitaś chadmadyūtam amantrayat.*

Stirring up the Storm

3. According to Vaiśaṃpāyana, Duryodhana is provoked to challenge Yudhiṣṭhira in a
   game of dice by his greed. But in Sūta's telling, the mockery episode, which may
   include an interpolation, also seems to have played a part in Duryodhana's decision.

The entire episode can be recapitulated as follows. Duryodhana reports the gambling episode in two different strands of text. The first is within Vaiśaṃpāyana's narrative, seamlessly integrated into the narrative that describes the events from Rājasūya to Dhṛtarāṣṭra's commanding Vidura to bring the challenge of dice to Yudhiṣṭhira (2.43–45). The second is an expanded version of the same by Sūta (2.46–51). It is noteworthy that although Duryodhana barely touches on his humiliation by the "guards" before Śakuni, he does not even once refer to it in his first dialogue with Dhṛtarāṣṭra (2.45). It is more than a little strange that both Śakuni and Duryodhana should remain quiet about the insult before Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Sūta, however, gives more weight to the mockery than Vaiśaṃpāyana does. Hiltebeitel observes this discrepancy as well: "In the Sanskrit, as it is first narrated, the mockery comes from Bhīma, Arjuna, and the Pāṇḍavas' servants (2.43.6–7). But when Duryodhana returns home to tell his father, he remembers it as coming from Bhīma (whose taunts embitter him most), Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna, Draupadī and the women, and the twins (2.46.26–35)" (1988, 228). In the first instance, Hiltebeitel mistakenly omits the twins from the list of mockers, who are mentioned at 2.43.7.

The preceding discussion may seem like a tedious amount of scrutiny of these textual variations. But they are important for appreciating the complexity of this sequence of events that came to have such a massive impact on the story told in subsequent episodes. Others have also seen value in attending to these differences; Edgerton observes "pretty convincing evidence of different and inconsistent accounts of the same events recorded in our text" (1944, XXXII-III), although his analysis of these inconsistencies makes no allusion to the ones I highlight above.

3.2 TV Series: "Blame the Woman"

According to Vaiśaṃpāyana, Duryodhana was mocked by the four younger Pāṇḍavas and some palace attendants, but in Sūta's account, Duryodhana accuses, along with the above-mentioned individuals, Kṛṣṇa and Draupadī. In this section, I provide a detailed synopsis and a brief interpretation of the same episode as it is presented in the Series. I try to trace how the narrative gradually but steadily came to focus on Draupadī as the main culprit. I argue that although the Series claims the Critical Edition as its "basic source," the principal content of the Series in this episode uses late tellings as its "basic source."

Duryodhana's jealousy and mockery

Yudhiṣṭhira courteously invites the Hastināpura royal family to his Rājasūya ceremony, and their arrival in the magnificent Sabhā is duly announced. When Duryodhana, along with his brothers, swaggers in and, pausing at the entrance, glares at the dazzling splendour of the Magical Palace (*Māyāvī Mahala*, *Māyā Mahala*), Śakuni recognizes his jealousy and wheedles him towards the assigned seat. But Duryodhana, flushed and outraged, struts sternly with his gaze fixed at the surrounding grandeur.

The ceremony begins with a song, a bardic accolade to the new sovereign Yudhiṣṭhira, and Duryodhana's full-blown bitterness is manifest throughout. Furthermore, the Series hints at Duryodhana's jealousy through Vidura, the sole authority on politics for the Kurus, who spells out the good and bad qualities of a king to Yudhiṣṭhira. In fact, he seems to be indirectly admonishing the by-standing, resentful Duryodhana:

> Your Majesty, the domain of a king who forsakes *dharma* and resorts to *adharma* shrinks day by day like a leather placed on heat. And he who begrudges other's wealth, looks,

bravery, nobility, happiness, prestige, and opulence is plagued by an incurable disease. (43:41)[30]

Duryodhana's resentment is again later recognized by Bhīṣma. Utterly disappointed at Vidura's scruples to instruct Yudhiṣṭhira to turn down the challenge for the game, he explodes: "Did you not see that, on the one hand, the fire was blazing in the sacrificial hearth, and on the other hand, in Duryodhana's heart?" (45:26)[31] Duryodhana's jealousy is highlighted once more. In his fury over the fact that he has not been able to thwart the ascendancy of the Pāṇḍavas, Duryodhana vents his anger on his uncle Śakuni, a well-known coolheaded, unscrupulous gambler: "I am not dice in your hands," Duryodhana bellows, and pulling a mad, brutish face, shouts as loudly as his lungs would permit, "I am DURYODHANA, DURYODHANA!" He is furious because all the crafty tricks of Śakuni have so far had reverse effects:

> You did not want Yudhiṣṭhira to be installed as the crown-prince of Hastināpura; dear uncle, Yudhiṣṭhira has performed the Rājasūya ceremony! And, we even had to appear at his Rājasūya ceremony and show that we are very happy. […] And you should take notice of this too: they are not content with acquiring Indraprastha, they are eying Hastināpura! Hastināpura! (44:7–9)[32]

Whereas Duryodhana reveals his unfounded but deep-seated insecurities through his imaginary suspicion that the Pāṇḍavas, unsatisfied with Indraprastha, would also annex Hastināpura, Śakuni is possessed by a vicious desire to cheat the Pāṇḍavas of Indraprastha in a game of dice. Śakuni,

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[30] *he rājan, jo rājā dharma ko choṛa kara adharma kā āśraya letā hai usakī rājya-bhūmi āṁca para rakhe hue carma kī bhāṁti dina-pratidina sikuṛatī jātī hai. aura jo dūsaroṃ ke dhana, rūpa, parākrama, kulīnatā, sukha, sammāna aura vaibhava se jalatā ho, usakā ye asādhya roga hai; asādhya roga hai.*

[31] *kyā tumane yaha nahīṃ dekhā ki vahāṁ eka tarafa havana kuṃḍa meṃ agni dahaka rahī thī, to dūsarī aura duryodhana ke hṛdaya meṃ?*

[32] *āja taka āpane jitanī bhī cāleṃ calīṃ, ve saba kī saba ulṭī paṛīṃ. āpa, āpa yudhiṣṭhira ko hastināpura kā yuvarāja nahīṃ banane denā cāhate the nā? māmā śrī, yudhiṣṭhira ne rājasūya yajña kara liyā hai, aura hameṃ usake rājasūya yajña meṃ jānā bhī paṛā, aura ye bhī jatalānā paṛā ki hama bahuta prasanna haiṃ. […] aura āpa ye bhī suna lījiye, indraprastha pākara ve saṃtuṣṭa nahīṃ ho gae haiṃ; unakī āṁkha hastināpura para hai, hastināpura para.*

relentlessly scheming, comforts him that the current situation (i.e., Yudhiṣṭhira's new sovereignty) is an outcome of Śakuni's own ambitious designs: "I have accomplished this very game (*khela*)" (44:9), and that his final game—a scheme to allure Yudhiṣṭhira into playing a dice game—is about to begin, he reassures Duryodhana. With all the guests having returned to their homes, Śakuni lingers in Indraprastha, awaiting Kṛṣṇa's departure from Indraprastha because no one except him knows a *mantra* (a remedial prayer or strategy) against Śakuni's snake-like bite. He is right. Just when Yudhiṣṭhira claims that Duryodhana is bewitched by the beauty of the Sabhā, Kṛṣṇa adds that Śakuni is seduced by Indraprastha itself. As a divine figure, Kṛṣṇa foresees the danger of gambling and warns Yudhiṣṭhira before bidding a goodbye: "Life is not a gamble, Older Brother! Life is consciousness. Politics, too, is consciousness. It is not about whether a dice throw falls in your favour or not" (44:16).[33]

So Śakuni awaits Kṛṣṇa's departure, and then prepares grounds for the future: he plays a mock game of dice against Yudhiṣṭhira and purposely loses to preposterously boost Yudhiṣṭhira's gambling ego. At the end of the game, defeated Śakuni, raising his hands toward the heavens with a reverberating demonic laugh, flatters Yudhiṣṭhira: "Defeating Śakuni in gamble means that you are the sovereign in gambling too. Today, the Rājasūya of your gamble is complete" (44:23).[34] He would soon use this sham defeat against Yudhiṣṭhira.

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[33] *jīvana juā nahīṃ hai, baṛe bhaiyā. jīvana cetanā hai. rājanīti bhī cetanā hī hai. aisā nahīṃ ke pāsā paṛa gayā to paṛa gayā, aura yadi nahīṃ paṛā to nahīṃ paṛā.*

[34] *paraṃtu itanā avaśya kahūṃgā, priya yudhiṣṭhira, ki śakuni ko jue meṃ harāne kā artha hai ki tuma jue ke bhī samrāṭ ho. āja to tumhāre jue kā rājasūya yajña ho gayā. hā hā hā. jue kā rājasūya yajña ho gayā! tuma mahān ho yudhiṣṭhira, hā hā hā.*

Stirring up the Storm

Duryodhana's mockery

Duryodhana spends most of his life begrudging the Pāṇḍavas and never expresses any appreciation for their accomplishments. But strangely enough, the moment Duryodhana enters the Sabhā in the Magical Palace (*Māyāvī Mahala*), a sincere feeling of astonishment supersedes his bitter resentment. Profoundly bedazzled by the beauty of the Magical Palace, he extolls to himself the miraculous skills of Maya. During the visit, he gleefully attempts to pass through a transparent door-like wall but suffers a head-on collision with it. Even then, he does not lose his calm and saunters about entranced. Consequently, he comes to dazed, grunting halts just as he is about to step on to the walkways that bear semblance to running water and blazing fire. Despite all that, he remains abnormally kindly disposed, pleasantly astonished by the magical beauty, and takes heed of instructions from the guards. He is happy!

But his good temper is short-lived. He makes a woeful mistake of not listening to the maid's warning about a water pool ahead, which was concealed with a colourful carpet-like artwork made of small floating objects. He shrugs her warning off, "even a slave is pulling a prank on me (*dāsī bhī humase khilavāḍa kara rahī hai*)," but just a few steps in, he tumbles to a full plunge into the concealed pool. But he is no more alone—someone has emerged onto the balcony of the facing building, the best place to watch and partake in the unfolding drama. It is Draupadī, and she sees him plummet into the water. Floundering, he emerges from the water and looks ahead at Draupadī, who is by now in a frenzy of resounding laughter. Pointing directly at him, she guffaws, "Blind is the son of the blind" (*andhe kā putra andhā*) (44:27–29). Her contemptuous laugh and words inflict deep wounds of humiliation in Duryodhana's heart, and as the narrator Cosmic Time and Yudhiṣṭhira would reflect later, the Bharata dynasty would have to

pay a hefty price for this laugh (and slur). Moreover, it seals her fate, as the vengeful

Duryodhana is never to let it go.

Not only is Duryodhana beside himself, even Yudhiṣṭhira and Cosmic Time, the narrator,

are filled with a sense of ominousness at Draupadī's laughter. Cosmic Time's poignant

evaluation of Draupadī's action testifies to its foulness:

> Draupadī had not even the slightest idea of how costly her one laughter would prove to be
> for the Bharata dynasty, its history, its ideals, and its present and future. But now she has
> laughed; and just as an arrow shot from the bow cannot be brought back, Draupadī cannot
> retrieve her laughter, even if she wanted to. And that very laughter has been troubling
> Yudhiṣṭhira. (45, opening remarks by Cosmic Time).[35]

Thus, Draupadī's action takes on the form of an absolute, irretrievable offence, which is bound to

damage the Bharata dynasty's ideals, past, present, and future beyond repair. Following Time's

rebuking assessment of Draupadī's laughter, Yudhiṣṭhira is seen plodding about apprehensively

in the palace. Just then Draupadī enters the scene. The following conversation is indicative of the

menacing nature of her act. Seeing Yudhiṣṭhira worried, she breaks the ice:

> Draupadī: If you are so saddened by the departure of the guests from Hastināpura, let us
> go and visit Hastināpura. I will meet the older mother[-in-law] too.
>
> Yudhiṣṭhira: The issue is not of meeting or separating from them, Pāñcālī!
>
> Draupadī: Then what is the problem? At least tell me!
>
> Yudhiṣṭhira: When Duryodhana fell in the water-pond of the Magic Palace (*Māyā
> Mahala*), did you mockingly say, "*andhe kā putra bhī andhā*" (Blind too is the son of the
> blind)?
>
> Draupadī: Yes, I did say [that]; and after saying that, it also occurred to me that I should
> not have said it. Duryodhana is your younger brother [cousin]. Moreover, in a way, I also

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[35] *draupadī ko isakā patā hī nahīṃ thā ki usakī eka haṃsī bharatavaṃśa, usake itihāsa, usakī maryādā, usake vartamāna, aura usake bhaviṣya ko kitanī mahaṃgī paṛane vālī hai. lekina aba to vo haṃsa cukī hai. aura jaise kamāna se nikalā huā tīra vāpasa nahīṃ liyā jā sakatā usī taraha draupadī agara cāhe bhī to usa haṃsī ko vāpasa nahīṃ le sakatī. aura usī haṃsī ne yudhiṣṭhira ko pareśāna kara rakhā hai.*

insulted my older father[-in-law] by saying it. Please, punish me appropriately but do not look so sad!

Yudhiṣṭhira: Such offences cannot be atoned for by means of punishment, Pāñcālī; rather, they must be expiated. Duryodhana was our guest at that time, and a guest is equal to God.

Draupadī: I do accept my wrongdoing!

Yudhiṣṭhira: I know that you are accepting your wrongdoing. But my problem is whether this issue will end with your acceptance of wrongdoing. Does your assuming responsibility resolve the issue? You have toppled Duryodhana from the summit of his ego. He must have undoubtedly been hurt gravely. Brother Duryodhana is among those who never remember the wounds that they have inflicted on others but never forget the ones that others have inflict on them. It is possible that your one laughter might end up being very costly to both Indraprastha and Hastināpura. (45:1–4)[36]

In this conversation, both Yudhiṣṭhira and Draupadī hint at the multi-faceted nature of

Draupadī's wrongdoing. Not only does she cast aspersions on Duryodhana, her comment

amounts to a flagrant disregard for humility and modesty that she is conventionally expected to

maintain toward her uncle-in-law. By extension, she also derides Duryodhana's blind father

Dhṛtarāṣṭra. But above all, her sin is particularly grave because through her behavior toward an

invited guest she flouts the basic etiquette of hospitality, according to which, as embodiments of

God, guests deserve unqualified reverence. Not only as the queen of Indraprastha, but also as the

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[36] Draupadī: *yadi hastināpura vāloṃ ke cale jāne kā itanā hī duḥkha hai, to calie, kucha dina ke lie hastināpura ho āeṃ. jyeṣṭha mātāśrī ke darśana bhī kara lūṃgī.* Yudhiṣṭhira: *samasyā unase milane yā bichaṟane kī nahīṃ hai pāñcālī.* Draupadī: *to kyā samasyā hai? batāie nā!* Yudhiṣṭhira: *jaba duryodhana māyāmahala ke jala kuṃḍa meṃ girā thā to kyā tumane haṃsa kara ye kahā thā ki andhe kā putra bhī andhā?* Draupadī: *kahā to thā, aura kahane ke paścāt ye dhyāna bhī āyā ki mujhe ye nahīṃ kahanā cāhie thā. duryodhana āpake anuja haiṃ, aura ye kaha kara eka prakāra se maine jyeṣṭha pitāśrī kā bhī apamāna kara diyā. mujhe ucita daṇḍa de lījie. para itane dukhī na dikhāī dījie.* Yudhiṣṭhira: *aise aparādhoṃ ke lie daṇḍa nahīṃ diyā jātā pāñcālī. aise aparādhoṃ ke lie prāyaścitta karanā paṟatā hai. duryodhana usa samaya hamārā atithi thā. aura atithi to bhagavān samāna hotā hai.* Draupadī: *apanā doṣa māna to liyā hai maiṃne.* Yudhiṣṭhira: *maiṃ jānatā hūṃ ki tuma apanā doṣa māna rahī ho. paraṃtu merī samasyā ye hai ki kyā tumhāre doṣa māna lene se ye samasyā samāpta ho jāegī? kyā isa samasyā kā samādhāna yahī hai ki tumane apanā doṣa māna liyā hai? duryodhana ko tumane usake abhimāna ke śikhara se girāyā hai. niḥsandeha use bahuta coṭa āī hogī. anuja duryodhana una logoṃ meṃ se haiṃ jo una ghāvoṃ ko kabhī yāda nahīṃ karate jo unhoṃne dūsaroṃ ko die haiṃ, aura una ghāvoṃ ko kabhī nahīṃ bhūlate, jo dūsaroṃ ne unako die haiṃ. ho sakatā hai ki tumhārī eka haṃsī indraprastha aura hastināpura dono ko hī bahuta mahaṃgī paṟa jāe.*

lady of the house, she should have attended to the "guest" with greater grace and nobility. And thus, her single ephemeral response proves to be the most lasting and lethal act in the narrative as shown in the Series. It creates an irreparable divide between the families. Her regrets and willingness to accept the "appropriate punishment" are now futile. Yudhiṣṭhira is convinced that such actions cannot be punished; rather, the guilty one must purge herself through proper atonement. The audience never hears about what that atonement could be. Perhaps he is suggesting that she must expect, or even accept, the vengeance of Duryodhana.

3.2.1 The mockery: the main provocation for gambling

Back in Hastināpura, the heartbroken Duryodhana turns into a vengeful person. Immediately after his return to Hastināpura, he is seen cruelly thrashing blameless soldiers. With his anger frenzied by the flashing images of a laughing Draupadī, he is about to strangle one of them to death when Karṇa bolts to hold him back and enquires about his mindless rage. Duryodhana groans with indignation:

> What should I tell [you], friend? A female snake bit me and rolled over,[37] whose venom is rushing through my veins. […] I am burning in a fire of insult, friend, and I cannot bear this burn. This fire is blazing within me. And if this fire could not reduce me to ashes, I will myself jump, to escape it, into a hearth (*agni kuṇḍa*). This blot of insult has sprouted on my forehead like a tree, which is growing with each and every instant. And I see no way out of it. […] I have been insulted by that Draupadī of five husbands, and I will by all means take revenge on her for this insult. (44:29–35)[38]

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[37] Some people in India believe that snakes effectively release their poison only if they twist and turn during the bite, which perhaps indicates the intensity of bite. Duryodhana is referring to the complete damage that Draupadī's scornful laughter has done to him. The bite is complete.

[38] *kyā batāūṁ, mitra? eka nāgina mujhe ḍasa kara ulaṭa gī hai. usakā viṣa merī nasoṃ meṃ baha rahā hai.* […] *maiṃ apamāna kī agni meṃ cala rahā hūṁ maiṃ, aura ye jalana mujhase sahī nahīṃ jā rahī ha. ye agni mere bhītara bhabhaka rahī hai. aura yadi yaha agni mujhe bhasma nahīṃ kara sakī to isase bacane ke lie maiṃ svayaṃ agni kuṃḍa meṃ kūda jāūṃgā. apamāna kā ye kalaṃka mere māthe para kisī vṛkṣa kī bhāṁti uga āyā hai, jo hara kṣaṇa ke sātha baṛhatā hī jā rahā hai. aura mujhe isase bacāva kā koī mārga dikhāī nahīṃ de rahā.* […] *merā*

This statement differs greatly from Vyāsa's text. It is not Duryodhana's jealousy of and lust for the Pāṇḍavas' gain of the never-seen-before riches and their unparalleled political supremacy; it is rather his humiliation by Draupadī that makes him suicidal.

At this moment, Duryodhana also invokes Karṇa's insult by Draupadī: at the gathering of the suitors at her *svayaṃvara* ceremony, Draupadī had disparagingly rejected Karṇa for a husband because of his apparent humble origins. Thus, she insults both Duryodhana and Karṇa for their somewhat deficient origins: Duryodhana for being a son of a physically disabled father and Karṇa for being a son of a charioteer. Karṇa dismisses his personal insult, he suggests an immediate attack on Indraprastha. But Śakuni, who considers gambling to be no less than war— his dices are his most dependable, indomitable army—proposes annexing Indraprastha through a gamble: "I give you [my] word, dear Duryodhana, that this time, if I do not make a pauper of Emperor Yudhiṣṭhira, I will exile myself into the forest. […] The Pāṇḍavas acquired, and walked away with, Indraprastha right here; the Pāṇḍavas will give Indraprastha and leave from right here; […] their journey to disaster will begin right here" (44:33–36). Just as in war, all wiles and ruses are fair for him in gambling, and words like just and unjust are simply meaningless.

But the assurance of annexing Indraprastha hardly abates Duryodhana's agony because his mind is singly preoccupied with exacting revenge on his mocker: "And Draupadī? What about the insult that I suffered, dear uncle?" (44:38),[39] he snarls with a seething anger. Śakuni reassures him that a scheme will be devised for that purpose too. Although Śakuni informs Dhṛtarāṣṭra that the cause of and remedy for Duryodhana's "ailment" is Indraprastha,

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apamāna kiyā hai usa pāṃca patiyoṃ vālī draupadī ne. aura maiṃ usase apane apamāna kā badalā lekara rahūṃgā.

[39] *aura draupadī? mere apamāna kā kyā hogā, māmāśrī?*

Duryodhana reports it differently; his heart is still sorely mortified by the contemptuous laugh of Draupadī. Nevertheless, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, naively unaware of their vile designs and paying no heed to the anti-gambling counsels of Bhīṣma, Gāndhārī, and Vidura, agrees to a game of dice against the Pāṇḍavas, just to alleviate the suffering of his disgruntled son through this finest leisurely activity. The reluctant Vidura obeys Dhṛtarāṣṭra's command: "If you have already decided to write the last chapter of the Kuru dynasty's history, Your Highness, then this servant of yours will obey your command and carry your message to Indraprastha" (45:10).[40]

The Series' notable deviation from Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* in its depiction of Duryodhana's mockery shows how Draupadī's one imprudent act stands in stark contrast with how her husbands treat Duryodhana and his companions in Indraprastha: although they are clearly not thrilled to see their Kaurava rivals, they do not transgress, even if only ostensibly, the protocol of welcoming them as guests (43:4–6). This effectively compounds Draupadī's insolence. At first glance, the viewer may be tempted to speculate that the Series finds faults with the heedless Duryodhana. It is he who brings the disaster on himself because, despite having witnessed several specious appearances, he recklessly shrugs off the warning of the attendant about the concealed water pool ahead and, as a result, falls into the water. But the hospitable acts of the attendants in fact further reinforce the idea of Draupadī's offensive audacity. Draupadī violates the basic principles of hospitality of being respectful to guests, which even the palace servants honour! For that, the Bharata dynasty must pay a hefty price. Or rather, and more appropriately so, Draupadī herself should suffer the monstrosities of the Kaurava coterie for insolently hurting Duryodhana's pride.

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[40] *yadi āpa kurū rājaparivāra ke itihāsa ke aṃtima adhyāya ko likhane kā nirṇaya le cuke haiṃ, mahārāja, to yaha sevaka āpakī ājñā kā pālana karate hue indraprastha avaśya jāegā.*

Stirring up the Storm

To demonstrate the role of Śakuni and Duryodhana in bringing about the gambling match, the Series relies on the public image of Śakuni and Duryodhana. In the Series, Śakuni's involvement in the politics of Hastināpura begins with vengeful feelings. At the time of her marital arrangement, his sister Gāndhārī comes to know that her prospective husband (Dhṛtarāṣṭra) is blind, so she voluntarily covers her eyes with a ribbon of cloth so as not to surpass him. Even after years, the blindfolds on Gāndhārī's eyes always remind Śakuni of the insult to the Gāndhāra nation and the misfortune of his sister. Consequently, he takes on himself the guardianship of his nephew. So, after the Rājasūya, he slyly unrolls his plan to recover the kingdom of Indraprastha and plays a mock game of dice against Yudhiṣṭhira even before Duryodhana suffers the derision.

By showing Śakuni as the evil force behind Duryodhana, the Series makes Duryodhana's character comparatively less wicked and naïve. Although he is not thrilled about the partition of Hastināpura and is disturbed by the riches of the Pāṇḍavas, he never expresses any interest in regaining control over Indraprastha. In fact, both Duḥśāsana and Duryodhana feel somewhat relieved at the time of partition that the five-pronged lance of the five Pāṇḍavas has been pulled out from their hearts for good. Duryodhana is confidently optimistic about the prospect of expanding his dominion with his own power. It is rather Śakuni who vows immediately after the partition that until the "half dominion" accorded to the Pāṇḍavas is reunited with Hastināpura, his heart will remain pierced with that thorn, for he supposes it to be a loss of half the kingdom for Duryodhana (38:18).

In the Series, after the Rājasūya ceremony, the audience sees Duryodhana in an unusually jovial mood when he enjoys a happy stroll in the Magical Palace, that is, until Draupadī laughs and throws slurs at him. Subsequently, he bears a face of shame and misery—a woman married

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to five men has disgraced him! Henceforth, he has one goal—to wreak revenge on Draupadī, which could be achieved through a game of dice, as his uncle suggests.

The mockery episode is perhaps the most telling example of how Vyāsa's story has changed. As noted earlier, in Vyāsa's epic, no one except Duryodhana accuses Draupadī of laughing at him; and no one, including Śakuni and Dhṛtarāṣṭra, before whom Duryodhana mutters about the incident, ever mentions Draupadī's involvement. This fact, in addition to the disrupted flow of the text in Sūta's section, makes me suspicious that his repeated account is a later addition that embraced some extraneous content, of which Draupadī's laughter is the key point. Whatever its origin, its inclusion into Vyāsa's work must have accorded it further credibility.

3.2.2 Historical evolution of the mockery episode

The most significant question, however, is: how did Draupadī become the main culprit in the mockery episode? It seems to me that Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* has already supplied a vague idea of what becomes more pronounced in later retellings. At Draupadī's birth, a bodiless prophecy is heard:

> Draupadī, the best of all women, is to lead all the Kṣatriyas to destruction. Blessed with a beautiful waistline, she will fulfill the mission of gods when the time comes. On her account, the Kṣatriyas will face a great danger. (1.155.44–45)[41]

No other character from the main narrative has such a sweepingly ominous prophecy articulated at birth. Although many dreadful omens occur when Duryodhana is born, their interpretation by

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[41] *sarvayoṣidvarā kṛṣṇā kṣayaṃ kṣatraṃ ninīṣati. surakāryam iyaṃ kāle kariṣyati sumadhyamā, asyā hetoḥ kṣatriyāṇāṃ mahad utpatsyate bhayam.*

the Brāhmaṇas and Vidura limits their effects to Duryodhana leading the Kuru family to

destruction (1.107.28–33). Naturally, if ruination of the Kṣatriyas is the sole purpose of

Draupadī's birth, it is easy to identify her as the cause of the war. That is indeed the common

view, which again might have its origins in the epic: after her maltreatment in the first dice

game, Draupadī relentlessly galvanizes her husbands to wage war against her harassers to the

extent that acting in accordance with Draupadī's motive (*draupadyāḥ padavīṃ*) becomes the

foremost goal of the Pāṇḍavas. The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* (800 and 1000 CE) states that even though

Yudhiṣṭhira forbade them, Bhīma, women, and some kings were encouraged by Kṛṣṇa to make

fun of Duryodhana (10.75.40).[42] It seems that Draupadī 's role in Duryodhana's shabby

treatment must have become magnified in the course of time. This eventually finds a place in the

Mahābhārata-tātparya-nirṇaya of Ānandatīrtha (1238–1317 CE), the chief promoter of the

Dvaita school of Vedānta, who belonged to Udupi, Karnataka, in South India. He seems to link

the prophetic proclamation and the blanket liquidation of the Kṣatriyas with Draupadī's laughter:

> Here Bhīma, signalled by Kṛṣṇa for the purpose of reducing the burden of the earth,
> mocked him [Duryodhana] aloud along with the daughter of the Pāñcāla king (Draupadī)
> and other kin; likewise, the wives of Kṛṣṇa joined in laughing. (Ānandatīrtha 21.282)[43]

Notice how the prophecy of the epic—Draupadī will lead all the Kṣatriyas to ruin—transforms

into Kṛṣṇa's goal to remove the earth's burden! Kṛṣṇa's objective is accomplished when, in

Ānandatīrtha's account, Duryodhana, infuriated by the mockery by Bhīma and Draupadī, says to

Śakuni:

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[42] *jahāsa bhīmas taṃ dṛṣṭvā striyo nṛpatayo 'pare, nivāryamāṇā apy aṅga rājñā kṛṣṇānumoditāḥ.* Interestingly though, scholars assign the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* to Tamil country. It was composed earlier than the texts wherein I detected a change in Draupadī's role.

[43] *taṃ prāhasad bhagavatā kṣitibhāranāśahetoḥ susūcita urusvarato'tra bhīmaḥ, pāñcālarājasutayā ca samaṃ tathā 'nyaiḥ svīyais tathā 'nujahasur bhagavanmahiṣyaḥ.*

> I do not wish to live unless I bring suffering to Bhīma and Draupadī who laughed at me in the presence of Kṛṣṇa. (21.285)[44]

This contrasts with Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*—according to which Duryodhana is suicidal because of his covetousness for Indraprastha: (1) Here, although Duryodhana is particularly annoyed at Bhīma and Draupadī, the latter is not the main and only culprit; and (2) Bhīma instigates the mockery, and others, including Draupadī, follow suit, at the suggestion of Kṛṣṇa, who has higher plans to rid the earth of evil forces. The second point exonerates all the characters of their misconducts because they are, after all, helpless puppets under Kṛṣṇa's divine plan. But Duryodhana, being the demon who will eventually rally and lead his allies to destruction, is not only ignorant but also defiantly arrogant; hence, he seeks to wreak revenge on Bhīma and Draupadī. And thus, Draupadī's maltreatment by him eventually leads to the catastrophic war. God's plan worked. This incident takes a major shift in the 15th century, when *Villipāratam* (*Villibhārata*) was composed by Villiputtūrār. It is also notable that the cult of Draupadī in South India, extensively explored by Hiltebeitel in two volumes (1988 and 1991), also holds Draupadī accountable for humiliating Duryodhana. He traces this view of Draupadī to Villiputtūrār's Tamil Mahābhārata:

> In the *Villipāratam*, it comes to be Draupadī's mockery that is repeatedly singled out (2.2.13, 215), and so it is in the dramas. "The Rājasūya Sacrifice" thus ends on this note: "Seeing this [Duryodhana's discomfiture], Pāñcālī clapped her hands and laughed" (*kaikoṭṭi pāñcāli kaṇṭu nakaitt' iṭavum*; IY, 64). Duryodhana will frequently recall Draupadī's mockery in subsequent dramas (e.g., Kiruṣṇappiḷḷai 1973, 17). But it is especially in "Dice Match and Disrobing" that he will recall her derision as a provocation to humiliate her in turn. (1988, 228)

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[44] *yau mām ahasatāṃ kṛṣṇābhīmau kṛṣṇasya sannidhau, tayor akṛtvā santāpaṃ nāhaṃ jīvitum utsahe.*

When Draupadī became the principal wrongdoer in this episode is difficult to say, but according

to Hiltebeitel, it might have originated in South India, reflected in the Southern recension of the

Mahābhārata: "the Sanskrit epic exists in a southern recension that, as one would expect, is often

closer to the south Indian Draupadī cult *Mahābhārata* than is the northern recension" (1999, 1).

Hiltebeitel also observes that the Southern recension of Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* further

systematizes Draupadī's role in the mockery by inserting it into Vaiśaṃpāyana's version (Black

2021, 96–97). He illustrates such a mutual augmentation: "from *Mahābhārata* vernaculars to

folk dramas, from folk dramas to ritual idioms, from ritual idioms to temple tales, from temple

tales to sisters' tales, from sisters' tales to regional folk epics, from regional folk epics to

Mahābhārata vernacularizations" (Hiltebeitel 2011a, 124).

And yet, what remains conspicuously absent throughout is the issue of taunting

Duryodhana as a son of a blind father: even if Draupadī has been accused of derision, no Sanskrit

version of Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* associates her with the words "like father, like son—both

blind." What is the origin of this slur? According to Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*, Duryodhana accuses

Sahadeva of smugly instructing him again and again, "Here is the door, go this way, king!" One

can imagine that if Sahadeva did make such a statement, it could be understood as a sarcastic

taunt about Duryodhana on account of his father's blindness. In this context, it is vital that we

consult the 17th-century Vulgate Mahābhārata,[45] which contains an additional statement by

Duryodhana:

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[45] The stanza might in fact be much older than the 17th-century Vulgate edition.

> There, Bhīma addressed me as "son of Dhṛtarāṣṭra," and laughing, he said to me, "O king, the door is this way." (2.46.34 *458; Nīlakaṇṭha 2.50.35)[46]

Thus, there are two verses in Duryodhana's account that allude, implicitly and explicitly, to his blindness, more precisely, his inability to perceive: (1) while Sahadeva states it implicitly by repeatedly ushering him in, "Prince, this is the door, please enter through here" (2.46.34), Bhīma bluntly calls him Dhārtarāṣṭra, "son of Dhṛtarāṣṭra," directly suggesting what was popularly known even before the Series as "like father like son—both blind."

Even though it may be next to impossible to trace the exact origins of this offensive slur, one allusion to it is found in Sabalasiṃha Cauhāna's *Mahābhārata*, a 17th-century Avadhī (a dialect of Hindi) telling composed in the *caupāī-dohā* style. In this account, Draupadī, laughing out loud at Duryodhana when he falls into and emerges from water, remarks to her friends: "He knows the old custom of the family, this son of a blind [man]" (1993, 80).[47] Other than her girlfriends, only Duryodhana, Duḥśāsana, and Bhīma could hear those remarks. It is Bhīma who delivers Draupadī's implicitly insulting comment with explicit lethal dose: "If the father is blind, why would the son see?" (ibid.).[48] Thus, Bhīma explicitly links Duryodhana's mishaps to his father's blindness.

The incipient role of Draupadī as one who insults others becomes even more explicit by the early 20th century. Nārāyaṇaprasāda Betāba (1872–1945), one of the most successful playwrights of Hindi-Parsi theatre, composed his mega-successful drama *The Mahābhārata Naṭaka* for the Alfred Nāṭaka Company in 1913. The most toured drama of the time, it was

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[46] *bhīmasenena tatrokto dhārtarāṣṭrātmajeti ca, saṃbodhya prahasitvā ca ito dvāraṃ narādhipa.*

[47] *jānata hai kularīti pachelī. andhasuvana jimi prakaṭa bheyere, manahauṁ śṛṅga karasāyala kere.*

[48] *pitā andha kyoṃ sūjhī pūtā.*

widely performed all over India for over two years. Herein Bhīma ushers Duryodhana to the Sabhā and pokes fun at him on several occasions. When Duryodhana expresses a wish to take a swim in what appeared to be a water pond but in fact was a slab floor, Bhīma laughingly asks him: "Did you not apply *suramā* in your eyes today, that you called a stone-floor a water pond?" (Betāba 1950, 18) [49] When Duryodhana falls in the water-pond, Draupadī, laughing, recites a stanza:

> On account of the palace's dazzle, he lost his bearing,
> [After all,] he is an offspring of a blind, how could he perceive the site! (ibid. 19)[50]

Duryodhana retorts in a fit of pique, a feeling we already saw above in the *Mahābhārata-tātparya-nirṇaya*:

> Draupadī calls me a son of a blind [man]!
> I shall be Duryodhana only if I revenge this mockery! (ibid.)[51]

The drama also articulates his mockery as the actual cause of Duryodhana's suicidal attitude. When Duryodhana expresses his jealousy, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's advice to him to purge himself of jealousy and to embrace contentment seems effective. Duryodhana admits that he could somehow tolerate Yudhiṣṭhira's ascendancy, but the real cause of his sorrow lies in his humiliation. He complains: "Father, if this were all, I would have said nothing—I would have tolerated this pain and rest with content. But the problem (*śoka*) is this: that Bhīma mocked me, and the laughter of women has reduced me to this woeful state" (ibid. 28).[52] As expected,

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[49] *vāha bhāī sāhaba kyā āja āṃkhoṃ meṃ suramā nahīṃ lagāyā jo patthara ka farśa ko pānī kā kuṇḍa batāyā?* Suramā (powdered sulphide of antimony) in India is known as a traditional remedy for poor eyesight.

[50] *cakācauṃdha se bhavana kī bigaṛa gayā saba taura, andhe kī aulāda hai sūjhe kyūṃ kara ṭhaura.*

[51] *mujhe kahata hai Draupadī andhe kī aulāda,* […] *badalā lūṃ isa haṃsī kā to duryodhana nāma.*

[52] *pitājī! agara itanā hī hotā to maiṃ kucha na kahatā. isa duḥkha ko sahatā aura saṃtoṣa se baiṭha rahatā, parantu śoka to yaha hai ki bhīmasena ne merī haṃsī uṛāī hai auratoṃ ke ṭaṭṭhoṃ ne merī yaha durgati banāī hai.*

Dhṛtarāṣṭra consoles him: "This all is a making of your mind. Teasing indeed occurs between [individuals] of equal status. Besides, Bhīma is your brother [cousin]" (ibid. 28).[53] This description is fraught with a vitiating point: in the Sabhā, Duryodhana avows to requite Draupadī's laughter; in stark contrast, he inculpates before Dhṛtarāṣṭra both *Bhīma* and *women* for mockery; he does not even mention the name of Draupadī! Regardless, it is evident that by now Duryodhana's jealousy has become marginalized, which he can put up with, but he cannot ignore the insult.

In 1965, a Hindi feature film titled *Mahabharat* was released. It is this telling of the story that determinedly forms the bedrock of the Series' treatment of Draupadī's role.[54] Herein, when Duryodhana sees Draupadī, he impishly initiates a playful joke: "Today my eyes are bedazzled as I see the adornment of sister-in-law [Draupadī]." And thus, enchanted by her beauty, he inattentively plunges into the specious pond. Bursting in cheeky laughter, Draupadī ebulliently strikes back at Duryodhana: "Blind indeed are the sons of the blind!" Her light-hearted temerity wounds Duryodhana deeply and elicits a livid reprisal from him: "Draupadī, the sons of the blind are not blind—this will become evident to you the day when I shall avenge this insult!" Draupadī playfully excuses her laughter: "Dear brother-in-law! You became annoyed? I was only joking!" This worries Yudhiṣṭhira a little, but Sahadeva explains to Yudhiṣṭhira what Draupadī's meant: "What a fool! He viewed the teasing by his sister-in-law as an insult!" But Yudhiṣṭhira is quite

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[53] *yaha saba tere mana kā vikāra hai. haṃsī dillagī to barābara vāloṃ meṃ huā hī karatī hai, varanā bhīmasena ākhira terā bhāī hai.* It seems unlikely that Betāba developed the excuse of fraternal joviality on his own. In the *Pāṇḍavacaritram*, a Jain version of the Pāṇḍavas' story, which is evidently an adaptation of a much older Sanskrit long poem of the same name, was published around 1913. According to it, Yudhiṣṭhira tries to attenuate Duryodhana's feelings of indignation: "Why fuss over the joviality of kinsmen? Compose yourself, do away with resentment, hold rather the magnificence of love in your heart." "*kiṃ bāndhavahāsyena? tvaṃ svastho bhava, khedaṃ muñca, premaprakarṣaṃ manasi mānaya*" (Gaṇi 1990, 122–25).

[54] It seems to have become the standard narrative. *Veer Bhimsen*, a movie released in 1985 (a remake of a 1964 movie of the same title) features the gambling episode in similar fashion (1:03–1:25).

concerned: "Sahadeva, you should not say anything without [first] understanding the matter. The wound of speech is much deeper than that of an arrow or sword. Arjuna, Draupadī must come along with us to Hastināpura to beg Duryodhana's pardon" (Mistri 1965, 1:00–2).[55] Note that it is Duryodhana who initiates the lighthearted play with his risqué humour. Draupadī's laughter and remarks were nothing but a playful rejoinder.

In addition to engineering a careful coherence between the act of mockery and its perpetrator, the most noticeable feature in these Mahābhāratas is that all individuals who were mentioned in Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* as guilty of treating Duryodhana shabbily have faded into oblivion, and it is only Draupadī who teases him, even if only playfully. Draupadī's joke is trivialized in the context of a culturally acceptable playful relationship that the younger brother and his older brother's wife cherish in modern India.

In terms of relations, the distinction between brothers and cousins is not as clearly defined as in English. Cousins are like brothers and sisters to each other. This makes Duryodhana Draupadī's *devara* and Draupadī his *bhābhī*. Gupta describes the *devara-bhābhī* relationship:

> The newly-married woman, a new entrant to a joint family household, finds in her devar [husband's younger brother] one person with whom she is not in an unequal power relationship. The devar's status as brother/son makes him the 'natural' recipient of the

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[55] Duryodhana: *āja to bhābhī kā śṛṅgāra dekha kara āṁkheṃ cauṃdhiyā gayīṃ.* Draupadī: *andhoṃ ke beṭe andhe hī hote haiṃ.* Duryodhana: *pāṃcālī, andhe ke beṭe andhe nahīṃ hote, isakā pramāṇa tumheṃ usa dina milegā jaba hama tuma se isa apamāna kā badalā leṃge.* Draupadī: *nārāza ho gae devara jī? maiṃne to masakharī kī hai.* Śakuni: *aura aba jale para namaka chiṛaka rahī ho.* Yudhiṣṭhira: *hastināpura se nimaṃtraṇa āyā hai. mahārāja ne hameṃ āśīrvāda dene ke lie bulāyā hai. jaldī calane kī taiyārī karo.* Arjuna: *māyā mahala māyājāla bana gayā. bhāī suyodhana krodhita hokara cale gae.* Yudhiṣṭhira: *kyoṃ?* Draupadī: *sūkhī dharatī samajha kara vo jala kuṃḍa meṃ gira paṛe. hā hā hā.* Arjuna: *pāṃcālī ko haṃsī ā gaī, aura vo ise apamāna samajhā.* Sahadeva: *kitane mūrkha haiṃ! bhābhī kī haṃsī ko apamāna samajhā?* Yudhiṣṭhira (fretfully): *sahadeva, bāta ko samajhe binā koī bāta muṃha se nā nikālo. tīra aura talavāra se baṛha kara bāta kā ghāva bahuta gaharā hotā hai. arjuna, pāṃcālī ko bhī hamāre sātha duryodhana se kṣamā māṃgane ke lie hastināpura calanā hogā.*

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> bhabhi's [older brother's wife] physical and emotional affections. He is the one male member of the household with whom she can talk freely. (Gupta 2002, 151)

Given such a cultural context, Draupadī's act does not amount to a serious offence. In these films, it is Duryodhana who is at fault: he irascibly mistakes a playful joke for an unforgivable insult and vows to avenge it. However, unlike these two films, the Series never suggests that Draupadī's acts were part of that playful relationship. They were altogether meant to humiliate Duryodhana.

The description of the mockery episode in the Series seems to draw almost entirely on these sources—both literary and media. In fact, not only the narratorial content, but also the cinematic renditions of the content show that this episode in the Series is simply a remake of its earlier representations. For the sake of space, I will cite just one example. In the 1965 movie *Mahabharat* already mentioned, the water pool looks as if the floor is covered with a precious, genuine carpet, and Draupadī appears on the balcony. In the Series, both of these elements are shown in exactly the same manner.

We see examples of how Draupadī becomes the main culprit even in the scholarly field. For example, even though it is Bhīma, in both the Critical Edition and the Vulgate, who is most frequently charged with mockery, and others' names also crop up more often than that of Draupadī, for whatever reason, Draupadī has gained the bad reputation of being the main culprit of the mockery episode. For example, according to Irawati Karve, an anthropologist from Maharashtra, India, it was Draupadī's "grave mistake" that she "laughed at a person she should have treated with respect. In front of everyone she had laughed when Duryodhana got confused in the Pandavas' marvellous palace Mayasabhā, mistaking water for dry land, and dry land for water. Her rude laughter was the worst insult Duryodhana had to bear" (1969, 124). On two

occasions, Karve names Bhīma and Draupadī who deliberately and derisively insult him with their loud laughter: "Duryodhana was not likely to forget this humiliation in a hurry" (ibid. 139); he "was so incensed and insulted that he declared that if he could not bring down the Pandavas' pride he would rather die" (ibid. 147). Karve thus sees the seeds of the gambling episode in Duryodhana's humiliating scene, and not in his jealous greed.

Draupadī's image as the primary perpetrator of irremediable hostility between the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas through her mocking of Duryodhana has been pervasive to the extent that even traditional Sanskritists of great stature have succumbed to it. Vidya Niwas Mishra (Vidyānivāsa Miśra), for example, writes: "Yes, Draupadī […] too commits a mistake—she becomes conceited over her riches, [when] Duryodhana mistakes the sparkling floor for water, she rudely bursts in laughter, 'son of blind was surely to be confused.' That sets Duryodhana's heart on fire. And then begins the vicious circle of vengeance" (1985, 51).[56]

Such an impression of Draupadī is visible in recent scholarship, too. For example, Brodbeck writes in his extensively researched work *The Mahābhārata Patriline* (2009): "But Duryodhana is piqued into delirium by Yudhiṣṭhira's success and Draupadī's having mocked him in Indraprastha (2.43, 45–9), and, encouraged by Śakuni (2.44, 51), he now persuades Dhṛtarāṣṭra to invite Yudhiṣṭhira to Hastināpura to play dice" (Brodbeck 2009, 190). The references supplied in the quote testify to Brodbeck's careful inspection of the material. But it seems that in accusing Draupadī, the popular narrative got the better of him. If not on account of the widespread perception of Draupadī's exclusive involvement, how else can one explain that

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[56] *use aiśvarya kā abhimāna hotā hai. duryodhana ko ujale farśa meṃ jala kā bhrama hotā hai to aśobhana tarīke se haṃsa paṛatī hai, "andhe ke putra ko yaha bhrama honā hī thā." usase āga bhaṛaka uṭhatī hai duryodhana ke mana meṃ. aura phira to pratihiṃsā kā duścakra śurū ho jātā hai.*

an erudite scholar of the *Mahābhārata* accuses only her of annoying Duryodhana, especially when Vyāsa's text consistently incriminates Bhīma and others more often?

I shall recapitulate the detailed discussion I have given thus far. In Vaiśaṃpāyana's account in Vyāsa's epic, although the mockery episode is described, Duryodhana does not allude to his mockery as a provocation for holding a gambling match; he simply wants to usurp Indraprastha with all its riches. Sūta's account introduces the element of mockery in Duryodhana's complaint to Dhṛtarāṣṭra. The southern recension of Vyāsa gives more weight to Duryodhana's complaint. Still, Duryodhana's greed remains the main cause of his interest in a dice match. The Vulgate version includes an additional stanza, in which Bhīma taunts Duryodhana with the words "son of Dhṛtarāṣṭra." In the 13th century, one comes across another explanation: it is in accordance with god's (Kṛṣṇa's) plan that Bhīma, Draupadī, and Kṛṣṇa's wives make fun of Duryodhana, for Kṛṣṇa knew that evil Duryodhana would not tolerate the insult. According to this version though, Bhīma and Draupadī are not guilty of any wrongdoing because they are unknowingly acting in accordance with Kṛṣṇa's plan. By the 17th century, in the Hindi speaking belt, Draupadī's role in insulting Duryodhana becomes more prominent: both Bhīma and Draupadī call Duryodhana the son of a blind father. By the 20th century, Draupadī alone pokes fun at Duryodhana for not being able to see the water pool ahead, but this is part of the playful relationship of brother-in-law and sister-in-law. But the idea of her violation of decorum preparing grounds for war was also not unknown. It was in this well-known role of Draupadī that the Series was produced, with special reference to the two films discussed above.

Draupadī's character suffers the most decisive depreciation in the Series, which not only absolves the main culprits of the supercilious ridicule, but it also maligns Draupadī's fine character as Vyāsa depicted it and trivializes the future monstrosity of the Kauravas. The Series

magnifies the contemptuousness of Draupadī's actions by completely removing the innocent playfulness of *devara-bhābhī*, but it also assesses it in harsh terms. The episode concludes with a moralistic stanza, which indirectly castigates Draupadī's reckless behaviour. In the Series, Draupadī becomes the Duryodhana of the Pāṇḍava side. Despite their bitter political rivalry, no Pāṇḍava has so far insulted Duryodhana. Also, no other individual except Duryodhana is condemned in such harsh terms in the entire TV Series.

Within the Series, Draupadī herself plainly admits that she has committed an offence. Yudhiṣṭhira further highlights Draupadī's wrongdoing by saying that such offences lie beyond the boundaries of the notion of penalty, escalating it to the level of sin that can be atoned for by performing penance only.

Moreover, the Series shows that Duryodhana, even though not happy with the unprecedented rise of the Pāṇḍavas, has no interest whatsoever in gaining control over their riches and kingdom. He agrees with Śakuni's idea to play a match of dice against Yudhiṣṭhira because he sees the opportunity of revenging himself.

Draupadī's role in mocking Duryodhana in the Series is thus so distinct from Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* that the latter cannot be considered as the 'basic source" of its content. A few viewers who had read the episode in Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*, most likely the Vulgate, were disenchanted by the Series' portrayal. For example, Sarla Anu and Jayashree dismiss the scene of Draupadī's laughter as a fabrication. Sarla remarks:

> …the versions I have read…I had read quite a few *Prabandans* and essays on *Mahabharata*…and I never came across where she had said that…she had laughed…I don't remember…Dr. Pratap Chandro Chandro [*sic*]…or someone like Dr. Viswanath Roy said that…I don't remember the exact name…he said…where did B. R. Chopra get this particular line from… (Bandlamudi 2012, 182–83).

Those who knew the description in Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* (including the Vulgate) felt that the

Series slanders Draupadī's character. Again, Sarla observes: "how could she...coming from such

a great family act so foolish?" (Bandlamudi 2012, 246). Sarla's statement implies that

Draupadī's character was shown wrongly in the Series.

But such viewers were by far a minority compared to those who either already had the

same impression as shown in the Series or were informed by it. Such an extreme portrayal of

Draupadī's character in the Series cemented her negative image in the minds of the audience. As

Bandlamudi notes,

> Among the 79 percent of single-voiced readers, the vast majority strongly condemned
> Draupadi's action as being "un-womanly" or "being too coarse for royalty" and, more
> importantly, for insulting her father-in-law, who in fact is blind. Only 11 percent of the
> subjects were willing to situate this plot in the broader context of the story to consider
> earlier humiliations that Draupadi's husbands suffered at the hands of Duryodhan and
> that this was a golden opportunity for her to pay back (2012, 229). She either violated a
> "gender code" or she was an inhospitable hostess or a "haughty princess." (ibid. 231).

Consequently, the blameless reputation of Draupadī, the graceful noble queen of Vyāsa's

Mahābhārata, is sullied. The imagery of Draupadī laughing intemperately, pointing finger at and

disparagingly reviling Duryodhana with the remark "like father like son—both blind" was

something that perhaps stayed with most viewers.

Conclusion

One clearly observes that the Series' presentation of Duryodhana's experience in the

Assembly Hall is strikingly different than its depiction in the epic. Even if one casts aside the

lack of consistency in the Critical Edition of Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*, which might point to earlier

and later textual layers, the fact is that Vyāsa's text propounds Duryodhana's jealousy and lust

for the Pāṇḍavas' wealth as the cause of the gambling match. The indignation aroused by the mockery has little or no role in that respect. Vyāsa's epic specifically highlights the role of the palace servants and the four younger Pāṇḍavas in making fun of Duryodhana. Although Duryodhana accuses everyone, including Draupadī but excluding Yudhiṣṭhira, of humiliating him in the Sabhā, it is Bhīma who is most frequently declared guilty of mockery, and it is he, if anyone, whom Duryodhana blames for hurling the taunt about his inability to perceive the reality by calling him "son of Dhṛtarāṣṭra." But the Series washes off Duryodhana's jealousy and greed for the Pāṇḍavas' kingdom and riches and sensationally highlights his indignation at the way Draupadī mocked him. He agrees with Śakuni's proposal to play the game against the Pāṇḍavas because he sees an opportunity to avenge his humiliation.

As I demonstrate above, although Draupadī's involvement in Duryodhana's mockery is minimal in the earliest textual sources, it seems to have grown gradually but steadily in popularity. By the 20th century, the role of the Pāṇḍavas and palace attendants is dropped and Draupadī alone is condemned for the injurious laughter combined with cutting remarks. Naturally, Duryodhana is expected to retaliate against Draupadī alone.

It should be noted that such an image of Draupadī is presented not as "an" image of her, but as "the" image of her, for the Series not only claims to have used Vyāsa's epic as the "basic source," the narrator Cosmic Time in fact repeatedly emphasizes his sole authority to tell the authentic history with a boastful claim. Cosmic Time opens the very first episode of the Series with a definitive assertion: "And no one else but I can narrate this story. Since I alone saw it happen as history, I know each of its characters and have witnessed each of its incidents. I am Duryodhana, I am Arjuna, and I am Kurukshetra, the battlefield, too." As such, the view of the Series is legitimated, even though Vyāsa's name is frequently evoked as the author of the events

in which he himself participated, and Cosmic Time declares that he witnessed everything. The Series was thus able to propagate a negative image of Draupadī all over India, blaming her for the devasting events that follow.[57]

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[57] Draupadī's character acquires much darker shade in some later adaptations. *Mahabharat* (2013*)*, an animation movie in which the Hindi film industry's prominent actors and actresses were involved, is one such case in point.

Chapter Four

Sailing into the Storm:
From Yudhiṣṭhira's heroism to damage-control

Vyāsa says that Duryodhana's consummate jealousy for the riches of the Pāṇḍavas makes him suicidal; the Series depicts that Duryodhana turns suicidal because of his humiliation by Draupadī. This difference forms the basis of how the gambling match comes about in these two sources. Dhṛtarāṣṭra sends his younger stepbrother and wise minister Vidura to Yudhiṣṭhira with a challenge to play a game of dice. In this chapter I examine how, despite the acknowledged conflictual and disastrous nature of gambling, which both sides fear deeply, the game materializes. I briefly narrate the relevant events—the efforts to prevent the game and Yudhiṣṭhira's consent to participate in it. Two questions stand out in this respect: (1) Why does Yudhiṣṭhira comply with the challenge? And (2) in the Series, what role does Draupadī's action of humiliating Duryodhana play in his decision to accept the challenge? The reasons for Yudhiṣṭhira's acceptance of the challenge, as described by Vyāsa, have attracted some attention from modern scholars (which I discuss in detail below). I argue that a good number of scholarly analyses of Yudhiṣṭhira's reasons unwarrantedly ignore Vyāsa's text. At the same time, no one has, as far as I know, studied the same in the Series. I propose that in Vyāsa's epic, Yudhiṣṭhira's decision to gamble is not linked in any way to the incident of Duryodhana's mockery. But the Series significantly highlights Draupadī's offensive behaviour as a reason for Yudhiṣṭhira's decision to accept the invitation. In this chapter, I examine the key differences between Vyāsa's and the Series' characterization of Yudhiṣṭhira, Draupadī, and Duryodhana, and how the Series'

departure from Vyāsa's text affects the narrative. The significance of differences becomes clear in the following chapter, which deals with the events of the gambling hall.

In the previous chapter, we saw that Duryodhana considers the Pāṇḍavas his archenemies, and in the epic their political supremacy makes him suicidal: he is ready to kill himself unless he can subdue the Pāṇḍavas and seize their wealth. Śakuni offers his help to achieve this goal in a game of dice. The pair reveals their sordid intentions to Dhṛtarāṣṭra, who is instantly terrified by the idea because it might launch a direct conflict against the invincible enemy. Hence, he wishes to consult Vidura about his predicament. But Duryodhana's threat to commit suicide compels Dhṛtarāṣṭra to forcibly send the unwilling Vidura to Yudhiṣṭhira. We hear neither approval nor disapproval of the proposed dice match from other dignitaries in the Hastināpura palace.

According to the Series, however, it is only Śakuni who covets Indraprastha and plans a game of dice on his own—Duryodhana, though jealous of the Pāṇḍavas' opulence and ascendancy, has no interest in annexing Indraprastha and its riches. He is rather somewhat relieved by the ejection of the Pāṇḍavas from Hastināpura, even if he had to share out half the kingdom with them. The sole cause of Duryodhana's irritation is Draupadī's mockery of him which, he feels, can be assuaged only by carrying out an act of cathartic vengeance against her. Thus, Śakuni and Duryodhana scheme together and dupe Dhṛtarāṣṭra into organizing a game of dice, the best sort of entertainment (44:46). The Series dramatizes the outcry over gambling by showing Bhīṣma, Gāndhārī and others expressing their strong disapproval of it, and how no one could prevent it.

4.1 Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*: Yudhiṣṭhira's heroism

My focus in this section is on determining why Yudhiṣṭhira plays the game. Scholars have mostly disregarded the reasons he frequently articulates because the honest and harmonious predisposition of Yudhiṣṭhira and what he perceives as an inherently deceitful and conflictual game[1] constitute an irreconcilable contradiction. I argue that despite such a contradiction between Yudhiṣṭhira and gambling, Yudhiṣṭhira's decision to play the game actually reinforces his honest and harmonious character.

When Dhṛtarāṣṭra learns about Śakuni's and Duryodhana's subterfuge to swindle Yudhiṣṭhira and his brothers out of their fresh but indomitable empire, he considers discussing it with Vidura. Duryodhana, fully aware that Vidura would persuade Dhṛtarāṣṭra against the plan, threatens suicide. Dhṛtarāṣṭra is thus browbeaten into planning the game without first consulting Vidura. But when Vidura learns about the scheme, he rushes to Dhṛtarāṣṭra and warns: "Please act in a way that no discord with your nephews is provoked" (2.45.52). But Dhṛtarāṣṭra deems the game preordained—he avows that with the gods' grace and in the presence of Bhīṣma and himself, no discord could be sparked. He compels the reluctant Vidura to fetch the challenge to Yudhiṣṭhira. Vidura approaches Bhīṣma, but the epic reveals nothing about their communication.

Sūta's narration adds further details to this account. Dhṛtarāṣṭra is disinclined to allow a gambling match because it would further aggravate the hostilities between the two families. Dhṛtarāṣṭra, warned by Vidura's words, earnestly urges Duryodhana to purge himself of excessive jealousy towards his cousins and not resort to the game. But he finally gives in. The

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[1] "Gambling is deceit and evil" (*nikṛtir devanaṃ pāpam*) (2.53.2), "Gambling will lead us to conflict, O steward" (*dyūte kṣattaḥ kalaho vidyate naḥ*) (2.52.10).

following section will examine Vyāsa's description of Yudhiṣṭhira's efforts to avoid the game of dice and analyze why Yudhiṣṭhira, arguably the most truthful and honest personality of his time, acquiesces to what he and others consider morally reprehensible and disastrous activity.

In Indraprastha, when the visibly anxious Vidura approaches Yudhiṣṭhira, the latter enquires about the cause of his mental distress. Vidura supplies a politically correct answer: he assures Yudhiṣṭhira that all is well in Hastināpura, and that the elderly king of Hastināpura requests the pleasure of his company in the newly built Sabhā (2.52.8): "Come, join your cousins in that [Sabhā], play a friendly game of dice, and enjoy yourself" (2.52.8).[2] Vidura subsequently adds: "You shall see the wily gambling fanatics whom the high-spirited king Dhṛtarāṣṭra has commissioned there—I have come for that reason; O king, take part in it" (2.52.9).[3] Here, Vidura's last words appear to suggest that Yudhiṣṭhira should take on the challenge.

Although Vidura has already asked Yudhiṣṭhira to participate in the game, the latter is not so sure because no one in their right mind, knowing that gambling leads to conflict, would indulge in it (2.52.10). At the same time, he seeks Vidura's personal advice in the matter, which he promises to abide by. This time, Vidura is not so frank: "I know that gambling is a den of iniquity, and I did try to avert it. But the king sent me to you. After hearing [this], O savant, do what is best in this matter" (2.52.8–11).[4]

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[2] *samāgamya bhrātṛbhiḥ pārtha tasyāṃ suhṛddyūtaṃ kriyatāṃ ramyatāṃ ca*. See also 2.51.21.

[3] *durodarā vihitā ye tu tatra mahātmanā dhṛtarāṣṭreṇa rājñā, tān drakṣyase kitavān saṃniviṣṭān ity āgato 'haṃ nṛpate taj juṣasva.*

[4] *jānāmy ahaṃ dyūtam anarthamūlaṃ kṛtaś ca yatno 'sya mayā nivāraṇe, rājā tu māṃ prāhiṇot tvatsakāśaṃ śrutvā vidvañ śreya ihācarasva.*

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Learning more about the "sorely unnerving" gamesters against whom he must compete, and who will no doubt get the better of him, Yudhiṣṭhira finds himself hemmed in by fate: "This world is under the control of what is preordained by the Creator; I cannot not play with those gamblers" (2.52.14).[5] Even though he is fully aware that he is certain to lose, he accepts the challenge on the following three grounds: first, seeing himself trapped in a sticky situation, he thinks that the game is preordained. He explains the sticky situation: "Owing to the command of King Dhṛtarāṣṭra, O savant, I dare not choose not to gamble" (2.52.15).[6] And, although he is personally against gambling, he cannot turn down Śakuni's challenge because, "if challenged, however, I never back down—that indeed is my sworn perennial pledge" (2.52.16).[7] Thus, Yudhiṣṭhira expresses his inability not to play the game: he must abide by the commands of Dhṛtarāṣṭra; he must abide by his vow of never shirking a challenge.

He departs for Hastināpura the very next day. There, too, he makes a last attempt to avert the brewing disaster with a plea to Śakuni:

> Dicing is chicanery, an evil; no valour of a warrior is in it, nor definite precept, prince. Why do you extol dicing? People do not approve of a gambler's conceit in deceitfulness. Śakuni, you must not triumph over us using iniquitous means like a cruel man. (2.53.2–3)[8]

Yudhiṣṭhira knows that gambling entails dishonesty, and Śakuni will surely beat him. What is chicanery and foul play in Yudhiṣṭhira's judgment is precisely the virtue of a gambler in

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[5] *dhātrā tu diṣṭasya vaśe kiledaṃ nādevanaṃ kitavair adya tair me.*

[6] *nāhaṃ rājño dhṛtarāṣṭrasya śāsanān na gantum icchāmi kave durodaram.*

[7] *na cākāmaḥ śakuninā devitāhaṃ na cen māṃ dhṛṣṇur āhvayitā sabhāyām, āhūto 'haṃ na nivarte kadā cit tad āhitaṃ śāśvataṃ vai vrataṃ me.*

[8] *nikṛtir devanaṃ pāpaṃ na kṣātro 'tra parākramaḥ, na ca nītir dhruvā rājan kiṃ tvaṃ dyūtaṃ praśaṃsasi. na hi mānaṃ praśaṃsanti nikṛtau kitavasya ha, śakune maiva no jaiṣīr amārgeṇa nṛśaṃsavat.*

Śakuni's opinion. Predictably, Śakuni praises the gambler's ability to retain numbers and to make moves accordingly. Yet Yudhiṣṭhira again deplores gambling and instead suggests a battle, "the finest form of gambling" (2.53.7). What Yudhiṣṭhira believes to be cheating is simply a part of life for Śakuni and therefore does not amount to cheating: "The educated indeed act towards the uneducated with trickery only, and so do the smart towards the not so smart; people do not call that trickery. That being so, if you still consider it trickery after coming to me, pull out of gambling, if you are scared" [9] (2.53.11–12).[10] This seals the deal: being a Kṣatriya, Yudhiṣṭhira cannot turn down the challenge, especially when Śakuni has invoked the idea of him being cowardly. And so Yudhiṣṭhira asserts "I have taken the vow that if challenged, I will not back away. Moreover, fate is powerful; I stand under the control of destiny" (2.53.13).[11] Because the professional and personal worth of a Kṣatriya man depended on his audacious heroism, nothing hurts his pride as much as the imputations of cowardliness.

The gambling episode comes at a juncture in the epic where it seems that all pre-gambling events lead to this single event, and all post-gambling events are merely a result of it. Although Duryodhana and his company are condemned for their appalling callousness, it is Yudhiṣṭhira's hitherto exemplary character that is besmirched by his participation in gambling. No other aspect of Yudhiṣṭhira's life has baffled scholars as much as his participation in the gambling match. In this section, I will analyze the perspective and interpretations of

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[9] Black interprets this statement as Śakuni's offer to Yudhiṣṭhira "to opt out of the game" (2021, 109); "if Yudhiṣṭhira is concerned about dishonesty, then he does not have to play (2.53.5). According to Śakuni, if Yudhiṣṭhira does not think it is a fair game, then his obligation to accept the challenge is not binding" (ibid. 108). I see it as Śakuni's scheme to arouse temerity in Yudhiṣṭhira, an indirect challenge.

[10] *śrotriyo 'śrotriyam uta nikṛtyaiva yudhiṣṭhira, vidvān aviduṣo 'bhyeti nāhus tāṃ nikṛtiṃ janāḥ. evaṃ tvaṃ mām ihābhyetya nikṛtiṃ yadi manyase, devanād vinivartasva yadi te vidyate bhayam.*

[11] *āhūto na nivarteyam iti me vratam āhitam, vidhiś ca balavān rājan diṣṭasyāsmi vaśe sthitaḥ.*

Sailing into the Storm

Yudhiṣṭhira's reasoning by some major scholars. I conclude that many of these interpretations unwarrantedly trivialize Vyāsa's version of the events and give undue credit to their own creative interpretations.

Only five people are directly involved in contriving the challenge for the dice-play: Duryodhana, Śakuni, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Vidura, and Yudhiṣṭhira. Of these, only the first two justify and insist on the fairness and desirability of gambling; the latter three consider it inherently conflictual, and hence, dangerous for the peace and well-being of the Kuru dynasty (2.52.10–11). Dhṛtarāṣṭra does warn Duryodhana about the ruinous outcomes of gambling (2.51.10–11) but quickly gives in because of his intemperate filial affection towards, and kingly ambitions for, Duryodhana (2.51.14–15).

Vidura's dialogue with Yudhiṣṭhira at this point is, prima facie, surprisingly feeble and brief. After all, he has been, and remains until the end, the most committed defender of the Pāṇḍavas' cause in the Hastināpura royal court. It is primarily due to the vigilant Vidura's alert but undercover guardianship that many attempts on the Pāṇḍavas' lives are foiled. Not only do Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Duryodhana, along with their coterie of friends and advisers, accuse Vidura of being openly biased in favour of the Pāṇḍavas, Yudhiṣṭhira too thinks of him as their loyal ally, mentor (*guru*), servant, father, mother, friend, and adviser (5.30.29).

Considering Yudhiṣṭhira's ineptness and Śakuni's unrivalled adeptness at gambling, one would naturally expect Vidura to urge Yudhiṣṭhira to shirk the challenge, especially since the latter has already promised to abide by his advice. But the wise uncle's advice to Yudhiṣṭhira is at best equivocal; not once does he enjoin Yudhiṣṭhira to turn down the challenge.

Sailing into the Storm

After Vidura conveys Dhṛtarāṣṭra's message to Yudhiṣṭhira, he closes the statement with his own suggestion, "accept it" (2.52.9). But when Yudhiṣṭhira denounces gambling, Vidura concurs, and yet winds up with the following: "After hearing, O savant, do what is best in this matter" (2.52.11). What does he mean by "do what is best?" It could be interpreted in three ways:

1. It would be best for Yudhiṣṭhira to decline the challenge because the dice match would inevitably lead to conflict. One could also add—because Vidura knew too well the treacherous nature of Śakuni, a dice match against him would surely ruin the honest Yudhiṣṭhira.

2. It would be best for Yudhiṣṭhira to accept the challenge.

3. Yudhiṣṭhira should decide for himself which of the above two options is best for him and act accordingly.

Given that Vidura and Yudhiṣṭhira have already expressed their disapprobation of gambling, the first interpretation appears to be the most plausible recourse—Vidura would like to avoid a gambling match. For the same reason, the second interpretation seems unlikely, and the third, although more fitting, might be understood as indicative of two points: (1) Vidura's impassive concern for Yudhiṣṭhira's wellbeing, or (2) as the emissary of Hastināpura, he cannot advise Yudhiṣṭhira to decline the invitation. Which of these three is consistent with the events, characters, and social norms of the epic will be clear once we have examined in more detail Yudhiṣṭhira's own reasons for accepting the challenge.[12]

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[12] Black argues that by comparing Dhṛtarāṣṭra's Sabhā with that of Yudhiṣṭhira, Vidura "possibly nudges Yudhiṣṭhira towards accepting the invitation" (2021, 104). I am, however, not convinced. Vidura is simply paraphrasing Dhṛtarāṣṭra's description of the Sabhā (2.51.21).

4.1.1 Yudhiṣṭhira's justifications for gambling

The reasons that Yudhiṣṭhira articulates are: he must abide by his vows to never turn

down a challenge and to never disobey his uncle Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and his conclusion that the game

must be predestined.[13] These reasons have generally failed to satisfy modern readers' questions

about his actions. Scholars have therefore interpreted and assessed the reasons for Yudhiṣṭhira's

participation in gambling given by himself variously; most deemed them to be too tenuous to

account for such an extremely disgraceful event with such grievous, heart-rending consequences.

The reasons seem simple: gambling has had a bad reputation, and it leads to unspeakable

miseries. The merit of distrust in Yudhiṣṭhira's justifications can be fully appreciated only after

knowing the perception of gambling in ancient India.

As early as the *Ṛgveda*, gambling had acquired a bad reputation among the Aryas. A

Ṛgvedic hymn bewails the contemptible, painful outcomes of gambling and chastises a gambler

in no uncertain terms: a gambler's wife suffers harassment at the hands of others and his female

relatives live in destitution (*Ṛgveda* 10.34.4, 10).[14] These warnings closely resemble the outcome

of the Hastināpura dice match (10.34.11). Manu calls gambling an "open robbery" (*prakāśam*

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[13] Black pinpoints "six distinct factors" that Yudhiṣṭhira alludes to in different places in Vyāsa's text: (1) the game was preordained; (2) he must obey his father/uncle; (3) he must uphold his vow; (4) he lost his reason; (5) he wanted to win Duryodhana's kingdom; and (6) he was tricked into playing. As I noted, only the second and third are genuine reasons, the first is merely an explanation of his inability to not observe the second and third considerations. About the fourth factor, Yudhiṣṭhira is said to have lost his reason *during* the game, and not *before* the game; he displays remarkable perceptiveness before the game begins (2.53.1–14). So, it cannot be a reason to "accept the invitation." The sixth factor, that Yudhiṣṭhira was "tricked into playing" has no sound basis in the text. The fifth factor is most noteworthy, as Yudhiṣṭhira does admit it (3.35.2). But we must bear in mind that Yudhiṣṭhira endeavors to dissuade Śakuni from engaging in the game and prefers a battle, a better form of gambling, to settle the issue. While Yudhiṣṭhira fears defeat in gambling and seems more confident to beat the Kauravas in a battle, I wonder about the persuasiveness of his intention to take Duryodhana's kingdom by means of a gambling match. It is possible that at 3.35.2, he describes the motive that might have sprung in his mind after his attempts to prevent gambling were rendered futile.

[14] *anye jāyāṃ pari mṛśanty asya; jāyā tapyate kitavasya hīnā mātā putrasya carataḥ kva svit.*

etat tāskaryaṃ) and instructs the ruler to spare no effort to stamp it out (Manu 9.221–26). A blunt warning about gambling is in fact eerily identical to the one in the *Mahābhārata*: "In the old times, this gambling was considered as a big precipitant of animosity; therefore, a wise person should not participate in gambling even for amusement" (Manu 9.227).[15] This is exactly what the epic text perpetually emphasizes.[16]

Thus, it seems incongruous that Yudhiṣṭhira, whose image is, before and after the gambling match, that of a man who is unwaveringly devoted to righteousness and peace, should engage in gambling;[17] gambling stands against both these virtues. This is what Emily Hudson refers to when she describes Yudhiṣṭhira's behaviour as "erratic and mysterious":

> Yudhiṣṭhira's ability to perceive *dharma* is somehow flawed, for how could Yudhiṣṭhira feel morally obligated to accept the invitation to dice at the same time that he knew that it would lead to a division in the family and to disaster? […] One thing, however, is clear from the depiction of Yudhiṣṭhira in this episode: from the dice game forward, we are encouraged to abandon our trust in King Dharma as a moral guide. (2013, 93–4).

According to Hudson, the three reasons cited by Yudhiṣṭhira "generate more questions than answers." The questions she raises are:

> Was Yudhiṣṭhira motivated by only *one* of them, or by all three [of the reasons he himself cites]? If the answer is the latter, then what does it mean to be impelled by *dharma* and by fate at the same time? What is the relationship between the two? Is Yudhiṣṭhira simply

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[15] *dyūtam etat purā kalpe dṛṣṭaṃ vairakaraṃ mahat, tasmād dyūtaṃ na seveta hāsyārtham api buddhimān.*

[16] The *Manusmṛti* is said to have been composed between the 2nd- and 3rd- centuries CE, when the constituent text of the Critical Edition is thought to have been completed. It is possible that the gambling episode of the *Mahābhārata* served as an example for the Manu's views on gambling. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the first reference to gambling in India occurs in the *Ṛgveda*, which also describes dicing as a source of anxiety and hostility, especially 10.34.14. See also *Atharvaveda* 4.38.4.

[17] Yudhiṣṭhira resorts to dishonesty only once, when he betrays Droṇa's trust and becomes an accomplice in his assassination (7.164.1–7). Generally, Yudhiṣṭhira is believed to have told a lie, but it is not so. Afraid of telling a lie, he grudgingly tells Droṇa that Aśvatthāmā was killed. Yudhiṣṭhira's fault in this case is that he purposely speaks the truth about the elephant so indistinctly that Droṇa could not clearly hear the word elephant (*avyaktam abravīd rājan hataḥ kuñjara ity uta* 7.164.6, see also 7.165.115, 7.167.35). Immediately after the war, a conscience-stricken Yudhiṣṭhira takes the responsibility for telling a lie (12.27.17).

confused here? If so, why? By flooding the text with several possible motivating forces without privileging one, the epic's strategies transform the question of what caused Yudhiṣṭhira to accept the challenge to dice into another riddle-question. (2013, 91)

The thrust of her premise is that the three reasons cited by Yudhiṣṭhira are simply a literary style meant to "encourage" the reader "to feel estranged from Yudhisthira, King Dharma, for what may be one of the first times in the epic" (ibid. 91). Prima facie, the quote above might give the impression that Hudson's argument points towards the text's design to prevent a search for the 'real' or 'right' answer; but that does not seem to be the case. For, according to Hudson, "we feel close to characters whose motives and modes of behavior make sense to us, and we feel estranged from those characters whose motives and modes of behavior do not" (ibid. 83). It is on account of Yudhiṣṭhira's "erratic behavior" that his reasons do not make sense and therefore distance readers from him.

According to Hudson, Yudhiṣṭhira's "flawed" perception of *dharma* is on account of his being "overtaken" by "anger and possibly greed,"[18] which results in his "succumbing to mental confusion and inverted vision" of *dharma* (2013, 95). Yudhiṣṭhira's unexpected behaviour for the reader is like a shock treatment: no one could see it coming. The narrative "directs us to question our assumptions and our expectations with respect to Yudhiṣṭhira as a moral guide and with respect to *dharma* as a category that helps us navigate the world. Perhaps we have too much confidence in either the character or the category, or both" (ibid. 94). The purpose of betraying the readers' trust in Yudhiṣṭhira is to allow them "a moment of reflection": "from the dice game

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[18] It is not clear what Hudson means by anger in this case, but greed possibly refers to one of Yudhiṣṭhira's statements to Bhīma: "I turned to the dice desiring to take away the kingship and kingdom from Dhṛtarāṣṭra's son" (3.35.2, see note 12 of this chapter). According to Bose, however, this statement of Yudhiṣṭhira is no more than an excuse which he makes up to conceal his guilt-ridden conscience (2005, 37, note 1).

forward, we are encouraged to abandon our trust in King Dharma as a moral guide" (ibid. 93–

94). Hudson summarizes the intention behind such estrangement as follows:

> [I]mproper responses (like greed, envy, or anger) to what one "sees" in the external world generate mental turbulence. Mental turbulence, in turn, causes inverted vision (where the wrong course appears as the right one and vice versa). Inverted vision then leads to bad decisions which have disastrous consequences and can lead to great suffering.

Hudson thus brushes off the reasons cited by Yudhiṣṭhira as invalid. The real motivation,

according to her, lies in his anger and greed, which cloud his perception of *dharma*, which in

turn leads him to make the "bad decision" culminating in the suffering of everyone involved in

the game.

Some scholars have brushed off Yudhiṣṭhira's justifications as weak excuses. Some have

relied on Śakuni's words—that Yudhiṣṭhira was addicted to gambling, whereas others have

disregarded such an evaluation of Yudhiṣṭhira (discussed below). Those who have accepted

Yudhiṣṭhira's stated reasons as somewhat valid saw an unambiguous flaw in his character. Mary

Brockington appears to accept his reasons as stated but deplores Yudhiṣṭhira's naïveté: "It is

harder to see the Pāṇḍavas as heroes, particularly Yudhiṣṭhira. He brings about the disaster by his

reckless behaviour or naïveté" (2001, 254). Sukthankar, too, implies a sense of weariness in

giving credence to Yudhiṣṭhira's pronounced reasons: "And why does he do all this? Merely

because—we are told as a Kṣatriya or an honourable knight, Yudhiṣṭhira, who was an utter

novice at the game, could not very well refuse to play when challenged" (1957, 62). It is the

corollary of "merely because—we are told" that indicates Sukthankar's reluctance to accept

Yudhiṣṭhira's reasoning as satisfactory.

Scholars have therefore endeavoured to discover what in their views might have been actual reasons or real motivations behind Yudhiṣṭhira's decision to participate in an inherently conflictual game. I devote the next few pages to a review of more explanations that scholars have advanced to find what seem to be, in their view, the right reasons.

4.1.2 Yudhiṣṭhira's decision, a ritualistic necessity?

The most vouched for explanation is that of van Buitenen, which was originally hinted at by C. V. Vaidya ("a game of dice was a necessary part of the Rājasūya celebration" [1930, section IV, 44]), and further investigated by Heesterman in his studies of the Rājasūya ritual, a Vedic rite that formally legalized the sovereignty of a new king (1957, 143–46). Van Buitenen advanced this theory to such a degree that many scholars put their confidence in his eloquently expressed arguments (Biardeau 1997, 109; 2002, 394–96; Brockington 1998, 75, 139; Sullivan 1999, 60; Shulman 1992, 352–53).

Given the pernicious reputation of gambling and Yudhiṣṭhira's commitment to honesty and truthfulness, it would seem preposterous to any reader to even imagine that he should consent to gaming. Śakuni does claim that Yudhiṣṭhira loves gambling, but given Yudhiṣṭhira's history, it sounds rather "disingenuous, for Yudhiṣṭhira has not so far been at all fond of gambling—we have seen quite a bit of him now—and can hardly be regarded as under a private compulsion to rise to any game" (van Buitenen 1975, 28). Van Buitenen discerns an inconsistency in Yudhiṣṭhira's character,

> in all of whose previous life there has not been so much as a hint of a compulsion to
> gamble, all of whose life has in fact been of exemplary rectitude and prudence? It is this
> disturbing contradiction in the character of Yudhiṣṭhira that demands the question
> whether this was indeed a contradiction, or whether the events in his life may not have
> been modeled on a preexisting structure. (ibid. 5)

The only way to reconcile this "most fascinating, but puzzling, feature," he concludes, is to go beyond the epic and delve into the Vedic Rājasūya rituals, according to which, "a dicing match *must* follow the installation of the new king" (ibid. 27). With such a ritual stipulation, the senseless contradiction in Yudhiṣṭhira's personality is absolved, because he is left with no choice but to game: "Once we accept the dicing as an integral part of the *rājasūya*, in The Assembly Hall as well as the ritual manuals, Yudhiṣṭhira is not at all the statue with the clay feet, the paragon of rectitude with the sudden tragic flaw" (ibid. 28).[19] He also puzzles out the intriguing case of Vidura, who vehemently pleads to Dhṛtarāṣṭra to end the game—he is deeply affected by Yudhiṣṭhira's downright losses during the game, but does not really counsel Yudhiṣṭhira to end the game. Van Buitenen concludes:

> To whom would one ordinarily expect such a plea to be directed? To the loser Yudhiṣṭhira, one fancies. But, on the contrary, Vidura urges Duryodhana's father to stop it and vilifies Duryodhana for persisting in it. This would make no sense if Vidura considered Yudhiṣṭhira a free agent; it makes excellent sense if Yudhiṣṭhira is bound by the rules of his own *rājasūya* and must rise to the challenge. (ibid. 29)

Van Buitenen's postulation that Yudhiṣṭhira is bound to abide by the Rājasūya rituals if he were to be formally recognized as an emperor is based on his understanding of an observance described in the ritual texts (1972, 71).

Van Buitenen's holding of Yudhiṣṭhira hostage to the exigencies of the Rājasūya ritual raises more questions than satisfactorily resolve the conundrum. The discrepancies between the ritual injunctions as per van Buitenen's interpretation— "a dicing match *must* follow the

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[19] See also van Buitenen, 1972, 68–84.

installation of the new king"—and the description of the gambling episode in Vyāsa's text are too substantial to consider them linked.

Johannes Bronkhorst, who bases his analysis on Harry Falk's interpretation of the ritual game of dice (1986), argues that Yudhiṣṭhira's Rājasūya flagrantly violates the prescription of the ritual texts, according to which the king must come out as a winner, but Yudhiṣṭhira loses fabulously (2012, 172). One might argue that an author can take a pre-existing convention and change it to their fancy. Vyāsa adapts the Rājasūya ritual and exploits it to account for his narrative. Accordingly, the argument by Falk and Bronkhorst can hardly be considered a strong one. But in my view the argument stands strong because the *Mahābhārata*'s description of the Rājasūya and gambling suggests no connection between the two. Moreover, if it was Yudhiṣṭhira's Rājasūya, and according to the ritual mandates, it is Yudhiṣṭhira who should have organized and performed a dice game in his own Sabhā, why does he fail to accomplish it? Why do Yudhiṣṭhira's well-wishers—the priests, who must have been fully cognizant with the features of the ritual, and friends and relatives—never draw attention to the gambling feature of the ritual? Instead, why is the entire theme of gambling set and executed by Duryodhana and Śakuni, and in a domain that lies beyond Yudhiṣṭhira's realm, let alone being part of Yudhiṣṭhira's Sabhā?

Even if one is to believe in van Buitenen's theory, there is no sound reason to assume that a challenge from a rival king should be considered as part of the ritual. These questions no doubt must have made scholars uneasy about van Buitenen's conjecture, but for whatever reason they found it more convenient to justify it than reconsider it. For example, fully convinced by van Buitenen's "fruitful argument," Hiltebeitel offers justification for the odd situation:

> As van Buitenen was the first to recognize in this connection […] a canonically performed Rājasūya is not complete without a concluding dice match in which the sacrificing king is supposed to be victorious. Thus even though the Pāṇḍavas' Rājasūya is said to be complete, insofar as there is no mention that it includes a dice match, the poets imply that this component of the rite is left for the Kauravas, the other half of the divided family. (1988, 224)

Here "the poets imply" is a clear example of forcing a conjectural interpretation on the epic. One may ask: is there a reason, literary or non-literary, for the poets to "imply" so? Why would the poets not make the relationship between the Rājasūya and gambling plain? In no other case of such significance does the epic maintain as deadly a silence. Biardeau seems to pick up from where Hiltebeitel leaves off:

> The dice ritual is not at all described in Yudhiṣṭhira's sacrifice. But this allows Duryodhana, who wants to rob Yudhiṣṭhira of his kingly power, to have a *sabhā* built. Nothing is said in the text about the game's ritual function and it is the only part of the royal ritual kept in Duryodhana's "sacrifice": it is significant that Duryodhana has a substitute play for him and a substitute that is sure to win—exactly what is required in the *rājasūya*. Duryodhana wants to reverse the results of the *rājasūya* in his favour. (Biardeau 1997, 109)

This raises another question: if the relationship between the ritual and gambling is modelled after the scriptural prescription of the former, do the ritual texts prescribe, or even "imply," that if a king leaves the ritual incomplete, another king may pick up from there? On the one hand, Biardeau justifies Duryodhana's representation by Śakuni with the assertion "exactly what is required in the *rājasūya*"; on the other hand, she is willing to render some fundamental ritual prescriptions meaningless by postulating that a rival king could continue the Rājasūya ritual if

the primary performer fails to complete it. In my own investigations into the ritual descriptions of the Rājasūya,[20] I have not been able to find any evidence to support this view.

The foregoing two quotations presume that gambling is an integral part of the Rājasūya ritual, which Yudhiṣṭhira must play if his Rājasūya ritual is to be deemed completed. Since he himself did not do it, Duryodhana takes advantage of the situation and arranges one for himself. But this logic is flawed. Securing universal sovereignty is not a matter of merely completing the necessary ritual. It should be noted that Yudhiṣṭhira *had* to defeat Jarāsaṃdha, the recognized emperor in the region, *before* even undertaking the Rājasūya. Could Duryodhana reverse the results of the Rājasūya in his own favour by just completing the last part of the ritual? As is evident from the narrative, he indeed emerges as a winner. So, should he be considered an "emperor"? The epic never describes Duryodhana in that capacity. On the contrary, Vyāsa suggests that Yudhiṣṭhira's status as the emperor in the region remains intact even after losing his kingdom in the second gambling match. When the Pāṇḍavas have been banished into the forest, Karṇa incites Duryodhana to go and camp with his royal entourage near the pauperized Pāṇḍavas' campsite. Karṇa's goal is to further wound the Pāṇḍavas' feelings. But Duryodhana and his army get into a fight with the army of Citrasena, a *gandharva* king. Duryodhana's army is defeated, Karṇa flees the battleground, and Duryodhana is taken into custody. The Pāṇḍavas free him, but Duryodhana cannot swallow the fact that his life was saved by his cousins. Once again, he becomes suicidal and refuses to return to his capital. Some demons come and convince him that with the help of his associates, such as Karṇa, he would eventually vanquish the

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[20] I consulted the following texts: *Taittirīyasaṃhitā* 1,8,16; *Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa* 1,7,10; *Maitrāyaṇīsaṃhitā* 2,6,12; 4,4,6; *Kāṭhakasaṃhitā* 15,8; *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* 5,4,3. *Baudhāyanaśrautasūtra* 12,14-15; *Āpastambaśrautasūtra* 18,18,5-19,6; *Kātyāyanaśrautasūtra* 15,7,1-21; Jaimini's *Mīmāṃsāsūtras* (4.4) with commentaries by Śabara and Kumārila.

Pāṇḍavas. After returning to Hastināpura, Duryodhana, still plagued by the grandeur of

Yudhiṣṭhira's Rājasūya, reveals his ambition to perform his own Rājasūya ceremony. Karṇa

supports the plan, but the learned priest, commissioned to perform the ritual, dismisses the idea:

> As long as Yudhiṣṭhira lives, O great Kaurava king, that greatest of rituals [Rājasūya]
> cannot be performed in your family. (3.241.26)[21]

So, the priest proposes another ritual. After the ritual is over, Karṇa once again comforts

Duryodhana: "I will congratulate you again, O best of men, when the Pārthas have been killed in

war and you have performed the Rājasūya" (3.243.10).[22] This demonstrates that Yudhiṣṭhira's

Rājasūya was complete *before and without* the gambling match. Moreover, his status as the

emperor remains intact even after Duryodhana takes over his kingdom. The view that the

Rājasūya requirements obliged Yudhiṣṭhira to accept the challenge and that Duryodhana

exploited the game's omission at Yudhiṣṭhira's Rājasūya seems to make the ritualistic provisions

no more serious than a children's game, the rules of which could be twisted to perform two

unwarranted moves. On the one hand, Yudhiṣṭhira's acceptance of the invitation for gambling is

justified on account of its description in the ritual; on the other hand, Duryodhana's challenge to

Yudhiṣṭhira and his helplessness in accepting is also seen as part of the ritual. But the provisions

of the Rājasūya ritual never even hint that if a king fails to perform the gambling ritual, another

king can resume it, and the first king must play the game. It is not reasonable to establish the

validity of one part based on ritualistic stipulations and insist also on the validity of the other part

that is categorically absent in the ritualistic texts. The Rājasūya ritual was not a children's game;

it was perhaps the most serious of all rituals as it formally elevated a king to the status of

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[21] *na sa śakyaḥ kratuśreṣṭho jīvamāne yudhiṣṭhire, āhartuṃ kauravaśreṣṭha kule tava nṛpottama.*

[22] *hateṣu yudhi pārtheṣu rājasūye tathā tvayā, āhṛte 'haṃ naraśreṣṭha tvāṃ sabhājayitā punaḥ.*

emperor and entailed serious violence. Just as Yudhiṣṭhira had to eliminate Jarāsaṃdha before performing the Rājasūya, Duryodhana also must do away with Yudhiṣṭhira. In my view, the theory that Yudhiṣṭhira accepts gambling on account of its being a ritualistic demand does not solve the moral disaffection one feels for Yudhiṣṭhira's action; rather, it raises many more questions.

Despite efforts to smooth over substantial discrepancies between the Rājasūya of the ritualistic injunctions and that of Yudhiṣṭhira, van Buitenen's justification of Yudhiṣṭhira's participation in the game remains unconvincing. Not unexpectedly, while some scholars express hesitation in giving credibility to his views, others reject them in no uncertain terms. Brodbeck, for instance, finds van Buitenen's theory bewildering and expresses clear hesitation to accept it in the form of a critical question:

> That dicing was an integral part of the *rājasūya* ritual the *Mahābhārata* nowhere mentions: although this is suggested by Vedic ritual manuals, and may help explain why the authors put the dice match here, such a proposal can only take us so far—it would be one more dharmic explanation to add to Yudhiṣṭhira's list. Behind his excuses and fondness for dice, where Yudhiṣṭhira's *real motivations* should be, questions remain. Why did Yudhiṣṭhira agree to play this game, and then, why did he stake Draupadī? (2007, 154; my emphasis)

Brodbeck thus finds the ritualistic explanation unsatisfactory.[23] And yet he is not convinced that the reasons cited by Yudhiṣṭhira for playing the game are his "real motivations." Although Mehendale rejects van Buitenen's theory, he, too, is sceptical to accept Yudhiṣṭhira's reasoning for accepting the challenge: "Probably, acceptance of such a challenge was looked upon as brave" (2001, 498). Elsewhere, he argues that "the game of dice and war were the two legitimate

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[23] Most recently Black voiced his dissatisfaction with van Buitenen's theory (2021, 112).

means available to the epic Kṣatriyas to deprive their opponents of their belongings" and defends

Yudhiṣṭhira also on account of his vow to never shirk a challenge (1995b, 47–48).

Another forceful and definite criticism of van Buitenen's theory comes from Bronkhorst,

who argues that the dice game to be played as part of the Rājasūya is not a "real game" played in

the spirit of gaining a victory and meting out a defeat. It is rather a ritual, mock game, for it was

arranged in a way that "the game was fixed beforehand, so much so that it was no longer a game,

but ritual" (2012, 166). But the game played between Yudhiṣṭhira and Śakuni is played in the

spirit of gaining a victory or suffering a loss and is not fixed beforehand. In addition, Bronkhorst

argues, "the game of dice is not part of the sacrifice: it is played after its completion. The text of

the *Mahābhārata* is quite explicit about it that the Rājasūya is completed before the very idea of

a game of dice is launched. The sacrifice is declared terminated in chapter 42, the topic of dicing

comes up in chapter 43" (ibid. 172). The epic indeed states explicitly that the Rājasūya had

already come to completion *before* the idea of gambling occurs to Duryodhana and Śakuni

(*samāpayām āsa*, *ā samāpter* 2.42.34). Although Bronkhorst satisfactorily debunks van

Buitenen's theory, he does not propose an alternative approach to make sense of Yudhiṣṭhira's

"erratic and mysterious behaviour" (Hudson 2013, 93).

Considering the foregoing discussion, I see no convincing reason to assume that

Yudhiṣṭhira is compelled to play the game because it is part of the Rājasūya. The supposed

ritualistic link assumes that "the poets no doubt knew, it [the Rājasūya] was not really complete

without a dice game" (Hiltebeitel 1990, 100). Rather, I would argue that the fact that the epic text

never mentions a link between the Rājasūya and the gambling match suggests that the redactors

of the *Mahābhārata* text were not aware of such a ritualistic connection or did not consider such

a link key to understanding their narrative. But this, too, is as hypothetical as Hiltebeitel's assumption.

Some might argue that the above-mentioned objections are not sufficiently persuasive, for an author can exploit ritual edicts to move the story forward in a way that suits the narrative, and therefore a lack of intratextual statements showing a link between Yudhiṣṭhira's Rājasūya and gambling is not persuasive enough. I find such an argument unconvincing. For one, it ignores the text and relies on extratextual sources. Secondly, the argument leaves the ritual injunctions at the mercy of an author, in this case, Vyāsa. If one insists that Yudhiṣṭhira's gambling was part of the ritual, one must offer some explanation from the *Mahābhārata* and a reliable ritual text. Van Buitenen claims: "The ritual texts prescribe that after the Unction, surely the high point of the *rājasūya*, the king must engage in a dicing game" (1972, 71), and "For according to the Vedic texts a dicing match *must* follow the installation of the new king" (1975, 27–28). He never supplies any evidence for his claim that gambling *must* follow the Unction. Heesterman discusses the order as it appears in the Śrautasūtras and suggests that gambling occurs after the unction (1957, 140–56). He also demonstrates variations in the dice ritual. The variations and certain parts of the ritual dice game—"the king seems to take no part in the game […] where only the four representatives of the varṇas engage in the game" (ibid. 155–56)— complicate the ritualistic link with Yudhiṣṭhira's gambling. What warrants our attention the most is the fact that the sequence of the Unction and gambling is reversed in practice by the authorities in ritualistic tradition. For example, Jamini's *Mīmāṃsāsūtra*, the foundational text of the ritualistic Mīmāṃsā system from the 3rd or 2nd century BCE, and Śabara's *Bhāṣya*, the most reputed commentary on the former from around the 4th century CE, argue that gambling, along

with some other minor rituals, ought to be performed *before* the Unction, and not *after*. Śabara

explains Jaimini's *sūtra* 5.2.21:

> In the [description] of the Rājasūya it is said that [the king] gambles with dice, has the legend of Śunaḥśepa recited, and is anointed with water. In this matter arises the question: are the gambling et cetera to be performed at the end, or before the unction? […] They should be performed before the unction, whose place is fixed [in the ritual]. The place of the unction is fixed: [the king] is anointed when the Māhendra hymn is recited. To honour this explicit [directive], [gambling et cetera] should be performed before the unction. (Jaimini 1932, 5.2.21, p. 1318)[24]

Jaimini and Śabara are refuting the position of Bādarāyaṇa, who believed that gambling should

take place after the unction. The identity of Bādarāyaṇa is not clear. Is he the same person who is

believed to have authored the *Brahmasūtra* text? If so, one should take into consideration the

philosophical differences between the *Mīmāṃsāsūtra* and the *Brahmasūtra*. The former is

perhaps the most important explanatory text on Vedic rituals and privileges rituals (*karma*) over

knowledge (*jñāna*) whereas the latter privileges knowledge over rituals.[25] In this case, the former

holds greater authority in matters of ritual.[26] Jaimini is said to have composed his text in the 3rd

or 2nd century BCE, a century before the earliest dates assigned to Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*, and

Śabara comes immediately after the closing period of the epic's growth (the 4th century). The

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[24] *rājasūye śrūyate, akṣair dīvyati, śaunaḥśepam ākhyāpayati, abhiṣicyate iti. tatra sandehaḥ. kiṃ videvanādīnām ante prayogaḥ, uta abhiṣekāt pūrvam iti* […] *kṛtadeśāt abhiṣekāt pūrvaṃ tu prayogaḥ. kṛtadeśo hy abhiṣekaḥ. māhendrasya stotraṃ pratyabhiṣicyate iti. pratyakṣānugrahāyābhiṣekāt pūrvaṃ prayoktavyam*.

[25] This characterization of the *Brahmasūtra* is based on Śaṅkara's doctrine, but Bhāskara (sometime after Śaṅkara) argued that the *Brahmasūtra* propagates both rituals and knowledge as a means of salvation (*atra hi jñānakarmasamuccayān mokṣaprāptiḥ sūtrakārasyābhipretā* 1.1). Even so, the distinction between the *Mīmāṃsāsūtra* and *Brahmasūtra* as ritualistic and knowledge-oriented remains.

[26] The hypothesis that Vyāsa's description of the gambling episode might be based on Bādarāyaṇa's interpretation does not conclusively negate the arguments I have presented herein. This too remains a pure speculation because Vyāsa's text never, even in passing, signals a link between the gambling match and the Rājasūya ritual.

idea of Yudhiṣṭhira's being compelled to accept the invitation because of ritualistic demands is not, in my view, well-grounded and therefore not convincing.

4.1.3 Was Yudhiṣṭhira addicted to gambling?

So, why does Yudhiṣṭhira play the game if he was not compelled by ritual injunctions, and if his rationale is nothing but "excuses" for his unknown "real motivations"? Besides van Buitenen's theory of the ritualistic demands to perform gambling, scholars have argued that Yudhiṣṭhira was helplessly addicted to gambling. Buddhadeb Basu, a scholar of the epic from Bengal, does not comment directly about the validity or invalidity of Yudhiṣṭhira's own justifications. He does, however, seem to think of them as invalid. He holds Yudhiṣṭhira's "own flaws and actions" accountable for the Pāṇḍavas' loss of kingdom and exile. According to Basu, Duryodhana's jealousy and Śakuni's vileness cannot vindicate him, for he participates in gambling on his own accord, not once, but twice. Basu considers these flaws and actions as the source of Yudhiṣṭhira's guilt which he later expresses on many occasions. The flaw of Yudhiṣṭhira lies in his addiction to gambling (2005, 36–37). Julius Lipner seems inconclusive in his evaluation of Yudhiṣṭhira's decision to play. He says that Yudhiṣṭhira is compelled to gamble "by his addiction to gambling, by his sense of honour, by the rules of the *rājasūya* sacrifice" (Lipner 2010, 234), but elsewhere he calls them "excuses" and "no more than a psychological ploy to indulge his addiction to gambling" (ibid. 233), a "fatal flaw in his character" (ibid. 158). He maintains that "the text has been careful to tell us: Yudhiṣṭhira loves to gamble. This *adharmic* addiction is a big chink in his *dharmic* armour" (ibid. 233). It is odd that Śakuni's claim about Yudhiṣṭhira's love for gambling should be interpreted as a "careful" characterization of Yudhiṣṭhira by the text.

B. K. Matilal rejects the suggestion that Yudhiṣṭhira is compelled to play the gambling match because of the ritualistic demands. He does not see any "moral (or dharma-centred) obligation on the part of Yudhiṣṭhira in this case" (Matilal 2016, 90) and rightly ignores the ritualistic explanation because while it may explain Yudhiṣṭhira's involvement in the first game, and to an extent, in the second game,[27] it fails to explain why Yudhiṣṭhira should not be able to refuse future challenges. After suffering a crushing defeat in the first game and inflicting unimaginable humiliation on himself, his brothers, and Draupadī, he agrees to the second game and loses the kingdom for the next thirteen years. And yet he continues to live in fear of receiving another challenge from Śakuni, who might wish to seize their weapons in a game (3.6.8, 3.78.14), because, as he confesses, he is unable to decline a challenge. If it was the ritualistic ordinance that obliged him to accept the first two challenges, why should he feel forced to accept future challenges on the same grounds? It is notable that Yudhiṣṭhira is by now way beyond the mandates of the ritual, and yet he adheres to his original simple reaction to a challenge: "If challenged, I cannot retreat." The text repeatedly calls attention to this justification.

Matilal, however, interprets Yudhiṣṭhira's insistence on accepting the challenge not as a sign of his commitment to his promise, but as a symptom of his irrepressible addiction to gambling. According to Matilal, Yudhiṣṭhira simply lacks the ability to "check his temptation," that is, the temptation to gamble. Like Lipner, he stigmatizes Yudhiṣṭhira's reasoning to accept the challenges as mere excuses of the weak: "Of course, he gave a reason in favour of this: as a prince, he must accept the so-called challenge. But a man under temptation can always argue

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[27] Although Brockington sees the solution for the second game in "the interruption of the match after the contested staking of Draupadī can only be that and the repeat match (the *anudyūta*) is inevitable" (1998, 139), but it still does not explain why Yudhiṣṭhira admits his inability to reject the future challenges. See also Brockington 187–88.

himself into finding reasons that support his action" (Matilal 2016, 90). Again, like Lipner, Matilal accepts Śakuni's pronouncement about Yudhiṣṭhira's love for gambling as true: "his addiction to gambling was almost proverbial—a fatal flaw in his character" (ibid.). It is, he concludes, a clear case of "moral conflict," "struggle against temptation," and "weakness of the will" (ibid.)." According to this view, the fact that Yudhiṣṭhira knows too well the unpropitious consequences of gaming, and yet he indulges in it, indicates his self-defeating addiction to gambling.

Bachchan Singh, a Hindi author, also contends that "gambling was an addiction of Yudhiṣṭhira." Singh supports the idea of Yudhiṣṭhira's addiction with another incident in his life. When Yudhiṣṭhira takes on the identity of Kaṅka in Virāṭanagara, he chooses gambling as his profession and the king insults him many times, "even then he did not quit gambling" (2011, 65). He accepts that Yudhiṣṭhira was plainly addicted to gambling.

This charge of a "fatal flaw" in Yudhiṣṭhira's character is, as far as the text is concerned, unwarranted. The only textual reference to it is Śakuni's revelation to Duryodhana, that Yudhiṣṭhira loves gambling but does not know how to play it (2.44.18, 2.45.38). But this statement seems to be concerned more with Śakuni's attempt to convince Duryodhana that Śakuni will unequivocally score a decisive victory over Yudhiṣṭhira in a dice game. The term that Śakuni uses to describe Yudhiṣṭhira's relationship with gambling is *dyūtapriya*, one who likes gambling. But liking can hardly be regarded as the same as addiction. Śakuni's allusion to Yudhiṣṭhira's fondness for gambling seems to highlight the irony of the situation: Yudhiṣṭhira likes gambling but he does not know how to play it (2.44.18). Śakuni cites in the next part of the same stanza what in his opinion seems to be the actual reason for Yudhiṣṭhira's inability to keep away from gambling: "And if challenged, the king [Yudhiṣṭhira] will not be able to retreat"

(2.44.18); he repeats the same reason again: "If challenged, he will surely come; so, challenge him, 'let us gamble'" (2.45.38). This is completely in line with Yudhiṣṭhira's repeatedly cited reason to engage in the game (2.53.13; 2.67.4, 17; 3.6.9). It seems extravagant to judge Vyāsa's presentation of Yudhiṣṭhira's character based on Śakuni's rhetorical characterization during his appeal to Duryodhana while ignoring Śakuni's conviction about Yudhiṣṭhira's inability to shirk the challenge. It also shrugs off many other explicit statements about Yudhiṣṭhira's motivations

One last point in connection with Yudhiṣṭhira's addiction to gambling also deserves some attention. Black is aware that prior to the gambling match, there is literally nothing in the text about Yudhiṣṭhira's interest in gambling, but he adds that "on several occasions after the game, characters strongly associate him with gambling" (2021, 113). The two examples given are the remarks made by Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa. Arjuna hurls insults at Yudhiṣṭhira: he had an unhealthy passion for gambling because of which they lost everything (8.49.85-87). Is this statement intended to describe Yudhiṣṭhira's association with gambling? Or is it uttered to achieve some other specific goal? Let us look at the context. When Yudhiṣṭhira receives a good thrashing in battle, he, wounded and humiliated, questions Arjuna's bravery and anticipates a better outcome if Arjuna would just hand over his bow to Kṛṣṇa. Intent on abiding by his vow to kill any man who would think of him as unworthy of the Gāṇḍīva bow and counsel to give it away, Arjuna pulls out his sword to behead Yudhiṣṭhira. Kṛṣṇa intervenes and advises Arjuna to insult and treat Yudhiṣṭhira unjustifiably (8.49.68),[28] for that would equal his death (8.49.70). It is in this context that Arjuna insolently slanders Yudhiṣṭhira's character (*paruṣaṃ prasahya* 8.49.72) not only about gambling but also about their relationship with Draupadī, the stratagem deployed in

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[28] *evam ācara kaunteya dharmarāje yudhiṣṭhire, adharmayuktaṃ saṃyogaṃ kuruṣvaivaṃ kurūdvaha.*

killing Bhīṣma, and how Yudhiṣṭhira avoids battles. But immediately after casting aspersions on

Yudhiṣṭhira, Arjuna pulls out his sword to kill himself for committing an offense: "I will cut

down my own body, with which I insolently committed an offense" (8.49.90) and prays for

Yudhiṣṭhira's forgiveness, because only in time will Yudhiṣṭhira realize the truth (8.49.98). The

context indicates that his remarks to Yudhiṣṭhira are not necessarily genuine, for they are uttered

with the specific purpose of insulting Yudhiṣṭhira. Had these been his genuine feelings, he would

not feel suicidally guilty after uttering them. Such an interpretation is corroborated by his

defense of Yudhiṣṭhira's gambling after Draupadī's bet. Bhīma could not watch Draupadī being

humiliated, and he condemns Yudhiṣṭhira in the strongest terms. One would expect Arjuna to

condemn Yudhiṣṭhira precisely when they lose everything, and Draupadī suffers humiliation. On

the contrary, Arjuna defends Yudhiṣṭhira and consoles Bhīma by saying that in the given

situation, Yudhiṣṭhira's gambling brought great glory to the Pāṇḍavas (2.61.7-9). (I discuss this

in detail in the next chapter.) It seems reasonably accurate that Arjuna's remarks about gambling

do not reveal his genuine feelings.

The second example comes from Kṛṣṇa. When Duryodhana's entire army barring a few

allies is eliminated, Duryodhana flees and hides in a reservoir of water. The Pāṇḍavas and Kṛṣṇa

track him down, scold him for this cowardly retreat, and challenge him to fight. Duryodhana

accepts the challenge but demands that only one of the Pāṇḍavas fight a duel with him, for it

would be against the law if they all joined forces against him (9.31.11, 49). Yudhiṣṭhira

reprimands him for not thinking of the same principle when many great Kaurava warriors jointly

attacked and killed Arjuna's son Abhimanyu (9.31.51). Still, he promises to surrender the

kingdom to Duryodhana if he defeats any Pāṇḍava in the duel. Yudhiṣṭhira's senseless

magnanimity angers Kṛṣṇa—after slaughtering the entire army of Duryodhana, how dare

Yudhiṣṭhira offer the kingdom to Duryodhana if he defeated any one of the Pāṇḍavas! This was a gamble, but all wars are gambles (*yuddhadyūta*). Even more striking is Kṛṣṇa's defense of Yudhiṣṭhira when he directs Arjuna to insult him: "The king was tired and extremely wounded in battle by Karṇa with scores of sharp arrows. That is why he spoke harsh [words] to you; in the battle against Karṇa today, it was [no less than a game of] gamble" (8.49.64).[29] Considering that Kṛṣṇa compares Yudhiṣṭhira's battle against Karṇa with gambling, it is not surprising that Bhīma's duel against Duryodhana reminds him of gambling, too. Although Kṛṣṇa feels relieved that Duryodhana picked Bhīma as the rival, he remains apprehensive about the outcome of the duel because Duryodhana is a better mace-wielder. It is this very situation that reminds Kṛṣṇa of the gambling match, where Śakuni was a better gambler than Yudhiṣṭhira. He articulates his concern: "O king, once again has begun a disproportionate gamble as it [happened] before between you and Śakuni. Bhīma is strong and competent, but king Duryodhana is [better] trained. Of the strong and the trained, O king, the trained excels" (9.32.7-8).[30] Note that Kṛṣṇa is not accusing Yudhiṣṭhira of creating a gamble-like situation, he is simply comparing the disproportionate abilities of Bhīma and Duryodhana with those of Yudhiṣṭhira and Śakuni in gambling. His frustration with Yudhiṣṭhira is that he gave Duryodhana a free choice and promised to hand over the kingdom to him, should he win the duel. Neither is Kṛṣṇa frustrated about the fact that Yudhiṣṭhira promised a duel with a single Pāṇḍava. In a duel, only one warrior could fight against one. Let us compare the situation with Kṛṣṇa's own actions. Before the Rājasūya, Kṛṣṇa warns Yudhiṣṭhira that the ritual is not possible without defeating Jarāsaṃdha.

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[29] *rājā śrānto jagato vikṣataś ca karṇena saṃkhye niśitair bāṇasaṃghaiḥ, tasmāt pārtha tvāṃ paruṣāṇy avocat karṇe dyūtaṃ hy adya raṇe nibaddham.*

[30] *tad idaṃ dyūtam ārabdhaṃ punar eva yathā purā, viṣamaṃ śakuneś caiva tava caiva viśāṃ pate. balī bhīmaḥ samarthaś ca kṛtī rājā suyodhanaḥ, balavān vā kṛtī veti kṛtī rājan viśiṣyate.*

Sailing into the Storm

Instead of attacking Jarāsaṃdha with an army, Kṛṣṇa chooses the path of duel. Jarāsaṃdha does not voice any concerns about the rule of war, that only one should fight against one; instead, he is willing to fight Kṛṣṇa, Bhīma, and Arjuna one by one, or even together (2.20.28). Kṛṣṇa responds: "With whom of us three is your mind thrilled to fight, O king? Who of us should get ready for battle?" (2.21.2) Thus, there seems to be nothing odd or disagreeable from Kṛṣṇa's viewpoint in Yudhiṣṭhira's decision to accept Duryodhana's plea that only one Pāṇḍava should fight against him. Moreover, Kṛṣṇa's allusion to the gambling match occurs when Duryodhana has already picked Bhīma. It does not seem plausible that in this case Kṛṣṇa is associating Yudhiṣṭhira with gambling, as Duryodhana's considerably greater skills in mace-wielding reminds him of Śakuni's greater skills in gambling. He is certain about Duryodhana's victory unless Bhīma resorts to cheating (9.32.14). This may also be a hint to Yudhiṣṭhira. Perhaps Kṛṣṇa anticipates Yudhiṣṭhira's objections to Bhīma's cheating, and an analogy with the gambling match offers an explanation: despite his unmatched skills and Yudhiṣṭhira's lack of experience in gambling, if Śakuni could resort to cheating, so can Bhīma. The statements by Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa are context-specific and serve other purposes. They can hardly be considered as simple allusions to Yudhiṣṭhira's strong association with gambling.

What is even more important in this matter is that Yudhiṣṭhira in fact tries his best to convince Śakuni to retract the challenge, for which the latter repudiates him contemptuously: "Retreat from gambling, if you are scared" (2.53.1–14). The fact that Yudhiṣṭhira sincerely urges Śakuni against gambling and proposes a battle instead indicates that his decision to accept Śakuni's challenge was not fostered by his passion for gambling. Vyāsa describes the irresistible force of addiction to or a strong urge for something: "A readily available desire cannot be turned away by even one who has become free of body [i.e., bodily needs and desires], let alone by one

who is attached to desires" (5.39.33 *234).[31] Yudhiṣṭhira's genuine efforts to dissuade Śakuni

from gambling demonstrate beyond doubt that his participation was not due to his addition to

gambling.

4.1.4 The legitimacy of Yudhiṣṭhira's rationale

At first view, the questions raised about Yudhiṣṭhira's indulgence in gambling strike one

as valid: his actions seem to be in sharp contrast to his otherwise Dharma-king image. But the

proposed resolutions are not well-founded. They suffer from one serious problem of

interpretation: they brush off the reasons cited by Yudhiṣṭhira himself in the epic as invalid and

resort to conjectural reasonings that cannot be substantiated by Vyāsa's narrative. This, in my

view, is a clear case of violation of one of the fundamental principles of interpretive theories,

which Śaṅkara, the most prominent Advaita philosopher, succinctly notes as *śrutahāni* and

aśrutakalpanā: turning a deaf ear to what is said and imagining what is not said. Śaṅkara spells

out the problem with this approach in his commentary on the *Brahmasūtra*:

> If one is allowed to conjecture a fictitious meaning, any and every meaning may be
> proven to be true; because there is no rule which could limit that a fictitious meaning,
> whether coherent or incoherent, may be conjectured to only a certain extent, and not
> beyond that. In addition, imagination depends on the imaginer and can be without
> limits.[32]

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[31] *upasthitasya kāmasya prativādo na vidyate, api nirmuktadehasya kāmaraktasya kiṃ punaḥ.*

[32] This is my paraphrase of a section from Śaṅkara's commentary on 2.2.17: *avidyamānārthakalpanāyāṃ sarvārthasiddhiprasaṅgāt. iyān evāvidyamāno viruddho 'viruddho vārthaḥ kalpanīyo nāto 'dhika iti niyamahetvabhāvāt, kalpanāyāś ca svāyattatvāt prabhūtatvasaṃbhavāc ca. naca [sic] vaiśeṣikaiḥ kalpitebhyaḥ ṣaḍbhyaḥ padārthebhyo 'nye 'dhikāḥ śataṃ sahasraṃ vārthā na kalpayitavyā iti nivārako hetur asti. tasmād yasmai yasmai yad yad rocate tat tat siddhyet. kaścit kṛpāluḥ prāṇināṃ duḥkhabahulaḥ saṃsāra eva mā bhūd iti kalpayet, anyo vā vyasanī muktānām api punar utpattiṃ kalpayet. kas tayor nivārakaḥ syāt?*

What Śaṅkara means is that one's "imagination" or wishful thinking cannot be considered valid unless it can be supported by the text. He extends the idea of imaginary thinking to logic, which also should be based on sound evidence; or else, it runs a risk of running amuck. He explains, "For this reason, too, one should not contradict the matters that can be learned from texts on the basis of logic alone, because logics that have no basis in texts and which have been formed solely on the basis of one's conjecture cannot be well-grounded, for conjecture can be wild" (*Brahmasūtra* 2.1.11).[33] Thus, one may reasonably depend on inferential interpretations when the text expresses no views about a matter. Inferences and logic, if not substantiated by relevant material, cannot be sufficient to prove or disprove something. My contribution to a scholarly appreciation of Yudhiṣṭhira's rationale is distinctive in the sense that nearly all contemporary interpretations of the same reflect reviewers' own moralistic approaches, and they disregard the text. I demonstrate below that Yudhiṣṭhira's consistently stated justifications represent his genuine position, if we read them within the larger context of the epic itself.

As I have briefly demonstrated, the theories proposed to explain the "real" cause or motivations behind Yudhiṣṭhira's participation in the gambling match cannot be substantiated by the epic text. Van Buitenen's theory has no direct support from the epic text, and the idea of Yudhiṣṭhira's addiction to gambling is based only on a partial and relatively less significant part of Śakuni's statement. What has been ignored is the fact that the epic consistently holds fast to the reasons cited by Yudhiṣṭhira without casting any doubt about them, an indication that the society of Vyāsa's epic or at least the redactors of the text considered them manifestly valid.

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[33] *itaś ca nāgamagamye 'rthe kevalena tarkeṇa pratyavasthātavyam, yasmān nirāgamāḥ puruṣotprekṣāmātranibandhanās tarkā apratiṣṭhitā bhavanti, utprekṣāyā niraṅkuśatvāt.* Disapproval of baseless unconstrained logic and inference seems to have been a general practice. Before Śaṅkara, Bhartṛhari, a Sanskrit grammarian-philosopher of the 5th century, had articulated his thoughts on the matter in the same manner (Bhartṛhari 1963, 27–43).

Therefore, they cannot just be wished away by logic alone, no matter how preposterous they may appear to us. We must therefore give due consideration to the reasons cited by Yudhiṣṭhira. I begin with Mishra's description of Vyāsa's Yudhiṣṭhira:

> He [Yudhiṣṭhira] has no conceit about affluence, and after losing his affluence in gamble, he has established himself even more firmly in his truthful nature. (1985, 54)[34]

Mishra's evaluation of Yudhiṣṭhira's nature hinges on Yudhiṣṭhira's ability to maintain composure even in harsh situations, which others lack. However, what I wish to emphasize here is more explicitly stated by Daniel Ingalls, a former Wales Professor of Sanskrit at Harvard University. He makes serious allowances for the textual description of Yudhiṣṭhira's consent to play the game. He writes:

> Yudhiṣṭhira is the upholder of *dharma*, a word that includes law, religion, and the norms of right conduct. He is what a Westerner would call a stoic, and the stoical ideal was held in high esteem by the warring nobility in ancient India. He never initiates action, but his stubbornness in holding to the right path makes any departure from that path unsuccessful as long as he lives. Yudhiṣṭhira did not seek to gamble, but he had made an eternal vow never to refuse if challenged. He had the full charisma of a king. There was no doubt in his mind that his position would be validated by the will of fortune as well as by human will, for his acts were in accordance with the cosmic pattern for royal action. He was so sure of his position that he was willing to be tested. Indeed it was only right that he should accept the test if any one doubted his claim. […] The truth, from the point of view of the author of the Sabhāparvan, is that Yudhiṣṭhira was strong at the dice game. He was upholding the *dharma* under circumstances that would have broken a lesser man. (Ingalls 1995, 4).

What Ingalls is referring to is Yudhiṣṭhira's ability to stick to his vow, even if that means his utter ruin. Added to the conventional pressure to accept the challenge is also Yudhiṣṭhira's personal vow to never turn down a challenge. Adherence to one's vow even in the face of utter

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[34] *unameṃ aiśvarya kā mada nahīṃ hai, aura jue meṃ aiśvarya gaṃvā kara vaha apane satyaniṣṭha svabhāva meṃ aura acchī taraha adhīṣṭhita* [*sic*] *ho gaye haiṃ.*

ruination and death was a prominent characteristic of members of the warrior community. One

might argue that Yudhiṣṭhira never seems to have cared for conventions: he has been accused of

not complying with the political exploitations that the success-obsessed warrior society deemed

perfectly moral and even desirable. I would like to draw attention to Yudhiṣṭhira's definition of

and adherence to *dharma*. He does not think that *dharma* should be followed for practical

advantages; his categorical dedication to truth and honesty is rather unconditional.[35] If he turns

down a challenge, his very vow, the word of honour, would amount to be a lie. His personal

dedication to truth is absolute. This is seen again and again in Yudhiṣṭhira's life. One prime

example of his stubborn adherence to truth is evident when Draupadī, his brothers, and relatives,

including Kṛṣṇa, argue that Yudhiṣṭhira is within his rights to attack the Kauravas and retrieve

his misappropriated kingdom, he flatly refuses. He objects to Draupadī's understanding of

dharma:

> I do not spend my life seeking the rewards of *dharma*, O princess; I give because I
> should, I sacrifice because I should. Whether it yields reward or not, I do, Draupadī,
> according to my ability, whatever a man living in the household should do. I carry out
> *dharma* not because of its rewards, beautiful woman; without transgressing the
> scriptures/tradition and having due consideration for the conduct of the good, my mind is
> naturally fixed on *dharma* alone. (3.32.2–5)[36]

According to this attitude of Yudhiṣṭhira, all actions that compromise principles of *dharma* are

simply reactions to situations and indicate the doer's lack of faith in *dharma*. Yudhiṣṭhira here

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[35] Bhīma repudiates Yudhiṣṭhira for his "impractical" approach to *dharma* and argues that one should abide by *dharma* only if it does not cause suffering for oneself and one's well-wishers (3.34.21–24).

[36] *nāhaṃ dharmaphalānveṣī rājaputri carāmy uta, dadāmi deyam ity eva yaje yaṣṭavyam ity uta. astu vātra phalaṃ mā vā kartavyaṃ puruṣeṇa yat, gṛhān āvasatā kṛṣṇe yathāśakti karomi tat. dharmaṃ carāmi suśroṇi na dharmaphalakāraṇāt, āgamān anatikramya satāṃ vṛttam avekṣya ca, dharma eva manaḥ kṛṣṇe svabhāvāc caiva me dhṛtam.* It is because of this perfectly dignified, good-willed dedication to the supreme principle of *dharma* that Yudhiṣṭhira has on many occasions been pejoratively called a Brāhmaṇa. At the same time, this is the highest and purest mindset, which Kṛṣṇa brings to the fore in the Bhagavadgītā (17.11, 17, 20).

highlights his determination not to react to situations; rather, he insists on performing *dharma* as it ought to be. Because he had accepted the results of the gambling match, he does not reinterpret the settlement even if the Kauravas cheated in the game. According to him, it would amount to a lie, to which he is not willing to expose himself:

> Who can flout the treaty that one has sworn in the presence of great men for the sake of the kingdom! I believe that for a noble man it is graver than death that he should secure the kingdom by overstepping *dharma* (3.35.14). Know this to be my true vow that I choose *dharma* over life and eternity (divinity); kingdom, offspring, glory, and wealth, all these do not amount to a fraction of truth. (3.35.21)[37]

Even Kṛṣṇa's efforts to move him from his position are futile. When Kṛṣṇa promises to kill all those who would come in his way to recover Indraprastha from Duryodhana, Yudhiṣṭhira says:

> Kṛṣṇa, I accept your claim that you will destroy my enemies along with their supporters to be true, great-armed one. But do so after the thirteenth year and make me true, Keśava, because I have promised amongst the kings that I would stay in the forest. (3.48.28–29)[38]

It is on account of this unwavering devotion to *dharma* that Yudhiṣṭhira earned the epithet of Dharmarāja, the Dharma-king. Kṛṣṇa commends his loyalty to many virtues, including *dharma*, truth, and honesty, and spells out the origins of the epithet Dharmarāja:

> You are by nature the Dharma-king because you do not delight in the habits of the unsophisticated, neither do you pursue, O king, anything on account of desires; furthermore, you do not abandon dharma out of greed for wealth [or other self-interests]. (3.180.18)[39]

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[37] *taṃ saṃdhim āsthāya satāṃ sakāśe ko nāma jahyād iha rājyahetoḥ, āryasya manye maraṇād garīyo yad dharmam utkramya mahīṃ praśiṣyāt. mama pratijñāṃ ca nibodha satyāṃ vṛṇe dharmam amṛtāj jīvitāc ca, rājyaṃ ca putrāś ca yaśo dhanaṃ ca sarvaṃ na satyasya kalām upaiti.*

[38] *pratigṛhṇāmi te vācaṃ satyām etāṃ janārdana, amitrān me mahābāho sānubandhān haniṣyasi. varṣāt trayodaśād ūrdhvaṃ satyaṃ māṃ kuru keśava, pratijñāto vane vāso rājamadhye mayā hy ayam.*

[39] *na grāmyadharmeṣu ratis tavāsti kāmān na kiṃ cit kuruṣe narendra, na cārthalobhāt prajahāsi dharmaṃ tasmāt svabhāvād asi dharmarājaḥ.* See also Bailey 2016, 3–27.

This is indeed what makes Yudhiṣṭhira a heroic figure: whereas others are willing to compromise—sooner or later, willingly or reluctantly—*dharma* and honesty to secure their self-interest, Yudhiṣṭhira prefers acting in accordance with *dharma*, even if it means his ruination.[40] "He prefers mercy (*ānṛśaṃsya*) over *dharma*, and *dharma* over riches; he does not approve of comfort and happiness that are procured with immoral means," says Saṃjaya to Dhṛtarāṣṭra (5.32.11).[41] Despite his well-wishers' constant pressure to retaliate against Duryodhana and his coterie, Yudhiṣṭhira does not move from his position: he would not lay claim to his lost kingdom until he has fulfilled the conditions of the game. It is a matter of truth and honesty for him, the values he resolutely observed since childhood to such an extreme that when Droṇa faces the question of life and death, he would not trust anyone but Yudhiṣṭhira (7.164.95–96). Ingalls acknowledgement of Yudhiṣṭhira as the hero of Vyāsa is fitting.[42]

No one in the epic displays such an ungrudging, self-sacrificing commitment to *dharma*, and because Vyāsa's aim in composing the epic is to establish the paramount importance of *dharma*, no one else seems a suitable option. In conclusion to his epic, Vyāsa bemoans: "With my arms raised high, I have been yelling but no one has been listening to me: *artha* and *kāma* emanate from *dharma*; why do [people] not observe it?" (18.5.49). His directive to observe

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[40] Black maintains that because dicing violates *dharma*, "Yudhiṣṭhira might well have been within the terms and conditions of his vow had he refused this challenge" (2021, 109). It could be right according to others, but Yudhiṣṭhira's actions are not reactions to others' actions.

[41] *paraṃ dharmāt pāṇḍavasyānṛśaṃsyaṃ dharmaḥ paro vittacayān mato 'sya, sukhapriye dharmahīne na pārtho 'nurudhyate bhārata tasya viddhi*.

[42] Basu also establishes Yudhiṣṭhira as the hero of Vyāsa's epic, but Sudipta Kaviraj repudiates such a claim: "Yudhiṣṭhira's attraction is so faint that very few poets from Kālidāsa to Tagore have composed a poem or play centered around him. We can clearly notice that he is not endowed with any of the qualities of an ancient epic hero and his 'progress' through the narrative is very slow. He is the most negligible warrior among the Kuru clan and he is also an unfit descendant of great lovers such as Śakuntalā's husband, Duḥṣanta, and Bhīṣma's father, Śantanu" (2021, 318). This reflects Kaviraj's own, and not Vyāsa's, perception of what a hero should look like. See the following selection.

dharma evokes the image of Yudhiṣṭhira: "One should never deviate from *dharma* on account of desire, fear, and greed, also even for the sake of one's life, [because] whereas *dharma* is permanent, pleasures and miseries are temporary; the soul is permanent, but the cause of it [its bodily manifestation] is temporary" (18.5.50, compare with 3.180.18). That Yudhiṣṭhira is the hero is also evident from the fact that he is juxtaposed against Duryodhana, the anti-hero (1.1.65–66, 5.29.45–46).

Even though commitment to truth is a universally recognized virtue, an insistence on keeping one's word was a key feature of the Kṣatriya identity. Why was it so? A king's primary duty was to maintain order in the society, which demanded that the members of the society adhere to mutual agreements. Bhīṣma relates the origins of the kingly institution. In early days, there existed neither government nor king, neither the law nor police. Everyone acted in accordance with *dharma*. But gradually greed overpowered them, which resulted in total chaos as they lost the ability to discern the difference between right and wrong. Trapped in their own mess, they appealed to Brahmā, the creator of the world, to resolve their problem. He laid the foundations of government and appointed a king. When the king asked about his duties, the gods and sages instructed him to enforce the law impartially and without being concerned about his personal likes and dislikes.

> And undertake this oath: "I will persistently uphold the terrestrial *brahma* [*dharma*?] in thought, actions, and speech.[43] And, whatever policy for enforcing justice in accordance with the law is declared herein [in Brahmā's system of laws], I will adhere to it—I will never yield to my own will." And also promise this, lord: "I will not punish the

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[43] "In thought, deed, and word rise up repeatedly to the promise" (Fitzgerald 2004, 12.59.112).

Brāhmaṇas, and I will safeguard the world from total intermingling [of people of different *varṇa*s]. (12.59.112–14.)[44]

A king's primary obligation is to maintain order in the society, which can be best ensured only if the king and his administration exemplify the necessary virtues. It is said that "Nothing but truth alone is the basis of a king's success. A king who observes truth delights here and after his death. Truth alone is the greatest wealth of even sages, and there is no greater basis of [his subjects'] confidence in their king than truth" (12.56.17–18).[45] It is also stated that "the king who is compassionate toward his subjects is father of the country. If he goes wrong, other people also go astray" (12.137.100).[46] A stanza from the *Cāṇakyanīti* (The Policies of Cāṇakya) illustrates this idea more pointedly: "Subjects follow the king: if the king is virtuous, [his subjects too] are virtuous; if [he] is wicked, [his subjects too] are wicked; if [he] is equitable, [his subjects too] are equitable; as is the king, so are his subjects" (Sternbach, 242).[47]

It is no surprise then that Rāma, even though fully aware of Sītā's sexual purity when in Rāvaṇa's custody, decides to outwardly cast doubts about her character. He does not want his subjects to form an impression of him as a lustful man who welcomes his wife, who had spent several months in another man's custody, without first confirming her purity (Vālmīki 6.118.12–21). Even Sītā's entering the fire and the testimony of many gods about her purity was not good enough for people. They denounce Rāma's acceptance of Sītā: "We will also have to condone

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[44] *pratijñāṃ cādhirohasva manasā karmaṇā girā, pālayiṣyāmy ahaṃ bhaumaṃ brahma ity eva cāsakṛt. yaś cātra dharmanīty ukto daṇḍanītivyapāśrayaḥ, tam aśaṅkaḥ kariṣyāmi svavaśo na kadā cana. adaṇḍyā me dvijāś ceti pratijānīṣva cābhibho, lokaṃ ca saṃkarāt kṛtsnāt trātāsmīti paraṃtapa.*

[45] *na hi satyād ṛte kiṃ cid rājñāṃ vai siddhikāraṇam, satye hi rājā nirataḥ pretya ceha ca nandati. ṛṣīṇām api rājendra satyam eva paraṃ dhanam, tathā rājñaḥ paraṃ satyān nānyad viśvāsakāraṇam.*

[46] *pitā hi rājā rāṣṭrasya prajānāṃ yo 'nukampakaḥ, tasmin mithyāpraṇīte hi tiryag gacchati mānavaḥ.*

[47] *rājñi dharmiṇi dharmiṣṭhāḥ pāpe pāpāḥ same samāḥ, rājānam anuvartante yathā rājā tathā prajāḥ.*

[such actions] regarding our wives, because the subjects follow whatever their king does" (Vālmīki 7.43.19).[48] Therefore, the notion of keeping one's word especially while enduring harsh adversities was a hallmark of the Kṣatriya (the kings' and administrators') identity. What might seem to common people an acceptable pragmatic compromise of truth and honesty can imperil the king's and his administration's authority to expect the same from the citizens. We witness this on many occasions in Yudhiṣṭhira's life. It was his unwavering commitment to *dharma* and truth that made him a favorite even of many dignitaries from the rival camp. For their dissimilar attitude to truth and *dharma*, Yudhiṣṭhira is well-loved and Duryodhana abhorred.

Two examples from Vyāsa's text will suffice. Seeing the Pāṇḍavas more powerful, Duryodhana grows insecure and repeatedly tries to kill them by various means. The citizens sense the tension, and recognizing the Pāṇḍavas endowed with virtues, they gather in courtyards and assemblies. Their decision is: Let us enthrone Yudhiṣṭhira, who is a truthful and compassionate man, and displays maturity beyond his years. Duryodhana hears this talk and urges Dhṛtarāṣṭra to do something about it. Dhṛtarāṣṭra, too, is afraid that the citizens of Hastināpura might assassinate him and his family for Yudhiṣṭhira's sake (1.129). The second example comes immediately after the second dicing match. When the defeated Pāṇḍavas depart for the forest, the virtuous people (*dharmācāraparāyaṇāḥ*) of Hastināpura openly denounce Bhīṣma, Vidura, Droṇa, and Kṛpa for not preventing the injustice meted out to the Pāṇḍavas. They conclude that Duryodhana despises his betters, does not comport himself well, is greedy, arrogant, mean, and cruel by nature. Under his kingship, nothing will survive, including us, our families, this dynasty, and this land. So, they decide to follow the Pāṇḍavas, whom they consider

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[48] *asmākam api dāreṣu sahanīyaṃ bhaviṣyati, yathā hi kurute rājā prajās* [sic] *tam anuvartate.*

as compassionate, big-hearted, self-restrained, hesitant to act wrongly, devoted to the law and customs, and greatly admired (3.1.11–16).

These examples demonstrate how the king's and his administration's good reputation formed the basis of a stable kingdom. We repeatedly see many Kṣatriyas and those who took on Kṣatriya responsibilities committed to keeping their word, even if it imperiled their welfare and life. Fully aware of Indra's scheme to divest him of his life-saving armor, Karṇa gives it to him because he had taken a vow to never turn down a demand of a Brāhmaṇa. Thus, Yudhiṣṭhira's commitment to adhere to his vow is in conformity with the norms of his time.

The same is true about Yudhiṣṭhira's decision to abide by Dhṛtarāṣṭra's command. It was also a matter of staying true to his word of honour. When Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Śakuni, and Duryodhana send the Pāṇḍavas to Vāraṇāvata, another important town of the Kuru kingdom, under the pretext to allow them a relaxing vacation, the citizens are highly suspicious of the trio's intentions. They love Yudhiṣṭhira as their future king and decide to follow the Pāṇḍavas to Vāraṇāvata. But Yudhiṣṭhira requests them to return to Hastināpura, which also reveals the reason for the Pāṇḍavas' resolve to abide by Dhṛtarāṣṭra's command: "It is our vow that we must without doubt do whatever the king, our respectable father (uncle) and best teacher (senior), commands" (1.133.14). Yudhiṣṭhira must stay true to himself.

Another reason Yudhiṣṭhira cites for engaging in gambling is that he could not turn down a challenge. Vikarṇa's claim that the warrior community of the epic suffered from four vices—womanizing, hunting, drinking, and dicing—is indicative of how these four activities were perhaps recognized as a matter of pride by the warrior community, even though they tended to result in violation of *dharma* and disaster (2.61.20–21, 13.141.28–29). It is perhaps the increased

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risk factor that made these activities admirable for them. But war and gambling are two different species: whereas the former is part of a warrior's duty, the latter is not a duty. On the contrary, gambling is consistently denounced as a vice. So, why should Yudhiṣṭhira accept a challenge for a condemned activity? If we look at Vyāsa's epic, the difference between war and gambling is not as pronounced as their interchangeability is. War is also a gambling match (*yuddhadyūta*), in which one's very life becomes the stake (*prāṇadyūta*). It is no surprise then that shirking a challenge for war or gambling was no less than a taboo. A variant reading noted in the Critical Edition in fact introduces this notion. Śakuni claims that, if challenged, Yudhiṣṭhira would not retreat from either gambling or war (*dyūtād api raṇād api* 2.45.38, *448).[49] Yudhiṣṭhira also compares gambling and war when he claims that battle is a superior form of gambling (2.53.7), and so does Śakuni (2.51.3). Such a comparison is frequent, but it is most pronounced in Dhṛtarāṣṭra's words. He asks Saṃjaya about the "mindless gamblers" (*kitavā mandāḥ*) who entered the dreadful "battlefield" (*sabhāṃ yudhi*) with their lives at stake (6.15.66–68). Nala, too, challenges Puṣkara to gamble: "If you do not want to gamble, then let there be the gamble of battle" (3.77.8).[50] It is on account of this nature of gambling and battle that a challenge for either could not be ignored. Nala, too, could not avoid playing against his own brother Puṣkara (3.56.8). The Critical Edition registers a variant after 3.56.8, which seems to account for Nala's justification for accepting Puṣkara's challenge: "If challenged, one should neither retreat from gambling nor from [making] stakes" (3.56.8, *235).[51] Like war, gambling ends with either

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[49] This seems to have been a common understanding. In Rājaśakhara's *Bālabhārata* (early 10th century), both Vidura and Yudhiṣṭhira articulate his promise to never retreat from a challenge for gambling and battle (*āhūto na nivarteya dyūtāya ca raṇāya ca*, 2.7, 13). Agastya Paṇḍita of the 13th century also attributes the same to Yudhiṣṭhira in his *Bālabhārata* (7.64).

[50] *na ced vāñchasi tad dyūtaṃ yuddhadyūtaṃ pravartatām.*

[51] *āhūto na nivarteta dyūtād api paṇād api.*

victory or defeat. It can be argued that retreating from an ongoing game of dice, especially if it is marked with combative spirit, would be as dishonourable as fleeing battle.

Let me complete the circle with Vaidya's opinion. He was, as far as the evidence available to me demonstrates, the first scholar who signalled a ritualistic relationship between gambling and Rājasūya ritual (1930, III. 57), "a necessary function in Rājasūya" (1930, IV. 30). Some later scholars unwarrantedly overemphasized this idea, and it became, to a considerable degree, an accepted explanation. But when Vaidya talks about Yudhiṣṭhira's decision to play the dice, he alludes to the Kṣatriyas' serious obsession with gambling. He states that the Kṣatriyas considered it shameful if someone challenged a Kṣatriya for gambling, but he declined it. It is because of this idea that Yudhiṣṭhira had to play the dice. Moreover, Yudhiṣṭhira, "a very wise and righteous king," had taken the vow, "if challenged, I shall not retreat." Nala was ruined because of the same vow.[52] This explanation perfectly aligns with Yudhiṣṭhira's two justifications discussed above.

Yudhiṣṭhira's third reason, that the game was destined to take place, seems to me the conclusion of the two above-mentioned justifications. He sees himself trapped in his unconditional devotion to remain true to himself, just as Dhṛtarāṣṭra is trapped in his unchecked love and inflated political ambitions for Duryodhana. The situation is thus beyond the control of both Yudhiṣṭhira and Dhṛtarāṣṭra: Dhṛtarāṣṭra strives to dissuade Duryodhana from gambling, and Yudhiṣṭhira earnestly urges Śakuni to abandon the idea of dicing; both fail. It is no wonder

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[52] *dyūtāsa ye aseṃ koṇīṃ mhaṭaleṃ asatā, nāhīṃ mhaṇaṇeṃ heṃ kṣatriyāṃsa lāṃchana mānaleṃ jāī. va dharmarājāsārakhe mahābuddhivān va dharmika rāje "āhūto na nivarteyam" aseṃ vrata bāḷagīta. Naḷāceṃhi aseṃca vrata asūna tyācā nāśa dyūtāneṃ jhāla* (1933, 23). See also, *koṇīṃ dyūtāsa āhvāna keleṃ asatāṃ nāhīṃ mhaṇaṇeṃ heṃ kṣatriyāṃsa apamānakāraka āhe aseṃ tyāṃsa vāṭata ase. Yā kalpanemuḷeṃca yudhiṣṭhirāsa dyūta kheḷaṇeṃ jarūra paḍaleṃ* (1918, 264).

that both Yudhiṣṭhira and Dhṛtarāṣṭra bring in the idea of fate. In my view, therefore, the idea of

fate is not a reason for Yudhiṣṭhira to accept the game; it is rather a conclusion of the other two

justifications: he must participate in the game on account of his vows to never turn down a

challenge and to always obey his uncle.[53]

In my view, Ingalls is right in his assessment of Yudhiṣṭhira: he "was upholding the

dharma under circumstances that would have broken a lesser man" (1995, 4). When seen in the

light of his adamant dedication for peace, honesty, and *dharma*, one can recognize the anxiety

that he might have experienced about the game. This is precisely why, when Śakuni challenges

him again, he says: "How indeed could a king like me, acting in accordance with his *dharma*,

retreat when challenged? I will gamble against you, Śakuni!" (2.67.17). Similarly, when he later

suspects that Śakuni might send another challenge to deprive the Pāṇḍavas of their weapons, he

declares: "Bhīma, I am unable to retreat if someone challenges me, 'come'" (3.6.9).

Yudhiṣṭhira's decision to play the game is neither on account of the ritualistic dictates nor

because of his addiction. He is not interested in the game. He decides to play the game to abide

by his commitment to his vows. He disastrously fails in the game but marvellously succeeds in

keeping his word.

4.2 TV Series: Śakuni's greed and Duryodhana's vengeance

As I have shown, in Vyāsa's epic Duryodhana challenges Yudhiṣṭhira to a game of dice

with the aim of seizing the Pāṇḍavas' riches, and Yudhiṣṭhira accepts the invitation for gambling

because he is committed to his vow to never turn down a challenge and to always obey his uncle.

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[53] See Julian Woods' *Destiny and Human Initiative in the Mahābhārata* (2001) and David Shulman's "*Devana* and *Daiva*" (1992) for further implications of fate.

The resulting inescapability from the situation leads him to conclude that the game was fated. In the following pages, I highlight the key differences in the Series' depiction of these characters and events. I draw the conclusion that Draupadī's act of mocking Duryodhana is the sole cause of Duryodhana's decision to challenge Yudhiṣṭhira for a dice match and a factor in the latter's acceptance of it.

As depicted in the Series, once Duryodhana and Śakuni have decided to take over the kingdom of Yudhiṣṭhira and take revenge for the former's humiliation by Draupadī, they browbeat Dhṛtarāṣṭra into inviting Yudhiṣṭhira for a match. The blind king summons his adviser Vidura, who counsels the king without mincing his words. Vidura fully knows that it is Śakuni's nefarious coaching which constantly fans the villainy in Duryodhana's heart. Besides, Vidura realizes that no one can beat the treacherous Śakuni in dicing. He senses an existential threat to the already fractured Kuru dynasty. Therefore, he takes a firm stand against the proposed game:

> I do not think it is proper, Your Majesty! […] Because gambling corrupts the conscience of the loser. In order to recover the lost possessions, he [gambler] continues to stake, bet after bet, and fails to realize when the play should be ended. This happens in the case of the winner too. In his avidity to win he forgets where the play should end. Both violate the bounds of gamble. Besides, the dice-mat should never be allowed to unroll between the brothers. Hence, I do not consider it appropriate. Still, as you command. (45:9–11)[54]

Gamblers are caught in a chase game: those who lose continue the game to recover their losses, and thus sink into deeper trouble; the winning party, too, chases victories to a greater extent.[55]

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[54] *maiṃ to ise ucita nahīṃ samajhatā, mahārāja.* […] *kyoṃki juā hārane vāle kī buddhi ko naṣṭa kara detā hai, mahārāja. vo hārī huī vastuoṃ ko phira se jītane ke lie dāṃva pe dāṃva lagātā jātā hai, aura ye nahīṃ soca pātā ki khela ko kahāṃ samāpta kiyā jānā cāhie. jītane vāle ke sātha bhī yahī hotā hai mahārāja. jīta kī lalaka meṃ vo ye saba bhūla jātā hai ki khela ko kahāṃ samāpta honā cāhie. donoṃ hī dyūta kī maryādā kā ullaṃghana karate haiṃ, mahārāja, ullaṃghana karate haiṃ. vaise to bhāiyoṃ ke bīca meṃ causara ko bichane hī nahīṃ denā cāhie. isalie maiṃ..., maiṃ ise ucita nahīṃ samajhatā, mahārāja, nahīṃ samajhatā. phira jo āpakī ājñā.*

[55] Vyāsa's epic also is familiar with this nature of gambling: Nala's passion for gambling grows more intensely with each bet that he loses against Puṣkara (3.57.13–14).

Vidura's strong advice against gambling is rooted in the fact that Duryodhana never displays any goodwill towards the Pāṇḍavas, and that he has been relentlessly looking for opportunities to dethrone them. But Dhṛtarāṣṭra summons Vidura not for exchanging views on the pros and cons of gambling, rather to convey the challenge to Yudhiṣṭhira. He turns a deaf ear to his wise minister's advice and orders him to leave for Indraprastha. An air of despondency fills Vidura's conscience, and he warns the blind king that his decision is a premonition to the Kuru lineage's imminent destruction. With this warning, Vidura returns to his home and is somewhat relieved to see that Bhīṣma is already there. Both individuals dread that no one can put an end to Śakuni's plot.

Vidura expresses his helplessness to prevent the plot because "I cannot stop a Kṣatriya [Yudhiṣṭhira] from accepting an invitation for gambling." He humbly rejects Bhīṣma's bidding that, as an uncle of the Pāṇḍavas, he should *command* Yudhiṣṭhira to not accept the invitation: "I am going [to Indraprastha] as an emissary of Hastināpura; I cannot flout the decorum of an emissary" (45:11–12). Because he was being dispatched as an emissary of Hastināpura to Indraprastha, now a sovereign nation, encouraging Yudhiṣṭhira to decline the invitation would amount to violation of his loyalty to his king, who enjoined him to bring "good news," that is, Yudhiṣṭhira's acceptance to join the match. Bhīṣma, too, is helpless because he is bound by his own oath of loyalty to the throne of Hastināpura—by now, his presence in Hastināpura is that of an elderly but powerful warrior hero, whose voice holds no sway whatsoever over the decisions of the king.[56] Gāndhārī's earnest exertions too fail because "no one in the palace listens to me

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[56] The TV Series modifies Bhīṣma's vows. According to the epic, he makes two promises to facilitate his father's marriage with Satyavatī: (1) he forswears the throne in favor of Satyavatī's son and (2) to avoid potential conflict in the next generation, he vows celibacy (1.94.68–89). But the TV Series describes them as follows: (1) Bhīṣma forswears the throne in favor of Satyavatī's son, (2) vows celibacy (3:38–42), and (3) to respect and serve the future

anymore" (45:29); Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Duryodhana have reached such high summits of their personal ambitions that "neither my hands nor my voice reach there" (45:30). She, too, is constrained by her wifely devotion to her husband. As she witnesses the helplessness that prevails in the room, she is spurred to curse Duryodhana, but the old sire (Bhīṣma) frantically intervenes before she could utter it: "Only blessings suit a mother's mouth" (45:31–33).

Vidura reaches Indraprastha when Yudhiṣṭhira, still rueing Duryodhana's slanderous affront by Draupadī, counsels her that such offences cannot be resolved by punishment. Draupadī requests him not to be bothered by the unfortunate incident, and asks for an appropriate punishment, if that is what it takes for him to get over it.[57] Vidura, hesitatingly and with conspicuous pauses, conveys Dhṛtarāṣṭra's invitation for gambling. Draupadī immediately intervenes, "Who would know better than you, uncle, that there is no disease deadlier than gambling? Gambling is a sort of stick which separates even water. Even then, do you consider it right?" (45:19) Vidura readily acknowledges Draupadī's anxiety but expresses his inability to bring Dhṛtarāṣṭra around on the matter. Meanwhile, a self-absorbed Yudhiṣṭhira declares his intent to comply with the invitation for the following reasons:

1. Gambling is indeed the root cause of ruin, but a friendly gamble does not count as gambling.

2. He wants to prove to Śakuni that his victory in the game in Indraprastha was not accidental; he scored a victory because he is a superb gambler.

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king(s) as his own father (4:23–25). This last vow is significant. While the former two vows do not explain his inability to put an end to Dhṛtarāṣṭra's blatantly unfair nepotism, which allows Duryodhana and his cronies to constantly harass the Pāṇḍavas, the last one does. Because Bhīṣma has vowed to respect and serve the king loyally, he cannot control Dhṛtarāṣṭra and his son's moral and legal transgressions.

[57] To avoid redundancy, I do not quote the long conversation here again. I recommend readers revisit the excerpt in the previous chapter.

3. As a Kṣatriya, he cannot ignore a challenge for battle and an invitation to gamble.

4. He will abide by Dhṛtarāṣṭra's command.

5. It will also be a good excuse for Draupadī to once again visit Hastināpura.

6. He does not wish to break Duryodhana's heart by rejecting the invitation.[58]

With this attitude, he arrives with his brothers and Draupadī in Hastināpura, where Duryodhana and his brothers orchestrate a sham, warm welcome, just as they had put on a false front when sending the Pāṇḍavas off to be burnt in the highly combustible palace. The four younger Pāṇḍavas sarcastically evoke the past wrongdoings of Duryodhana, but the unsuspecting oldest Pāṇḍava conciliates Duryodhana: "They all are naive. But bear in mind, now that we have come for a game of dice, we will only return after winning your heart over" (45:35). It is notable that Yudhiṣṭhira displays an irritating naiveté—he never makes an effort, implicit or explicit, to avert the dicing match. On the contrary, he casually brushes off Draupadī's angst about the game. Thus, the stage for the game is set.

4.2.1 Śakuni's greed and Duryodhana's vengeance

It is not possible to understand the Series' portrayal of this episode without delving into its depiction of the Kuru dynasty's past. As noticed in the introduction, no other incident is so central to the narrative of the epic, whether that of Vyāsa or the Series, as the gambling match. I have also reflected above that Yudhiṣṭhira's indulgence in gambling has been perceived as the

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[58] *juā avaśya vināśa kī jaṛa hai, pāṃcālī. paraṃtu mitravat khele jāne vālā juā jue kī ginatī meṃ thoṛe hī ātā hai! aura māmā śrī śakuni ko bhī yaha dikhalānā hai ki maiṃ yahāṃ indraprastha meṃ unase kevala saṃyoga se nahīṃ jītā thā. balki isalie jītā thā ki maiṃ uttama khilāṛī hūṃ. [...] maiṃ kṣatriya hone ke nāte yuddha kī lalakāra aura dyūta ke nimaṃtraṇa ko kabhī asvīkāra nahīṃ kara sakatā. āpa jyeṣṭha pitāśrī ko kaha dījiegā, kākā śrī, ki hama unakī ājñā kā pālana karane avaśya āeṃge. aura isī bahāne pāṃcālī eka bāra phira hastināpura ke darśana kara legī. [...] aura maiṃ anuja duryodhana kā hṛdaya bhī nahīṃ dukhānā cāhatā. yadi vaha causara khelanā cāhatā hai to maiṃ causara khelane avaśya hastināpura āūṃgā.*

most scandalous incident in his entire life, an incident that has perplexed scholars and public

alike. The creators of the Series must have felt pressure to make sense of Yudhiṣṭhira's

behaviour. At least, so it seems from their portrayal of gambling habits of the Kṣatriya

community, which the Series advances steadily from the beginning of the second episode. It is

seen as a casual but favourite pastime of the Kuru kings at least since the era of Śaṃtanu.[59]

In the Series, when Śaṃtanu violates the condition of his marriage with Gaṅgā, she

leaves him and takes their newborn eighth son Devavrata (later known as Bhīṣma) with her.

Because Gaṅgā herself is a goddess, she raises Devavrata in heaven and procures excellent

training for him there. The young son, having grown in the company of gods and trained under

several prominent sages, is aptly schooled in the conventions of both heaven and earth. After his

professional training in statecraft, Gaṅgā returns the adolescent Devavrata to Śaṃtanu.

Following their introductory conversation about Devavrata's training, the very first activity they

do together as father and son is gambling. Apparently, Devavrata had also learned to play dice in

heaven. Devavrata quells his father's curiosity about the gods' recreational activities by saying

that even gods indulge in dice, in which humans are used as dice and Cosmic Time as gods'

agent who executes both the winning and losing throws.[60]

Kuntī, who later gives birth to Karṇa before marriage and the older three Pāṇḍavas after

marriage, too, is seen decorously delighting in a game of dice with her adoptive father

Kuntibhoja (7:24–26). Later, her expertise in dicing is brought up again through her younger co-

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[59] The TV Series pronounces its modern form Śāntanu.

[60] This deceptively innocent episode is a significant note on the game of Hastināpura. On the one hand, it attempts to establish that dicing was simply a harmless source of amusement, which even gods played, and on the other hand, it surreptitiously absolves both the gaming parties in Hastināpura of their responsibilities—it was gods who were amusing themselves through Time and humans.

wife Mādrī, who wants Kuntī to join her in a game of dice against their husband Pāṇḍu.

According to Mādrī, because Kuntī's maternal lineage was renowned for its skills in the game,

she could easily score a victory over Pāṇḍu (8:32–36). Thus, the Series demonstrates that

gambling had been, prior to the ill-fated dicing match, a staple leisurely activity in which

members of the Kuru dynasty regularly indulged. This means that the Pāṇḍavas' parents

regularly amused themselves through gambling, which in turn implies that Yudhiṣṭhira and his

brothers inherit a rich legacy of recreational gambling from both sides of their family. Even

Yudhiṣṭhira has played many congenial games against Duryodhana in the past. Sometime before

the partition of Hastināpura, Duryodhana plots to burn the Pāṇḍavas in a highly inflammable

palace which he and Śakuni had constructed specifically for the purpose. Duryodhana, thrilled to

know that they would move into the palace the next day, puts on a false front and proposes a

game of dice in good spirits. The next morning, Sahadeva and Nakula happily announce the

good fraternal rapport to Bhīṣma: "We spent the whole night together, uncle. We played dice,

and he kept on getting defeated." Duryodhana jovially responds: "Yes, uncle, I have never been

defeated like that before" (30:26–27).[61] In this connection, we should revisit the game that takes

place between Yudhiṣṭhira and Śakuni immediately after the Rājasūya ceremony. Śakuni

purposefully loses the bet and lets the Pāṇḍavas light-heartedly ridicule his mastery over dice.

When Yudhiṣṭhira asks what Śakuni plans to stake next, he replies: "I wager the kingdom of

Gandhāra." Yudhiṣṭhira rejects the possibility of such a bet: "No dear uncle, kingdoms are won

or lost in the battlefield, not in the field of dicing" (44:22–24). Śakuni later confesses before

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[61] Currently available versions of the TV Series do not include this dialogue. It is found in the published English translation of the script (Bhatnagar and Magan, vol. 3, 169). The Marathi translation also includes it: "Sahadeva: *kāla rātrī duryodhana va māmāśrī āmacyākaḍe āle hote te ātāparyaṃta āmacyābarobaraca āhet.* Nakula: *sārīpāṭācā kheḷa kāla rātrī phāraca raṃgalā hotā. tātaśrī. duryodhanabhayyā kāla manasokta harale.* Duryodhana: *kāla rātrī kharaṃca mī khūpa haralo*" (Garge and Lāṭakara 1990, vol. 1, 307). In addition, I have notes made years ago upon watching the TV Series' version of this scene. Thus, my discussion here must rely on the authority of the published translations of the script.

Duryodhana and Karṇa that he lost the game in Indraprastha on purpose: "It is this loss that will open the doors to your victory" (44:36–37). This sham loss also proves to be a masterstroke to convince Yudhiṣṭhira that he can again triumph over Śakuni in the proposed gambling match. It also helps Śakuni to convince the unsuspecting Dhṛtarāṣṭra that the great gambler is simply itching to even the score with Yudhiṣṭhira: "Then admit it, brother Śakuni, that you want to exact retribution for your loss in Indraprastha" (44:46). Dhṛtarāṣṭra is unaware of Śakuni and Duryodhana's plan to seize Indraprastha and avenge Duryodhana's mockery by Draupadī.

At the same time, the Series makes sure that the audience is reminded of the imminent disastrous game of dice. Soon after Śakuni injects himself into Hastināpura politics, gambling becomes a matter of concern. For example, when Mādrī invites Kuntī to join her in a game against their husband, Kuntī agrees only to watch the game and not play at all: she is weary of gambling, because to her "dice feel like foes and throws as nemeses. I do not know why, but I see ill omens of disastrous future in throws of dice" (8:33–34). The immediate scene after this statement shows Śakuni walking with dice in his hands with sinister music playing in the background. He determinedly sows the seeds of discord and provokes Dhṛtarāṣṭra to not compromise about his right to the throne. Obviously, the ill omens that Kuntī foresees in gambling are directly linked to Śakuni's villainous nature and divisive politics. But this is not the first time the Series portrays Śakuni as a villain. His very first entry in the Series typecasts him into a naturally spiteful individual: he is oversensitive in matters that can be categorized as victory or defeat. The Kuru dynasty's indulgence in gambling as a leisurely activity is sharply contrasted with Śakuni's indulgence in the game. Śakuni's very first appearance in the Series lays bare his dark character and perception of the game. He is seen playing a game of dice

against his father, Subala, who makes a move and gleefully declares his victory over Śakuni.

Their conversation is telling:

> Subala: But, how do you like losing?
>
> Śakuni: Losing against you feels fine. But a Kṣatriya can never feel good about losing.
>
> Subala: Even in dicing?
>
> Śakuni: A battlefield is after all a battlefield; and wherever defeat or victory is determined, that surely is a battlefield.
>
> Subala: But son, this is only a game!
>
> Śakuni: That which results in a win or a loss cannot be a mere game. Neither one indulges in dicing to lose nor does one enagage in a battle to lose. (7:7–10)[62]

This scene serves two purposes: (1) it indicates that dicing as a leisurely activity was a common practice among most Kṣatriyas, and (2) it brings out Śakuni's dark character; he considers gambling and fighting in a war on par, as both activities result in a winner and a loser. Thus, what has hitherto conspicuously been a leisurely activity in the Kuru dynasty becomes a premonition of disaster. It is the inimical presence of Śakuni that makes dicing an ill omen. The Series also uses this very opportunity to communicate Śakuni's intentions behind his permanent move to Hastināpura from Gandhāra. Just as the father and sons—Śakuni and Subala—are having the above-mentioned conversation, Bhīṣma arrives with the proposal of Dhṛtarāṣtra's marriage with Gāndhārī. Śakuni views it as an insult to his family. Mortified by his sister's

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[62] Subala: *ye to tumhārī parājaya huī, śakuni!* Śakuni: *vo to ho gaī, pitāśrī.* Subala: *paraṃtu hāranā tumheṃ kaisā lagatā hai?* Śakuni: *āpa se hāranā acchā hī lagatā hai, paraṃtu eka kṣatriya ko hāranā acchā nahīṃ laga sakatā.* Subala: *causara meṃ bhī?* Śakuni: *raṇabhūmi to raṇabhūmi hī hotī hai, aura jahāṃ hāra jīta ho, hotī to vo raṇabhūmi hī hai!* Subala: *paraṃtu ye to khelamātra hai, putra!* Śakuni: *jahāṃ hāra jīta kā pariṇāma nikalatā ho, pitāśrī, vo kevala khela nahīṃ ho sakatā. nā hī koī hārane ke lie causara khelatā hai aura nā hī koī hārane ke lie yuddha hī karatā hai, pitā mahārāja!*

marriage with the blind prince Dhṛtarāṣṭra, he slyly injects himself with revengeful intents into Hastināpura's royal family and court.

What happens in the Series' gambling episode is the culmination of these two contrasting approaches to the game: Śakuni arranges the game with sinister motives to seize Yudhiṣṭhira's kingdom and Duryodhana for avenging his mockery, whereas Yudhiṣṭhira accepts the invitation for a "friendly" game for various reasons, although he does acknowledge his Kṣatriya obligation to accept the challenge.

Even though the Series establishes gambling as an innocent, recreational activity of the Kuru dynasty, Yudhiṣṭhira's expectation of a "friendly" game is, to a degree, unconvincing. We know that Yudhiṣṭhira is thoroughly, nay, dreadfully, cognizant of the fact that the unforgiving Duryodhana will surely avenge his humiliation that he suffered in the Magical Palace. He has already articulated his fear to Draupadī that Duryodhana never thinks of the wounds he inflicts on others but also never forgets the ones others inflict on him. He fears that both Indraprastha and Hastināpura might have to pay a hefty price for Draupadī's laughter. In such a condition, it is puzzling that, given the circumstances, he should expect an invitation for a "friendly" game from one who has spared no effort in doing away with him and his family! It is clearly an attempt on the part of the Series' creators to demonstrate Yudhiṣṭhira's innocence in connection with his engagement in gambling.

4.2.2 Yudhiṣṭhira bids for damage-control

Yudhiṣṭhira's justifications—as a Kṣatriya, he could not refuse to take on the invitation and that he must abide by Dhṛtarāṣṭra's wish—are in line with Vyāsa's epic. Śakuni, for example, is convinced that the Pāṇḍavas will surely come to Hastināpura to play the game,

"because no Kṣatriya can turn down an invitation to war or to gamble. This is the Kṣatriya code (*maryādā*), nephew, and the Pāṇḍavas can never violate a code. Moreover, this invitation will be sent at the behest of [their] eldest uncle" (44:39).[63] These two reasons are cited again by Draupadī and Yudhiṣṭhira. After the first gambling match, when Śakuni and Duryodhana compel Dhṛtarāṣṭra to send yet another invitation for a game, Draupadī says: "Now you will have to go to the gambling hall to abide by [your] Kṣatriya *dharma*." Yudhiṣṭhira replies, "Draupadī, I will have to go there to comply with the command of older uncle" (49:26).

But the two cited reasons are not as inviolable in the Series as in the epic text. In the larger context, they become overshadowed and lose force, because they are thoroughly downplayed in a conversation between Bhīṣma and Vidura. Although Vidura finds himself incapable of advising a Kṣatriya against accepting an invitation for gambling, Bhīṣma instructs him to advise, nay command, Yudhiṣṭhira to decline the invitation. Bhīṣma thus thinks that it is acceptable, or even expected, that Yudhiṣṭhira transgress his Kṣatriya obligation to accept the invitation and disobey his eldest uncle. It seems Vidura agrees with the idea but rejects Bhīṣma's proposal on account of his ministerial loyalty to his king (45:13). A similar dialogue takes place between them after Vidura returns from Indraprastha (45:25).

That the Kṣatriyas of the Series are not obliged to accept a challenge is further suggested during the great war between the Kaurava and Pāṇḍava armies. Droṇa once plots to take Yudhiṣṭhira into custody, but he could not accomplish this goal if Arjuna stood guard over him. So, the Kauravas hatch another plan to remove Arjuna from the scene. A warrior is to take

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[63] *āyeṃge, bhāṃje, ve avaśya āeṃge. kyoṃki koī bhī kṣatriya yuddha aura jue ke āmaṃtraṇa ko to asvīkāra kara hī nahīṃ sakatā. ye to kṣatriya maryādā hai, bhāṃje. aura pāṇḍava to maryādā-bhaṃga kara hī nahīṃ sakate. aura phira ye āmaṃtraṇa to jyeṣṭha pitāśrī kī ora se jāyegā nā!*

Arjuna away from Yudhiṣṭhira by issuing a challenge. Bhīma warns Arjuna about Droṇa's plot

and advises him to ignore the challenge. But Arjuna chases the challenger because of his vow to

never spare an enemy who contemptuously recommends him to drop his bow (81:16–17). The

Series thus introduces the idea of not taking on a strategically issued challenge. Arjuna, however,

does not heed Bhīma's warning. Droṇa fails to apprehend Yudhiṣṭhira that day, and the same

warrior is to challenge Arjuna again the next day. Despite knowing the fact that only he can

protect Yudhiṣṭhira, Arjuna insists on accepting the challenge again because "this indeed is

Kṣatriya *dharma*." Kṛṣṇa gives a sarcastic chuckle and admonishes him:

> Now you will teach me the precepts of Kṣatriya *dharma*, Pārtha! The Pāṇḍavas' defeat in
> this war means the fall of all pure and auspicious symbols of society's well-being. Your
> duty is to fight in war for the sake of the well-being of society, Pārtha. Paying heed to a
> challenge from Suśarmā in this war is not Kṣatriya *dharma*. Yes, it surely is a crutch for
> your personal ego of Kṣatriya identity. (81:36–39)[64]

This statement is significant. The Series portrays Kṛṣṇa not as a shrewd politician but as an

incarnation of god Viṣṇu, who has descended on earth to protect *dharma*. He knows

everything—the past, present, and future, as well as the subtle implications of *dharma*. Here, he

juxtaposes two obligations of a Kṣatriya: (1) fighting in battle for the well-being of society, and

(2) taking on a challenge. Kṛṣṇa concludes that only the first is a Kṣatriya obligation; the second

is *not*. It is merely a matter of ego.

The foregoing dialogues between Bhīṣma and Vidura and Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna suggest that

some Kṣatriyas (Śakuni and Arjuna) feel obliged to accept a challenge, but others, the wiser

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[64] *aba tuma mujhe kṣatriya dharma ke adhiyācana samajhāoge, pārtha! isa yuddha meṃ pāṇḍavoṃ kī parājaya kā artha hai samāja kalyāṇa ke sāre śuddha aura śubha lakṣaṇoṃ kā patana. tumhārā dharma to kevala samāja kalyāṇa ke lie yuddha karanā hai, pārtha. isa yuddha meṃ suśarmā kī lalakāra sunanā kṣatriya dharma nahīṃ hai. hāṁ, tumhāre vyaktigata kṣatriya aham kī baisākhī avaśya hai.*

individuals (Bhīṣma, Vidura, and Kṛṣṇa), deem such an obligation non-binding. In fact, according to the latter, mindless acceptance of challenges that might result in harm is a misguided notion of Kṣatriya *dharma*. While such views do not directly invalidate Yudhiṣṭhira's rationale, they certainly weaken their binding force. Yudhiṣṭhira is the humblest Kṣatriya of his time. It is also notable that Yudhiṣṭhira of the Series does not allude to his vow of never turning down a challenge. These forgoing examples from the Series indicate that Yudhiṣṭhira's reasoning for accepting the invitation for a gambling match on account of his Kṣatriya identity is not as irreproachable as in Vyāsa's epic. In the Series, even Bhīma finds it objectionable to heed a strategic challenge. In Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*, Kṣatriyas' obligation to accept a challenge is considered beyond reproach.

The reason that Yudhiṣṭhira should feel compelled to prove his worth before Śakuni also feels insufficient. Why is Yudhiṣṭhira determined to prove his superior skills to Śakuni? It seems completely inconsistent with his almost annoyingly humble and irritatingly guileless character in the Series. It is particularly baffling because no one, including Śakuni, ever expresses any doubt about his skills in gambling or even insinuates that his victory was a matter of chance. If anything, Śakuni proclaims, even if only affectedly (of which Yudhiṣṭhira does not have the faintest idea), that by defeating him, Yudhiṣṭhira has established himself as the master of gambling too. It is therefore illogical that he should wish to prove his mastery in gambling.

It is the last two reasons that are significant for understanding how Draupadī's action of humiliating Duryodhana influences Yudhiṣṭhira's decision: it will be an excuse for Draupadī to once again visit Hastināpura, and Yudhiṣṭhira does not wish to break Duryodhana's heart. Although it is not clear in the Series why it is important for Draupadī to visit Hastināpura once again, one can understand Yudhiṣṭhira's anxiety to appease Duryodhana. Recall that nothing has

so far bothered Yudhiṣṭhira as much as Draupadī's misdemeanor. Besides, he knows that Duryodhana will never forget it, and that both Indraprastha and Hastināpura dynasties might have to pay a hefty price for her misconduct. Obviously, he is dreading a retaliation from Duryodhana. Moreover, he believes that Draupadī's wrongdoing can be redressed through repentance only. One can imagine his anxiety to assuage Duryodhana's hurt feelings at the first opportunity. Yudhiṣṭhira seems to be imagining a scenario in which a light-hearted meeting of Draupadī and Duryodhana might ease the tension between them. This, however, is not explicitly stated here. He expresses it later when he arrives in Hastināpura. He says to Duryodhana: "And note this, dear brother, now that we have come to play dice, we will return after winning over your heart" (45:34).

As I noticed in the previous chapter, the gambling episode in the Series heavily borrows from the movie *Mahabharat* (Mistri 1965), which articulates the importance of Draupadī's visit to Hastināpura. Yudhiṣṭhira announces to Nakula and Sahadeva that Dhṛtarāṣṭra has invited them to Hastināpura to bless them (*āśīrvāda dene ke liye*). The invitation is general, and it is not for a dice match. He cheerfully accepts the invitation, "Quickly make the arrangements to go." So far, it seems that only the Pāṇḍava brothers would be going to Hastināpura. But when Yudhiṣṭhira learns about Duryodhana's insult by Draupadī, he repudiates the naiveté of his brothers, who think that Duryodhana's mockery by Draupadī was simply an affectionate, silly joke between brother-in-law and sister-in-law: "The wound inflicted by jibe is much more severe than that inflicted by sword and arrow. Arjuna, Draupadī also must come with us to Hastināpura to apologize to Duryodhana" (1:00). It seems plausible that in the Series, too, Yudhiṣṭhira highlights the need of Draupadī's visit to Hastināpura with hopes of repairing the damage. That is why Yudhiṣṭhira does not wish to break Duryodhana's heart by rejecting the invitation.

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Yudhiṣṭhira can only hope to assuage Duryodhana's otherwise implacable indignation by accepting the invitation for gambling and save the Kuru lineage from calamity. Such an interpretation becomes unambiguously coherent because it was not on account of his greed and jealousy that Duryodhana settled on a match of dice; his sole purpose was to avenge the mockery.

While an outright invalidation of Yudhiṣṭhira's other reasons—as a Kṣatriya, he must accept the invitation; he must comply with Dhṛtarāṣṭra's command; and he wishes to prove his superior skills in gambling to Śakuni—would be too extreme, they are quite weak, as I have shown above. It seems that both the invitation for gambling and Yudhiṣṭhira's affirmative reply to it are principally affected by Draupadī's transgression: Duryodhana wants vengeance, and Yudhiṣṭhira wishes to avert disaster by making peace with Duryodhana.

Conclusion

As depicted in Vyāsa's epic, nothing but seizing the fortunes of Yudhiṣṭhira could quell the fire of greed and resentment that torments Duryodhana's body and soul. Dhṛtarāṣṭra, fully aware of Duryodhana and Śakuni's nefarious plan, becomes complicit and sends a challenge for a match of dice to Yudhiṣṭhira. It is chiefly on account of his Kṣatriya duty and personal vow to never say "no" to a challenge that Yudhiṣṭhira accepts it; his vow to remain obedient to Dhṛtarāṣṭra also shapes his decision. His allusion to the fatefulness of the game is nothing but a submission that he is restrained by his promises. He remains reluctant to gamble throughout due to the treacherous nature and conflictual outcomes of it. Even after arriving in Hastināpura, he personally pleads with Śakuni to withdraw the challenge, but the latter gets the better of him with a taunt that no proud Kṣatriya could ignore—you came all the way from Indraprastha to play

against me, but now you got cold feet; feel free to retreat if you are scared! Yudhiṣṭhira, perhaps

frustrated, reaffirms his vow and declares his intention to take on the challenge. Yudhiṣṭhira

finds himself in a hopeless situation. He cannot fight off the strength of fate! (2.53.12–13)

But in the Series, it is Draupadī's act of mockery that becomes more pronounced. It gives

the impression that had Draupadī not slandered her irascible brother-in-law, the families would

have been just fine, for Duryodhana had accepted, even if only grudgingly, the partition of the

Kuru kingdom. Duryodhana feels somewhat comforted by the five Pāṇḍavas' removal from

Hastināpura politics—he views it as if the partitioning had pulled out the five-pronged shaft from

his ever-bleeding heart. Even though jealous, he exhibits no interest in the fortunes of

Yudhiṣṭhira. But Draupadī's unleashing of the fresh storm of conflict with Duryodhana filled the

air with the most portentous signs of calamity, which are visible in Yudhiṣṭhira's anxiety,

Cosmic Time's judgement, and Duryodhana's unprecedentedly violent release of anger—neither

before nor after this moment is he seen so consumed by indignation and a drive for revenge.

Śakuni, too, had succeeded in convincing Duryodhana to demand a match of dice exactly

because the latter saw an opportunity to avenge himself. In Indraprastha, Yudhiṣṭhira is

especially sensitive to these and would do anything in his capacity to mitigate their potency.

Naturally, Yudhiṣṭhira thought that perhaps bringing Draupadī to Hastināpura would give an

opportunity to steer the feelings in a more positive direction. Or maybe he himself could, with

his ingenuous peaceful disposition, win over Duryodhana's heart and reconcile the matter for

good. The invitation for gambling gives him a good excuse to visit Duryodhana.

Be that as it may, it is Draupadī who sparks the flames of fury between the two groups of

cousins, leading to the dice match. The fire of jealousy that raged in Duryodhana's heart after

seeing the Pāṇḍavas' affluence in Indraprastha would culminate in a greater storm in

Sailing into the Storm

Hastināpura, the gambling match. Vyāsa's resolute, brave Yudhiṣṭhira sails into the storm with sincere heroism, but the Series compromises his sincerity by introducing the pressure to appease a revengeful Duryodhana, who was consumed by Draupadī's reckless mockery. The Series portrays Draupadī's action as intentionally malicious and portentous. In contrast to Vyāsa's completely blameless Draupadī, in the Series, she becomes the primary cause of unrelenting hostility between the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas, of which the gambling match is the first outcome.

Chapter Five

A Battered Boat: Draupadī's humiliation

The preceding two chapters identify a key difference between Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* and the Series: the creators of the Series turn the innocence of Vyāsa's Draupadī into a catastrophic transgression. Even though Vyāsa's Duryodhana accuses her of laughing at him, it remains a minor and unreliable reference. Even if we do take it into consideration, the Series omits the names of men that Vyāsa's text lists more frequently and blames only Draupadī. In the Series, her scathing remarks about Duryodhana's inability to "see" as if blind acompanied by a contemptuous laugh portend disastrous ramifications for Indraprastha and Hastināpura kingdoms, as both Cosmic Time and Yudhiṣṭhira forebode. The disaster strikes in the form of the dice match. In this chapter, I focus on how a single act of Draupadī strengthens and weakens women's claim to an honourable treatment. More specifically, I describe how the innocent, noble character of Vyāsa's Draupadī strengthens her claim to an honourable treatment, which the Series turns into what one might call the insidious rhetoric that "she deserved it."

More specifically, in my discussion of both Vyāsa's text and the Series, I underscore (1) the Pāṇḍavas' accountability in exposing Draupadī to abuse; (2) how everyone fails to protect her; (3) Kṛṣṇa's role in protecting her; and (4) how Draupadī shoulders the burden of protecting herself against the Kauravas' domineering wickedness. Vyāsa's text has attracted a fair amount of scholarly attention in these matters. I assess the earlier scholarship and offer alternative interpretations of some key issues. With regard to the Series, I argue that by posing Draupadī as a symbol of womankind, it underscores the momentousness of according honour and protection

to women, but due to its characterization of Draupadī, the message is weak, as many viewers'

responses have indicated.

5.1 Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*: the agony of an innocent

When Yudhiṣṭhira fails to avoid the challenge, he opens the game with a stake, which

Duryodhana counters, and Śakuni throws the dice to a win. From here on, Śakuni scores

uninterrupted wins and Yudhiṣṭhira never gets a turn to throw the dice.[1] It is noteworthy that

after most throws, Vaiśaṃpāyana describes Śakuni as hellbent on cheating (*nikṛtiṃ*

samupāśritaḥ). Yudhiṣṭhira loses everything, and with each lost bet, his gambling spirals

disastrously. In desperation, he wagers his brothers, one by one, losing them in servitude to

Duryodhana, and finally he himself meets the same fate. Śakuni, the masterly manipulator of his

rival's discomposure, deems it profoundly immoral that Yudhiṣṭhira staked himself when he still

had Draupadī available for a bet. He goads Yudhiṣṭhira openly:

> There still remains your dear wife, one bet that is still unwon. Wager Kṛṣṇā of Pañcāla
> and win yourself back through her. (2.58.31)[2]

This is a direct provocative challenge, which leads Yudhiṣṭhira to wager Draupadī, and she, too,

is lost to Duryodhana. This bet is, however, fraught with a legal predicament: could Yudhiṣṭhira,

after losing himself, carry on the game? Having become himself a slave of Duryodhana, what

right did he have to stake Draupadī? The Kauravas take advantage of this ambiguity as well as of

the assembly's inability to resolve the issue. They taunt the Pāṇḍavas, treat Draupadī

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[1] The game of the epic is frequently said to have involved throwing of dice: "Let us throw dice and agree to gamble," *akṣān uptvā devanasya samayo 'stu* (2.53.1).

[2] *asti vai te priyā devī glaha eko 'parājitaḥ, paṇasva kṛṣṇāṃ pāñcālīṃ tayātmānaṃ punar jaya.*

contemptuously as a slave and "whore," physically abuse her, and try to strip her naked in sight

of many men.

In the face of mounting pressure, Bhīṣma finally replies to Draupadī that the matter is too

complicated to be answered by him. Karṇa's words that Duḥśāsana should take away the clothes

of the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī provoke a particularly risqué reaction from Duryodhana, who

throws an audacious smile toward the former and then with a deliberate, devastatingly offensive

action particularly directed towards Bhīma, uncovers his brawny left thigh[3] and vulgarly flaunts

it at Draupadī. Duryodhana sees an opportunity in the ambiguity of the situation. Perhaps to

fester fraternal hostilities among the Pāṇḍavas, he declares that Draupadī would be freed from

slavery if the Pāṇḍavas declared Yudhiṣṭhira a fraud (2.63.20). The final word comes from

Arjuna:

> Kuntī's son, the great-souled Dharma-king, was entitled to stake us earlier. But whose
> master was he after losing himself? That all you Kurus should discern. (2.63.21)[4]

Duryodhana wanted a Pāṇḍava to answer the riddle, which Arjuna does, or so it seems. Arjuna's

response is followed by the ominous cries of jackals, donkeys and birds. Vidura and Gāndhārī

earnestly beg Dhṛtarāṣṭra to intervene; he eventually chastises Duryodhana for quarrelling with a

woman, especially the revered Draupadī. Dhṛtarāṣṭra reinstalls the Pāṇḍavas to their pre-

gambling status through two boons that he grants to Draupadī. Deeply disappointed and irritated

with this outcome, Duryodhana plays on his father's fears and anxieties, declaring that the

Pāṇḍavas left the palace intent on retaliation. They are sure to destroy the Kauravas. And thus, he

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[3] Biardeau states that Duryodhana makes such a suggestive risqué gesture "so that Karṇa does not dare to express his own desire" (1997, 107). Vyāsa's text does not support such an interpretation.

[4] *īśo rājā pūrvam āsīd glahe naḥ kuntīputro dharmarājo mahatma, īśas tv ayaṃ kasya parājitātmā taj jānīdhvaṃ kuravaḥ sarva eva.*

persuades Dhṛtarāṣṭra to send yet another gambling challenge to Yudhiṣṭhira. This time, he inteneds to play one round only with the condition that the losing party hand over their kingdom to the winner, live in the forest for twelve years, and spend the thirteenth year incognito among people. If the condition is fulfilled successfully, everything would be restored to the pre-game status. But if recognized during the incognito period, they must repeat the original condition. Duryodhana feels secure in his mind that Śakuni will once again prevail, and the Pāṇḍavas will never be able to break the cycle. Once again, Yudhiṣṭhira, fully aware of the disastrous results of the game, plays for exactly the same reasons he cites in connection with the first game: he could neither turn down a challenge for gambling nor disobey his eldest uncle (2.67.4). As expected, he loses again and departs for the forest along with his brothers and Draupadī.

5.1.1 Draupadī's bet: Yudhiṣṭhira's accountability?

Before I proceed to Yudhiṣṭhira's accountability, a glimpse into the purposes of the two dice games will be helpful. Vyāsa sees the two gambling matches more or less independently, the first titled as Dyūtaparva, the gambling episode (2.52–65), and the latter as Anudyūtaparva, the successive gambling episode (2.66–72). Devabodha, an 11th-century commentatator on Vyāsa's text, explains the first game of dice as part of God's plan:

> The implication [of chapters 2.52–65] is: in collaboration with God's will, the five Indras, who were great warriors in three worlds, became sons of Pāṇḍu. And in that context, considering that there is no other means than gambling to subdue the magnanimity of and incite anger in Ajātaśatru (Enemy-less) [Yudhiṣṭhira], as willed by God, the perpetration of hundreds and thousands of offences such as abusive remarks, robbing of everything, and abuse of Draupadī through gambling incite anger in the heart of Ajātaśatru. In that connection, the secondary implication follows from Yudhiṣṭhira's intentions, that not

running away is an obligation of a Kṣatriya who has been challenged in gamble and battle. (2.52.1)[5]

As a man of peace and harmony, the fair-minded Yudhiṣṭhira harbors no ill-feelings even towards his enemies. As such, he is a sort of impediment in God's plan to bring about a war and rid the earth of the burden that many good-for-nothing kings caused. The torturous abuses he suffers in the dice game are meant to create hostilities towards the Kauravas. Devabodha sees a second intention: by showing Yudhiṣṭhira's intentions for engaging in the game, Vyāsa seeks to communicate that it is a Kṣatriya duty not to shirk a challenge for war and gambling. Devabodha states that the purpose of the second dice match was to rekindle the anger that Dhṛtarāṣṭra had placated through his decision to restore the Pāṇḍavas to their pre-gambling status, although the Pāṇḍavas never forget the insults they suffered in the gambling hall (2.66.1). Mary Brockington does not see such an authorial intention behind the second dice match, nonetheless she advances extactly the same argument in connection with the first game. She poses the problem: "If what the author wants is to engineer the exile of the brothers, why have them first enslaved and then released? If two sessions are wanted at all, it would be artistically more effective to have the second one repeat the outcome of the first" (2009, 25–26). She replies: "My answer is that he wants to take the Pāṇḍavas to Kurukṣetra not only fuelled by resentment at being cheated out of their rights of property and sovereignty but burning with fury to avenge the shameful outrage to Draupadī—an outrage they have been unable to prevent" (ibid. 26).[6] Brockington's essay does

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[5] *īśvarasaṃkalpasahakāritayā ca trilokīsubhaṭāḥ pañcendrāḥ pāṇḍuputratāṃ gatāḥ. tatra cājātaśatroḥ kṣamām abhibhūya krodham udbhāvayituṃ dyūtād anyo nopāyo 'stīti dyūtena tatra paruṣā giraḥ sarvasvaharaṇaṃ draupadīdharṣaṇam ity evamādiśatasahasrāparādhabhāvena bhagavaddiṣṭaiḥ pariṇatāḥ ajātaśatrucetasi krodham utpādayantīti tātparyārthaḥ* (erroneously printed as *tātparthārthaḥ*). *tatra ca yudhiṣṭhirāśayānusāreṇa dyūte yuddhe ca āhūtasya kṣatriyasyāparāṅmukhatvaṃ svadharma ity avāntaratātparyārthaḥ.*

[6] Hudson alludes to the same idea proposed by A. N. Bhattacharya in 1992, but Hudson finds this solution unsatisfactory to explain Yudhiṣṭhira's disturbing behavior (2013 93, note 81).

not hint that her interpretation emanates from Devabodha's remarks, but her line of reasoning is strikingly similar, although it differs from that of Devabodha in one respect: whereas Devabodha sees the arousal of anger in Yudhiṣṭhira through gambling as God's plan, Brockington sees the same as the authorial intention of the poet.

This connection between the first and second games is related to Yudhiṣṭhira's accountability for the disastrous outcomes. Devabodha seems to acquit Yudhiṣṭhira of any wrongdoing as he was nothing but a puppet in the hands of God. Similarly, Brockington sees Yudhiṣṭhira's "initial fault or weakness" as part of the plot: "the hero who gains some great objective, loses it catastrophically, and regains it" (ibid. 24). As part of the plot, Brockington argues that Yudhiṣṭhira should not be seen as entirely culpable in wagering Draupadī; that in the face of almost overwhelming provocation and personal loss, Yudhiṣṭhira can be shown to retain honour, dignity and integrity (ibid.), and "[a]t the critical points, he remains the supreme knower and upholder of *dharma*" (ibid. 30).[7] She argues that Yudhiṣṭhira's status as a slave of the Kauravas obliges him "to say and do only what he is ordered by his master" (ibid. 28), and that "it is in obedience to Śakuni's command that Draupadī is staked for the final throw" (ibid. 27). This is related to Draupadī's legal challenge to her staking by Yudhiṣṭhira, which I examine in detail in the next chapter. Here I review how the text views Yudhiṣṭhira in connection with Draupadī's abuse.

In Vyāsa, all but the abusers from the Kaurava party express extreme despair as they witness Draupadī being staked and humiliated. And yet, no one condemns Yudhiṣṭhira for staking her, which suggests that the actual cause of their despair was not Yudhiṣṭhira's action,

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[7] Compare with Ingalls' evaluation of Yudhiṣṭhira as an "upholder of *dharma*" (1995, 4).

but the repulsive treatment of the noble queen. Only Bhīma holds Yudhiṣṭhira accountable for overstepping the limits of decorum (2.61.1–6), but only temporarily. Bhīma is so overcome by Draupadī's suffering that he is ready to burn the arms of his revered brother and king. This is the only condemnation that Yudhiṣṭhira meets with in the Sabhā. From the gathering of great kings, no one else speaks a single word against Yudhiṣṭhira. Vidura surely defends Draupadī's freedom and directly declares her bet void. And yet, he finds no fault with Yudhiṣṭhira. Similarly, Vikarṇa, a younger brother of Duryodhana, is also deeply disturbed at the heart-rending scene. He also proclaims the bet void but surprisingly does not criticize Yudhiṣṭhira. Bhīṣma opens his mouth but only to express his inability to answer Draupadī's question. Other dignitaries, including Droṇa and Kṛpa, maintain dead silence throughout.

So, why does no one else in the Sabhā condemn Yudhiṣṭhira? I think the answer lies in the lines immediately after Bhīma's condemnation of Yudhiṣṭhira. As revolting as it may feel to modern readers, Arjuna's disapproval of Bhīma's chastisement of Yudhiṣṭhira seems to open a window into the specific notion of Kṣatriya *dharma* in those days:

> Bhīma, never before have you spoken words like these. Your high regard for *dharma* is indeed vitiated by our mean foes. Do not make the enemies' wishes come true, observe only the noble *dharma*. You cannot overstep your law-abiding eldest brother.[8] Challenged by others, the king, mindful of Kṣatriya *dharma*, is engaged in gambling. That brings us great glory. (2.61.7–9)[9]

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[8] The word *arhati* in the Critical Edition seems awkward, and the editors have marked it as uncertain. In the same stanza, Arjuna addresses Bhīma directly in the grammatical second person (*ācara*), but the word *arhati* is in first person. Some manuscripts read *arhasi*, the second person form, which corresponds to other parts of Arjuna's statement. The Nīlakaṇṭha edition embraces the reading *ko 'tivartitum arhati* ("who can overstep?").

[9] *na purā bhīmasena tvam īdṛśīr vaditā giraḥ, parais te nāśitaṃ nūnaṃ nṛśaṃsair dharmagauravam. na sakāmāḥ pare kāryā dharmam evācarottamam, bhrātaraṃ dhārmikaṃ jyeṣṭhaṃ nātikramitum arhati. āhūto hi parai rājā kṣātradharmam anusmaran, dīvyate parakāmena tan naḥ kīrtikaraṃ mahat.*

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Arjuna's reply to Bhīma covers four issues: (1) Bhīma's unprecedented reprimand of Yudhiṣṭhira is on account of the emotional disturbance caused by Draupadī's humiliation, (2) Bhīma's defiance is in violation of his obligation to honour his "law-abiding" eldest brother, (3) Bhīma's defiance also makes the Kauravas' wishes come true because they have long wanted to cause conflict among the Pāṇḍavas, and (4) as distressful as it might be, Yudhiṣṭhira violates no Kṣatriya *dharma* in staking Draupadī. The reason he cites is that Yudhiṣṭhira upholds Kṣatriya *dharma* by taking on the challenge thrown by the foes. This is yet again a reminder of the genuineness of Yudhiṣṭhira's rationale. Just as Yudhiṣṭhira is seen as helpless in the case of accepting the initial challenge to gamble, he is seen as helpless, hence not guilty, regarding Draupadī's stake. In fact, Arjuna praises him and thinks that Yudhiṣṭhira's actions are immensely glorious for the Pāṇḍavas. It seems to me that this notion and practice of Kṣatriya obligation is why no one finds fault with Yudhiṣṭhira. It is not only Arjuna who thinks so. Two other individuals defend Yudhiṣṭhira in this matter. Draupadī, the victim of Yudhiṣṭhira's staking, exonerates him from wrongdoing. As soon as the Pāṇḍavas settle in the forest, many of their allies come to visit them; all are ready to wage war against the treacherous Kauravas. Draupadī harshly denounces the Pāṇḍavas before Kṛṣṇa, but no one chastises Yudhiṣṭhira for staking her (3.13.58–70; 3.13.107–13). Moreover, during his peace-mission in Hastināpura, Kṛṣṇa indicates that during the gambling match, Yudhiṣṭhira conducted himself in accordance with Kṣatriya *dharma*. Despite the fact that Yudhiṣṭhira continued to respect Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the latter allowed Śakuni to use ultimate trickery in the gambling match, where Yudhiṣṭhira, reduced to a dreadful condition as Draupadī was brought to the hall, "did not swerve from Kṣatriya *dharma*" (5.93.57–58). Kṛṣṇa thus finds no fault with Yudhiṣṭhira's conduct. He accuses the Kurus and other diginitaries present in the Sabhā of violating *dharma*.

A Battered Boat

Vyāsa highlights that no loss, even of their own personal freedom and fall from social nobility to slavery, devastates the Pāṇḍavas as much as Draupadī's humiliation. Kuntī, too, claims that she loves Draupadī more than her sons and nothing hurt her as much as the menstruating Draupadī standing before her elders (5.88.48, 5.135.16–18). Her lamentation before Kṛṣṇa is almost like that of Bhīma: neither the loss of kingdom nor the defeat in dice, not even the banishment of her sons, pains her as much as Draupadī's subjugation. Despite that, she, too, never denounces Yudhiṣṭhira's actions in connection with gambling. No one even from the Kaurava camp ever criticizes Yudhiṣṭhira. One plausible conclusion one can draw from these descriptions—although one not comforting to modern sensibilities—is that Yudhiṣṭhira was not, according to the norms of the Kṣatriya community and conjugal code, at fault at all.

The tragic events of the gambling match serve as permanent scars in the hearts of the Pāṇḍavas and their well-wishers. Bhīma and Draupadī confront Yudhiṣṭhira for his excessive commitment to *dharma*, but not for gambling. The most authoritative voice in this case would be Kṛṣṇa's for two reasons. (1) In Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*, Kṛṣṇa is the most evolved personality, within whom also inhere divine qualities. That is why Bhīṣma succesfully convinces Yudhiṣṭhira that Kṛṣṇa alone deserves the first and foremost honour in the large assembly of kings. Bhīṣma claims that after a careful inspection of all people, including children, he found no one who equalled Kṛṣṇa in two virtues: knowledge and prowess (2.33.26–36). Kṛṣṇa is consistently seen as the highest authority in matters of applied *dharma*. The fact that Kṛṣṇa is the last person to go to Hastināpura to secure peace between the warring cousins, and most dignitaries in Hastināpura esteem his voice as the most authoritative, shows his superlative position. (2) Despite his predictable humility, Yudhiṣṭhira stands firm on his idea of *dharma* and how one should act upon it. Not only in times of doubt does he consider Kṛṣṇa's opinion most authoritative, as he did

when making a decision about performing the Rājasūya ritual (2.12.25–40), he also could be swayed by Kṛṣṇa alone, as in the case of telling a lie to simplify Droṇa's assasination (7.164.97–109). Dhṛtarāṣṭra, too, knew well of Kṛṣṇa's undeniable influence on Yudhiṣṭhira (5.22.37). So, what does such an authoritative voice have to say about the gambling match? When he meets the Pāṇḍavas in the forest after the dicing matches, Kṛṣṇa listens to Draupadī's desperate cries and reassures her that the women of her abusers would also weep the way she wept before him (3.13.114–17). He also articulates the methods he would have employed to prevent the gambling match: he would highlight the evilness of gambling and ask Duryodhana to refrain from it; if he refused to obey, Kṛṣṇa would forcibly bring him and his coterie under control (3.14.1–17). However, he does not accuse Yudhiṣṭhira of any wrongdoing. On the contrary, when in Hastināpura, Kṛṣṇa praises Yudhiṣṭhira: even after being swindled out of his riches and having seen Draupadī in the Sabhā, Yudhiṣṭhira did not veer away from Kṣatriya *dharma* (5.93.58). It seems then Yudhiṣṭhira's behaviour during the gambling match remains above reproach.

As far as the consequences of his gambling are concerned, Yudhiṣṭhira himself is terribly mortified, as are others. He later repents about his role in the downfall of the Pāṇḍava brothers and Draupadī's subjection to torture "What have I, unthinking and keen for gambling, done?" (3.144.12–14).[10] For this reason, he could not sleep well for eleven years (3.245.3–5). Draupadī observes that the guilt-ridden Yudhiṣṭhira withdrew within himself and spent much of his time saying nothing (4.17.14). It is worth asking whether Yudhiṣṭhira is feeling guilty about his decision to accept the challenge and play the game, or the consequences of it. In my view, it is the latter. Even after having suffered everything in the gambling hall and after having been

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[10] *kim idaṃ dyūtakāmena mayā kṛtam abuddhinā*. The term *dyūtakāma* seems to indicate that Yudhiṣṭhira wanted to play the game, but it conflicts with his firm efforts to dissuade Śakuni from gambling. His intention or desire to play the game here likely alludes to his commitment to play the game, if challenged.

banished to the life of twelve years of forest-dwelling and one year incognito, he expresses clear

determination to accept future challenges (3.6.8–9). His sorrow emanates from being the cause of

his family's misery and not from playing the game. His despairing words to the sage Bṛhadaśva

illustrate this point: the guileful expert gamblers challenged him, an inept gambler, to the game

and deceitfully misappropriated his riches and kingdom and also dragged his wife, dearer than

life, into the Sabhā. He might as well have been the unluckiest person in the world (3.49.32–

34).[11] The sage does not condemn Yudhiṣṭhira for gambling; rather he sympathizes with his

condition and teaches him the secrets of gambling as a preventative measure for the future.

The most important voice in this case is that of Draupadī. She also vindicates Yudhiṣṭhira

of a wrongdoing. With regards to the bet that compromises her dignity, she states:

> The king [Yudhiṣṭhira], son of Dharma, is committed to *dharma*, but *dharma* is subtle
> and accessible to experts only. I do not wish to give up my virtue, and not even in speech
> do I lay even an iota of blame on my husband. (2.60.31)[12]

Draupadī then goes on to express what she perceives as *adharma*, namely that Duḥśāsana drags

her in the midst of the Kuru heroes, even though she is in her menses. What Draupadī seems to

imply is that the legal aspect of her bet is too complex for Yudhiṣṭhira to understand, who is not

only an inept gambler but also so ingenuous that he could not detect Śakuni's underhanded

trickeries. If he does not understand it, he cannot be accused of wrongdoing, at least, until the

matter is settled. Yudhiṣṭhira's vindication by her is again forcefully articulated when she

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[11] *akṣadyūtena bhagavan dhanaṃ rājyaṃ ca me hṛtam, āhūya nikṛtiprajñaiḥ kitavair akṣakovidaiḥ. anakṣajñasya hi sato nikṛtyā pāpaniścayaiḥ, bhāryā ca me sabhāṃ nītā prāṇebhyo 'pi garīyasī. asti rājā mayā kaś cid alpabhāgyataro bhuvi, bhavatā dṛṣṭapūrvo vā śrutapūrvo 'pi vā bhavet, na matto duḥkhitataraḥ pumān astīti me matiḥ.*

[12] *dharme sthito dharmasutaś ca rājā dharmaś ca sūkṣmo nipuṇopalabhyaḥ, vācāpi bhartuḥ paramāṇumātraṃ necchāmi doṣaṃ svaguṇān visṛjya.*

counters Bhīṣma's response that Yudhiṣṭhira voluntarily staked her. Not only was Yudhiṣṭhira

left no choice but to gamble her because he was challenged, he was also cheated (2.60.43–45).

Arjuna uses the same frame of reference to vindicate Yudhiṣṭhira (2.61.7–9).

Whereas Yudhiṣṭhira holds himself accountable for the outcomes of gambling—even if

he was compelled to accept the challenge in accordance with his vow to uphold the Kṣatriya

code of conduct and to comply with Dhṛtarāṣṭra's command—Draupadī and Bhīma are scornful

about Yudhiṣṭhira's inability to gamble skilfully. Bhīma and Draupadī do not criticize

Yudhiṣṭhira for playing the game, but for his failure to *win* on account of his unrealistically strict

adherence to the ideals of right and wrong that prevent him from contervailing Śakuni's

treacheries. Draupadī, Bhīma, and Arjuna consider it fully within the parameters of *dharma* to

beat trickery with trickery, and therefore they thought that it was extremely foolish of

Yudhiṣṭhira not to do so. His loss is a direct result of his "misgivings" about Kṣatriya *dharma*,

they believe. But Yudhiṣṭhira's ideals of *dharma* are more than exceptional. For him, it does not

matter how others treat him; what matters the most is his sense of responsibility to himself and

his treatment of others. If he acts with full consciousness of *dharma* and without being affected

by love and aversion and gain and loss, he passes his own test. But if he acts in a way that does

not conform to his ideals of *dharma*, he fails. Let the world revile him as a loser, but he would

not be intimidated into breaching the code of *dharma* that he set for himself. Once again, Ingalls

articulates

> It is only later, under the emotional distress of defeat and exile that Draupadī and Bhīma
> accuse Yudhiṣṭhira of weakness. Indeed, all the heroes of the Mahābhārata are accused at
> one time or another in the poem of vices which they do not have. Karṇa reviles Arjuna,
> Śalya reviles Karṇa. Even Kṛṣṇa is reviled by Śiśupāla. This is no more than the way of
> the world . Which of your heroes in India, or of mine in America, has not been reviled by
> others who were suffenng under loss or misfortune. The truth, from the point of view of
> the author of the Sabhāparvan, is that Yudhiṣṭhira was strong at the dice game. He was

upholding the *dharma* under circumstances that would have broken a lesser man. (1995, 4)

Yudhiṣṭhira's extreme tendency not to deviate from what he considers *dharma* irks his close relatives on more than one occasion,[13] the gambling episode being just one of them. Not only does Yudhiṣṭhira refuse to cheat, his inexperience in gambling makes him acquiescent to Śakuni's treacherous moves (2.60.42). As Draupadī's challenge to her bet and enslavement (discussed in the next chapter) demonstrates, the laws of gambling seem to have been flouted, either by Yudhiṣṭhira or Śakuni, or even by both. For Bhīma and Draupadī, their harshest reprimand of Yudhiṣṭhira is that he is *poor* at gambling (*durdyūtadevī*[14]), whether this was due to his inability to comprehend the subtleties of the game or his ineptness resulting from his commitment to honesty, for it is only the guileful who would naturally excel at a game of treachery. The foregoing analysis suggests that no one in Vyāsa's epic finds fault with Yudhiṣṭhira's decision to play the game and to stake Draupadī. It is not surprising, especially in light of the fact that he has already staked and lost his brothers, that no one questions the validity of their bets. The complexity of Draupadī's bet that sparks off a heated debate solely hinges on the question whether Yudhiṣṭhira, who had already become a slave of Duryodhana, had a right to stake her.

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[13] Even after the war, when Yudhiṣṭhira—who has been self-reproachful for being a cause of the great destruction, especially that of his relatives and respected figures—decides to renounce the throne, Draupadī declares him pathologically insane, one who should be treated medically and thrown in prison (12.14.30–36).

[14] The term *durdyūtadevī* is frequently used for Śakuni as well. Yudhiṣṭhira is a poor gambler whereas Śakuni, although a master gambler of his time, is a morally bad gambler.

5.1.2 Draupadī denied protection

Another issue that disturbs Draupadī in the Sabhā is that no one effectively protects her. The fact that no one finds fault with Yudhiṣṭhira also indirectly sheds light on why no one could effectively shield her from abuse. One would, of course, expect the Pāṇḍavas to protect their wife. If Bhīma and Arjuna would leap up to protect her, no one could stop them. Bhīṣma and Droṇa seem to be fully capable of protecting her, but they do not offer any help. In light of this, the question of why they fail to protect her becomes more urgent.

First, let me briefly discuss some notable interpretations by modern scholars. Why did the Pāṇḍavas not come to protect Draupadī? Brockington distinguishes between the effects of Draupadī's physical humiliation and her menstrual condition. She feels Draupadī's pain: "Physically, the assault on Draupadī is horrifying; morally, it is disgusting, and it is told in vivid terms calculated to arouse our revulsion" (2001, 258). In spite of that, she contends that "what rankles with her [Draupadī] and her husbands is that she appeared there at all, not that she was hurt getting there" (ibid.). Brockington's argument is that "to an ancient Indian, any physical problems attached to menstruation were far less important than the pollution it caused, pollution whose impact fell chiefly on the men" (ibid.). Hence, she contends that "[b]y insisting on her presence once she has declared her condition, by talking to her, by touching her, and by openly soliciting her sexual favours, the Dhārtarāṣṭras knowingly and deliberately defile themselves, making shameless depravity the foremost of the sins for which they must ultimately pay on the battlefield" (ibid. 259). However, "Yudhiṣṭhira is great, not despite his inactivity, but because of it," by "restraining his natural angry impulses and thus keeping himself and his brothers pure" (ibid.) from the "pollution" resulting from interacting with his menstruating wife. The purity thus preserved might be understood, Brockington supposes, as "having some kind of active, magical

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protective force, or as a narrative metaphor for the Pāṇḍavas' straightforward moral superiority over the Dhārtarāṣṭras" (ibid.).

So why does Vyāsa not introduce the pollution angle? Brockington believes that the notion was so universally known that its mention by the author "in the middle of this action-packed narrative would be […] unnecessary, pedantic and banal." Hence, "the narrators' repeatedly stressed formulaic reminders of the fact of menstruation alone is sufficient" (ibid.). While this argument might be acceptable in cases where one finds no specific explanatory details, its usage is objectionable in cases where the source text offers ample details. Otherwise, a reader, too willing to produce innovative interpretations, might disregard the text and hypothesize some inconspicuous content behind every narrative. Having said that, the main reason I question Brockington's explanation is that not only does it ignore the textual description, it also unwarrantedly overemphasizes the conventional and scriptural precepts regarding the behaviour and treatment of a woman in menses. The repeated "formulaic reminders" of Draupadī's menstruating state to which Brockington alludes include *ekavastrā, rajasvalā,* and *śoṇitāktā*—the menstruating Draupadī is wearing a single garment which is spattered with menstrual discharge. If pollution had been a factor of any sort, the reader would have been puzzled as to why it remains absent from the narrative. There is not a single reference to this fact, either in the text or in commentaries. Brockington contrasts the "Liberated Women and New Men" with "a man who had never heard of these concepts" (ibid. 257). She warns the former to not read the text from their perspective; rather, the text should be read from the perspective of the ancient Indian man. Surprisingly though, in the long history of interpretations and retellings of the *Mahābhārata*, no one ever advanced such an explanation that the Pāṇḍavas fail to protect Draupadī because touching and communicating with a menstruating woman would

lead to a grave offense. It is especially noteworthy because premodern Indians were more sensitive to this practice, and yet no one mentions it. However innovative Brockington's explanation might seem to be, it can be supported neither by the text nor by the long tradition of the Mahābhārata. She flouts the very advice she enjoins her readers to abide by: as a "liberated woman," she backreads her understanding of menstrual pollution into Vyāsa's narrative.

Brockington's interpretation is odd for several reasons. First of all, even though she feels Draupadī's pain, she deems it to be less serious than what she considers the calamitous and morally horrific impacts of coming in contact with a menstruating woman. She asserts that "[t]he physical and moral aspects of the attack on Draupadī receive considerably less stress than does her menstruation, both in the primary narration, and in subsequent recollections by herself and even by her husbands" (ibid. 258), which is not true. Thus, according to Brockington's interpretation, Draupadī's suffering becomes deformed into a case of a patriarchal system wherein a "pious woman" protects her male relatives by not coming before them and the male relatives protect themselves by not coming to her rescue.

Such a simplification of Draupadī's humiliation and her protectors' passivity disregards the text itself. Not only does this interpretation trivialize the traumatic humiliation of Draupadī— her insult "is an insult less to Draupadī than to the Pāṇḍavas"—it also wrongly paints the helplessness of those who could protect her. To begin with, one might ask: is it really such a big sin to come in contact with a menstruating woman even physically and casually, let alone when she deserves protection against "shameless depravity"? Perhaps the best measure to determine this would be to reflect on the penalty or repentance prescribed for it. Julia Leslie describes that a man could purify himself of the menstrual pollution by bathing with his clothes (1989, 85). Could the Pāṇḍavas not consider it a matter of *āpad-dharma*, a duty in times of crisis, when the

sin of neglecting their wife's pitiful pleas for protection outweighs the sin of touching her? In this situation, could the Pāṇḍavas and others, for that matter, not easily rise to protect the noble woman, and then purify themselves with a bath, do the laundry, and touch fire? Brockington thus unduly exaggerates the convention of not coming in contact with a menstruant woman.

Moreover, Brockington's emphasis on the extreme requirement for the Pāṇḍavas to avoid contact with the menstruating Draupadī is, according to scriptural injunctions, indefensible. The most intimate contact between a man and a woman takes place during sex. Rules and regulations with regards to sexual relation would therefore allow us to evaluate with definite certainty the gravity or triviality of touching a menstruating woman.

That men were unequivocally advised to refrain from engaging in sexual activities with a menstruating woman is too well-known to repeat here. There was, however, an alternative rule, which superseded it. The *Yājñavalkyasmṛti*, composed sometime between the 3rd- and 5th-centuries CE, has been accepted as one of the most prominent works in the Dharmaśāstra literature. After prescribing that the husband should have intercourse with his wife during the ovulatory cycle, Yājñavalkya says:

> Or, [the husband] should comply with her desire, minding the boon given to women. (1.81)[15]

Vijñāneśvara of the 11th or 12th century explains in his *Mitākṣarā* commentary:

> The word *yathākāmī* means "when his [the husband's] actions are such that they do not infringe on his wife's desires." The word "or" (*vā*) is aimed to incorporate another rule and not to cast aside the previous rule. "Bearing in mind the boon given to women," given by Indra: "He who will infringe on your desires will be a sinner." Accordingly, "women said, 'we choose a boon, may we bear offspring when [the husband] approaches

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[15] *yathākāmī bhaved vāpi strīṇāṃ varam anusmaran.*

us in season; and let our desires be satisfied until the delivery.' Hence, women bear children when approached in season, and [are entitled] to sex until the delivery [according to their desire], for this is the boon they chose.'"[16] […] [The husband] "should abide by [his wife's] desire" is also a rule; that is to say, he must please his wife even during menstration if the wife so desires. (Yājñavalkya 1.81, pp. 39–41)[17]

A suggestively similar view is expressed in Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*: "and one should not approach [his] wife during menses—[the husband] should abide by his wife's decision with all his heart" (12.261.26).[18] The *Viṣṇupurāṇa* also clearly states: "Keeping this in mind, a man should make love with his wife when she is in the ovulatory cycle, and even when she is in menses, if she so desires, provided the [above] mentioned restrictions are inapplicable"

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[16] The boon to which Yājñavalkya alludes is found in the *Taittirīyasaṃhitā* at 2.5.1. The *Mahābhārata* is aware of Indra's absolving his guilt by apportioning it to rivers, trees, mountains, and women (5.1316–18). Elsewhere, Indra is said to have been absolved of the guilt after bathing in the Aruṇā river (9.42.34–36). A more detailed description recounts that the guilt was portioned out to fire, vegetables, women (*apsaras*), and water. According to it, a woman becomes free of her portion when a man copulates with her during menses. Thus, the *Mahābhārata* is aware of the connection between Indra's guilt and menses (12.273.17–44; see also 12.159.50). Interestingly, the *Mahābhārata* mentions that if an unmarried girl has sex, she incurs one third of the *Brahmahatyā* and her partner two thirds: *tribhāgaṃ brahmahatyāyāḥ kanyā prāpnoti duṣyatī, yas tu dūṣayitā tasyāḥ śeṣaṃ prāpnoti kilbiṣam* (12.159.40). Fitzgerald translates this verse as follows: "A maiden who spoils herself acquires three quarters of the sin of brahmicide, while he who causes her ruin gets the remaining quarter of the sin" (2004, 12.159.40). Singular forms such as *tribhāgam*, *caurbhāgam*, and *ṣaḍbhāgam* mean one third, one quarter, and one sixth (see van Buitenen 1975, 2.5.60; 1978, 4.47.16; 5.114.15; Fitzgerald 2004, 12.69.24; 12.89.17). The seemingly trivial difference between the translations is consequential from the sociological perspective. Johann Meyer's correct translation throws light on it: "But all the shame and guilt does not fall withal, as it does in almost all lands, on her that has strayed, but we are told: 'A third of the murder of a Brahman (that is, of the most heinous of all crimes) is what the sinning virgin (kanyā dushyatī) [nonitalic in the original] takes on herself; but he that brings shame on her takes two thirds'" (1953, 44).

[17] *bhāryāyā icchānatikrameṇa pravṛttir asyāstīti yathākāmī bhavet. vāśabdo niyamāntaraparigrahārthaḥ, na pūrvaniyamanivṛttyarthaḥ. strīṇāṃ varam indradattam anusmaran bhavatīnāṃ kāmavihantā pātakī syāt iti. yathā tā abruvan varaṃ vṛṇīmahā ṛtv iyāt prajāṃ vindāmahai kāmam ā vijanitoḥ saṃbhavāmeti tasmād ṛtv iyāt striyaḥ prajāṃ vindante kāmam ā vijanatoḥ saṃbhavanti vāre vṛtaṃ hy āsām iti.* […] *yathākāmī bhavet ity ayam api niyama eva. anṛtāv api strīkāmanāyāṃ satyāṃ striyam abhiramayed eveti.* Aparāditya (12th century), another eminent commentator on the *Yājñavalkyasmṛti*, also interprets the term *yathākāmī* in the same way: *strīṇāṃ kāmam icchām anatikramann anṛtāv api gacchet* (1.81). Other Sanskrit interpretations and English and Hindi translations that I came across follow Vijñāneśvara and Aparāditya. But this old traditional understanding of man's submission to woman's desire to have or not to have sexual intercourse is reversed in Olivelle's translation: "Or else, he may follow his desire" (2019, 1.80), thereby giving the impression that Yājñavalkya is advising men to impose their will on their wives.

[18] *bhāryāvrataṃ hy ātmani dhārayīta.*

(3.11.124.).[19] The most impressive implication of such statements found in a variety of texts is that it acknowledges women's right to their desires over men's other Dharmaśāstric guidelines; i.e., a husband should comply with his wife's desires, even if it involves breaking the rule of not coming in contact with them during menses. Thus, Brockington's oversimplified, rigid view that the Pāṇḍavas could not come forward to protect Draupadī because of the fears of becoming polluted seems, even according to ancient Indian tradition, fallacious. Neither the ancient nor later traditions corroborate Brockington's logic.

In my view, Vyāsa draws attention to Draupadī's menstruating state because it escalates her public humiliation to a new level of "shameless depravity" (in Brockington's words) that the Kauravas display. As a woman of noble standing, she presents herself in public on rare, specific occasions only; the menstruating condition requires that she limit her contact even with male family members. It is a matter of uttermost embarrassment for her to stand before the revered dignitaries in inadequate clothing, that too, stained with the menstrual discharge (2.60.28–34, 2.62.4–10, 4.17.3). In the assembly hall, she is being abusively exposed and manhandled, and a wicked attempt is made to strip her naked. This is what Vyāsa draws attention to—Draupadī, the Pāṇḍavas, their mother Kuntī, Kṛṣṇa, Vidura, Bhīṣma, Droṇa, etc., all repeatedly bring

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[19] *iti matvā svadāreṣu ṛtumatsu naro vrajet. yathoktadoṣahīneṣu sakāmeṣv anṛtāv api*. The above-mentioned restrictions are cited at 112–13, 115–16, and 118–23, which include a woman in love with another man (*anyakāmām*) and not in the mood (*akāmām*) (113). Thus, consideration of a woman's desire to have sex seems to have been a noticeable concern. Accordingly, marriage with an undesirable man was not appreciated. Bhīṣma explains to Yudhiṣṭhira in the *Mahābhārata*: "Sages have ordained: a girl should not be given [in marriage] to a man whom [the girl] does not like" (*nāniṣṭāya pradātavyā kanyā ity ṛṣicoditam*) (13.44.35). Bhīṣma has a personal experience in this case. When Ambā, whom Bhīṣma kidnaps in accordance with the Rākṣasa (Demonic) type of marriage, appeals to him to send her back to her lover Śālva, Bhīṣma consults Brāhmaṇas expert in Vedic knowledge (*vedapāragaiḥ*), his stepmother Satyavatī, ministers (*mantriṇaḥ*), and priests (*purohitān*). It was concluded that Ambā should be returned to her lover (1.96.48–51, 5.171.6–172.2).

Draupadī's grisly humiliation into focus, which the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī are determined to avenge (2.61.52, 2.62.12, 3.13.53–63, 112–14).

Sally Sutherland[20] also invokes the idea of pollution (1989, 65) but states that

as a man who has lost his authority over all but his brothers and his wife, he [Yudhiṣṭhira] has no ability to defend Draupadī. As such, she must suffer humiliation, and is a victim of her husbands who themselves are victims of society's constraints—constraints in which the prohibition on the manifestation of affect in the presence of one's elders or superiors is more powerful than one's duty to protect one's wife. (ibid. 71)

The argument raises several issues. Firstly, Sutherland does not corroborate her views with an evidence. Before I address the weakness of the distinction that Sutherland avers between elders/superiors and juniors, I should set the context for understanding the idea expressed by the phrase "the manifestation of affect," which in this case alludes to expression of romantic feelings.

Vyāsa advises complete privacy in sexual relations: "At a proper time, one should engage in legitimate and concealed sex act" (12.186.16); "at all times, [one should engage] in concealed sex act" (13.148.21).[21] It was perhaps to ensure the practice of desired privacy and secrecy in sexual relations that sex was not recommended during daytime (3.107.100). In her cultural study of sexual relations, Germaine Greer writes: "In many cultures intimacy between spouses is too sacred to be exposed to public comment" (1984, 242). It is this idea of sacredness of intimacy between the couple that encouraged privacy and secrecy in sexual relations. A glimpse into sexual offenses indicates that the notion of sexual relations included expression of romantic feelings: "Doing favors, dallying, touching the ornaments or clothes, and sitting together on a

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[20] Now Sally Sutherland Goldman.

[21] *maithunaṃ samaye dharmyaṃ guhyaṃ caiva samācaret; maithunaṃ satataṃ guptaṃ* […] *samācaret.*

bed—all this, tradition tells us, constitutes adultery" (Olivelle 2005, 8.357). One can plausibly

conclude that the above-mentioned activities were looked on as expressions of romantic feelings.

Hence, these too were regarded as private. In light of this view, remarks of Abbe Dubois (1765–

1848), a French Catholic missionary who spent much of his time in South India and became

familiar with the customs thereof, are significant:

> It may seem incredible, after what I have just said, when I add that there is no country in the world where greater attention is paid to what may be described as outward propriety. What we call love-making is utterly unknown amongst the Hindus.[22] The playful sallies, the silly jokes, the perpetual compliments, and the eager and unlimited display of attention in which our youths are so profuse would be looked upon as insults by any Hindu lady, even the least chaste, that is, if they were offered to her in public.[23] Even if a husband indulged in any familiarities with his own wife it would be considered ridiculous and in bad taste. (1899, 315)[24]

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[22] This statement is reasonable if by "love-making" Dubois means what he describes in the next sentence. But if it connotes copulation, I wonder how he would have a knowledge of what is practiced in absolute secrecy.

[23] As any other cultural concept and convention, the notions of privacy and secrecy and their application also undergo changes with time. In modern India, Dubois' description would generally appear inaccurate. The concept of privacy in the modern Western world is even more strikingly different. In the context of India, Greer writes: "The woman's modesty is absolute; her breasts and vagina are too sacred to be seen" (1984, 114). Contrast it with the Western idea of privacy: "It is truly ironic that representatives of societies where breaches of privacy are punishable in law, even if they consist in no more than the photographing of a couple in a public place or the revelation of an individual's sources of income, should have no scruple about interposing themselves between man and woman in their sexual relation. Western concern with privacy seems to have grown up as modesty decayed, so that the young woman who displays clitoris, labia minora and vaginal introitus in a double spread in a girlie magazine suffers less injury thereby than she would if her telephone were tapped, but most other societies have not brought the despiritualization of the body to anything approaching such a level" (ibid. 120). In the cases where such contrasting differences exist, the risk of unintentionally misinterpreting a concept or practice from another culture becomes profoundly real, and one cannot be too careful to listen to the voices of members of the culture.

[24] The *Nāṭyaśāstra* (sometime between 500 BCE and the 8th century CE), the earliest and most authoritative work on theatrical performance, advises the theatre crew to diligently exclude the acts that can cause one to feel bashful, including couples lying on bed together, kissing, embracing and so forth: *na kāryaṃ śayanaṃ raṅge nāṭyadharmaṃ vijānatā, kenacid vacanārthena aṅkacchedo vidhīyate. yad vā śayītārthavaśād ekākī sahito 'pi vā, cumbanāliṅganaṃ caiva tathā guhyaṃ ca yad bhavet. dantacchedyaṃ nakhacchedyaṃ nīvīsraṃsanam eva ca, stanāntaravimardaṃ ca raṅgamadhye na kārayet. bhojanaṃ salilakrīḍā tathā lajjākaraṃ ca yat, evaṃvidhaṃ bhaved yad yat tat tad raṅge na kārayet. pitāputrasnuṣāśvaśrūdṛśyaṃ yasmāt tu nāṭakam, tasmād etāni sarvāṇi varjanīyāni yatnataḥ* (Kavi 1954, 22.295–99).

Note that the traditional view of privacy in "the manifestation of affect" is universal,[25] and it endorses no distinction between elders/superiors and juniors. Elders are expected to conceal their romantic feelings in the presence of young ones, and vice versa. It can be said with certain conviction that even the presence of strangers, both elders and juniors, is a constraining factor in this regard. I think the distinction that Sutherland avers is arbitrary. Moreover, I do not know how the idea of expression of affection can be compared with the idea of protection. In the moments when one's wife is being humiliated and assaulted, and in a dire condition of hopelessness she despairingly calls for protection, a man does not feel romantic. This is exactly how Vyāsa portrays the Pāṇḍavas' emotional state—demoralized, they smolder with indignation and sink into despair for not being able to protect their wife. Neither anger nor demoralization amounts to "the manifestation of affect." Let me illustrate my point with an opposite example. In traditional India, a romantic setting would be marital rituals, in which elder relatives, including parents of the couple, and friends play significant roles. Marriage also signals imminent love-making. If one is to regard Sutherland's assumption as true, no one could get married in the presence of elders.

Vyāsa's text in fact proves the opposite of what Sutherland advocates. It is a well-known point that traditionally women faced more constraints than men. One would have to explain if Draupadī breached the etiquette of "the manifestation of affect" by calling on her husbands to protect her in the presence of her elders/superiors. She discloses the Pāṇḍavas' affect: "The Pāṇḍavas who did not tolerate me being touched by the wind in the home before are now being

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[25] Three exceptions to this etiquette come to mind: very close friends, tantric practices, and *Madanotsava*, a vernal festival celebrated in honour of *Kāma* and *Rati*, the personification of male and female sexual forces.

tolerant as this wicked [Duḥśāsana] lays his hands on me" (2.62.6).[26] Also consider how affectionate, or rather sensual, Yudhiṣṭhira's description of Draupadī is when he stakes her:

> She is neither little nor large, neither too dark nor rubicund; her eyes are tinged with love—I stake her against you. Alas, I now place the slim-waisted, beautiful Pāñcālī Draupadī as the bet, Śakuni. Her eyes look like the petals of autumn lotuses and she exudes fragrance of autumn lotuses, she delights in autumn lotuses and in beauty she resembles [goddess] Śrī. With respect to leniency and splendid beauty as well as benevolent manners she is the kind of woman whom a man desires. She goes to sleep after [everyone else] and wakes up before [everyone else], she knows about all [chores], completed and not completed, down to the cowherds and goatherds. Her face glows like a lotus and when sweaty, it [sparkles] like a jasmine flower; her waist is slim like the narrow centre or an altar, hair is long, eyes match the colour of copper, and the body has not too much hair. (2.58.32–37)[27]

If Yudhiṣṭhira can so sensuously describe Draupadī's physical beauty and character (which comes across as male fantasy) in the presence of his elders/superiors, it would be more than strange that he would not want to protect his wife against physical and sexual assault in the presence of the same individuals. Another oddity of Sutherland's argument is expressed by her interpretation of Duryodhana's flaunting of his "left thigh" to Draupadī. She writes in the same essay: "*savyam ūruṃ* seems to be a euphemism that refers to Duryodhana's genitalia. Convention forbids explicit mention of the genitals, and this is considered an acceptable substitute" (1989, 66).[28] How odd that the Pāṇḍavas should ignore their wife as she is being

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[26] *yāṃ na mṛṣyanti vātena spṛśyamānāṃ purā gṛhe, spṛśyamānāṃ sahante 'dya pāṇḍavās tāṃ durātmanā.*

[27] *naiva hrasvā na mahatī nātikṛṣṇā na rohiṇī, sarāgaraktanetrā ca tayā dīvyāmy ahaṃ tvayā. śāradotpalapatrākṣyā śāradotpalagandhayā, śāradotpalasevinyā rūpeṇa śrīsamānayā. tathaiva syād ānṛśaṃsyāt tathā syād rūpasaṃpadā, tathā syāc chīlasaṃpattyā yām icchet puruṣaḥ striyam. caramaṃ saṃviśati yā prathamaṃ pratibudhyate, ā gopālāvipālebhyaḥ sarvaṃ veda kṛtākṛtam. ābhāti padmavad vaktraṃ sasvedaṃ mallikeva ca, vedīmadhyā dīrghakeśī tāmrākṣī nātiromaśā. tayaivaṃvidhayā rājan pāñcālyāhaṃ sumadhyayā, glahaṃ dīvyāmi cārvaṅgyā draupadyā hanta saubala.*

[28] Van Buitenen rules out such an interpretation: "While one might well think that the exposure of the thigh is a bowdlerized version of the exposure of more private parts, there is no reason to. What Duryodhana is doing in showing Draupadī his left thigh is to invite her to sit on it as his wife" (1975, 817, note 63.10). In my opinion, van Buitenen's interpretation and its justification is satisfactory. Moreover, if Duryodhana flaunts his genitals, as Sutherland insists, one would have to concede also that Bhīma's vow to break Duryodhana's thigh, which he

abused to abide by the convention of not expressing their love for their wife, but a prince/king would flaunt his genitalia openly in an assembly full of many reputed dignitaries.

In addition, Bhīma is a junior of Yudhiṣṭhira and respects him dearly. But Bhīma could not watch Draupadī being assaulted, and he asks Sahadeva to fetch the fire so that he could burn Yudhiṣṭhira's hands that staked Draupadī. Is this an expression of anger or a "manifestation of affect" for Draupadī? If the latter, how should one compare it with Sutherland's argument in connection with the Pāṇḍavas' inability to protect her? Sutherland's argument converts a decorous convention into "society's constraints" that victimize the society's members. As per this argument, it would seem reasonable to conclude that any stranger could barge into a family gathering and steal the wives of younger male members without much resistance, for their husbands would not protect them in the presence of their respected elders, lest they violate the decorum of not expressing their "affection" towards their wives. But as I noted, standing up to protect one's wife is not an expression of romantic feelings. Not only is Sutherland's interpretation of a cultural convention inaccurate, it is also not supported by Vyāsa. Like Brockington, she seems to have backread her misinterpretation of a cultural convention into Vyāsa's text.

Hiltebeitel proposes another explanation. Duryodhana's brother Vikarṇa passionately defends Draupadī's freedom, which Karṇa counters with equal zeal. Because of her polyandrous marriage with the five Pāṇḍavas, he calls Draupadī a "whore" who could be brought to the Sabhā and stripped naked (2.61.34–38). Hiltebeitel concludes: "A whore is common to all and protected

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accomplishes at the end of war, also denotes his genitals. Apart from this logic, Vyāsa's epic renders this argument untenable. For example, the epic exhibits no qualms about mentioning genitalia (3.2.61, 5.4.22, 12.159.47, 12.278.30–32).

by none—a reminder that Bhīma cannot protect Draupadī" (2001, 249).[29] In my view, the conclusion that a "whore" is protected by no one is misinformed, and I am not convinced that Karṇa implies that. For not only were the professinal services of sex workers protected (Olivelle 2013, 3.13.37), they were also afforded legal protection against sexual assault: "The fine for sexually assaulting a prostitue is 12 Paṇas, if several men force themselves on a single [sex worker], the fine is 24 Paṇas each" (ibid. 4.13.38).[30] Even if Hiltebeitel's interpretation of Karṇa's statement is right, it is nothing more than an indication of the intensity of Karṇa's personal disdain for the Pāṇḍavas, and perhaps also for sex workers or "promiscuous" women. For the Pāṇḍavas, however, Draupadī is their wife, whom they protect on more than one occasion. This speech of Karṇa is indeed one of the most serious offenses that makes Draupadī's and her husbands' blood boil for the next 13 years. In my view, Bhīma's admission that he would have protected Draupadī had she not been staked by Yudhiṣṭhira explains the exact cause of what held the Pāṇḍavas back.

We may no doubt find fault with Yudhiṣṭhira's extreme law-abiding and non-discordant nature, as do those who suffer because of it, but after Draupadī's stake is lost and she becomes a slave of Duryodhana in her own right, Yudhiṣṭhira perhaps found it unjustifiable to interfere between a master (Duryodhana) and his slave (Draupadī). Kṛṣṇa appears to support this view. Although he does not always agree with Yudhiṣṭhira's understanding of Kṣatriya *dharma*, he consistently admires his selfless, steadfast adherence to it. According to him, Yudhiṣṭhira's

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[29] The concept of "protected" (*guptā*) versus "unprotected" (*aguptā*) is clarified in the next chapter.

[30] *rūpājīvāyāḥ prasahyopabhoge dvādaśapaṇo daṇḍaḥ. bahūnām ekām adhicaratāṃ pṛthak caturviṃśatipaṇo daṇḍaḥ*. In Smṛtis, too, one finds similar penalties for sexual assaults, a clear acknowledgement of legal protection afforded to "promiscuous" women and professional sex workers: "About sex workers, Vyāsa says: the fine for sexually assaulting a sex worker is 10 Paṇas" "*veśyāviṣaye tu vyāsa āha*: […] *prasahya veśyāgamane daṇḍo daśapaṇas smṛtaḥ*" (Devana-Bhatta, 750).

attempt to rescue Draupadī would somehow have been in violation of Kṣatriya *dharma*. He says: "Having been reduced to that state and watching Draupadī in the Sabhā, the great-souled Yudhiṣṭhira did not stray from Kṣatriya *dharma*" (5.93.58). In addition, Arjuna thinks that Yudhiṣṭhira's actions complied with Kṣatriya *dharma*. He displays a remarkable loyalty and support for Yudhiṣṭhira and does nothing that might bring disgrace to him (2.61.7–9).[31] Vyāsa depicts no response by Nakula and Sahadeva. This is not to say that the Pāṇḍavas felt no anger. On the contrary, even Yudhiṣṭhira, known for his excessive admiration for peace, seethes with anger, but for reasons explained in the previous paragraph, he does not react. The other Pāṇḍavas, too, feel trapped by *dharma*. Bhīṣma later recalls that the Pāṇḍavas held back because they were trapped in the snare of Kṣatriya *dharma* (4.47.8). Arjuna warns Karṇa, when they face each other in the battle of Virāṭa, that Karṇa was about to pay for his offence to Draupadī in the Sabhā, which the Pāṇḍava swallowed because he was trapped in the noose of *dharma* (4.55.5). Even Bhīma, rash and given to indignation, failed to protect Draupadī because of his devotion to Yudhiṣṭhira (2.63.6) and bemoans his inability to protect Draupadī, because Yudhiṣṭhira had staked Draupadī and lost the bet (2.63.7). He explodes with rage a few times during Draupadī's humiliation. Although his anger is mostly directed at Yudhiṣṭhira (2.61.4–6, 63.6–7), he declares that he would have thrashed Draupadī's offenders immediately if he were not fettered in the noose of *dharma*: "But being thus fettered in the noose of *dharma*, held back by due regard [for Yudhiṣṭhira] and on account of Arjuna's reprimand, I am unable to overcome this calamity! But if Dharmarāja unleashes me, I would crush these evil sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra with my swordlike

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[31] Dhṛtarāṣṭra later expresses deep relief that Arjuna would not flout Yudhiṣṭhira's wishes but is also deeply concerned about Bhīma's irascible nature (3.225.18).

palms, as a lion squashes meagre creatures!" (2.62.36–37).[32] Evidently, for the younger

Pāṇḍavas, the legal conundrum was twofold: the conditions of the game and their unwavering

submission to their eldest brother, who would not permit them to transgress the law. Later in the

epic, after finally killing Duryodhana in a duel by striking his thigh, which was against the laws

of mace-fighting, Bhīma, somewhat trepidatious, faces his victim's grieving mother and

confesses: "We would have killed your evil son right there [and then, in the Sabhā], mother, but

at that time, we adhered to the terms of [of the game] by the command of Dharmarāja"

(11.14.8).[33]

Even after Dhṛtarāṣṭra emancipates the Pāṇḍavas from the slavery of Duryodhana, and

they are no more obliged to brook insults from the Kauravas, Bhīma, ready to annihilate the

enemy, abides by Yudhiṣṭhira's wish (2.64.10–16).[34] Thus, Bhīma uncharacteristically postpones

his impulses to retaliate with several terrible vows to be fulfilled in the future. So did the other

Pāṇḍavas. Biardeau holds the same opinion: "But Yudhiṣṭhira remains silent and his brothers

refuse to speak in his place: he still is their master, this is the only thing they know" (1997, 108).

Thus, they do not really ignore the humiliation; constrained by their adherence to *dharma* as they

were in the Sabhā, they simply postpone their reprisals.

The Pāṇḍavas' hands are tied by *dharma*. Whereas one aspect of *dharma* is clear—they

must abide by Yudhiṣṭhira's directives—another is not. Vyāsa often refers to their helplessness

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[32] *dharmapāśasitas tv evaṃ nādhigacchāmi saṃkaṭam, gauraveṇa niruddhaś ca nigrahād arjunasya ca. dharmarājanisṛṣṭas tu siṃhaḥ kṣudramṛgān iva, dhārtarāṣṭrān imān pāpān niṣpiṣeyaṃ talāsibhiḥ.*

[33] *tatraiva vadhyaḥ so 'smākaṃ durācāro 'mba te sutaḥ, dharmarājājñayā caiva sthitāḥ sma samaye tadā.*

[34] Draupadī claims that Bhīma, eager to kill the enemies, is held back by his wish to act in accordance with Yudhiṣṭhira's wish (3.28.22).

on account of their being bound by the laws (2.72.16, 4.47.8, 5.136.4). What aspect of *dharma*

constrained them? I find Brockington's view convincingly in line with Vyāsa's description:

> [T]he Pāṇḍava brothers have been made slaves at the time of the outrage, and as slaves ought to remain subject to Duryodhana. It would not be possible to introduce here a scene in which the Pāṇḍavas attack their masters, drink blood, smash thighs, trample heads into the ground, or exact vengeance in any appropriately climactic way, especially when they have invited their own enslavement. (2001, 255)

Despite their having been trapped in an impossible condition, the Pāṇḍavas are not fully

acquitted. Vyāsa registers Draupadī's painful cries as she condemns them for not protecting her:

"I reprove the Pāṇḍavas, who, despite being powerful, excellent warriors in battle, watch their

glorious, respectable wife being harrassed. Damn the strength of Bhīma, and damn the

bowmanship of Arjuna, O Kṛṣṇa, who tolerated my being manhandled by the ignoble. That even

the weak husbands protect their wives has been the eternal moral obligation which the good have

always followed (3.13.58–60,[35] also see 3.13.67–70). Her anguish culminates in despair:

"Madhusūdana, I neither have husbands nor sons; neither brothers nor father; neither you nor

kinsmen, for you all turn a blind eye to me, as if it does not bother you, even though I was

abused by the ignoble. My fury over how Karṇa laughed to scorn does not cool off even today"

(3.13.112–13).[36] It seems, however, that Draupadī's condemnations of her husbands and other

male relatives whom she castigates for not retaliating for her humiliation are likely provoked by

their inaction after the gambling matches, and not during the match, when the Pāṇḍavas were

trapped in an impossible situation.

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[35] *garhaye pāṇḍavāṃs tv eva yudhi śreṣṭhān mahābalān, ye kliśyamānāṃ prekṣante dharmapatnīṃ yaśasvinīm. dhig balaṃ bhīmasenasya dhik pārthasya dhanuṣmatām, yau māṃ viprakṛtāṃ kṣudrair marṣayetāṃ janārdana. śāśvato 'yaṃ dharmapathaḥ sadbhir ācaritaḥ sadā, yad bhāryāṃ parirakṣanti bhartāro 'lpabalā api.*

[36] *naiva me patayaḥ santi na putrā madhusūdana, na bhrātaro na ca pitā naiva tvaṃ na ca bāndhavāḥ. ye māṃ viprakṛtāṃ kṣudrair upekṣadhvaṃ viśokavat, na hi me śāmyate duḥkhaṃ karṇo yat prāhasat tadā.*

A Battered Boat

Still, the assembly hall was full of many other powerful, authoritative personalities, the majority of whom remain mute onlookers of Draupadī's prolonged abuse. Why do they not rise to protect her? Vyāsa suggests two reasons for it: (1) the uncertainty about Draupadī's status as Duryodhana's slave or free woman, and (2) the crippling fear of Duryodhana. In the Sabhā, only two individuals—Vidura and Vikarṇa—defend Draupadī's freedom by declaring the bet null and void. But Bhīṣma expresses the legal conundrum that seems to have frustrated the arguments of Vidura. At the same time, views of Vidura and Vikarṇa attract harsh denunciation from Duryodhana and Karṇa respectively: Vidura is accused of disloyalty to his masters, the royal family of Hastināpura, and Vikarṇa is pronounced too stupid to know the subtlety and depth of the matter (2.61.29–30).

Bhīṣma's response to Draupadī also reveals another side of the story. Everyone but Vidura and Vikarṇa seems to have been paralyzed by the fear of Duryodhana's reaction if they disagreed with his win (2.62.22, 5.29.34), especially because the question of Draupadī's enslavement or freedom is not settled. In this case, Bhīṣma's words—when the nature of *dharma* is convoluted, people accept it as the powerful define it (2.62.15)—are illustrative. Hence, although deeply pained by Draupadī's plea, the majority of them do nothing. And of those who do, Vidura and Vikarṇa, their defence is either ignored or preposterously dismissed by the gloating Kaurava party, proving thereby Bhīṣma's maxim of "might is right" (2.62.15).

Just before the two armies strike at each other, Yudhiṣṭhira approaches Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Kṛpa, and Śalya for their blessings. They all wish him well but declare their helplessness in joining Yudhiṣṭhira's forces because "a man is a slave to *artha*" (6.41.36, 51, 66, 77). With the term *artha*, they pronounce their relationship with the Hastināpura monarchy: they are employees of the Kauravas (*baddho 'smy arthena kauravaiḥ*). One may be tempted to condemn

their attitude as cowardly or even selfish, but they might as well be tied by their sense of loyalty to the Kauravas, their employers. Loyalty to the master is seen as a great virtue.[37] It surely has been a vindicatory argument in the case of Karṇa's otherwise morally contemptible support for Duryodhana.[38] Although it is true about such dignitaries as Bhīṣma, Droṇa, and Kṛpa, who were paid employees of the Hastināpura monarchy, this does not apply to many other independent kings who came to Hastināpura for the gambling match. Not only Draupadī but also Vidura and Vikarṇa passionately appeal to the present kings to decide on Draupadī's status as a free woman or a slave, but they say nothing. Interestingly, they criticize Śakuni (2.61.25), Duḥśāsana (2.61.47), and even Dhṛtarāṣṭra (2.61.50), but never Duryodhana, not even when he uncovers and flaunts his thigh at Draupadī. Fear of punitive measures from Duryodhana surely is a crippling factor in their case: they remain silent because they are scared of Duryodhana (2.62.22). In addition, Bhīṣma's words that "whatever the mighty think is *dharma*, others also call that *dharma*" (2.62.15) suggest an environment of fear in the Sabhā.[39]

Bhīṣma's behaviour in the gambling hall brings much disgrace to his otherwise commendable personality. His inability to afford protection to the Kuru noble woman is seen as

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[37] Draupadī, in fact, does bemoan the lack of courage in Bhīṣma, Droṇa, and Dhṛtarāṣṭra (2.60.34).

[38] McGrath says: "Disregarding the moral consequences of his loyalty, this strict adherence to his given word supplies one of the conditions qualifying Karṇa as superlatively heroic" (2004, 127). Sibesh Chandra Bhattacharya states: "But if we are asked to single out the chief trait of his character then 'loyalty' will stand out most prominently. Of course, he carried his loyalty to Duryodhana to a perverse extreme. And Karṇa himself was aware of it, for in his conversation with Kṛṣṇa, he admitted as much. Not only did he remain loyal to Duryodhana till the very last, his loyalty to his foster parents and the *sūtas* speaks of high-mindedness at its very best" (2018, 41). That Karṇa's loyalty to Duryodhana was beyond doubt becomes debatable when he abandons Duryodhana in the war against the Gandharvas (3.230.31, 3.236.9–14). Luckily for Duryodhana, the Gandharvas do not kill him. Instead, they arrest him, and he is later freed by the Pāṇḍavas. This betrayal of his friend in a life-threatening emergency might be seen as a serious lapse on Karṇa's part.

[39] After the Pāṇḍavas successfully complete the conditions of the second game and seek to regain control over their kingdom, Drupada suspects that Bhīṣma and Droṇa would be too timid to stand up to Duryodhana (5.4.2). Kṛṣṇa too accuses the kings of timidity who silently watched Draupadī's abuse (5.29.34). Likewise, Gāndhārī feels that Bhīṣma, Droṇa, and Kṛpa etcetera will likely "lay down their lives out of fear of forfeiting the king's dole" (van Buitenen 1978, 5.127.52).

his biggest failure. Mehendale reproaches him: "One cannot but say that his attitude towards Draupadī's question was unbecoming of him; and since Draupadī was not only insulted with abuse, she was also a victim of molestation, his attitude must be judged unpardonable" (1985, 194).[40] Such a condemnation of Bhīṣma, Droṇa, and Dhṛtarāṣṭra is first articualated by Draupadī (2.60.34). Kṛṣṇa, too, reproaches the Kurus, who, led by Bhīṣma, did not stop Duryodhana from abusing Draupadī (5.29.31). He later condemns the kings for being too timid to prevent Draupadī's abuse:

> Behold this even more evil act of the Kurus that took place in the Sabhā. The Kurus, with Bhīṣma as their head, ignored a weeping Draupadī—a dear wife of the Pāṇḍavas, a glorious woman blessed with virtue and conduct, as she was taken hostage by a willful [Duryodhana]. Had the Kurus, young and old, then come together and stopped him, Dhṛtarāṣṭra would have done me a favor, and it would have been good for his sons! Contrary to law, Duḥśāsana dragged Draupadī into the Sabhā and [in front of her] fathers-in-law. Once brought there, she lamented pitifully but found no protector except Vidura. It was definitely on account of timidity that the assembled [nobilities] could not speak against the king [Duryodhana] in the Sabhā. (5.29.30–34)[41]

On the one hand, Kṛṣṇa condemns the Kauravas for being too cowardly to protect Draupadī against abuse; on the other, he draws attention to her virtuous conduct, her innocense, thereby implying that she is in no way responsible for the humilation she suffers in the Sabhā. It should be read in connection with the text's repeated assertions that Draupadī does not deserve such a mistreatment (*anarhatī*, 2.61.5, 2.62.7, 7.126.14).

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[40] See also Hiltebeitel 2001, 247; note 25.

[41] *idaṃ punaḥ karma pāpīya eva sabhāmadhye paśya vṛttaṃ kurūṇām. priyāṃ bhāryāṃ draupadīṃ pāṇḍavānāṃ yaśasvinīṃ śīlavṛttopapannām, yad upekṣanta kuravo bhīṣmamukhyāḥ kāmānugenoparuddhāṃ rudantīm. taṃ cet tadā te sakumāravṛddhā avārayiṣyan kuravaḥ sametāḥ, mama priyaṃ dhṛtarāṣṭro 'kariṣyat putrāṇāṃ ca kṛtam asyābhaviṣyat. duḥśāsanaḥ prātilomyān nināya sabhāmadhye śvaśurāṇāṃ ca kṛṣṇām, sā tatra nītā karuṇāny avocan nānyaṃ kṣattur nātham adṛṣṭa kaṃ cit. kārpaṇyād eva sahitās tatra rājño nāśaknuvan prativaktuṃ sabhāyām.*

In conclusion, the text seems to vindicate the Pāṇḍavas of failure to protect Draupadī because they were trapped in a legal conundrum concerning Draupadī's status. As slaves of Duryodhana, it would have been against the law to rise against their own master. This might seem a simple matter, but how the other Kṣatriyas would have reacted to such a blatant breach of master-slave relationship remains a matter of hypothesis. Moreover, the younger Pāṇḍavas were held back by their loyalty to Yudhiṣṭhira, a man who consistently refused to compromise with *dharma*. But the pusillanimity of many a king is surprising. Although it is possible that they remain silent because of the complexity of Draupadī's status, it is this very complexity they could have used to defend Draupadī against abuse: the Kauravas had no right to treat Draupadī as a slave until her arguments against the enslavement had been successfully refuted. Draupadī questions the validity of wagering her, and Vidura and Vikarṇa declare it null and void. Due to their timidity, other royal dignitaries sit silent. The Kauravas' discorteous behaviour in this case is a classic example of how bullies exploit ambiguities and an environment of fear.

5.1.3 Kṛṣṇa/*dharma*:[42] the defenders of Draupadī

Despite the fact that the Pāṇḍavas and other powerful dignitaries present in the gambling hall could not, or did not, safeguard Draupadī, she was not left without protection. The Critical Edition states that an invisible stream of clothing blanketed her. How did that stream of clothing appear? The Critical Edition is strikingly quiet, but the Vulgate editions describe how Draupadī

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[42] Hiltebeitel presumes a connection between *dharma* and Yudhiṣṭhira and Vidura (2001, 255), which Karve had evoked in her *Yuganta* (1969, 89–103). Karve often refers to Yudhiṣṭhira as Dharma, a sobriquet, which Hiltebeitel follows. I, on the other hand, interpret the term *dharma* not as an epithet but a term that connotes law. Hence, I do not use a capital D.

calls upon her divine friend Kṛṣṇa. The difference between Vyāsa's text and the Vulgate editions has given rise to a debate about the implications of the incident.

Based on his understanding of the manuscript tradition, Edgerton, the chief editor of the Critical Edition of the Sabhāparva, concludes: "It is perhaps not strange that later redactors felt it necessary to embroider the story [with Kṛṣṇa's miraculous role]. Yet to me, at least, the original form, in its brevity, simplicity, and rapid movement, appeals very forcefully" (Edgerton, 1944, xxix). But Hiltebeitel suggests caution because "at a charged point, a text can be both expanded and contracted"; therefore, "Edgerton's choice could merely typify the eagerness of the Critical Edition's editors to excise Bhakti by stripping the text." He therefore argues that "it is possible, as analog, that late sectarian copyists might have omitted Kṛṣṇa's part in rescuing Draupadī to rescue *him* from 'textual contact' with her impure single garment" (2001, 251). Here, Hiltebeitel makes an allusion to the tradition that considers a menstruating woman impure and prohibits contact with her, a sort of overinterpretation similar to Brockington's.

Given the complex history of the *Mahābhārata*'s textual development, it is difficult to accept or reject Hiltebeitel's proposition. But the evidence on which he substantiates his position in fact contradicts his conclusion. In order to argue in favor of Kṛṣṇa's role in safeguarding Draupadī, he cites what are according to him "the two powerful passages that explicitly recall Draupadī's prayer to 'Govinda'!" Both of these passages occur in the Udyogaparva. Kṛṣṇa sends a warning to Hastināpura that they should fulfil their desire to eat, drink, and be merry to their hearts' content before the war:

This old debt will not glide off from my heart, that Kṛṣṇā cried out, "O Govinda," when I was far away. (5.58.21)[43]

According to the Vulgate edition (2.61.40 *543; Nīlakaṇṭha 2.68.41–43), Kṛṣṇa is alluding to Draupadī's prayer that she is reported to have cried out, which obliges him to protect her (ibid. 44–45). Draupadī, too, recalls before Kṛṣṇa:

While the apathetic, motionless Pāṇḍavas looked on, when I said, 'Save me, O Govinda,' you were longed for in my mind. (5.80.26)[44]

This indeed makes, according to Hiltebeitel, the reconstituted text of the Critical Edition incongruous: either the text of the Sabhāparva, without Kṛṣṇa's role, is authentic, or the two passages from the Udyogaparva are. Both cannot be equally valid. But I do not see any narratorial incongruity in Edgerton's reading. Both the passages surely imply that Draupadī *thought* of, or even prayed to, Kṛṣṇa in those awful moments, which is consistent with the trust the entire Pāṇḍava family displays in Kṛṣṇa. When Duḥśāsana drags Draupadī into the Sabhā, he already hints about the possibility of Draupadī's calling Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna for help (2.60.26). And yet, the passages cited by Hiltebeitel do not stipulate that Kṛṣṇa indeed came to her rescue. The first passage, in fact, implies quite the contrary. If Kṛṣṇa did indeed reciprocate Draupadī's prayer with his miraculous enwrapping of her, Kṛṣṇa would have no reason to feel indebted. He feels indebted precisely because he did not protect her. In addition, Draupadī laments before Kṛṣṇa, "Madhusūdana, I neither have husbands nor sons; neither brothers nor father; neither you nor kinsmen, for you all turn a blind eye to me, as if it does not bother you, even though I was abused by the ignoble. My fury over how Karṇa laughed to scorn does not cool off even today"

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[43] *ṛṇam etat pravṛddhaṃ me hṛdayān nāpasarpati, yad govindeti cukrośa kṛṣṇā māṃ dūravāsinam.*

[44] *nirāmarṣeṣv aceṣṭeṣu prekṣamāṇeṣu pāṇḍuṣu, trāhi mām iti govinda manasā kāṅkṣito 'si me.*

(3.13.112–13). This, too, gives the impression that Kṛṣṇa did not return her prayer. Even though the Vulgate mentions Draupadī's prayer to Kṛṣṇa and his rushing to help her, it never states that Kṛṣṇa protected her. It credits *dharma* for her protection: *tatas tu dharmo 'ntarito mahātmā samāvṛṇod vai vividhaiḥ suvastraiḥ* (2.61.40 *543) and *nānārāgavirāgāṇi vasanāny atha vai prabho, prādurbhavanti śataśo dharmasya paripālanāt* (2.61.41 *553). A small number of manuscripts include a stanza, also published in the Southern Edition (1906, 2.90.49) which seems to imply Kṛṣṇa's role in protecting Draupadī "*tasya prasādād*" (because of his grace) (2.61.41 *551). The preceding stanza speaks of Kṛṣṇa, and it can be argued that the term *tasya* (his) refers to him. But it becomes complicated in the other published edition of the Southern recension, where the term *tasya* appears to denote *dharma* (1932, 2.61.49) because the previous verse alludes to *dharma*'s role in protecting her.[45] Above all, when Kṛṣṇa visits the Pāṇḍavas in the forest, he confesses his lack of knowledge about the dice match, and he becomes aware of it only after the fact:

> O king, had I been present in Dvārakā sooner, you would not have suffered this misfortune. I would have come to the gamble, even if the Kauravas, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, or Duryodhana had not invited me. I would have brought Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Kṛpa, and Bāhlīka together, and would have stopped the game by showing them many disadvantages [of it.] (3.14.1–3). […] But at that time, I was not present in the Ānartas,[46] which is why you all fell into this trouble caused by gambling. After I returned to Dvārakā, O best of the Kurus, Pāṇḍu's son, I heard from Yuyudhāna exactly how you ended up in trouble. And, as soon as I heard about it, O king, I was overwhlemed with distress, and with an urge to see you, O lord of people, I came fast. (3.14.14–16)[47]

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[45] Hiltebeitel takes note of the second quote (2001, 257).

[46] A region which Arjuna conquered as part of the Pāṇḍavas' territorial expansion (2.23.14). It seems that Dvārakā, Kṛṣṇa's hometown was in the same region as he speaks of his absence in Ānartas and Dvārakā.

[47] *nedaṃ kṛcchram anuprāpto bhavān syād vasudhādhipa, yady ahaṃ dvārakāyāṃ syāṃ rājan saṃnihitaḥ purā. āgaccheyam ahaṃ dyūtam anāhūto 'pi kauravaiḥ, āmbikeyena durdharṣa rājñā duryodhanena ca. vārayeyam ahaṃ dyūtaṃ bahūn doṣān pradarśayan, bhīṣmadroṇau samānāyya kṛpaṃ bāhlīkam eva ca. […] asāṃnidhyaṃ tu kauravya mamānarteṣv abhūt tadā, yenedaṃ vyasanaṃ prāptā bhavanto dyūtakāritam. so 'ham etya kuruśreṣṭha*

Not only did Kṛṣṇa have no idea about the gambling match, he was enaged in a serious battle in another region and learned about it *after* returning to Dvārakā, which must have been after the Pāṇḍavas' arrival in the forest. Needless to say, considering such compelling textual evidence, I am inclined to put confidence in Edgerton's reading, and I suggest that Hiltebeitel made an error. Regardless of such textual complexities, many subsequent Mahābhārata tellings assert, almost invariably, that Kṛṣṇa had rushed to Draupadī (2.61.40 *543; Nīlakaṇṭha 2.68.45).

If one embraces the Critical Edition's omission of Kṛṣṇa's role in protecting Draupadī, the question arises: who protects Draupadī? Or rather, how is Draupadī's honour preserved? The Critical Edition gives no straightforward solution. When Duḥśāsana begins to pull Draupadī's dress off, the text reads:

> But just as Draupadī's garment was being pulled off, O lord of people, another garment of similar look appeared multiple times. (2.61.41)[48]

People noticed the strange phenomenon and let out a cry. But the text is silent about the source of the miraculous appearance of garments. Edgerton postulates that "it is apparently implied (though not stated) that cosmic justice automatically, or 'magically' if you like, prevented the chaste Draupadī from being stripped in public" (1944, xxix). It is interesting that Edgerton seems to have resorted for his hypothesis to the very verse that he relegated to interpolation, that it was *dharma* who saved Draupadī's honour.

The question as to who protects Draupadī remains of great importance, because giving credit to Kṛṣṇa for protecting Draupadī does, in a way, affect the virtuous strength of her

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dvārakāṃ pāṇḍunandana, aśrauṣaṃ tvāṃ vyasaninaṃ yuyudhānād yathātatham. śrutvaiva cāhaṃ rājendra paramodvignamānasaḥ, tūrṇam abhyāgato 'smi tvāṃ draṣṭukāmo viśāṃ pate.

[48] *ākṛṣyamāṇe vasane draupadyās tu viśāṃ pate, tadrūpam aparaṃ vastraṃ prādurāsīd anekaśaḥ.*

character. Wendy Doniger observes: "Some later versions of this passage remove Draupadi's agency by saying that she called for help from Krishna, who arrived and performed the miracle of the expanding sari. There is a real loss of feminist ground here" (2013, 542, note xi). She further observes that it is "the power of Draupadi's own dharma" that protects her. Her *dharma*, according to Doniger, is nothing but her "chastity," "her unwavering devotion to her husband(s)" (2013, 542). Even though the idea that a wife can acquire supernatural powers through her unwavering devotion to her husband is well-known, and Draupadī is on several ocassions praised as a *pativratā* (3.28.2, 3.222.8, 3.277.3),[49] the claim that Draupadī had acquired such supernatural powers as a result of her devotion to her husbands cannot be substantiated from the epic. Karve suggests a more abstract miraculous intervention, "it seemed as if the power of the universe itself had awakened to protect her" (1969, 127).

To conclude, let me summarize my discussion of Vyāsa's text before turning to the Series. Vyāsa's account of Draupadī's maltreatment in the Sabhā contains references to practices specific to the Kṣatriya community. It also alludes to common practices, such as a husband's authority over his wife, as well as master-slave relationships. As the eldest male, Yudhiṣṭhira was the head of the family; as such he enjoyed rights to acquire or dispense with (sell, give away, or stake in gamble) the family members and properties. It is an example of the workings of an extended family. He staked and lost his family property, brothers, himself, and Draupadī. Even though a painful scene to witness, no one objects to his authority, and given the circumstances, no one accuses him of a wrongdoing. In order to remain true to his word, he could neither

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[49] *Pativratā*, a wife devoted to her husband; keeping her senses restrained and mind controlled, she thinks of her husband as her deity (3.196.6). An example of supernatural power acquired solely through her devotion to her husband is found in Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* 3.196, where a woman acquires an ability to instinctively perceive others' emotional state and incidents that she does not herself witness (3.197.28–30). The force of Gāndhārī's curse on Kṛṣṇa seems to ensue from her devotion to her husband (11.25.39).

disobey his older uncle nor decline to accept a challenge. Once the Pāṇḍavas became slaves of

Duryodhana, they were not in a position to defy his authority, which prevented them from

effectively protecting Draupadī. Some contemporary interpretations of why the Pāṇḍavas could

not protect her are, as I have shown, flawed, for they misleadingly backread into Vyāsa's

narrative some misinformed cultural aspects—the claim of the dreadful effects of menstrual

pollution, the claim that sex workers were completely unprotected, and the claim that younger

males do not protect their wives lest they breach the principle of not expressing their conjugal

love in the presence of elder relatives. Such speculative interpretations are not supported by

Vyāsa and other literature.

5.2 TV Series: Vyāsa versus later tellings

My inquiry in this section builds upon the points that I raise in the section on Vyāsa's

epic. The nature of Draupadī's humiliation in the Series is almost the same as in Vyāsa's

Mahābhārata, even though the actions and dialogues of the episodes have been modified. There

is hardly any noticeable difference between Draupadī's abuse in the Sabhā by the Kauravas, who

characterize her as a slave and a "promiscuous" woman, and why the powerful dignitaries fail to

defend her effectively. I will therefore critique the Series' portrayal of these points briefly. I

focus on three issues that stand out in the Series: Draupadī as the agent provocateur for her own

mistreatment, the Pāṇḍavas' accountability for subjecting her to humiliation, and Kṛṣṇa's role in

protecting her. I will argue that the Series' creators' goal to contemporize[50] the epic story is on

the one hand underscored by holding the Pāṇḍavas and others who fail to shield Draupadī from

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[50] See the last section of Appendix II.

abuse responsible but, on the other hand, it is weakened by showing it as a result of Draupadī's own flaws.

5.2.1 Notable features of the Series

After his much-coveted victory that won him Draupadī in the bet, Duryodhana, with a look of deep satisfaction, and as if fantasizing his next step, orders Vidura to fetch Draupadī. Unlike the epic's Vidura, who declares Draupadī's bet null and void, Vidura of the Series screams out: "You fool, do not invite the Lord of Death!" (46:37) This is, however, no deterrent for Duryodhana, who is crazed by his unprecedented triumph over the Pāṇḍavas—all his previous efforts to do away with them were in vain. But now that he has taken possession of the Pāṇḍavas' kingdom and wealth and reduced them and their wife Draupadī to slavery, he sees it as an irreversible victory, and therefore intends to satiate his relentless thirst to put the Pāṇḍavas in their place for good. So, he orders a doorman to go to Draupadī. Strangely enough, Draupadī, who, being in menses, avoided seeing even her aunt-in-law Gāndhārī, displays no hesitation in standing close to and conversing freely with the doorman. Weeping and trembling, and after a long-drawn faltering, the doorman breaks the bad news to Draupadī, bit by bit. The news of the lost bet of the Pāṇḍava brothers alarms Draupadī. She is deeply concerned because brothers cannot be considered as "property." No person could be counted as property. Before she could collect herself from this shock, the weeping doorman reveals that "he even lost you, Queen!" She refuses to accept her loss in the bet, for "not even a wretched (*adharmī*) [man] can stake his wife on a bet"; hence, she wonders if Yudhiṣṭhira was gaming "under the influence of alcohol." "He was not," informs the doorman, which arouses in Draupadī's heart a sharp, contemptuous spurn toward Yudhiṣṭhira: "He lost me and his brothers knowingly? Then return there, and ask the gambler who lost me, whether he first lost himself or me. I shall not go there without knowing

the answer to this question" (46:41).[51] The doorman returns to the Sabhā and repeats Draupadī's

question, but Duryodhana, impatient finally to pay Draupadī back, fumingly orders him: "Go and

tell that [wife] of five husbands that she must come and ask her question here." Draupadī agrees

to present herself but only if the elder Kurus are willing to drag the "honour of the Kuru family"

into the assembly (47:11). Duryodhana roars a hoarse rejoinder: "Who is she to pose a question

to the Kurus? I won her, and she must obey me and come here." Bhīṣma makes yet another

feeble request to Dhṛtarāṣṭra to stop the game right there and then, which Duryodhana brushes

off as unjust:

> The king [Dhṛtarāṣṭra] cannot inflict such an injustice on me, grandsire. Yudhiṣṭhira
> himself staked Draupadī in the bet! Before he staked Draupadī, why did you all not
> advise Yudhiṣṭhira that Draupadī is the honour of this royal family, and that he should not
> stake the honour of the Bharata lineage in a bet? Why are these questions being raised
> now when I have won the bet? Does anyone have a reply to my question? (47:13)[52]

The effectiveness of Duryodhana's point is highlighted with the fact that all sit quietly with their

heads bowed in agony, an indication that they should have stopped Yudhiṣṭhira as he was about

to stake Draupadī, and that their attempts to stop the game came too late. In the Sabhā, Draupadī

stands face to face to Bhīṣma and condemns him for being a party in her humiliation. He is

"sitting in the shade of an evil tree," she admonishes him. Accusing him of being an aid in her

humiliation, she asks:

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[51] Draupadī: *āryaputra to dharmarāja haiṃ. apanī patnī ko to koī adharmī bhī dāṃva para nahīṃ lagā sakatā. kyā vo madirā pīkara khela rahe the?* Doorman: *nahīṃ, bahūrānī, unhoṃne madirā nahīṃ pī hai.* Draupadī: *vo apane bhāiyoṃ ko aura mujhe jānate-būjhate hāra gae? to vahīṃ lauṭa jāo, aura mujhe hāra jāne vāle usa juārī se ye pūcho ki vo pahale apane āpa ko hārā thā yā mujhe. isa praśna kā uttara jāne binā maiṃ vahāṃ nahīṃ cala sakatī. mere praśna kā uttara lekara āo, aura mujhe le calo.*

[52] *mahārāja mere sātha yaha anyāya nahīṃ kara sakate, pitāmaha. yudhiṣṭhira ne svayaṃ draupadī ko dāṃva para lagāyā thā. draupadī ko dāṃva para lagāne se pahale, usa samaya, āpa saba logoṃ ne yudhiṣṭhira se kyoṃ nahīṃ kahā ki draupadī rājagharāne kī lāja hai, aura vo bharatavaṃśa kī lāja ko dāṃva para na lagāe? ye sāre praśna aba kyoṃ uṭha rahe haiṃ jaba dāṃva maiṃ jīta cukā hūṃ? mere praśna kā uttara hai kisī ke pāsa? hai kisī ke pāsa mere praśna kā uttara?*

> You know the scriptures, grandsire! Tell me, a person who has lost himself in gamble, who is he (what right does he have) to stake someone else's freedom and self-dignity? […] If the wife is a property of her husband, then when my husband lost himself, he lost me too! Then how could I be staked? If the wife is not a property of her husband, then how can my husband stake me without my permission? (47:20)[53]

Bhīṣma painfully but silently shakes his head. She approaches Dhṛtarāṣṭra, who also brushes off her plea, for neither Yudhiṣṭhira nor Duryodhana had sought his "permission" to include her as the bet. She should, therefore, demand an answer to her question from Yudhiṣṭhira, "who violated the decorum of the Bharata dynasty by staking her" (47:23). Draupadī finally appeals to Vidura, who has rightly gained the reputation as a speaker of bitter truth, to answer her two questions:

1.   Does the husband have a right to lose his wife in gambling?

2.   Does a slave have a right to stake someone else's freedom in the bet?[54]

Vidura, weeping and swaying his head convulsively, had nothing to say; Vikarṇa's support for Draupadī is also ignored as Śakuni affectionately consoles Duryodhana: "Let whosoever wishes to speak, speak. Whatever was to happen, that has happened. Dear Yudhiṣṭhira has already lost Draupadī." Draupadī stands her ground with a fiery retort: "Who is he to lose me? Even if he had a right to lose his wife, I am not a wife of him alone! I am a wife of all the five Pāṇḍavas. Hence, he alone does not have an authority over me!" (47:25) Of course,

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[53] *āpako to śāstroṃ kā jñāna hai, pitāmaha. mujhe batāie, jo vyakti svayaṃ apane ko jue meṃ hāra cukā hai vo kauna hotā hai kisī aura kī svataṃtratā, kisī aura ke ātma-sammāna ko dāṃva para lagāne vālā? […] yadi patnī pati kī saṃpatti hotī hai, to jaba mere pati apane ko hāre to usake sātha mujhe bhī hāra gae. to phira maiṃ dāṃva para kaise lagī? yadi patnī pati kī saṃpatti nahīṃ hai, to mere pati merī ājñā lie binā mujhe dāṃva para kaise lagā sakate haiṃ?*

[54] *kākāśrī, mahātmā vidura kī nīti isa viṣaya meṃ kyā kahatī hai? āpa to karave saca bolane ke lie prasiddha haiṃ. āpa to cupa na rahie. kyā kisī pati ko adhikāra hai [ki] vo apanī patnī ko jue meṃ hāra jāe? kyā kisī dāsa ko adhikāra hai ki vo kisī aura kī svādhīnatā ko dāṃva para lagā de?*

Yudhiṣṭhira had refused to seek his brothers' permission to stake her. Draupadī goes to the

Pāṇḍava brothers and asks them if Yudhiṣṭhira secured their permission before he staked her.

She finally confronts Arjuna, the greatest archer who won her in the *svayaṃvara*:

> Did you win my *svayaṃvara* competition so that the eldest son of Kuntī [Yudhiṣṭhira]
> could stake me? There have been gamblers before him too in the world, but did anyone
> stake even his concubine? But you all just watched your wife being staked! Damn your
> bravery! (47:26)[55]

Arjuna is Draupadī's main target because he is the one who won her hand in the self-choice

ceremony. Even if she is married to all five Pāṇḍavas, she specifically holds him responsible for

her miserable state. Vikarṇa makes an apparently brave but shallow stand—he fiercely appeals to

the present dignitaries to reply to Draupadī's question, for their reply "will open the doors of

fortune or misfortune for Hastināpura" (47:27). Screaming his lungs off, he demands an answer

to *his* question (which is, in fact, Draupadī's first question). If they failed to answer that question,

he warns, it will haunt them in many lifetimes to come, and they "will have to be born again and

again" to answer it. Finally, Bhīṣma, who had so far not dared to utter a single word on the

subject, raises his head and with eyes filled with tears, he speaks in a grim and sad voice:

"Yudhiṣṭhira did not act well in staking Draupadī, but the husband's right over his wife is

confirmed" (47:28).[56]

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[55] *ye hote kauna haiṃ mujhe hārane vāle? yadi inheṃ apanī patnī ko hārane kā adhikāra ho bhī to bhī maiṃ kevala inakī patnī to nahīṃ hūṁ. maiṃ pāṃcoṃ pāṇḍuputroṃ kī patnī hūṁ, aura mujha para kevala inakā adhikāra nahīṃ hai. kyā inhoṃne dāṁva para lagāne se pahale tuma se yaha pūchā thā ki ye tumhārī patnī ko dāṁva para lagā sakate haiṃ yā nahīṃ? kyā tumane inheṃ ājñā dī thī, sarvaśreṣṭha dhanurdhara? mīna-vedhana karake merā svayaṃvara jītane vāle śūravīra, tuma bolo! kyā tumane merā svayaṃvara isalie jītā thā ki jyeṣṭha kuntīputra eka dina mujhe dāṁva para lagā deṃ? saṃsāra meṃ inase pahale bhī juārī ho cuke haiṃ, para kisī ne kabhī apanī rakhaila ko bhī dāṁva para lagāyā thā? aura tuma loga? tuma loga apanī byāhatā ko dāṁva para laga jānā dekhate raha gae. dhikkāra hai tuma logoṃ kī vīratā para, dhikkāra hai.*

[56] *yudhiṣṭhira ne draupadī ko dāṁva para lagā kara acchā nahīṃ kiyā. paraṃtu patnī para pati kā adhikāra to siddha hai.*

A Battered Boat

With a contemptuous grimace and an exclamation of dismay, Draupadī springs toward him: "Right? What is the definition of right? Is it also not true, grandsire, that protecting his wife is the husband's ultimate duty?" Karṇa, overtly hostile to both Draupadī and her husbands, resumes his personal attack: "These five indeed could not protect you; therefore, come and sit in my friend Duryodhana's lap." Proudly patting Duryodhana's stretched out thigh, he scoffingly proposes, "You are already married to five husbands, then what harm is there in marrying the sixth?"[57] Looking poised but boiling with a violent anger within, Arjuna warns him, "One day I will surely punish you for this humiliation, Karṇa!" Undeterred, Karṇa continues, "A woman who lives with as many as five husbands is not a wife, she is rather a whore." Just as the mortified Pāṇḍavas, drenched in sweat, glare at him, he instigates the most dreaded incident of the epic, "And for a harlot, honour and dishonour mean nothing. Even if she were brought naked here, still it would not have been inappropriate" (47:29).[58] Basking in his victory, the confident Duryodhana impudently agrees with Karṇa: "My friend is absolutely right! What is honour or dishonour for a "whore" or a slave? Duḥśāsana, strip this slave of mine naked." In a salacious tone, he continues: "After all, let me see how the slave whom I have won looks." Bhīma warns, "Duḥśāsana, if you even dare to touch Draupadī's dress, then I swear by the honour of a Kṣatriya, I will snap your arms." Duḥśāsana's retort to Bhīma reveals his dark intentions: "Then tell your wife of five husbands that she must herself remove her clothes. And if she does not do so, then I will have to use my hands" (47:30). Amid the callous, howling laughter of Duryodhana, Karṇa, and Śakuni, Duḥśāsana darts toward Draupadī to strip her naked. In that

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[57] *ye pāṁca to tumhārī rakṣā nahīṃ kara pāe. isalie ākara mere mitra duryodhana kī goda meṃ baiṭha jāo. pāṁca patiyoṃ vālī to tuma pahale hī se ho, to chaṭhe kā hātha pakaṛa lene meṃ hāni hī kyā hai?*

[58] *jo strī pāṁca pāṁca puruṣoṃ ke sātha rahatī ho vo patnī nahīṃ, veśyā hotī hai. aura veśyā kā māna kyā, aura apamāna kyā. ye yahāṁ nagna bhī lāī jātī, taba bhī anucita nā hotā.*

desperate moment, Draupadī realizes that she cannot count on any individual then present in the court to protect her dignity; consequently, she wholeheartedly submits to the will of the god Kṛṣṇa. Swiftly averting their tear-filled eyes from such an unseemly scene, all the elders turn and twist helplessly on their seats. Kṛṣṇa, invisible to all, supplies an endless piece of *sārī* of the same colour and design that Draupadī wore at the time. Duḥśāsana relentlessly continues to pull her *sārī*. Finally, completely exhausted, he falls to the ground, everyone sighs a relief, and Bhīma rises to announce his terrible vow summoning all the present, past, and future Kṣatriyas as his witness: "What I am about to say, no one before me has said so, nor will anyone after me say so. I, Pāṇḍu's son Bhīma, announce that I shall not show my face to my ancestors until I have torn this Duḥśāsana's chest open in war and drunk his blood" (47:35). Upon hearing Bhīma's reverberating vow, Bhīṣma, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Droṇa, and Vidura display a premonition of imminent disaster. The heartbroken Vidura, with a voice almost choked with tears, begs the dignitaries:

> We have witnessed what we ought not have. Now at least reply to Draupadī's question. A wounded soul, the wounded honour of this royal family, has brought up a question before you. […] You all know *dharma*, and Draupadī's question indeed relates to *dharma*. Remaining silent while one knows the answer to a question related to *dharma* is equal to telling a half lie, and not giving the right answer surely amounts to a full lie. Tell me, whether you will take the responsibility for a half lie or a full lie? For no one amongst us today has the courage to tell the whole truth. Even so, we cannot remain silent. We will have to tell Draupadī at least this, "Oh, weeping Draupadī, rise up. Collect your tears and humiliation and approach another court (Sabhā), because this court is occupied by dead people." (47:36)[59]

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[59] *jo nahīṃ dekhanā thā vo to dekha cuke. aba draupadī ke praśna kā uttara to dījie. eka ghāyala ātmā, isa rājagharāne kī ghāyala maryādā, āpake sāmane eka praśna lekara āī hai. aura isa samaya isa bharī sabhā meṃ apane hāthoṃ se apane muṃha ko chupāe ro rahī hai. kṛpayā usake praśnoṃ kā uttara to dījie. āpa sabhī dharma ke jñānī haiṃ, aura draupadī ke praśnoṃ kā saṃbaṃdha dharma hī se to hai. dharma ke praśna kā uttara jānate hue bhī cupa rahanā ādhā jhūṭha bolane ke barābara hai, aura ṭhīka uttara na denā to pūrā jhūṭha hai hī. ye to batāie ki āpa loga apane sira ādhe jhūṭha kā āropa leṃge yā pūre jhūṭha kā? kyoṃki pūrā saca bolane kā sāhasa āja hama meṃ se kisī ko bhī nahīṃ hai. phira bhī hama cupa to nahīṃ raha sakate. hameṃ draupadī se itanā to kahanā hī paṛegā ki "he bilakhatī huī draupadī, uṭha. apane āṃsū aura apane apamāna ko sameṭa kara kisī aura sabhā meṃ jā, kyoṃki ye sabhā, ye sabhā to mṛtaka logoṃ kī sabhā hai."*

A Battered Boat

With a heavy heart, Draupadī rises to her feet, and after describing the "moral defect" of the Kurus which Dhṛtarāṣṭra allowed to prevail in the Sabhā—a perverse attempt was made to strip her naked in her own home before the very eyes of her own respectable kin and relatives—she seeks to settle accounts with the power of her speech:

> Listen, you all! In this court, full of shameless ones and cowards, I, Draupadī, the daughter of Drupada, the wife of the king of Indraprastha, and the daughter-in-law of Hastināpura's emperor, curse you all (47:39)

But before she can utter her infallible curse, Gāndhārī makes an unanticipated sensational entrance into the court, with a terrified, resounding "No." The pain and pitch of her voice stuns the entire assembly, causing everyone to turn their tearstained faces to her. The episode concludes with a couplet issuing a warning to those who insult womankind: those who insult women meet their destruction at the hands of God.[60]

Episode 48 begins with Gāndhārī's comforting embracement of Draupadī, and Gāndhārī fires her triumphant shot: "Duryodhana, you have had your sister-in-law disrobed! Now ask Duḥśāsana that he now disrobe your mother Gāndhārī, too. Why are you silent, shameless? Command your brother!" Weeping, she then turns to Śakuni: "Brother Śakuni, tell your dear nephew that he should at least obey one bidding of his mother."[61] With an unusual unkindness, she reprimands Duryodhana: had she listened to Vidura's advice to kill Duryodhana immediately after his birth, the Bharata dynasty would not suffer such an embarrassing moment. Summoning

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[60] *jo bhī nārī jāti kā yūṁ karatā apamāna, usakā nāśa avaśya hī kara detā bhagavān.* The couplet seems to be a free Hindi composition of Manu 3.56–58.

[61] The TV Series seems to have borrowed this dialogue of Gāndhārī in the Sabhā from *Jaya Bhārata* (1952) by Maithilīśharaṇa Gupta, one of the most prominent Hindi authors. For example, Gupta's Gāndhārī laments: "Alas, is even the opprobrium of the world (people) no more taken into consideration? If today it is of the daughter-in-law, is my hip-garment also not in peril tomorrow (future)?" *hāya! loka kī lajjā bhī aba nahīṁ raha gayī lakṣita kyā? āja bahū kā to kala merā kaṭi-paṭa nahīṁ arakṣita kyā?* (1952, 139).

the ancestors of the Bharata dynasty, she seeks their forgiveness, for she has given birth to

Duryodhana. Gāndhārī is enraged at Dhṛtarāṣṭra too:

> In the very lineage in which no one's hand had until today reached to the dress even of a maid slave,[62] the hand of the successor of Bharata reached to the dress of your daughter-in-law, and you said nothing? Dear husband, did you not even fear the curse of this chaste woman? Should Draupadī decree, the earth shall refuse to yield crops, moon its light, rivers their waters, and sun its light. Even your army cannot block the curse of this chaste [woman], my lord. (48:8)[63]

She herself is quite frightened by Draupadī's vengeful impulse to curse and begs her to not spell

a curse on "her own" people. Draupadī honours her request but vows never to forgive Śakuni,

Duryodhana, Duḥśāsana, and Karṇa. Even though she can "understand" Draupadī's condition,

Gāndhārī, smitten with motherly love, weeps before Draupadī to forgive Duryodhana and

Duḥśāsana, for irrespective of their mean character, they are her own "sons." But Draupadī

exhibits no signs of pity. Prodded by Gāndhārī, Dhṛtarāṣṭra at long last stirs his tongue; he

invokes his ancestors, Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Kṛpa, Pāṇḍavas, and the noble Draupadī as witnesses to

his wish that the present and the future of Hastināpura never forgive him, because he deserves no

such forgiveness for his willfully negligent behaviour. Displaying his true Janus-faced character,

he immediately expects Draupadī to forgive him and offers to fulfil her wish. Draupadī seeks

first Yudhiṣṭhira's freedom and then the freedom of the other Pāṇḍavas along with their

weaponry. Seeing an end of the conflict, the big-hearted Dhṛtarāṣṭra voluntarily and

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[62] This contradicts Vyāsa's text and the TV Series' depiction of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's character. When Gāndhārī was pregnant, Dhṛtarāṣṭra had a relationship with his maid, who gave birth to Yuyutsu, the stepbrother of the Kauravas (1.107.35–36). In the TV Series, Duryodhana admits that Yuyutsu is not his brother, but a stepbrother (54:22), although Dhṛtarāṣṭra's extra-marital relationship is never disclosed explicitly.

[63] *jisa vaṃśa meṃ āja taka kisī kā hātha kisī dāsī ke vastra taka na pahuṃcā ho, usī kuru rājavaṃśa meṃ bharata ke uttarādhikārī kā hātha āpakī putravadhū ke vastra taka pahuṃca gayā! aura āpane kucha na kahā! āpako satī ke śāpa kā ḍara bhī nahīṃ lagā, āryaputra! yadi draupadī kaha de to bhūmi āpako anāja dene se, cāṃda āpako cāṃdanī dene se, nadī āpako pānī dene se, aura sūraja āpako dhūpa dene inkāra kara de. āpakī senā bhī isa satī ke śāpa ko roka nahīṃ sakatī, āryaputra.*

enthusiastically reinstates all that which Yudhiṣṭhira had lost in the gamble. Draupadī, perhaps seeking to block any possibility of feelings of assuagement in the Pāṇḍavas and hoping to exact revenge in future, insinuates that the Pāṇḍavas not accept the lost properties in free offering. Her attitude elicits a sharp comment from Karṇa: "I swear by Mahādeva, dear uncle, I have seen many beautiful women, but none possesses the acuity which Draupadī has" (48:14). The clamorous Bhīma's violent threat to thrash them all unless they shut up is irritatingly interrupted by Yudhiṣṭhira, for speaking in such a "loud voice" before their uncle is a sign of disrespect.

Even though the first gambling episode and Draupadī's humiliation in the Sabhā thus draw to a close, the frightening and dangerous after-effects of such a dreadful transgression of decorum is introduced later. Just as Dhṛtarāṣṭra fully re-establishes the Pāṇḍavas' sovereignty and Duryodhana, absolutely frustrated at his father's naivety, plans yet another game, the Pāṇḍavas are seen getting ready for their departure to Indraprastha. Draupadī, now dressed in an attire indicative of her menses having ended, enters the room with her hair undone. Yudhiṣṭhira asks Draupadī, with his usual irksome naivety, the reason for leaving her hair undone. She does not mince words: she intends to keep her "abused" hair loose so that it will always remind her heroic husbands of her harrowing mistreatment by Duḥśāsana. She is determined to keep it loose until one of her husbands brings a handful of blood from Duḥśāsana's chest—she will adorn her hair only after washing her humiliation off it with Duḥśāsana's blood (49:22).

She rebuffs Yudhiṣṭhira's request to forgive the "younger cousin" with sarcasm: "You are an emblem of *dharma* on this earth; you might very well forgive Duryodhana and Duḥśāsana. But I represent the honour (*svābhimāna*) of womankind; I will never forgive them" (49:23). When Arjuna vents his vengeful feelings before Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma rebukes Arjuna, very uncharacteristically, for speaking rudely to their eldest brother. Draupadī, disenchanted by this

talk of civilized heroism, resentfully protests that they must prove their (vengeful Kṣatriya) heroism to her: she will never be satisfied until she washes her hair with Duḥśāsana's blood. Their immediate departure to Indraprastha is abruptly hampered by the second invitation to the game, which again Yudhiṣṭhira cannot decline. This time, Draupadī joins her husbands in the gambling arena, indicating that she is no more menstruating. Unlike the first game, Yudhiṣṭhira's luck in the second game shows signs of victory, and all the Pāṇḍavas express a condescending sneer. Little do they know that Śakuni was playing at being a poor player. And as expected, eventually Śakuni prevails.

5.2.2 The Pāṇḍavas' accountability

As I demonstrated in my analysis of Vyāsa's epic, neither Yudhiṣṭhira nor the other Pāṇḍavas are criticized for staking Draupadī. Bhīma's criticism of Yudhiṣṭhira is silenced by Arjuna's justification of Yudhiṣṭhira's actions, which were, Arjuna claims, glorious and in accordance with Kṣatriya *dharma*. This is not the case in the Series.

In the last episode of the Series (94), before his death Bhīṣma delivers a sermon to Yudhiṣṭhira on politics and society. He compares the boundaries of a nation with the clothes of a mother, which must be protected by all means. The notion that women's well-being indicates their society's condition permeates the entire TV Series. This has a precedent. Manu declares the same sentiment in regards to a family: "Gods delight in [the families] where women are honoured, whereas all activities are futile where they are not honoured. The family in which the women suffer perishes in no time, but the [family] in which they do not suffer thrives forever. The homes that the women, not honoured properly, curse are destroyed in every way, as if

destroyed by witchcraft" (Manu 3.56–58).[64] This quotation is not irrelevant in the case of the Series as it quotes the first part of Manu's pronunciation through Kindama, a sage (8:38).[65]

The episode of Draupadī's maltreatment had been used symbolically to highlight the subjugation and abuse of India by the British, which Pamela Lothspeich surveys in her *Epic Nation: Reimagining the Mahabharata in the Age of the Empire* (2009). The Series, however, draws attention to the condition of women in independent India. Śikhaṇḍī's disconcertment in Vyāsa's text about men controlling the honour and dishonour of women permeates the Series: "We are living in a very strange society, brother; [here] men are in charge of even honour and dishonour of woman. She neither has her own personal honour nor dishonour" (70:16).[66] It is this notion that enables Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna to advise Draupadī to put her feelings of humiliation and revenge behind for the well-being and honour and dishonour of the nation. Arjuna, who is always conscious of the disgrace he and Bhīma would incur if they failed to fulfil their promises of killing Karṇa, smashing Duryodhana's thigh, and washing Draupadī's hair with Duḥśāsana's blood, never considers the fact that it was Draupadī's personal vow to wash her hair with Duḥśāsana's blood. It is her vow that becomes a vow of Bhīma. Despite the fact that the Series strives to send a strong message that a woman's honour is significant, it constantly implies that it is the men, her guardians, through whom her honour can be maintained.

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[64] *yatra nāryas tu pūjyante ramante tatra devatāḥ, yatraitās tu na pūjyante sarvās tatrāphalāḥ kriyāḥ. śocanti jāmayo yatra vinaśyaty āśu tat kulam, na śocanti tu yatraitā vardhate tad dhi sarvadā. jāmayo yāni gehāni śapanty apratipūjitāḥ, tāni kṛtyāhatānīva vinaśyanti samantataḥ.*

[65] Vyāsa's epic also expresses similar sentiments for women (13.46.5–6), but it seems more plausible that the TV Series borrows them from Manu because Vyāsa does not contain the first part of Manu (3.56), which Kindama recites verbatim.

[66] *hama baṛe vicitra samāja meṃ jī rahe haiṃ, anuja. nārī ke māna-apamāna para bhī puruṣoṃ kā adhikāra hai. nā unakā apanā vyaktigata māna hai, nā apamāna.*

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In the Series, Yudhiṣṭhira's righteous innocence for his participation in the gambling match is endorsed by showing dicing as a harmless favorite pastime of Yudhiṣṭhira's paternal and maternal ancestors, as well as of his parents. He inherits this legacy and is seen playing such leisurely games against his cousins. But Śakuni sees gambling no less than a battle. He sees the rival player as an enemy who must be defeated by all means available to one. Maddened by his losses and provoked by the demonic taunting laughter of the Kauravas, Yudhiṣṭhira stakes Draupadī, and loses the bet.

The Series uses this opportunity to condemn gambling as an addiction that overwhelms the conscience of even an enlightened soul. After Yudhiṣṭhira loses everything, the concluding stanza of episode 46 reminds the audience: "Gambling is evil; it overwhelms one's conscience. Even the virtue (*dharma*) of the Dharma-king was entrapped in the snare of gambling."[67] The Series continues to warn about the pernicious nature of gambling in the following episodes as Yudhiṣṭhira, Arjuna, and Draupadī see in their disastrous losses a valuable lesson for the world. For instance, as per the conditions of the second game, the Pāṇḍavas must spend the last year in secrecy. Should their whereabouts be found by Duryodhana, they must repeat twelve years of banishment and one year of incognito. To spend the incognito period undetected, the Pāṇḍavas take on different identities and employ themselves in the service of Virāṭa, the king of the Matsya kingdom. Yudhiṣṭhira disguises himself as Kaṅka, a former assistant of Yudhiṣṭhira. He is once scolded by the queen for stoking the gambling instincts of the king and potentially leading him to ruination. Kaṅka draws a lesson from the disastrous consequences of the Hastināpura games: "Had he [Yudhiṣṭhira] not staked everything [including his brothers and

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[67] *juā burā hai khelanā kare buddhi kā nāśa, dharmarāja kā dharma bhī baṃdhā jue ke pāśa.*

Draupadī], how could the gravity of evil (*aśubha*) and personally destructive nature of gambling be demonstrated. The grip of gambling is so firm that neither the winner nor the loser wishes to quit it" (57:27).[68]

We have heard it before from Vidura, who counsels the blind king: because gambling warps the intellect of the loser, he continues to raise his stakes in the hope of recovering his losses and loses the sense of when to stop. The winner is no different. He continues gambling to maximize his gains. Both of them overstep the limits and rules of the game (45:9). The game in Hastināpura has proven it—they both violated the limits of the game. Arjuna, too, sees a practical lesson for the world: "Now we can tell the public with total conviction that gambling is an ignominious disease, that gambling pushes decorum to the brink of self-destruction, that gambling can turn brothers and wife from persons into objects" (60:32).[69]

These are both moralistic and practical warnings, which are not irrelevant in modern times. Although extremely rare, there have been cases of men staking their wives while gambling. As recently as 2020, a drunkard staked his wife, who was then subjected to sexual assault by the winning party.[70] The moralizing approach of the Series speaks directly to these modern gamblers.

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[68] *yadi ve saba kucha dāṁva para na lagāte, mahārānī, to ye siddha kaise hotā ki dyūta-krīṛā kitanī aśubha, kitanī vyakti-vināśaka krīṛā hai? dyūta kī pakaṛa itanī gaharī hotī hai, mahārānī, ki na jītane vālā hī uṭhanā cāhatā hai, aura nā hārane vālā.*

[69] *aba hama jana samudāya se pūre viśvāsa-sahita ye kaha sakate haiṃ ki dyūta eka sammāna-levā roga hai. ki dyūta maryādāoṃ ko ātmahatyā kī sīmā taka le jā sakatā hai. ki dyūta bhāiyoṃ aura patniyoṃ ko vyakti se vastu banā sakatā hai. apanī isa yātrā se hama jana samudāya ke lie ye upahāra lekara indraprastha lauṭeṃge. isalie yadi dhyāna se dekho to yaha saudā mahaṃgā nahīṃ hai. isalie, he mahāyoddhā uttara, unakī ālocanā nā karo. unakī ālocanā ke lie to ṛṣiyoṃ-maharṣiyoṃ ke muṁha choṭe paṛa jāte haiṃ. aura choṭe muṁha ko baṛī bāta śobhā nahīṃ detī.*

[70] "Bihar: Alcohol Addict Bets Wife During Gambling Bout, Loses Her to Friends Who Then Rape Her" (*Times Now News*, December 15, 2020).

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By using the Pāṇḍavas' tragedy as an example, the Series seems to focus more on warning viewers about the paralyzing effects of gambling and less on justifying Yudhiṣṭhira's wrongdoings. The Series does not justify the Pāṇḍavas' actions. In fact, they serve as a warning precisely because they were inexcusable. In contrast to what we saw in Vyāsa's text, Yudhiṣṭhira is constantly reprimanded in unambiguous terms for staking Draupadī. The Series holds not only Yudhiṣṭhira but all the brothers responsible for it. Soon after the gambling match, Arjuna goes to bid farewell to Bhīṣma and issues a warning that Hastināpura, i.e., those responsible for abusing Draupadī, must suffer the consequences of their actions. Bhīṣma reasons: "But the thing I want to ask you, son, is this: Who is responsible for the insult you are speaking of? Did Duryodhana stake our daughter-in-law? When Draupadī was being staked, did Duryodhana, Duḥśāsana, Karṇa, and Śakuni tell you to not protest against it? If not, then you yourselves are responsible for your own insult!" (48:37–38)[71] In the same vein, when Kṛṣṇa visits the Pāṇḍavas in the forest, he asserts the rights of all brothers to the kingdom of Indraprastha, for even though Yudhiṣṭhira was crowned as the king, they all had contributed to the creation of the empire. Yudhiṣṭhira had no right to stake the property of his brothers. He applies the same principle in the case of Draupadī: "If she [Draupadī] were a wife of him alone, even then he had no right to stake her. Wife is not a property, Pārtha, she is a life-partner. Therefore he [Yudhiṣṭhira] should repent." Kṛṣṇa then rebukes Arjuna for harbouring a lust to avenge Draupadī's humiliation through bloodletting: "You all, too, have no right to grow restless for war, because when brother Yudhiṣṭhira was violating the limits of decorum, it was the duty of you all to oppose him. But no

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[71] *kiṃtu jo bāta maiṃ jānanā cāhatā hūṁ vo ye hai, vatsa, ki jisa apamāna kī bāteṃ tuma kara rahe ho, usakā dāyitva kisa para hai? kyā kulavadhū draupadī ko duryodhana ne dāṁva para lagāyā thā? jaba yudhiṣṭhira ne draupadī ko dāṁva para lagāyā thā to duryodhana, duḥśāsana, karṇa, aura śakuni ne kyā tuma logoṃ se ye kahā thā ki isakā virodha na karo? aura yadi nahīṃ, to jo apamāna huā hai, una saba kā dāyitva svayaṃ tuma logoṃ para hai.*

one except Draupadī objected to it, no one. So, keep on swallowing the poison of humiliation, for it is your repentance" (52:7–9).[72] Duryodhana, too, vindicates himself of any villainy: "I am not ashamed of what occurred in the gambling hall, dear teacher. Draupadī had already become my maid. As her master, there was no limit to my powers over her. If anyone should be ashamed, it is brother Yudhiṣṭhira, who had staked his wife on a bet" (49:11).[73] Kuntī also is more ashamed of her sons' conduct during the gambling match than hurt by the Kauravas' wickedness. She consoles Draupadī: "The mother of those coward gamblers begs your forgiveness, Draupadī. I was proud of my sons, Draupadī; that no mother in the world can give birth to sons [as good] as mine. But that pride of mine was shattered in the gambling hall. I could not even imagine that they would inflict such an insult to my [mother's] milk and motherhood by gambling you away" (48:17).[74] These outright condemnations of Yudhiṣṭhira and the younger Pāṇḍavas stand in stark contrast to Vyāsa's account.

The Series holds every single person present in the Sabhā responsible for not rising to protect Draupadī. Cosmic Time opens episode 47 with an appeal to the audienc to pause and analyzye the shameful violation of Draupadī, which illustrates how everyone in the Sabhā commits a breach of decorum:

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[72] *vo akele yadi unakī patnī rahī hotī, taba bhī use dāṁva para lagāne kā unheṁ koī adhikāra nahīṁ thā. patnī sampatti nahīṁ hotī, pārtha; jīvana kī bhāgīdāranī hotī hai. isalie unheṁ prāyaścitta to karanā hī cāhie. aura tuma sabako bhī yuddha ke lie vyākula hone kā koī adhikāra nahīṁ. kyoṁki jaba bhrātā yudhiṣṭhira maryādā kā ullaṁghana kara rahe the to tuma sabakā ye kartavya thā ki unakā virodha karate. paraṁtu ye virodha draupadī ke atirikta kisī ne nahīṁ kiyā; kisī ne nahīṁ. isalie apamāna ke isa viṣa ko pīte raho, ki yahī tumhārā prāyaścitta hai.*

[73] *dyūta-krīṛā bhavana meṁ jo kucha huā, maiṁ usake lie lajjita nahīṁ hūṁ, guruvara. draupadī merī dāsī ho cukī thī. aura usake svāmī hone ke nāte usa para mere adhikāroṁ kī koī sīmā nahīṁ hai. yadi lajjita hoṁ to svayaṁ bhrātā yudhiṣṭhira, jinhoṁne apanī patnī ko dāṁva para lagāyā thā.*

[74] *una juārī kāyaroṁ kī mātā tuma se kṣamā cāhatī hai, draupadī. baṛā abhimāna thā, baṛā abhimāna thā mujhe apane putroṁ para ki isa saṁsāra meṁ koī bhī māṁ mere putroṁ jaise putroṁ ko janma nahīṁ de sakatī, draupadī. paraṁtu dyūta-krīṛā bhavana meṁ merā vo abhimāna cakanācūra ho gayā. maiṁ yaha soca bhī nahīṁ sakatī thī ki vo yūṁ tumheṁ dāṁva para lagā kara mere dūdha aura merī mamatā kā yūṁ apamāna kareṁge.*

> Mahābhārata's story is at a shameful turn. Today, no one but Draupadī stands within the limits of decorum, and all stand outside the limits of decorum. Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Kṛpa, as well as the Pāṇḍava brothers—all stand outside such a bound. It is therefore a moment to stop and think, for everyone belonging to the present and future will have to decide whether they are within or without the bounds of decorum. Every individual will have to enter into this tragedy.[75]

This statement bears witness to how Draupadī's ill-treatment has been the most heart-rending scene of the Mahābhārata. Its portrayal in the Series resonated with many contemporary women's experiences who had experienced molestation in public places and the eyewitnesses looked the other way. With his admonishment of such dignitaries as Bhīṣma, Droṇa, and Kṛpa, Cosmic Time directly reproaches those who turn a blind eye to such indecent assaults on women. Episode 48 opens with the expression of grief by Cosmic Time:

> I am no doubt impartial, but impartiality does not mean that I shut my eyes, although this moment surely merits closing the eyes. In a country where "Śakti" is revered, in that very country, "Śakti" is being disrobed—I am a witness to this humiliation of a woman. But an Indian woman is not born to [simply] tolerate humiliations. Hence, listen to Draupadī's statement which is resonating in my streets even today, and will always resonate. (48, Cosmic Time's opening remarks)[76]

Notably, it was Cosmic Time who expressed the deepest anxiety about the future of the Bharata dynasty after Duryodhana's mockery by Draupadī, and now again, it is Cosmic Time who is expressing that a woman is none other than the goddess Śakti, and her humiliation is bound to result in a disaster. This also suggests Draupadī's resolve to avenge her humiliation. Bhīṣma, too,

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[75] *mahābhārata kī kathā eka lajjājanaka moṛa para hai. maryādā kī rekhā ke isa pāra āja draupadī ke atirikta koī nahīṃ, aura maryādā kī rekhā ke usa pāra sabhī haiṃ. bhīṣma, droṇa, kṛpa, aura pāṇḍava bhāīyoṃ sahita sabhī isa rekhā ke usa pāra haiṃ. isalie ye ruka kara socane kī jagaha hai. kyoṃki ye nirṇaya vartamāna aura bhaviṣya ke hara vyakti ko lenā paṛegā ki svayaṃ vo isa maryādā rekhā ke isa pāra hai yā usa pāra hai. hara vyakti ko isa durghaṭanā meṃ praveśa karanā paṛegā.*

[76] *maiṃ niṣpakṣa avaśya hūṃ, kiṃtu niṣpakṣatā kā artha ye nahīṃ ki maiṃ āṃkheṃ mūṃda lūṃ, yadyapi ye jagaha āṃkheṃ mūṃda lene hī kī hai. jisa deśa meṃ śakti pūjanīya ho, usī deśa meṃ śakti kā vastra-haraṇa ho rahā hai. maiṃ isa nārī apamāna kā sākṣī hūṃ. kiṃtu bhārata kī nārī apamānoṃ ko cupacāpa sahana karane ke lie janma nahīṃ letī. isalie vo draupadī-vākya phira sunie jo āja bhī mere galiyāroṃ me gūṃja rahā hai, aura sadaiva gūṃjatā rahegā.*

experiences constant tension between his dedication to the well-being of his king, country, and clan. It was his absolute adherence to his vow to protect the king of Hastināpura that holds him back from defending Draupadī. He takes on the responsibility of disrobing Draupadī: "It is these hands of mine which disrobed Draupadī" (94:29). In other words, he feels responsible for creating the conditions for and allowing it to happen right under his nose. In that moment, he instructs Yudhiṣṭhira: "And, one more thing. Listen to it carefully, son. The right criterion of a society's wellbeing is this—whether it respects women or disrespects them" (94:32).

The Series thus holds not only Yudhiṣṭhira and his brothers reponsible for exposing Draupadī to abuse, it also holds responsible every single person in the Sabhā who silently witnessed her abuse and offered no protection.

5.2.3 Draupadī denied protection

The Pāṇḍavas are held responsible for not stopping Yudhiṣṭhira from staking Draupadī, but the Pāṇḍavas' inability to protect her is shown as reasonable on account of their enslavement. During Draupadī's abuse, Bhīma and Arjuna lose their temper, and they impulsively leap to attack the Kauravas. Each time, Duryodhana orders them to sit back and watch. Having lost his brothers and himself, when Yudhiṣṭhira concedes complete defeat because he owns nothing that he could stake, Karṇa retorts that he still possessed the "arrogant" and "doe-eyed" Draupadī. Enraged by such a proposal, the younger four Pāṇḍavas spontaneously pounce to attack him, only to be commanded by their master: "You all have become my slaves. Sit down. SIT DOWN!" (46:31). As the helpless Pāṇḍavas retreat to their seats, the Kauravas let out demonic laughs. Duryodhana is then seen provokingly, or rather challengingly, asking Yudhiṣṭhira if he would stake Draupadī. This leads Yudhiṣṭhira to impulsively stake her. When Duryodhana

commands his obsequious brother Duḥśāsana to have Draupadī sit on Duryodhana's thigh, Bhīma vows to break his thigh. Duryodhana mockingly reprimands him: "Slave, try to forget the speech of a Kṣatriya." Karṇa reassures Duryodhana that the Pāṇḍavas would sooner or later forget that they ever belonged to the Kṣatriya community. Once again, when Karṇa condemns Draupadī as a "whore" who could even be brought in to the Sabhā naked, the Pāṇḍavas impetuously jump off their seats to attack him, only to be withheld by Yudhiṣṭhira and commanded by Duryodhana: "Sit down" (47:29). The Series in this regard seems to have gotten the epic's portrayal of the Pāṇḍavas' helplessness right. As Duryodhana's slaves, they were bound to abide by his commands.

Why did others not come forward to protect her? Let me begin with Bhīṣma, the most prominent figure in the Sabhā, who has earned the severest disapprobations for passively watching Draupadī's abuse. When Duryodhana commands that Draupadī be brought to the Sabhā as a slave, an agitated but composed Bhīṣma approaches Dhṛtarāṣṭra, who remains conspicuously unaffected by Draupadī's humiliation: "If you can reflect, then do reflect. Draupadī is married in our family (*kulavadhū*). Her humiliation is a humiliation to the family." But Duryodhana interrupts him: "Draupadī is no more a *kulavadhū*; she is my slave from today onwards. She will live with other slaves in the palace and will also work like them." Bhīṣma refuses to acknowledge Duryodhana's authority: "My loyalty is to the Hastināpura throne, and not to Duryodhana's obstinacies." Duryodhana's protest explains Bhīṣma's helplessness in the Series: "And on that throne sits my father, grandsire." Sad and disheartened, Bhīṣma returns to his seat. Even though the Series consistently makes Duryodhana's singular authority clear in these episodes, Bhīṣma's helplessness cannot be appreciated without revisiting his younger days.

A Battered Boat

As Vyāsa describes it, Devavrata's (Bhīṣma's) father Śaṃtanu falls in love with a young woman Satyavatī, whose father agrees to accept Śaṃtanu's marriage proposal only if her son's enthronement could be promissed, which meant that Devavrata, the rightful heir, must renounce his claim to the throne. Devavrata immediately gives his affirmative assurance. But Satyavatī's father voices his fear that Devavrata's son might challenge her son's succession to the kingship. Devavrata acknowledges his fear and promises: "O king, I have already renounced the kingdom. I will now take an oath concerning my offspring too. Dāśa, I will from this day on observe celibacy" (1.94.87–88). Because of this fierce vow, gods and other celestial beings shower Devavrata with flowers and nickname him "Bhīṣma," the furious one. He upholds his vow of celibacy even after his father's demise. His two step-brothers also die childless, leaving no heir for the throne. Bhīṣma declines Satyavatī's proposal to marry his step-brother's young widows even for the sake of producing an heir. Should he fail to observe his vow, Bhīṣma would cease to be Bhīṣma. This event becomes the defining aspect of Bhīṣma's life. But this episode of the epic does not explain his extreme helplessness in the Sabhā as shown in the Series.

In the Series, too, Devavrata vows to Satyavatī's father to remain celibate, childless for life (3:37–42). But the Bhīṣma of the Series earns more sympathy for offering even less support to Draupadī in the Sabhā than the Bhīṣma of Vyāsa. This the Series accomplishes by introducing another vow in Bhīṣma's life. When Śaṃtanu returns to the throne after Bhīṣma's vow, the seat of the crown prince is left vacant, which outrages the prime minister and others in the court. The prime minister expresses annoyance at Bhīṣma for renouncing the kingdom in favor of Satyavatī's son, for "who will be responsible for whether the child to be born from the queen's womb will be fit for this throne?" Bhīṣma takes another oath: "If Bhīṣma's word (*vacana*) has some merit, then today I promise before Hastināpura that this son of Gaṅgā [Bhīṣma] will see the

image of his father only in [the king] who will ascend to this throne and continue to serve him for all his life" (4:24).[77] He later repeats the same vow to his anxious, remorseful father: "I will serve and protect the Kuru dynasty and this Hastināpura throne for all my life. There will be no other goal of my life. And, until I see that the Kuru kingdom is safe from all sides, and it no more needs my serice, I will keep living, and I shall not depart from this mortal world" (4:29).[78]

The audience is fully cognizant of the fact that Bhīṣma never contravenes his commitment to his word. This is reiterated time and again in the Series. It does not take long for Bhīṣma to realize how his second promise has rendered him impotent to protect Hastināpura from Śakuni's evil influence. He sees the conflict between the young Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas as a result of his love for his father. He feels embarrassed that his promise has obliged him to silently watch the brewing political conflict in Hastināpura. Vidura asks him: "So, do you now think that you should have not taken that terrible oath?" "No," Bhīṣma replies emphatically. "I can never even think so. Never. If I were to be born a hundred times, and I face the same issue a hundred times, then I will take the same oath every time" (22:38). Even though he refuses ever to retract his vow, he counsels Vidura that one should not let their personal life encroach on their civil obligations, which is what Bhīṣma has done by giving promises to his father. His commitment to his vow is again underscored when Dhṛtarāṣṭra commands Vidura to fetch the invitation for gambling to Yudhiṣṭhira. Vidura expresses apprehension about how some policies and conventions should never be thought of as eternal. Like an individual, they too have an age

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[77] *paraṃtu yadi bhīṣma ke vacana kā koī mūlya hai to āja maiṃ hastināpura ko ye vacana detā hūṁ ki isa rājasiṃhāsana para jo bhī virājamāna hogā usameṃ ye gaṃgāputra devavrata apane pitāśrī kī hī chavi dekhegā, aura ājīvana usakī sevā karatā rahegā.*

[78] *jīvana-bhara kuruvaṃśa aura hastināpura ke isa rājasiṃhāsana kī sevā aura rakṣā karūṁgā. aura usake sivā mere jīvana kā koī aura lakṣya nahīṃ hogā. aura jaba taka maiṃ ye na dekha lūṁ ki kururājya aba cahuṁ ora se surakṣita hai aura use merī sevā kī koī aura āvaśyakatā nahīṃ hai, taba taka maiṃ jīūṁgā, aura isa mṛtyu-loka ko nahīṃ tyāgūṃgā.*

(i.e., an expiry date). Vidura is alluding to a Kṣatriya's obligation to accept a challenge for gambling. Bhīṣma asks him: "But Vidura, does a pledge also have an age?" Vidura's reply that a pledge remains effective as long as the pledger lives prompts a response from Bhīṣma: "But I had taken the pledge of protecting the Hastināpura throne, Vidura!" Vidura refreshes Bhīṣma's memory: "No grandsire, you had also sworn before Hastināpura that you would see the image of your father in whosoever ascends to the Hastināpura throne" (45:13). Bhīṣma later implores Dhṛtarāṣṭra's wife Gāndhārī to help Dhṛtarāṣṭra overcome his obsession with the throne and love for Duryodhana. He admits that he cannot "order" Dhṛtarāṣṭra (45:28). It is his promise to his father and Hastināpura to serve and protect the Hastināpura king that renders him incapable of interfering with Duryodhana's actions, which are almost always carried out in the presence of or with the approval of Dhṛtarāṣṭra. It should be noted here that the Series consistently depicts the pain and dilemma of Bhīṣma with convincing dialogues and powerful performance by the actor. Therefore, Bhīṣma's failure to provide protection to Draupadī in the Sabhā makes the viewers sympathetic to the situation he was facing.

Why did the Series present Bhīṣma in this manner? One possible answer to this question is found in my conversation with Pankaj Dheer, the actor who played Karṇa in the Series. In his opinion:

> The TV Series is written from the point of view of Bhīṣma *Pitāmaha* [grandsire]. Why it happened also I will tell you. It was not meant to be that way. Because the story started much earlier, you see. But at the time when Bhīṣma hit the television, the screen, and with his *pratijñā* [vow] he became very popular. Now, always remember that television goes by ratings. And they have a pulse recorder. They understand which character is red hot. So what they do is, they give you the info that this character is red hot. Let us pursue him for a while. So Bhīṣma was red hot, and they decided that why don't you follow this character for a while because people are going with him. […] So this *Mahabharat* which you see is a 100% story told from the point of view of Bhīṣma. (personal communication, April 3, 2013)

That Bhīṣma was intended to be the hero of the *Mahabharat* series is also corroborated by

Mankekar (1999, 237). It was, according to Dheer, the popularity of Bhīṣma's character that

compelled the creators of the Series to keep him in good reputation. Breaking his heroic and

morally upright image would most likely have devalued the character, hence the ratings of the

Series. He explains this phenomenon later in the conversation. When I pointed out how the

Series whitewashes the Pāṇḍavas' role in burning six people in the palace of Vāraṇāvata (Vyāsa

1.136.1–10), Dheer offers a rationale for such a change; it was meant to retain the ratings of the

Pāṇḍavas and thereby the Series' TRP[79]:

> Why they did that was again, like I said, it is the presentation of the hero and the bad
> guys. The moment you talk about TV Serial, we are talking about clarity here. Because
> the moment we say that he is grey, it is very difficult for audiences to follow what is grey.
> They want to know who is my hero, and they want to know who is the dark guy. That is
> the human mind. When you see a film like Superman, or you see a film like Batman,
> there is a joker who is pure evil, and Batman or Superman can do no evil. So, these guys
> [the Pāṇḍavas] are the superheroes. […] If we showed that [as told by Vyāsa], the ratings
> of the Pāṇḍavas would fall down.

Bhīṣma is the only character who remains at the centre of the story and for the longest time. So,

the Series could secure good ratings for the longest time by depicting Bhīṣma as a heroic and

morally respectable character. By introducing another vow in his life, they were able to show

him as a victim of circumstances, even if the circumstances were a result of his own promises.

The Series shows Vidura, Vikarṇa, and Kṛpa speaking against Duryodhana's unhinged

vileness in the Sabhā, but Dhṛtarāṣṭra maintains a deafening silence, and Duryodhana exerts his

power and authority without any resistance. What is not clear in the Series is why these

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[79] TRP, or Television Rating Point, is used to calculate a program's popularity and the viewers' likes and dislikes. The results of TRP are used to attract higher viewership by prioritizing the most-liked elements in the program.

individuals feel obliged to comply with Duryodhana's insolent directives to remain seated

quietly and unobtrusively. That they were afraid is nowhere evident.

5.2.4 Draupadī as an/the agent provocateur

Similar to the epic, the Series, too, portrays three individuals who directly inflict pain on

Draupadī: Duryodhana, Karṇa, and Duḥśāsana. Of these, the first two are important; the latter is

nothing but a shadow of Duryodhana.[80] Duḥśāsana mistreats Draupadī simply to please his

brother. As per the Series, Draupadī has committed two grave mistakes for which she must now

pay. First, during her *svayaṃvara* (marriage) ceremony, she had insulted Karṇa, the wound of

which remains ever fresh in his heart. Second, her laughter and biting remarks aimed to

humiliate Duryodhana in Yudhiṣṭhira's palace turn Duryodhana into a wounded, proud Kṣatriya

who must avenge his humiliation.

As noted in the third chapter, the Series shows that Draupadī had earlier insulted both

Duryodhana and Karṇa, which neither of them ever forget. She had mocked Duryodhana for

falling into the pool, and with a roaring laughter and a cruel remark, "like father like son—both

blind." It is these cutting remarks that Duryodhana exploits to vindicate his own maltreatment of

Draupadī: "What did you call me, 'like father like son—both blind!' Duḥśāsana, have this slave

sit on my thigh" (46:16).[81] His vengeful feelings are palpable through and through. His stern

retaliation to Draupadī's remarks about his blindness culminates in his lewd comeback to "see"

her naked. When Karṇa, embittered by his own public humiliation by Draupadī at her marriage

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[80] As Bhīṣma, lying on the bed of arrows, laments the death of Duḥśāsana: "Do you know, child! Duḥśāsana had only one flaw—he dearly loved Duryodhana, so dearly that he let his own person become a shadow of Duryodhana" (89:23).

[81] *kyā kahā thā tūne? andhe kā putra andhā! duḥśāsana, isa dāsī ko merī jaṃghā para biṭhā do.*

ceremony, implies that as a slave and "whore," she lies outside the boundaries of honour and

dishonour, and therefore bringing her into the Sabhā even in a state of nature would not have

been inappropriate, Duryodhana instructs Duḥśāsana to strip her naked so that he could "see"

how his newly acquired slave "looks." Although the Series' sharp condemnation of Duryodhana

for his inhumanely wicked treatment of Draupadī is evident, it still holds her accountable for

bringing it on herself. Even later, twelve years after the incident, Draupadī herself remains

mindful of her role. When Sudeṣṇā, the wife of the king Virāṭa, whom Draupadī served as a

beautician during the incognito, wrathfully proceeds to curse Yudhiṣṭhira for tolerating

womankind's dishonour, she remarks: "Whatever happened [in the Sabhā], for that Draupadī's

arrogance too was more or less responsible" (57:32). Thus, the genesis of Duryodhana's

vindictive bitterness lies in her mean-spirited laughter and scathing remark. As I have

emphatically demonstrated, whereas Vyāsa's Draupadī is not depicted as responsible for her own

humiliation, the Series' Draupadī is not only responsible for causing irreconcilable hostilities

between the two families, she is also accountable for her own humiliation by Duryodhana.[82]

According to the Series, Karṇa, too, has a good reason to be angry at Draupadī. Although

a son of Kuntī (a Kṣatriya maiden) and Sūrya (the god Sun), he was abandoned at birth and

raised by a couple who belonged to the socially underprivileged class. In Vyāsa's epic, Karṇa's

inexorable rivalry with Arjuna is the foundation of his friendship with and loyalty to

Duryodhana. Duryodhana wants the kingdom and Karṇa is determined to vanquish Arjuna. His

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[82] The idea that Draupadī's abuse by Duryodhana was a result of her own actions and could be justified to a degree is held by some prominent scholars too. For example, Matilal says: "The devilish treatment of Draupadi in the *Sabhāparvan* was another dark, perhaps the darkest, shade to Duryodhana's character during his adulthood. But even this can somehow be condoned. The insults heaped upon Duryodhana's head at the court of Indraprastha during the Rājasūya sacrifice might have accounted for this rather extreme reaction (see later). But still his actions were beyond any limit of decency" (2002, 112).

villainy is revealed long before he formally becomes an ally of Duryodhana: he is part of Duryodhana's schemes to kill the Pāṇḍavas even before Droṇa was hired to train them in weaponry. He remains the main instigator of hostility between Duryodhana and the Pāṇḍavas. Whenever he boasts about his competence to vanquish the Pāṇḍavas, he is snubbed as "low-bred" and incompetent. It is notable that he is a prodigious braggart and is invariably defeated by Arjuna in battles. He has not forgotten his public humiliation by Draupadī. Because she had arrogantly spurned him in a ceremonial setting of matrimony on account of his lowly upbringing (34:36), he settles the score on both accounts. In his eyes, Draupadī has divested the marriage of its traditionally acceptable norms by marrying and living with five men—she is more like a "promiscuous" woman. Moreover, her husbands failed to protect her and signed her nobility and freedom away to Duryodhana—she has been relegated to the lowest stratum of the social system. Conversely, although Karṇa is still a *sūtaputra* (a charioteer's son), he is definitely superior to the enslaved Draupadī. He is also superior to the Pāṇḍavas who are deprived of their sovereignty while Karṇa is the king of Aṅga. This fully reversed condition kindles the old fire of indignation in Karṇa, and he too rejoices in the moment of retribution: he is eager for Draupadī, who insulted him on account of his lowly family background, to learn to address her own sons as sons of slaves. He avenges his matrimonial rejection by calling her a harlot. Note that he justifies her dishonour on two accounts: she is a slave and a "harlot." His vile attack on the dignity of Draupadī attracts harsh criticism and arouses unabating vengeful feelings in the hearts of Draupadī and her husbands.

The Series' focus on Duryodhana's and Karṇa's vengeful feelings towards Draupadī, which cannot be corroborated from the Critical Edition, is surprising. Only the Chopras and Reza knew why they included these scenes. My guess is that they had not studied or even read the

Sanskrit Critical Edition, which they claimed was their basic source, and adopted these episodes

from other sources with more melodramatic intensity based on feelings of insult and retaliation.

Staying with Vyāsa's narrative also would have sent a clear message to audiences that no woman

should ever be subjected to violence on account of male rivalry.

There could, however, be another interpretation of the Series' portrayal. Its outright

condemnation of Draupadī's abusers, including of Duryodhana and Karṇa, suggests, one might

argue, that the Series seeks to safeguard women from abuse in all conditions, including when

they might be held guilty of committing an offence for which a man could be punished without

incurring criticism. Did they wish to communicate that taking revenge on a woman is an

abominable act? Maybe. But it does not seem so. The Series never draws attention to such an

interpretation, and many audiences thought that the Kauravas' vengeful feelings were justified

(Bandlamudi 2012, 176–79, 211–12). In connection with Duryodhana's vengence, Nagaraj, a

viewer of the Series, responds:

> The vengeance of Duryodhan as a normal being is fully justified...that a person who is
> hurt has not been considered hurt and on the contrary being made fun of...is actually a
> humiliating phenomenon for any normal human being...added to that being a little
> egoistic king...makes it worse for him...so he is justified as a normal human being when
> he takes vengeance on Draupadi...on the contrary I could never understand the character
> of Draupadi at this stage (ibid. 180)

As for Draupadī and Karṇa's actions, Bandlamudi summarizes the audiences' response:

> When asked specifically about Draupadi as a character, a significant number of subjects
> were either indifferent or expressed intense dislike towards her, whereas in specific plots
> she is judged according to the situation and is held accountable, as a character, for her
> actions. Unlike Draupadi, who engenders a whole range of responses, Karna commands
> unconditional respect, sympathy and admiration. Everyone that I interviewed—100
> percent of them—said that their hearts go out to Karna and he is the only character in the
> *Mahabharata* they would salute in admiration. Karna is the tragic hero, who has been

abandoned by his mother, ostracized by the society, betrayed by teacher and tricked by gods, so he is rarely the sinner, but always sinned against. (ibid. 154)

The fact that according to audiences Duryodhana's vengeance was justified, Draupadī's actions made her unlikeable, and Karṇa commanded unconditional respect suggest a major shift in characterological attributes. In contrast to the Series, in Vyāsa's account of the Kaurava-Pāṇḍava story, Draupadī is a respectable noble woman and Duryodhana and Karṇa the two most malicious souls. In the following, I offer my view of what must have been the sources of the Series, and how Vyāsa's Draupadī becomes considerably less likeable. This is clear from some viewers' evaluations of the scenes where Draupadī appeals to the powerful dignitaries to rise and save the honour of womankind. According to some viewers, she had forfeited her right to woman's honour when she had mocked and taunted Duryodhana. For example, Bandlamudi quotes Ravi's and Pankaj's views:

> Ravi: She is totally out of place...every time...she says *Nari ka* [Women's]... something...but when she did the same thing to Duryodhan way back...I mean Duryodhan would not hate Draupadi to that extent if that incident had not occurred...there should be something to make Duryodhan hate her so much...

> Pankaj: ...Draupadi keeps saying...women...women...thing... I think it is a little out of place...is she really... had an idea... wanted to be so...*Nari* [Woman]...things she wouldn't have done the same kind of thing...even if she felt like laughing...she would have kept quite...gone inside and laughed...but not this *Nari Maryada* [respect for women]...if she had laughed on his face she has no right to ask for *Nari Maryada* [respect for women]...just because as an excuse...that sort of... (2012, 199)

This is indicative of how the epic's description of Draupadī as a woman who deserved no such mistreatment (2.61.5, 2.62.7) turns into a Draupadī who "deserved what she got for violating her feminine codes" (Bandlamudi 2012, 199)

A Battered Boat

The editors of the Critical Edition did not consider Karṇa's rejection by Draupadī as part of the early textual narrative. That this "very late" interpolation, which describes a "palpably *faked and thoroughly unreal* situation" (italics in the original), is inconsistent with other parts of the text was first hinted at by Sukthankar in the Prolegomena of the Ādiparva (1933, LX-LXI), which Mehendale reiterated in his essay, "Interpolations in the *Mahābhārata*" (2001, 196–97). I would like to expand on their theory. Not only does the text affirm that caste was not considered a qualification for participation in the *svayaṃvara* (1.85.23), it explicitly states that Karṇa failed to bend (string) the bow (1.179.4). Even though a very late interpolation, the stanza about Karṇa's rejection by Draupadī is found in Nīlakaṇṭha's Vulgate recension (1.187.21–23), which also includes additional contradictory accounts. Prior to the passages that record Karṇa's rejection, it lists the names of suitors who tried to fulfill the condition of the marriage but failed (1.187.15–19). Karṇa is among them (1.187.15). Even after describing Karṇa's rejection by Draupadī, it again claims that Karṇa could not string the bow (1.188.19). Although Nīlakaṇṭha remarks on these stanzas, he does not take note of these narratorial incongruities in his commentary. One can understand why the Critical Edition does not include the "melo-dramatic interlude" of Karṇa's rejection. Even the Vulgate editions describe Karṇa's failure in shooting at the target more prominently than his rejection by Draupadī.

Sukthankar observes the powerful presence of Karṇa's rejection by Draupadī in her marriage ceremony in popular accounts. Despite the narratorial incongruities, the scene of Karṇa's rejection has somehow "won its way into people's hearts" (1933, LXI), which has, in turn, allowed many to downplay his vicious assualts on Draupadī's character. In her literary analysis of the Mahābhārata, first published in 1962, Durga Bhagwat [Durgā Bhāgavata], a renowned female author of Marathi, expresses surprise about why Draupadī could not

understand that Karṇa's scornful derision of her in the hall was a "scathing reply" to her own contemptuous treatment of him during her marriage (2012, 62). In 1967, Śivājī Sāvaṃta, another notable Marathi author, published a lengthy novel, which describes the Mahābhārata narrative from Karṇa's viewpoint. Titled *Mṛtyuṃjaya* (The Death Conqueror), it was awarded several Indian literary awards. The novel's Karṇa expresses his agony:

> The wound that Draupadī cruelly inflicted on my proud mind before the very sight of all respected kings during the *svayaṃvara* in the Pāñcāla kingdom is as fresh even today. No wound of insult heals quickly. Especially the wounds inflicted by women never heal. Even if they heal, their ugly scars remain behind forever. By organizing her *swayaṃvara*, the woman had loudly told everyone that Karṇa's life was one of inferiority, neglect, fraud and humiliation. A soft tongue in a woman's mouth weighed Karṇa's robust body on her words only! What could be a more horrible death for a warrior than this? All people live on the grandeur of wealth and glory, but a warrior lives only on the grandeur of the mind. That is why he can never forget an incident of insult and aspersions—surely never a cruel insult done by a common woman. He never forgives that woman. That is why despite a long time that has passed after that incident, her poisonous words were gnawing at my heart as the waters of a flooded river gnaw at its banks every moment. I was trying to forget those arrows of words, but each time they rose before me in new forms as new offshoots sprout on a pruned tree, [and] made me sick in quiet times, stirring the lake of [my] mind. (Sāvaṃta 2003, 275)[83]

The text of the novel is full of such extreme expressions of Karṇa's bitterness toward Draupadī. When Duryodhana and Duḥśāsana rejoice in humiliating Draupadī, Karṇa's conscience urges him to stand up and protect her, but the feelings of the unforgivable insults he had suffered at the

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[83] *pāṃcālāṃcyā rājyāta svayaṃvaraprasaṃgī draupadīnaṃ sarva mānyavara rājāṃsamakṣa mājhyā mānī manāvara nirdayapaṇe kelelī jakhama ajūna taśīca olī hotī. avamānācyā koṇatyāca jakhama lavakara bharūna yeta nāhīta. viśeṣataḥ striyāṃnī kelelyā jakhamā tara kadhīca lavakara bharūna nāhī yeta! ālyā tarī tyāṃce virūpa vraṇa kuṭhaṃtarī kāyamace māgaṃ rāhatātaca rāhatāta! āpalaṃ svayaṃvara māṃḍūna tyā strīnaṃ sarvāṃnā garjuna sāṃgitalaṃ hotaṃ kī, karṇācaṃ jīvana mhaṇaje hīnatā, upekṣā, vaṃcanā āṇi avamāna! strīmukhātalyā ekā nājūka jibhenaṃ karṇācaṃ kaṇakhara śarīra kevaḷa āpalyā śabdāvara tolalaṃ hotaṃ! yoddhayāsāṭhī yāpekṣā anya koṇataṃ bhayānaka maraṇa asataṃ? sarva loka saṃpattīcyā āṇi vaibhavācyā ubhārīvara jagata asatāta, paṇa yoddhā hā kevaḷa manācyā ubhārīvara jagata asato. mhaṇūnaca avahelanece āṇi adhikṣepāce prasaṃga to kadhīca visarū śakata nāhī. ekā yaḥkaścita strīkaḍūna jhālelā ghora avamāna to visarū śakata nāhī āṇi tilā kṣamāhī karū śakata nāhī. mhaṇūnaca tyā ghaṭanenaṃtara dīrgha kālāvadhī loṭalā tarī mahāpurācyā pāṇyānaṃ nadīcā tāsa kṣaṇākṣaṇālā kurataḍata jāvā tase tice viṣarī śabda mājhyā aṃtaḥkaraṇālā kurataḍata āle hote. te vāgbāṇa visarāve mhaṇūna mī prayatna karīta hoto, paṇa chāṭalelyā vṛkṣālā nave dhumāre phuṭaveta tase te veḷoveḷī navyāca āviṣkārāta mājhyāpuḍhaṃ ubhe rāhata. śāṃta veḷī malā agadī asvastha karīta. manācaṃ sarovara ḍhavaḷūna ṭākīta.*

hands of Draupadī prevail upon his goodwill. Even so, his conscience rebukes him that it does not befit a hero to take revenge on a woman. Protecting the honour of a woman embodies the ultimate manliness of a man. But he is ultimately dissuaded by his past experience: what if Draupadī refuses to accept protection from a charioteer's son! It would be yet another blow to his already wounded pride (ibid. 314). Two key points to be noted in the above description are: (1) even though Karṇa was seething with anger and feelings of revenge, he was a gentleman and sincerely wished to safeguard Draupadī's honour, but he could not do so because (2) he feard yet another wounding rejection of his generous help by Draupadī. It also expresses that for a man, a wound inflicted by a woman is especially painful and lasts forever. Even though Karṇa's bravery and charitable nature is reported in Vyāsa's epic and other literature, I could not find a pre-20th-century account that cites Karṇa's vengeful feelings as the source of his maltreatment of Draupadī in the gambling hall.

In the forward to the novel, Sāvaṃta reports the story of his fascination with Karṇa's character. He claims to have studied a vast amount of literature written in various Indian languages and was guided by Chintamani Vinayak Vaidya, a senior scholar of Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*. So, it is difficult to say why the novelist felt so compelled to glorify Karṇa and vilify Draupadī. Karṇa's image of a tragic hero, as all audiences of the Series expressed, seems to be the primary reason for his image improvement. *Mṛtyuṃjaya*'s stress on the pain of social rejection that Karṇa is said to have suffered encapsulates the spirit of literary works for social justice in the 20th century. It is said to have been inspired by, among many other works, Rāmadhārī Siṃha Dinakara's long Hindi poem *Raśmirathī*, first published in 1952. Dinakara's words in the forward to *Rashmirathi* suggest, even if partially, the reason for Karṇa's popularity in modern times:

> This era is that of the upliftment of the Dalits and the marginalized. It is therefore natural that the attention of the poets of India's national language (*rāṣṭra-bhāratī*) should focus on the character who has been standing before us for thousands of years as a silent symbol of the marginalized and of the tainted humanity. […] The desire for the upliftment of Karṇa's character demonstrates that the recognition of human merits will grow in our society. The pride of family and caste is vanishing. (Dinakara 2009, 10)[84]

Karṇa's image as that of a victim had become proverbial. McGrath quotes Gandhi: "Karna is the wronged hero, wronged by teachers, brothers and mother, more wronged and more heroic than other wronged heroes" (2004, 98, note 54).[85] It is no surprise that to secure sympathies, Karṇa's character needed improvisations. Dinakara continues that the nature and form of the future society will be such that family and caste background will not play a role in an individual's professional and social recognition. Even though the notion of the birth-based caste system had been seriously challenged and criticized by several Hindu leaders such as Jyotirao Govindrao Phule (1827–1890) and institutions such as the Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj, social and

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[84] *yaha yuga dalitoṃ aura upekṣitoṃ ke uddhāra kā yuga hai. ateva, yaha bahuta svābhāvika hai ki rāṣṭra-bhāratī ke jāgarūka kaviyoṃ kā dhyāna usa carita kī ora jāe jo hajāroṃ varṣoṃ se hamāre sāmane upekṣita evaṃ kalaṃkita mānavatā kā mūka pratīka banakara khaṛā rahā hai. […] karṇacarita ke uddhāra kī cintā isa bāta kā pramāṇa hai ki hamāre samāja meṃ mānavīya guṇoṃ kī pahacāna baṛhānevālī hai.*

[85] Karṇa's modern image of a tragic hero has spilled into the scholarly interpretations of Vyāsa. Sukthankar captures the accurate image of Karṇa in Vyāsa's text, which Bhattacharya finds "a bit too harsh" (2018, 41). Even though Hiltebeitel cannot be accused of producing a wrong translation, his interpretation of Karṇa's character indicates that his impression of Karṇa is shaped by some extra-textual sources. He writes: "Karṇa has been called the *Mahābhārata*'s tragic hero, since he bears up to Aristotle's type as a flawed good man. As Kṛṣṇa puts it after Karṇa's death: 'He who announced Draupadī won by dice' was 'the vilest of good men (*satpuruṣas*)'" (Hiltebeitel 2011c, 457). The inherently contradictory expression "the vilest of good man" is nothing but a faithful translation of *satpuruṣādhamaḥ*, a faulty misprinting. The original publication of 1954 reads: *yaḥ sa dyūtajitāṃ kṛṣṇāṃ prāha satpuruṣādhamaḥ* (8.69.17). It was corrected by the editors in *The Mahābhārata*: *Text as Constituted in its Critical Edition* (1974) to *yaḥ sa dyūtajitāṃ kṛṣṇāṃ prāhasat puruṣādhamaḥ*, that "vilest man" who mocked Draupadī, when she was won in the dice game. In the original 1954 publication, *prāha* ("said" or "announced") was, most likely inadvertently, cut off from *sat* (which as an adjective means "good") and was fused with the following word, *puruṣādhamaḥ*. Thus, *prāhasat puruṣādhamaḥ* ("the vilest man, who mocked") became *prāha satpuruṣādhamaḥ* ("the vilest of good men," who "announced"). So strange is the expression *satpuruṣādhamaḥ* that it led Hiltebeitel to do more research about it and to make an interesting assertion "[t]hat the *Mahābhārata* invests such energy in an exemplary good man of low station means that there may be others of his kind whose mistreatment and killing might trouble the conscience of a fairly good king" (2011c, 460). Karṇa, who is consistently described as a vile man by Vyāsa, thus is erroneously described as "an exemplary good man of low station" and a "tragic hero." He is, however, called a *satpuruṣa* elsewhere. After Karṇa's death, Saṃjaya praises his commitment to charity and Brāhmaṇas to console Dhṛtarāṣṭra (8.68.44).

religious degradation of people based on caste-prejudices gained national prominence only when Mahatma Gandhi made the issue a part of his national movement, and Bhimrao Ambedkar articulated a need for compensatory political, professional, and legal rights for Dalits. In such an environment, Karṇa represented the marginalized sections of society who deserved emancipation from social prejudices and fair acknowledgment of professional skills. It is in this context, I think, that Karṇa's character attracts well-deserved sympathies and becomes glorified. But in the process, Draupadī becomes vilified. For it would not be possible to glorify the character of Vyāsa's Karṇa without adding vindicatory justifications for his morally deplorable actions. The intensity with which Karṇa insults Draupadī in the Sabhā is inexcusable. But it becomes justified because, according to the popular anecdote, Draupadī had already insulted him publicly during her marriage ceremony.

I am convinced that the characters of Duryodhana and Karṇa in the Series are directly inspired by modern retellings of the Mahābhārata, especially by Sāvaṃta's novel *Mṛtyuṃjaya*.[86] In this case, it is interesting to look at Sāvaṃta's repeated comments on women that are expressed through Karṇa and Duryodhana. Duryodhana voices his anxieties when Kuntī returns to Hastināpura with the Pāṇḍavas after Pāṇḍu's death:

> But… women? …Yuck! At times, women burn down the whole kingdom to ashes because of their greed for the kingdom. All the people say that a woman embodies the Creator's splendor, woman is the gauge of humanity, woman is beauty in form, woman represents ultimate tenderness, woman is the pinnacle of love. But I find it all lies. Man [surely] becomes cruel at times, but his cruelty remains limited, because his cruelty is

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[86] In fact, a closer look at the TV Series and Sāvaṃta's *Mṛtyuṃjaya* confirms that the former adapts many sections from the latter. Sāvaṃta's other, considerably longer novel based on Kṛṣṇa's life, *Yugandhara*, also appears to be an important source for the TV Series.

against one individual. But once a woman toughens her mind, she defies many eternal principles of the nature. (2003, 192–93)[87]

Notably, this would be his first meeting with Kuntī and her young children (Pāṇḍavas), neither of whom have so far given him a reason to be suspicious or annoyed. It is understandable that he should feel threatened by the arrival of the Pāṇḍavas, who might assert their entitlement to the crown, but his condemnation of women seems unwarranted. Similarly, Karṇa holds Draupadī to be the sole cause of the Kuru dynasty's ruination: "Those tender-hearted individuals who claimed that woman is an adorable manifestation of great goodness did not even imagine that at times woman can become the sole cause of violent destruction and foul devastation; the only cause" (ibid. 323).[88] Sāvaṃta's Duryodhana and Karṇa, both wronged by Draupadī, thus seem to be strongly prejudiced against women, which allowed them to act as horribly as they did. While the Series expresses reverence toward womankind, its portrayal of Duryodhana and Karṇa's character as victims of Draupadī's insults downplays their viciousness by laying the blame on Draupadī for inititating the cycle of violence. Many viewers sympathized with Duryodhana, who, according to them, was justified in avenging his humiliation. Whereas some male viewers tried to see the scene of Draupadī's abuse "from a woman's point of view" (Bandlamudi 2012, 194) and felt her pain, some female viewers were very critical of Draupadī's behaviour. The

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[87] *paṇa... striyā?... che! striyā rājyalobhāsāṭhī prasaṃga paḍalyāsa te saṃpūrṇa rājyacyā rājya jāḷūna khāka karatīla! sagaḷe loka mhaṇatāta, strī mhaṇaje vidhātyācaṃ vaibhava, strī mhaṇaje mānavatecā māna, strī mhaṇaje sauṃdaryācaṃ saṃghaṭana, strī mhaṇaje komalatecā kaḷasa, strī mhaṇaje premācā parvata! paṇa malā he khoṭaṃ vāṭataṃ! puruṣa prasaṃgī krūra asato; paṇa maryādita. kāraṇa tyācā krūrapaṇā ekhādyā vyaktībābata asato, paṇa strīnaṃ ekadā āpalaṃ mana ghaṭṭa kelaṃ kī, tī niyatīcyā aneka śāśvata tattvāṃśīhī baṃḍa karūna uṭhate.*

[88] *strī mhaṇaje mahāna māṃgalyācaṃ manohara prakaṭana, asaṃ mhaṇaṇāryā sarva bhāvukāṃnnā yācī kalpanāhī nasela kī, hīca strī prasaṃgī virāṭa vināśācaṃ, virūpa vidhvaṃsanācaṃ kevaḷa ekameva kāraṇa ṭharū śakate! ekameva kāraṇa!*

following conversation between two female audience members, Renuka and Mamta, illustrates

the point.

> Renuka: They [Duryodhana and Karṇa] had every reason to go against Draupadi...
> because she made fun of them...
>
> Mamta: Of whom?
>
> Renuka: Karna and Duryodhan...always...so they had every right to...
>
> Mamta: What about the others...I am sorry...I didn't get what you are saying...
>
> Renuka: When she is staked...they got a kick...because she has always been cruel to
> them...Draupadi bullied both of them...remember... I don't blame them for that.
>
> (Bandlamudi 2012, 197)

As well-intentioned as it might have been, it is the noble woman, the heroine of Vyāsa's epic,

whose character becomes maligned, and the Series ends up perpetuating versions of the narrative

that are not found in Vyāsa and are damaging to the image of Draupadī.

5.2.5 Draupadī's protection by Kṛṣṇa

Although Vyāsa in the Critical Edition makes no allusion to Kṛṣṇa's role in guarding

Draupadī's honour by invisibly supplying clothes to cover her, and the manuscript tradition of

the epic rarely attributes Draupadī's protection to Kṛṣṇa, his miraculous covering of Draupadī is

a feature point of the Series. Moreover, although Vyāsa's text contains material that establishes

Kṛṣṇa's divinity, it scarcely looks back to his childhood.[89] Conversely, the Series halts the

Mahābhārata narrative and spends several episodes introducing Kṛṣṇa's action-packed

childhood, brimming with his divine powers. Kṛṣṇa's role in miraculously covering Draupadī in

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[89] These Vyāsa describes in the *Harivaṃśa*, an appendix to the Mahābhārata. Whereas the Mahābhārata revolves around the Bharata lineage, the *Harivaṃśa* focuses on Kṛṣṇa's lineage.

the Sabhā is one of the most prominent displays of Kṛṣṇa's divinity. I also noted in the Vyāsa section of this chapter how some scholars have interpreted Draupadī's protection by Kṛṣṇa as a blow to Draupadī's agency. According to them, it might be Draupadī's chastity and devotion to her husbands that manifest in the form of the miraculous supply of clothes.

According to the Series, however, there is another factor that impels Kṛṣṇa to preserve Draupadī's dignity—he is simply reciprocating a favour. During the Rājasūya, Kṛṣṇa slits Śiśupāla's throat with his Sudarśana disc, a self-returning circular saw-blade which Kṛṣṇa could materialize and make it vanished at will. The disc injures Kṛṣṇa's index finger as it returns and vanishes. Draupadī ungrudgingly tears off a piece of her exquisite *sārī* and dresses Kṛṣṇa's bleeding finger. In turn, Kṛṣṇa pledges: "Today, I have become indebted to you, Draupadī. On the right time, I will repay the debt of each and every strand" (*samaya āne para eka-eka dhāge kā ṛṇa utārūṅgā*) (45:30–37). He knew, as is implied, that one day he will have to cover her nakedness. Note that no version of the Sanskrit epic attributed to Vyāsa mentions this episode, and the north Indian secondary literature on the epic is mostly ignorant of it. It is based on a regional folk narrative: as Hiltebeitel notes, the idea of Draupadī bandaging Kṛṣṇa's bleeding finger and his promise to return the favour has been part of the performed version of Draupadī's cult in South India (1988, 226).[90] Hiltebeitel also cites a Maharashtrian story, often used to

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[90] Hiltebeitel also cites the North Indian variant of the same event, often used to explain the "historical" origins of *rākhī* (1988, 226–29). Another incident, not related to Kṛṣṇa, is described in the *Śivapurāṇa*. Once sage Durvāsā was bathing in a river, as was Draupadī nearby. The water current carried away the sage's garments. When Draupadī noticed the sage in an embarrassing situation, she ripped off a piece of her garment and floated it to the sage. Rescued by her, he blessed her with the expansion of her garments, through which she later saves her dignity (*Śivapurāṇa*, Śatarudrasaṃhitā 19.63–66). It makes no allusion to Kṛṣṇa's agency in protecting Draupadī. The 1923 and 1950 editions of Betāba's *Mahābhārata Nāṭaka* show how texts change. The 1923 publication mentions that Kṛṣṇa cut his finger while cutting sugar cane (*bhoga pāne ke liye ūkha kāṭate samaya nigāhahaṭagithī* [*sic*] *isa liye yaha uṃgalī tanaka kaṭa gī thī*, 21), which the 1950 edition mentions that it was cut during Śiśupāla's beheading (*śiśupāla kā sara kāṭate samaya nigāha haṭa gī thī usī samaya yaha uṅgalī jarā kaṭa gī thī*, 23)

explain the "historical" origins of *rākhī*, or *rakṣā-bandhana*, one of the major Hindu ritual ceremonies designed to strengthen the bond between brothers and sisters:

> One time Bhagavan Krishna's hand was cut and bleeding. When Dropadi [*sic*] saw this she immediately tied a piece of cloth from her dhoti on her brother's hand. Because of this tying, Shri Krishna saved Dropadi's [*sic*] honour at the time of Dusharsan's taking her sari."[91] The Rājasūya setting is not stipulated, but one sign suggests that rather than being just a bit of pan-Indian epic folklore, this northern story has a southern source: it draws on the apparently southern theme of Draupadī being Kṛṣṇa's sister. But the sibling theme is also found in the Potrāj-goddess cult of Maharashtra. (1988, 226–27, note 6)

It should be noted that the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, one of the most preeminent texts of the Kṛṣṇa devotional tradition, includes no such description (10.74.43). There is another incident in the Series that prophesizes Draupadī's humiliation in the Sabhā. Draupadī is dragged into the Sabhā by Duḥśāsana by her hair. But this too is expected. Immediately after the partition of Hastināpura, Vyāsa visits the Kaurava-Pāṇḍava gathering. Fully cognizant of future events, he warns Yudhiṣṭhira that in the process of accomplishing his ambitions, he would be responsible for all the outcomes of his deeds, be they good or bad. Vyāsa feels that Draupadī, born from fire, is beyond the reaches of his blessings. Consequently, he blesses everyone but Draupadī, the freshly installed queen of Indraprastha, which leaves Yudhiṣṭhira utterly perplexed. Vyāsa replies: "Her self-confidence needs no blessing." Then with his hands raised in a blessing gesture and gazing at Draupadī with affectionate apprehensiveness, he rather warns her: "Look after your hair, child!" This is followed by an ominous thunderbolt, which makes everyone anxious about the implications of his words. Kṛṣṇa gives a smile of "I know." This incident is directly linked with Duḥśāsana's dragging of Draupadī into the Sabhā by the hair and her consequent vow to not tie it until she has avenged its humiliation by soaking it into Duḥśāsana's blood. In this case, the

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[91] Irregular spellings of the names in the original.

Series capitalizes on Vyāsa's narratorial approach to narrating the fateful events to the fullest, which John Smith describes:

> If a storyteller wants to convey a sense of fate as a powerful force in his narrative, it is not enough for him to describe certain events and then announce that they had always been fated to occur; rather, he must make sure that his listeners or readers know in advance that those events are going to happen. The possibility of surprise is lost, but in its place a feeling of grinding inevitability can be established. The *Mahābhārata* makes extensive use of this technique. (2009a, xliv)

According to this, Kṛṣṇa's promise to return Draupadī's favour and Vyāsa's warning about her hair are two narratorial elements to establish the inevitability of Draupadī's humiliation by the Kauravas.

Draupadī's prayer to Kṛṣṇa and her reciprocal protection by the latter have been a powerful narrative of devotion in India, and the scene highlights the spiritual importance of devotional surrender to the divinity, which compels God to rescue the innocent when all else fails. Not only is this incident fondly remembered in devotional hymns, inspiring devotion and faith in Kṛṣṇa's ability either to empower the devotee to overcome the problem or to simply rescue the devotee from the trouble, it continues to play a significant role in the lives of modern Hindus. For example, as an example of his definition of surrender to and trust in the divinity, Gandhi often presented Draupadī's pure-hearted surrender to Kṛṣṇa as the ideal emotional purity and encouraged his followers to embrace it in their fight against the injustice of the British.[92]

> Shraddha means self-confidence and self-confidence means faith in God. When dark clouds gather all around, when the shore is not in sight, and when one feels one is sinking, one who says even then that he will not drown is a man of faith. Draupadi was being stripped of her garments. Yudhishthira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, Sahadeva, none of them was able to protect her from disgrace. Even then, she did not lose faith. She uttered

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[92] Although Gandhi never seems to have equated the Kauravas with the British, one could easily assume the comparison between the two given the context of Draupadī's prayer.

the name of Krishna. She had the faith that as long as Shri Krishna was there, nobody could strip her naked. Do you have this faith? If you have it, you can win swaraj with Poona's strength alone. (Gandhi 1967, 88).

Gandhi claimed that Draupadī's prayer is a "celebrated instance" of "extraordinary strength" and professed that "if one has faith in one's prayer, I have not a shadow of a doubt in my mind that it can move mountains" (Gandhi 1969, 35). Thus, Draupadī's prayer to Kṛṣṇa and her protection by the same was used by Gandhi to express his faith in acting justly even when the other is hellbent on treacherous means to score a political victory.

Gandhi was a special case. Nothing seemed to shake his faith in truth and honesty, an indication of his absolute devotion to God. For some, it was as if he had befriended God. This is how the Series portrays Draupadī's and Kṛṣṇa's relationship. It is a special example of a human woman's friendly relationship with the God-incarnate of her time. He is blessed with all the divine powers. However, I find the Series' portrayal of Draupadī's protection by Kṛṣṇa problematic in addressing average women's vulnerability to sexual harassment. First of all, in the same way that Draupadī's marital chastity gives her supernatural powers to curse her abusers, Draupadī's friendship with Kṛṣṇa also makes her case special, which to an average woman seems beyond her reach. Even if one assumes that Kṛṣṇa was in a human form, the issue remains problematic for the majority of women. Kṛṣṇa is a powerful figure, and his intervention in shielding Draupadī is an example of one's access to a powerful individual. The majority of women have no such powerful connections. Indirectly, again, it sends a wrong message that poor, disadvantaged, and powerless women have no possible course of action to guard themselves against harassment. As a TV Series viewer commented: "everyone does not have Krishna to save [them]" (Bandlamudi 2012, 203). Kṛṣṇa's role in protecting Draupadī is without doubt part of the tradition and has inspired many to have faith in God. Nevertheless, I see its

depiction as a grave failure of the creators of the Series to contemporize the Mahābhārata narrative by diverting societal responsibility to a supernatural phenomenon.

Conclusion

When compared to Vyāsa's text, the Series has dramatically reorganized the narrative content and incorporated extra-textual descriptions to emphasize the idea of Draupadī as a representative of womankind, the honour of her family, society, and nation. In Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*, Śakuni provokes Yudhiṣṭhira to bet Draupadī, and if Yudhiṣṭhira won the bet, he would be freed from slavery of Duryodhana. Thus, Śakuni in a way defines Draupadī's role, which Karṇa later compares with a boat. In both, Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* and the Chopras' *Mahabharat*, Draupadī is the battered boat who endures the devastating wave slaps of the gambling-storm that Duryodhana stirs.

What remains uniformly consistent throughout the Series is that Draupadī herself is responsible for bringing it on herself. When viewed in light of the fact that, according to Vyāsa her part in the mockery is either nothing or negligible, Draupadī's ill-treatment by the Kauravas becomes a disturbingly grotesque humiliation of a queen. But the Series sensationally highlights her role in mocking Duryodhana, which substantially diminishes the evil behaviour of her abusers. Duryodhana's interest in gambling is simply because he wants to avenge his humiliation by Draupadī. Moreover, Duryodhana and Karṇa justify their abuse of Draupadī by invoking the incidents of their own insults by her. Many viewers saw Duryodhana as a "normal human being," and his desire to avenge his mockery by Draupadī as "fully justified"; in other words, "she brought it upon herself." Given that many in the audiences viewed Karṇa and Duryodhana's behaviour as justified, one can argue that the Series depreciates Draupadī's character. Even

though the Series denounces the passivity of the royals present in the Sabhā, it invents reasons for Bhīṣma's inability to intervene: because he has vowed to guard Hastināpura and maintain loyalty to his king, he cannot go against the will of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, who himself is a helpless prisoner of his blind love for Duryodhana.

The Series, however, succeeds in contemporizing the episode in other ways. First, whereas Vyāsa's epic is at best silent about its judgment on the Pāṇḍavas' role in subjecting Draupadī to abuse, the Series denounces the behaviour of Yudhiṣṭhira and his brothers as shameful. Given the ideological and practical conventions of a modern audience, not denouncing their behaviour as abominable would have caused not only emotional tumult but also would have attracted a strong backlash for its regressiveness in matters of women's freedom and empowerment.

Chapter Six

Draupadī: A Noble Sailboat

This chapter is devoted to Draupadī's intellectual acuity, knowledge of the law, and resilience. I expound on how she challenges the legality of the bet through what is known as Draupadī's question. When Yudhiṣṭhira loses almost everything, including his brothers and himself, Śakuni goads him: "You still have your dear wife, a bet still unwon. Stake the dark-skinned Draupadī, and through her, win yourself back" (2.58.31). Yudhiṣṭhira stakes Draupadī and loses the bet, thus apparently making her a slave of Duryodhana. The Kauravas claim victory, but their feelings of jubilation soon turn into a quarrel over the legitimacy of Draupadī's enslavement, as articulated by Draupadī herself: could Yudhiṣṭhira, himself a slave, stake his free wife? This is also the crux of Draupadī's question. In the context of this quarrel, arguments by various people are made about the legitimacy of Draupadī's enslavement. These centre on three possibilities: (1) the bet is lawful, resulting in Draupadī becoming a slave; (2) the bet is unlawful because Yudhiṣṭhira, as a slave of Duryodhana, no longer has the authority to stake Draupadī; and (3) the issue is unresolvable—Yudhiṣṭhira is a free man, who becomes a slave and deprived of his rights, but his permanent rights over a wife are recognized under the family and social system of laws. I demonstrate that the issue of Draupadī's slavery remains unsettled. I analyze the arguments for the legality or ethics of Draupadī's enslavement in two ways. I pay particular attention to Draupadī's own arguments. I contextualize these arguments by comparing them to those found in the Dharmaśāstra literature, the legal and ethical literature of the classical Hindu tradition.

Draupadī: A Noble Sailboat

Karve thinks that Draupadī's defiant insistence to have her question answered in accordance with the law was her "greatest mistake" (1969, 125). Karve acknowledges the complexity of her question that stumps even Bhīṣma (125). She labels Draupadī's question "not only foolish," but also "terrible" because if Bhīṣma acknowledged Yudhiṣṭhira's right to stake her, her slavery would be confirmed and, if Bhīṣma refuted the same, she would be a widow (126). Karve imagines that instead of "arguing about legal technicalities like a lady pundit," a better choice for Draupadī would have been to cry out "for decency and pity in the name of the Kshatriya code" (126). Karve's observations seem to arise from the following premise:

> Nevertheless, no one had liked her pretensions to wisdom, and Dharma never forgot it for the rest of his life. In the forest, too, Draupadi sometimes tried to show off her learning before him, but defeating Dharma in learning was impossible; each time he quickly silenced her. She had made many mistakes in her life that were forgiveable, but by putting on airs in front of the whole assembly, she had put Dharma into a dilemma and unwittingly insulted him. The fact that the insult was unintentional did not make it forgiveable. Though she was only a young bride of the house, she had spoken in the assembly of the men, something she should have known she must not do. Over and above, to pretend that she could understand questions that baffled her elders—that was inexcusable arrogance. These two things wounded Dharma and did nothing to add to her good name. In Aranyakaparva Dharma called her a "lady pundit", hardly a complimentary epithet in the eyes of the Kshatriyas of the Mahabharata. Gandhari and Kunti could give advice to their sons because they were older, experienced women. For a young bride to show off her intelligence in the presence of her elders was a grave mistake. This mistake Draupadi apparently never understood and Dharma never made her aware of it. What she had done was the result of her earthy, violent, but basically simple nature. (127–28)

Karve describes Duryodhana's mockery by Draupadī as her "grave mistake" (124) but her insistence "on the question of Dharma's right to stake her" (127) as her "biggest mistake." I am not sure what Karve means by "Dharma never forgot it for the rest of his life," but it likely pertains to her latter statement, "[i]n Aranyakaparva Dharma called her a 'lady pundit', hardly a complimentary epithet in the eyes of the Kshatriyas of the Mahabharata." A couple of points deserve attention. It is not Dharma (Yudhiṣṭhira) who calls her a "lady pundit" (*paṇḍitā*); rather,

it is the narrator of the *Mahābhārata* (3.28.2) who introduces her as such. That it is not used pejoratively is evident from the other epithets used with it: loved (*priyā*), good-looking (*darśanīyā*), and chaste wife (*pativratā*). I think the epithet "lady pundit" is used to genuinely announce her intellectual acuity that she displays again in her long discussion with Yudhiṣṭhira (3.28–33). Karve's assessment of Draupadī's conduct in the Sabhā reveals another and more momentous assumption: as a young lady, she should have kept her mouth shut in the assembly of men. Karve's opinion seems to have been shaped by her view that the society of Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* was awfully patriarchal and repressed women's voices. On the contrary, in Vyāsa's epic it is never implied that Draupadī should not have stood up for her rights. First, Duryodhana asks her to come to the assembly and raise her issue before the assemblymen. While the Kauravas are condemned for mistreating Draupadī, no one ever implies that as a woman she should remain in her limits and keep quiet before men. Draupadī receives praises only for her conduct. Instead, it is Duryodhana who is rebuked for arguing with a woman in the assembly (2.63.25). Karve opines that Draupadī survived her "biggest mistake" because the "ominous, threatening noises" alarmed many and frightened Dhṛtarāṣṭra finally to intervene. This is not true. As I show in this chapter, Vyāsa's text is unambiguous in its assessment of Draupadī's role in the Sabhā: time and again, she is praised for rescuing the Pāṇḍavas. Even Yudhiṣṭhira, who, according to Karve, never forgets the insult and wound that Draupadī's conduct inflicts on him, praises Draupadī for pulling them out of the ocean of gambling. Besides, the assumption that Draupadī's emotional appeal to an honorable treatment on account of her Kṣatriya background would have been a better choice also seems void. She certainly makes such an appeal repeatedly. In fact, her first words to Duḥśāsana and the assemblymen are full of such a painful cry

(2.60.23–35). But it fell on deaf ears. It neither saves her in Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* nor in the

Series.

A sincere study of Draupadī's intellectual wisdom is thus imperative not only to

appreciate the accolades she receives for saving the Pāṇḍavas but also to dispel such

depreciations.

6.1 Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*: a noble sailboat

Let me set the stage by summarizing the debate. Vidura and Vikarṇa insist on Draupadī's

freedom by arguing that Yudhiṣṭhira lacked authority to stake Draupadī because he had already

lost himself. Vikarṇa adds that Yudhiṣṭhira was challenged to stake Draupadī, and it was Śakuni

who names Draupadī as a bet. Yudhiṣṭhira alone had no right to stake Draupadī, for she was a

common wife of all the Pāṇḍavas. Vikarṇa's defense of Draupadī's freedom is loudly welcomed.

Karṇa alone attempts to refute his arguments and makes a case for Draupadī's enslavement. He

conveniently ignores Śakuni's role in initiating Draupadī's bet and claims that the other

Pāṇḍavas had consented to it. He interprets the silence of the Pāṇḍavas and assemblymen as

indicative of their acknowledgement of Draupadī's enslavement. He further argues that because

Yudhiṣṭhira had staked "everything," as part of his possessions, Draupadī also was lost

automatically. Besides, because her husbands had already become Duryodhana's slaves, she, as a

property of slaves, became a property of their master. Karṇa also avers that there was nothing

odd if Draupadī was dragged into the gambling hall because, he argues, she was no better than a

"whore" for having married five men (2.61.34–36). These statements suggest that for the

Kauravas both conditions do not have to be simultaneously present: either slavery or her

"whore"-like character supply sufficient ground to treat her as they did. Bhīṣma, on the other

hand, treats Draupadī as a noble woman but is not sure about her enslavement—a man cannot

stake something that he does not own, but then, a husband always has an authority over his wife.

6.1.1 Draupadī's enslavement: the legality of the bet

Given that Draupadī has been often commended as the rescuer of the Pāṇḍavas, it is

important to grasp the force of her statements, which somehow has not been elaborated on so far.

When the palace attendant sent by Duryodhana to fetch Draupadī into the Sabhā informs her

about her loss, she tells him to go back to Yudhiṣṭhira and ask him: "Did you first lose yourself,

or me?" (2.60.7)[1]

As soon as the bet is lost, the Kauravas assume their victory to be a legal one: "you have

been won," and we have "acquired you in accordance with the law" (*jitāsi*, *dharmeṇa labdhāsi*)

(2.60.20). Karṇa insists that those who thought that Draupadī's enslavement was illegal did not

know the law (2.61.30). Even though Vidura (2.59.4) and Vikarṇa (2.61.20–24) categorically

refute Draupadī's enslavement by denying Yudhiṣṭhira an agency and a legal right to stake her,

Karṇa supports her enslavement by interpreting facts slightly differently. Bhīṣma, on the other

hand, is utterly confused by the complexity of the situation and finds himself unable to answer

Draupadī's question:

> I cannot properly resolve your question, good lady, because of *dharma*'s subtlety, for a
> person without property cannot stake another's, but I also understand that a woman
> remains under the jurisdiction of her husband. Yudhiṣṭhira would rather give up the entire
> earth with her riches, but he would not desert the truth. The Pāṇḍava has conceded, "I
> have been won"; I cannot therefore resolve this matter. Of all men, Śakuni is the best in

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[1] *kiṃ nu pūrvaṃ parājaiṣīr ātmānaṃ māṃ nu bhārata.* Hiltebeitel understands the term "*parājitātmā*" in a
philosophical context: "Yudhiṣṭhira's loss of self appears—it is only described so by others—to be a loss of
consciousness. Is it the higher Self that is ultimately at stake in Draupadī's question?" (quoted in Black 2021, 129–
30; see also Hiltebeitel 2001, 242). I agree with Black that Draupadī's question is devoid of philosophical
implications.

gambling; he left Kuntī's son [Yudhiṣṭhira] free to make his own decision. The great-souled [Yudhiṣṭhira] does not view it as deception. Therefore, I am not responding to your question. (2.60.40–42)[2]

Bhīṣma here relies on two facts: Śakuni is the most knowledgeable individual in the field of gambling, and Yudhiṣṭhira would not deviate from *dharma*. Śakuni's proposal to stake Draupadī and Yudhiṣṭhira's staking of her indicate that the bet was, at least according to both players, legal. Assigning agency to Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīṣma believes that he was free to stake or not to stake Draupadī. Śakuni does not force him to stake Draupadī. Moreover, the bet must have been lost lawfully because Yudhiṣṭhira, who always abides by *dharma,* has accepted his defeat and sees no deceit (2.60.41–42).[3] The issue that confuses him is whether Yudhiṣṭhira, a slave with no right to own personal property, still had a right over his free wife.

Bhīṣma's assertion that Yudhiṣṭhira, who never deviates from *dharma,* staked Draupadī and accepted the loss without drawing attention to any foul play implies that his action was in accordance with *dharma*. Prima facie, such an assumption on Bhīṣma's part might appear as his reluctant, weak defence of Draupadī. But trust is the key here. Yudhiṣṭhira is known as the king of *dharma* (*dharmarāja*) because neither lust for pleasure (*kāma*) nor desire of wealth and power (*artha*) ever causes him to deviate from the path of *dharma*. He rather delights in charity, truth, austerity, faith, peace, patience, and endurance (3.180.18–19). Bhīṣma's faith in Yudhiṣṭhira's unyielding commitment to act lawfully seems understandable. Like his diligence in matters of

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[2] *na dharmasaukṣmyāt subhage vivaktuṃ śaknomi te praśnam imaṃ yathāvat, asvo hy aśaktaḥ paṇituṃ parasvaṃ striyaś ca bhartur vaśatāṃ samīkṣya. tyajeta sarvāṃ pṛthivīṃ samṛddhāṃ yudhiṣṭhiraḥ satyam atho na jahyāt, uktaṃ jito 'smīti ca pāṇḍavena tasmān na śaknomi vivektum etat. dyūte 'dvitīyaḥ śakunir nareṣu kuntīsutas tena nisṛṣṭakāmaḥ, na manyate tāṃ nikṛtiṃ mahātmā tasmān na te praśnam imaṃ bravīmi.*

[3] I discuss Bhīṣma's perplexity later, which arises from the fact that a slave cannot stake something that he does not own, in this case Draupadī, who is a free individual. On the other hand, slave or not, a husband has an authority over his wife (2.60.40).

dharma, Yudhiṣṭhira's commitment to truth was also proverbial. During the war, Droṇa's

invincibility forces Kṛṣṇa to hatch a plot for his assassination by inflicting on him an emotional

trauma. To this end, he advises that someone should inform Droṇa of his son Aśvatthāmā's

death. Yudhiṣṭhira dislikes the cunning plan but eventually agrees to it quite reluctantly. Perhaps

to ease Yudhiṣṭhira's anxieties about the strategic falsehood, Bhīma kills a homonymous

elephant, and, somewhat embarrassed, apprises Droṇa of Aśvatthāmā's death. However, Droṇa

does not trust Bhīma. Droṇa is convinced of Yudhiṣṭhira's unwavering commitment to truth

since the latter's childhood. Hence, he asks Yudhiṣṭhira to tell the truth. Yudhiṣṭhira, afraid of

telling a lie, confirms the death of Aśvatthāmā, but adds, although unintelligibly, that it was an

elephant that was killed. Droṇa trusts him without hesitation, and traumatized by his son's

apparent death, he loses his proficiency and courage to fight substantially (7.164.95–111). It is

no wonder that Bhīṣma expresses such an extreme trust in Yudhiṣṭhira's unwavering

commitment to *dharma* that he interprets his action and demeanor as indicative of their dharmic

nature.

       But Draupadī rejects Bhīṣma's assumptions:

> The skillful obsessive gamblers—black-hearted, uncivil, and cheats—challenged the
> king, an unskilled [gambler], in the Sabhā; how can he be said to have been left to his
> own choice? Purehearted, the best of the Kurus and Pāṇḍavas could not discern the shady
> maneuvers. Moreover, he was defeated as they all ganged up on him. Furthermore, he
> made the bet after [he had already lost himself]. (2.60.43–44)[4]

 She deems it unconscionable that Yudhiṣṭhira's devotion to truth and honesty and lack of

expertise in gambling should turn out to be self-defeating in an assembly filled with many

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[4] *āhūya rājā kuśalaiḥ sabhāyāṃ duṣṭātmabhir naikṛtikair anāryaiḥ, dyūtapriyair nātikṛtaprayatnaḥ kasmād ayaṃ nāma nisṛṣṭakāmaḥ. sa śuddhabhāvo nikṛtipravṛttim abudhyamānaḥ kurupāṇḍavāgryaḥ, saṃbhūya sarvaiś ca jito 'pi yasmāt paścāc ca yat kaitavam abhyupetaḥ.*

experts of *dharma*. Thus, she dismisses Bhīṣma's (2.60.41) reasoning by declaring Yudhiṣṭhira a pure-hearted (*śuddhabhāva*) and rather inexperienced (*nātikṛtaprayatna*) gambler. Accordingly, he was incapable of even detecting the treacherous moves of his rivals. How could Yudhiṣṭhira and the other Pāṇḍavas raise objections about something of which they were not even aware? Here is the crux of her argument: treachery cannot be accepted simply because the duped party, unaware of cheating, lodges no complaint and concedes to the transaction. Moreover, Draupadī argues that the game was rigged from the outset because many individuals ganged up on Yudhiṣṭhira alone. Thus, in her view, Yudhiṣṭhira's silence, or even acceptance of defeat, could not be interpreted as proof of the legality of her loss.[5]

Draupadī also opposes Bhīṣma's second explanation, i.e., Śakuni has no equal in gambling and he allows Yudhiṣṭhira to make his own choice, which implies that no one forced Yudhiṣṭhira to stake her, and therefore the bet was valid. But Draupadī challenges this point, too. She asserts that it is fallacious to think that Śakuni leaves Yudhiṣṭhira a free choice to wager or not to wager her. In her opinion, the black-hearted gamblers "challenged" him in the Sabhā; therefore, he was not free. She is alluding to the Kṣatriya obligation not to shirk a challenge. The principle is that of battle, which has also been called a gamble—when challenged, fighting is the only option, even if the inevitable outcome is absolute defeat. Injuries and death in a battle are a matter of pride, while shirking a challenge inevitably results in the loss of face, even if one lived an opulent life after turning down a challenge. Moreover, Yudhiṣṭhira had taken a vow to never turn down a challenge. On that account, he was not really free. Because Draupadī is contending

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[5] Not only is it commonsensical, but the legal system also upholds the rights of an unknowing dupe: "A verbal agreement or a claim, even if corroborated [with written document etcetera], does not become true if what is said is outside the bounds of the established system of law" (*satyā na bhāṣā bhavati yady api syāt pratiṣṭhitā, bahiś ced bhāṣyate dharmān niyatād vyāvahārikāt*) (Manu 8.164).

the validity of her bet, this "challenge" should be understood as Śakuni's provocation to stake Draupadī. Later, Arjuna employs Draupadī's logic to assuage Bhīma, who, disturbed by Draupadī's humiliation, admonishes him for going beyond the limits (2.61.4–6). Arjuna says: "The king, indeed challenged and mindful of Kṣatriya *dharma,* is playing by the will of others—that brings great glory to us" (2.61.9).[6] That Draupadī appeals to the idea of challenege specifically to dispute the validity of her enslavement becomes evident from the words of Vikarṇa, a notable younger brother of Duryodhana: "[Yudhiṣṭhira] resorted to the bet of Draupadī as he was challeneged by the gamblers" (2.61.22). His argument further mentions that it was in fact Śakuni who identified Draupadī as a bet (2.61.22, 24). Both Arjuna and Vikarṇa later use the very argument that Draupadī has already used to dispute Bhīṣma's reasoning. Given that the game itself is a result of a challenge, one could argue that this left Yudhiṣṭhira no choice but to play.

If one is to assume the illegality of Draupadī's bet on account of the challenge, as I argue in the previous paragraph, one could, with the same argument, conclude that the entire game is illegal—all Yudhiṣṭhira's losses and Śakuni's winnings are null and void. In my view, it is not the idea of challenge that renders Draupadī's bet as illegal. Consider two facts: (1) it is Śakuni, not Yudhiṣṭhira, who names Draupadī as a bet, and (2) Yudhiṣṭhira had already lost himself. The first part likely alludes to a gambling regulation, now unknown to us, that the bettor alone is authorized to name the bet. As Draupadī, Arjuna, and Vikarṇa contend, naming a bet by the rival amounts to an unfair provocation for the bettor. Therefore, it is plausible that the gambling regulations outlawed the naming of bets by the non-bettor, especially by the rival. If so, the bet is

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[6] McGrath takes note of this important factor (2016, 39).

not really made by Yudhiṣṭhira but by Śakuni, and therefore it is null and void. Mary Carrol Smith interprets Śakuni's naming of Draupadī as "the Gambler goads him into wagering Draupadī" (1972, 23). Kṛṣṇa also recalls the naming of Draupadī as a bet by Śakuni to be a form of treachery (5.29.39–40). Draupadī thus challenges both assumptions of Bhīṣma. According to her, not only was Yudhiṣṭhira left no choice in wagering her, the bet itself was also flawed. Draupadī also disputes Yudhiṣṭhira's agency from another perspective: Yudhiṣṭhira stakes her after he himself had become a slave. As far as Bhīṣma's ambiguity about Yudhiṣṭhira's authority to stake her is concerned, it arises from two conflicting principles: a man cannot dispose[7] of a thing that does not belong to him and a wife remains under the authority of her husband (2.60.40). But this confusion is simply a reiteration of Draupadī's question: how could Yudhiṣṭhira bet her after he had lost himself? More precisely, after becoming a slave of Duryodhana, does Yudhiṣṭhira retain his husbandly relationship with and rights over Draupadī? Or, does he cease to be Draupadī's husband and, as a result, also loses husbandly authority? Or, does he remain Draupadī's husband but is deprived of the husbandly rights? If he is stripped of his husbandly rights, in what capacity does he remain Draupadī's husband?

Biardeau concludes that if Yudhiṣṭhira has "lost himself, he has become a mere slave of the Kauravas and thus cannot stake his wife who does not belong to him any longer" (Biardeau 1997, 107). According to Hiltebeitel, "she is without husbands, for, since they have lost their kingdom, the relationship between them and herself as Śrī, 'Royal Prosperity', has 'dissolved'" (Hiltebeitel 1976, 89–90).[8] Van Buitenen also interprets Draupadī's question in the same vein:

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[7] By "disposing" I mean gifting, selling, or desertion (*dāna*, *vikraya*, and *atisarga*). One frequently comes across the terms *īśa* (master, lord, guardian and so forth) and *anīśa* (lacking the former attributes) in the context of Yudhiṣṭhira's authority to stake Draupadī.

[8] For Hiltebeitel, it is not the enslavement of the Pāṇḍavas, rather the loss of kingdom that makes her "without husbands."

"he had lost his freedom and, as a slave of the Kauravas, no longer owned her to stake" (1975, 30).

But the epic description does not accommodate the interpretation that the marital relationship between Yudhiṣṭhira, or even the Pāṇḍavas, and Draupadī becomes dissolved. Bhīṣma admits that by losing his bet, Yudhiṣṭhira had lost the ownership of his self, but Draupadī was still a free person, and thus a master of her own self. At the same time, he also concedes, as do others, that the marital relationship between Yudhiṣṭhira and Draupadī outlasts the former's loss of freedom. For example, Śakuni declares Yudhiṣṭhira's right to stake Draupadī (2.58.29); even after Draupadī is lost, Draupadī is called "wife of the Pāṇḍavas" (2.59.1; 2.60.3, 22, 31, 2.62.18). Bhīṣma's statement therefore means that even a slave husband had authority over his wife. Moreover, not only do both Śakuni and Yudhiṣṭhira consider her as Yudhiṣṭhira's wife and acknowledge the latter's right to wager her, but Draupadī herself continues to treat the Pāṇḍavas, even after they become slaves of Duryodhana, as her husbands. Obviously, the consensus upholds their marital relationship. So, if Yudhiṣṭhira retains his husbandly right over Draupadī, the loss of his personal freedom is immaterial. That being the case, there is nothing unlawful in the bet, and Draupadī becomes Duryodhana's slave. But there is presumably no legal or social framework that would categorically determine the exact nature of their relationship. It is a bizarre situation: the husband is a slave, but the wife is free. Does a slave husband have a right to stake his free wife? If yes, on what account can a slave person have a right over a free person? After all, he does not even have a right over himself.[9] Draupadī has thus succesfully complicated the matter in such a manner that it could not be resolved categorically.

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[9] See Karve on the nature of Draupadī's relationship with her husband and Yudhiṣṭhira's husbandly authority over her (1969, 125–27).

Draupadī: A Noble Sailboat

Moreover, Draupadī questions Yudhiṣṭhira's agency or freedom to stake her from another angle: Yudhiṣṭhira stakes her after he himself had become a slave of the rival gamblers (2.60.44). According to Nārada, these three are *svatantra*, authorized to make legal transactions: a king, a teacher, and a head of the family (Nārada 1.28). Nārada further states that women, sons, and slaves, along with their possessions are dependent, i.e., not authorized to make legal transactions on their own (ibid. 1.30).[10] The *Mahābhārata* is evidently cognizant of such a principle: a wife, a slave, and a son own no property; all their possessions belong to him who owns them (1.77.22).[11] Most importantly, Karṇa cites the same opinion to prove Draupadī's emslavement (2.63.1, which I discuss in the next section). Thus, the *Mahābhārata*'s views on the owenership of property are similar to those found in the Dharmaśāstras and therefore can be constructively interpeted with the help of the latter. Accordingly, the king, the teacher, the head of the family, and a master have the authority to control, give, sell, and buy their possessions (*īśvara*, a synonym for *īśa*). Although permitted in dire circumstances, sale and purchase of the individuals under one's authority is seen as a morally deplorable offence. Vyāsa says: "A man who seeks money by selling his son or who trades his daughter with money for his livelihood descends after death into the extremely terrifying Kālasūtra hell, the worst of the seven [hells], and there he consumes sweat, urine, and feces" (13.45.19–20).[12] Thus, transactions made by slaves, disciples, and

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[10] The *Nāradasmṛti*, a text composed sometime between 100 BCE and the 6th century CE (Lariviere 2003, 10–11; Olivelle and Davis 2018, 27–28), is perhaps the most comprehensive work on legal procedure, and it supplies the most comprehensive description of laws on slavery. It should be noted that, according to most scholars of Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*, the epic, too, acquired its present form in the same general time frame. The idea of Yudhiṣṭhira's lack of authority after becoming a slave of Duryodhana suggests some parallels between the *Nāradasmṛti* and the *Mahābhārata*.

[11] *traya evādhanā rājan bhāryā dāsas tathā sutaḥ, yat te samadhigacchanti yasya te tasya tad dhanam.* The verse is repeated at 5.33.57.

[12] *yo manuṣyaḥ svakaṃ putraṃ vikrīya dhanam icchati, kanyāṃ vā jīvitārthāya yaḥ śulkena prayacchati. saptāvare mahāghore niraye kālasāhvaye, svedaṃ mūtraṃ purīṣaṃ ca tasmin preta upāśnute.* Also, "Wives and sons, if unwilling, should not be made subjects of sale or gift; wives, sons and one's entire wealth should be employed by a man himself (for any purpose of his own); but in times of adversity one may sell or gift away (even one's wives and

family members without the seal of approval of their heads are deemed null and void. In addition, because a slave is no master of himself, he is deprived of authority to make transactions unless by the command of his master (Nārada, 1.25, page 28).[13] It is in this context that Yudhiṣṭhira's right to stake Draupadī is disputed: he is a slave of Duryodhana, which limits his right to make legal transactions. If it is so, then should the transactions contracted by a slave at his master's behest be deemed as contracted by the master, and not by the slave? It is difficult to affirm the nature of, and the extent to which, Nārada's rule on slavery was applicable in the epic period. Draupadī's challenge to the bet—Yudhiṣṭhira staked her after he was already a slave—surely implies that Yudhiṣṭhira, as a slave of Duryodhana, had ceased to be a legally independent individual and had lost the authority to make further transactions. At the same time, we must bear in mind that it was Śakuni, his master, who had provoked Yudhiṣṭhira to bet Draupadī. In that case, should the bet made by him at the behest of his masters be considered legal? If yes, then the bet was arguably made by Śakuni, because Yudhiṣṭhira had no legal agency and was bound to abide by the command of his masters. Thus, because it is Śakuni who in effect stakes Draupadī for Yudhiṣṭhira, the bet's validity could be questioned. Nīlakaṇṭha, the commentator on the *Mahābhārata*, is of the opinion that as a slave Yudhiṣṭhira lacked agency to make the bet; hence, it was void (2.67.49). Draupadī thus complicates what appears to the Kauravas as a straightforward victory. Therefore, it is Draupadī herself who shapes the structure of logic on which Arjuna and Vikarṇa build later.

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sons), but he should not proceed to do so otherwise (i.e. in the absence of adversity). This is the definite conclusion of the Śāstras." (*vikrayaṃ caiva dānaṃ ca na neyāḥ syur anicchavaḥ, dārāḥ putrāś ca sarvasvam ātmanaiva tu yojayet. āpatkāle tu kartavyaṃ dānaṃ vikraya eva vā, anyathā na pravarteta iti śāstraviniścayaḥ*) (*Kātyāyanasmṛtisāroddhāra*, translation by Kane 1933, 638–39).

[13] *tathā dāsakṛtaṃ kāryam akṛtaṃ paricakṣate, anyatra svāmisaṃdeśān na dāsaḥ prabhur ātmanaḥ.*

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Duryodhana, Duḥśāsana, and Śakuni assert their ownership of Draupadī without backing their claim with reasoning. Vikarṇa, Duryodhana's younger brother, makes Draupadī's arguments more explicit and adds one of his own. He views the bet as null and void because:

1. The Kṣatriyas are said to be smitten with four vices: hunting, drinking, gambling, and a penchant for sex. A man in the grip of these tends to disregard *dharma*; accordingly, the actions of such a person are said to be as good as not done at all. Yudhiṣthira was consummately in the grip of gambling, and being challenged by the gamblers, he staked Draupadī.

2. Draupadī is the common wife of all the Pāṇḍavas. Yudhiṣthira alone had no right to stake her.

3. Yudhiṣthira staked her after losing himself.

4. Strictly speaking, it was not Yudhiṣthira who staked Draupadī; rather, it was Śakuni who specifically proposed her as a bet.

A review of Mehendale's and Hiltebeitel's analyses of Vikarṇa's points will be a good point of departure. Mehendale breaks down the first point into four parts, but it remains essentially the same. The fourth simply consists of the conclusion that he draws from the first three. He then enters the second, third, and fourth points as part of the second ground. He does so perhaps because the last three points do not by themselves satisfactorily prove Draupadī's freedom. He finds them, unreasonably, more convincing if lumped together. In his later essay on the dice match, he acknowledges four points as listed above (1995, 34). They are in my view four independent grounds on which the validity of Draupadī's bet can be firmly challenged.

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Hiltebeitel recognizes the last three points in Vikarṇa's statement but omits the first point because "it makes no argument that Draupadī has not been lost, and because Karṇa ignores it" (2001, 248–49, note 30). The first point, which Hiltebeitel rejects, combines two factors: (1) Yudhiṣṭhira's loss of self-control on account of his being in the grip of gambling and (2) a challenge thrown by the "gamblers." I have already discussed the idea of challenge. The epic also informs us of his consummate absorption in the game after its commencement, of course, compounded by Śakuni's challenge. Still, the first factor, which alludes to the age-old question of individuals' ability to exercise their free will and the lack thereof, is also significant. The epic makes it abundantly clear that while individuals have a moral responsibility to put their free will into effect, there are also circumstances—natural and social—that render their free will ineffectual.[14] Whether individuals are morally responsible for actions that they commit under the influence of forces beyond their control often depends on the personal assessment of the action and the circumstance. Presumably, what appears to us a sheer suggestion of Śakuni to Yudhiṣṭhira to stake Draupadī seems to have been more than a suggestion—it amounted to a challenge. Draupadī has already used the same argument to refute Bhīṣma's presumption that Śakuni had left Yudhiṣṭhira free to make a choice. Śakuni no doubt tells us that Yudhiṣṭhira enjoyed gambling, which may or may not be true, since Yudhiṣṭhira opposes the proposal in no uncertain terms.

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[14] Saṃjaya first admonishes Dhṛtarāṣṭra: "An individual who suffers misfortune (*aśubham*) because of his own wrongdoing should not impute the wrongdoing to Fate or Time" (5.156.9). But then he consoles him: "A man is indeed not the doer of good or bad deeds; helpless, he is forced to act like a wooden puppet. Some men are obliged by god, others by chance, and yet others by their past deeds. This world is dragged in [these] three ways" (5.156.14–15). For an insightful critique of an individual's responsibility versus fate in the epic, see Peter Hill (1993, 1994, and 2001) and Julian Woods (2001).

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Vikarṇa's defense of Yudhiṣṭhira on account of his being in the grip of gambling is strictly concerned with his legal responsibility, for all transactions of gambling are governed by rules and regulations pertinent to them. Thus, once Yudhiṣṭhira stakes and loses Draupadī, the transaction is legally complete. But Vikarṇa invalidates the bet. To understand his point, let us take the example of drinking. Any transaction made by an individual whose sense of right and wrong is impaired by inebriation may not be legally acceptable. Similarly, the other vices render a person incapable of making informed free choices. According to Kṛṣṇa, gambling is the worst vice of all because neither the winner nor the loser ever wants to stop the game (3.14.8–9). The epic articulates the nature of gambling: the more Nala lost to Puṣkara, the more his penchant for gambling grew (3.57.13).[15] It has been stated, time and again, that Yudhiṣṭhira had gone mad by gambling (*dyūtamadena mattaḥ*). Again, the significance of Vikarṇa's defense becomes clear when we view it in the context of ancient legal codes. Nārada, for example, decrees:

> A transaction completed by a man gone *non compos mentis*, even if he is legally autonomous, is to be considered not done, because the doer becomes legally unfit for a different reason. Those suffering from desire, anger, arraignment, illness, fear, and vices, and those consumed by love and aversion should be recognized as *non compos mentis*. (1.36–37)[16]

Bhavasvāmin (ca 16th century), a prominent Sanskrit commentator, interprets "vices" as "gambling, drinking and so forth, or the loss of a well-wisher" (*vyasanaṃ dyūtapānādi,*

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[15] When in the forest after the second dice match, a self-reproachful Yudhiṣṭhira asks a sage if there has ever been another man as unlucky as he was. The sage tells him the story of Nala, who was challenged to a dice match by his brother Puṣkara. Like Yudhiṣṭhira, Nala could not shirk the challenge and lost everything he owned. Just as Śakuni prods Yudhiṣṭhira into staking Draupadī, Puṣkara also urges Nala to stake his wife Damayantī. But he refuses and leaves the game. The difference between Yudhiṣṭhira and Nala at that stage was that Yudhiṣṭhira had already lost himself into slavery, whereas Nala never staked himself, and therefore, was able to leave the game. Through the story of Nala, Yudhiṣṭhira learns the secrets of gambling to preclude future disasters.

[16] *svatantro 'pi hi yat kāryaṃ kuryād aprakṛtiṃ gataḥ, tad apy akṛtam evāhur asvatantraḥ sa hetutaḥ. kāmakrodhābhiyuktārtabhayavyasanapīḍitāḥ, rāgadveṣaparītāś ca jñeyās tv aprakṛtiṃ gataḥ.* Also compare with Manu 8.163 (*mattonmattārtādhyadhīnair bālena sthavireṇa vā, asaṃbaddhakṛtaś caiva vyavahāro na sidhyati*) and Yājñavalkya 2.32 (*mattonmattārtavyasanibālabhītādiyojitaḥ, asaṃbaddhakṛtaś caiva vyavahāro na sidhyati*).

suhṛdviyogo vā). Thus, there seems to be a connection between this law and Vikarṇa's statement and the epic. So, even if Yudhiṣṭhira's right to wager Draupadī can be upheld in normal conditions, his *non compos mentis* condition renders him legally unfit, making the bet of Draupadī void. It should be noted that this legal code applies strictly to legal transactions, and not to crimes. Crimes committed under the influence of a vice must be paid for. Considering such clear stipulations about the illegality of transactions by a man whose mental state is compromised beyond his control, Hiltebeitel's assumption that Vikarṇa's first point does not prove Draupadī's case underappreciates the cogency of the argument. This, however, does not absolve Yudhiṣṭhira of his moral responsibility. That too, though, is understood differently in the epic. Although Bhīma does not really challenge Yudhiṣṭhira's right to wager Draupadī, he surely condemns him on moral grounds (2.61.1–6), whereas Arjuna finds Bhīma's reaction "immoral" and defends Yudhiṣṭhira's glorious adherence to his Kṣatriya *dharma* (2.61.7–9).

Vikarṇa's second point also warrants an interpretation of the events. Even if Yudhiṣṭhira's right to stake Draupadī is upheld, he could, in a sense, stake her if she were a wife of him alone. But she was a wife of his younger brothers too, whose authority, if the majority is to be considered, outweighs his single authority. The implication is that Yudhiṣṭhira staked Draupadī alone, without the permission of her other husbands, and thus he acted illegally.

The third point is merely a reiteration of Vidura's and Draupadī's statement. The fourth point requires some explanation. Vikarṇa's argument seems to allude to a gambling regulation, now unknown to us, that the bettor alone is authorized to name the bet. As I noted earlier, naming a bet by the rival amounts to a challenge for the bettor. Vikarṇa argues that Draupadī's bet was indeed originally named by Śakuni. Consequently, the bet was not really made by

Yudhiṣṭhira, but by Śakuni, and therefore is null and void. Kṛṣṇa also recalls the naming of

Draupadī as a bet by Śakuni as a form of treachery (5.29.39–40).

Vikarṇa's heartfelt defense is received with positive enthusiasm by the assembly, but for

Karṇa, it was no less than an act of family betrayal that was about to sabotage the game plan of

Vikarṇa's own siblings. So, he steps in to defend Duryodhana's win. He repudiates Vikarṇa's

contention by reestablishing Yudhiṣṭhira and his brothers' role in the bet of Draupadī. Karṇa

validates Draupadī's bet and enslavement from various angles. He construes the assembly's, or

the Pāṇḍavas', silence about the issue as their acceptance of the lawfulness of Draupadī's loss:

"Despite being urged by Draupadī, they[17] said nothing; I think they believe Draupadī to have

been won in accordance with *dharma*" (2.61.28).[18] Also, Karṇa insists: "Yudhiṣṭhira himself

explicitly announced Draupadī as a bet, and the Pāṇḍavas consented to it" (2.61.33).[19] Karṇa's

points sound simple and straightforward: should the assemblymen and the Pāṇḍavas have had

doubts about the validity of the bet and its loss, they would have raised objections, especially in

the face of Draupadī's repeated requests to resolve the matter. Yudhiṣṭhira's acceptance of defeat

and the silence of the assemblymen/Pāṇḍavas indicates that they perceive nothing unlawful in

Draupadī's enslavement. Draupadī never responds to Karṇa's arguments, perhaps because her

rejoinder to Bhīṣma included those points. That the assemblymen/Pāṇḍavas sat speechless as

Draupadī urged them to answer her question cannot be interpreted as their acceptance of

Draupadī's enslavement. For Bhīṣma, one of the greatest experts on *dharma*, expresses his utter

bewilderment in the matter and concedes his inability to resolve the issue. Aware of their

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[17] It is not clear who "they" are. It could be the Pāṇḍavas or the assemblymen, or even both.

[18] *ete na kiṃ cid apy āhuś codyamānāpi kṛṣṇayā, dharmeṇa vijitāṃ manye manyante drupadātmajām.*

[19] *kīrtitā draupadī vācā anujñātā ca pāṇḍavaiḥ.*

comparatively inferior knowledge of *dharma*, others might have reckoned their inability to add

some meaningful points to the debate, which can be an explanation for their silence. Note that

Draupadī has already disputed, quite forcefully, Bhīṣma's indecision. She has also argued against

Yudhiṣṭhira's explicit staking of her. Interestingly, Karṇa makes no allusion to the fact that

Yudhiṣṭhira had already become a slave of Duryodhana when he wagers Draupadī, which forms

the basis of Bhīṣma's confusion about the subtlety of *dharma*. In addition, Karṇa omits another

critical detail, that it is Śakuni who first proposes Draupadī as a bet and asks Yudhiṣṭhira to stake

her. According to Draupadī's incisive response to Bhīṣma, because Yudhiṣṭhira was a slave of

the Kauravas, could he snub Śakuni's proposal? As a slave, was Yudhiṣṭhira even qualified to

make legal transactions? It is the master who retains accountability for the transactions that his

slave contracts.

Karṇa offers another argument: because Yudhiṣṭhira had staked and lost "everything,"

Draupadī, who was part of Yudhiṣṭhira's "everything," was also lost (2.61.31–32). Inasmuch as

Karṇa's remark is part of his rebuttal of Vikarṇa's argument, Draupadī does not counter it. It is

as if the assemblymen were discussing the matter amongst themselves, and Draupadī should not

interfere. But Karṇa's claim that Yudhiṣṭhira stakes "everything" is a plain lie, as far as the

narrative is concerned. Yudhiṣṭhira never makes a stake that includes "everything." Each bet

specifies the items included in the wager. So much so, that when he bets his "city, capital, land,

and men," the most comprehensive stake he ever makes, he specifically excludes the Brāhmaṇas

and their property (*abrāhmaṇadhanaiḥ saha*, *abrāhmaṇāś ca puruṣā* 2.58.7). Additionally, the

bet specifically mentions "men" (*puruṣāḥ*). Consequently, women, too, are not part of the bet. Hence, Yudhiṣṭhira makes no bet that could possibly include Draupadī as a wager.[20]

Although during the debate, Vidura and Vikarṇa support Draupadī's freedom, Vikarṇa, disturbed by the abuse of Draupadī by his Kaurava brothers, builds on Draupadī's defence and supplies some additional arguments (2.61.20–24). Without addressing Bhīṣma and Karṇa's viewpoints,Vidura simply insists on his opinion that had Yudhiṣṭhira not himself become a slave, he would have had a right to stake Draupadī. It is Draupadī alone who disputes Bhīṣma and Karṇa's assumptions, and keeps the problem open for debate.[21] In conclusion, it can be said that the Kauravas' claim to their right to treat Draupadī as their slave was unjustified, and according to the logic internal to the narrative as well as to the understanding of relevant Dharmaśāstra liteture, they stand guilty of humiliating a noble and morally virtuous woman. They stand guilty not because Draupadī's case was resolved in her favor, but because the case remains unresolved until the end.

Draupadī's enslavement: is a slave's wife also a slave?

Perhaps moved by his loyalty to Duryodhana and utter dislike of the Pāṇḍavas, Karṇa tries to support Draupadī's enslavement with another argument: "These three own no property—

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[20] According to Hiltebeitel, Karṇa's response to Vikarṇa consists of "a point for point rebuttal," with which Mehendale disagrees. While I do concur with Mehendale on this point, I disagree with his suggestion that Karṇa's statements belong to some other version of the epic, because they seem "so far removed from Vikarṇa's argument" (Mehendale 1985, 186). As I see it, Karṇa might simply be presenting the events that would tilt the balance in his friend's favor.

[21] According to the law, court decisions can be unanimously acceptable (*niḥśalya*) or disputable (*saśalya*) (Nārada 3.16). Draupadī's case remains disputable because no agreement could be reached.

a slave, a disciple, and a dependent woman.[22] You are a wife of a slave, [as his property], you are now his [Duryodhana's] property. O good woman, you have lost your masters [husbands], you are slave property, and a slave" (2.63.1). Karṇa puts this argument forward after Duryodhana has left the matter in the court of the Pāṇḍavas: if the Pāṇḍavas would declare Yudhiṣṭhira a fraud for wrongfully staking her, she would be released from slavery (2.62.24–26). Therefore, Draupadī has no chance to counter the argument. Lest this might give the impression that Karṇa's argument is valid beyond doubt, I would like to complicate it. The argument was likely based on laws that governed slavery. Given Karṇa's plain extreme hostility towards the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī, his opinion should be examined carefully. After all, he has already told an outright lie to support his friend Duryodhana. Unfortunately, the epic does not supply further material in this matter. I will therefore look for clues in the Dharmaśāstra literature, much of which was more or less composed/compiled during the same time as Vyāsa's epic.

Vyāsa's text contains a straightforward principle: a son, a wife, and a slave—these three own no property; whatever they acquire, it belongs to their father, husband, and master

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[22] Hiltebeitel incorrectly interprets the first part as "[t]here are three who own no property: a slave, a student, and a woman are nonindependent" (2001, 259). Black, too, follows Hiltebeitel (2021, 123). First, this translation suffers from linguistic incongruity. The term *asvatantrā* does not relate to all—to a slave, a student, and a woman. It specifically refers to *nārī* (a woman), as it is the feminine singular term. In plural, it would have been *asvatantrāś*. Second, it misreads Karṇa's statement about women's status. The text does not declare women's or others' dependence; rather, it enlists those who own no property, which includes a "nonindependent woman." Van Buitenen and Smith translate it correctly. The difference in translations is crucial. The correct translation acknowledges that women could be both dependent and independent. Black remarks about how the idea of women's dependence and independence remained in tension (ibid.). Women who settled on a lifestyle outside the family fold (Scharfe 2002, 204) must have been seen as independent. We learn this from the dialogue between Aṣṭāvakra and Uttarā, an old woman, who claims her independence because she was never married (13.21.12–20). In addition, it is likely that sex workers were independent and as such were authorized to own property. Moreover, the Smṛti literature contains views that a woman had "complete independence" to spend or give away the gifts that she received from her relatives. She was advised to conserve the gifts given by her husband in his lifetime but enjoyed freedom to spend it as she wished after his death: *saudāyike sadā strīṇāṃ svātantryaṃ parikīrtitam, vikraye caiva dāne ca yatheṣṭaṃ sthāvareṣv api. bhartṛdāyaṃ mṛte patyau vinyaset strī yatheṣṭataḥ, vidyamāne tu saṃrakṣet …* (Devana-Bhatta 655; see also Nārada 1.24, page 27). The precept of women's dependence and independence as related to their rights within family is more complex than the common perceptions thereof. The term *asvatantrā* therefore applies specifically to women who were seen as dependent within the context of property laws.

respectively (5.33.57).[23] Note that this statement comes from Vidura, the most renowned law-expert in the epic who dismisses Yudhiṣṭhira's right to wager Draupadī. In a similar manner, the Dharmaśāstra author, Kātyāyana, states that a free woman who marries a slave man also becomes a slave, for her husband is her master, who himself is under his master's control (Davis 2020, 11). Karṇa, therefore, does not appear to be fully wrong in declaring Draupadī a property of the Pāṇḍavas' masters. He tauntingly suggests that she marry another free man so that she could automatically free herself from slavery (2.63.3). Karṇa's claim implies that if a free man becomes a slave, his wife, too, becomes a slave of his master; and if a slave woman marries a free man, she, too, becomes free.[24] The case of the Pāṇḍavas' enslavement is, however, different and complicated.

In light of most slavery laws as described in the Dharmaśāstra literature, Karṇa's argument seems untenable. Nārada lists fifteen kinds of slaves (Nārada 5.23–26),[25] including one lost in betting. The slaves are categorized into two types: hereditary and those forced into slavery by a tragic turn of events. The legal framework of the hereditary law make the possibility of their freedom extremely difficult (ibid. 5.27) whereas the right of those forced into slavery to procure freedom by fulfilling the necessary conditions is protected under the law. The rights and

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[23] This seems to have been a general rule as confirmed by Manu 8.416 and Nārada 5.39.

[24] Mehendale's interpretation of Karṇa's statement is inconsistent with Vyāsa's text. Karṇa argues that these three own no properties: a slave, a student, and a dependent woman. Mehendale suggests that as a wife of Yudhiṣṭhira, who had already become a slave, she remains Yudhiṣṭhira's property. He explains: "What Karṇa is driving at is that although, generally speaking, a slave has no property (and hence cannot participate in a game of dice), if he is married he has his wife as 'property' which he may stake" (ibid. 188). Mehendale is aware of a statement found in Vyāsa's text, that a wife, a son, and a slave own no property (ibid. 188, note 1). But when expounding Karṇa's view on a slave's right to property, he ignores the latter part of the stanza: "Whatever they [a wife, a son, and a slave] acquire, [that all] belongs to him to whom they belong" (1.77.22). According to this, if a slave's wife is his "property," as Mehendale asserts, then Draupadī automatically becomes a "property" of her husband's owner, i.e., of Duryodhana. In that case, Yudhiṣṭhira would have no right to stake Draupadī; nor would Śakuni have a need to "win" Draupadī and prod Yudhiṣṭhira to stake her.

[25] See Donald Davis' "Slaves and slavery in the *Smṛticandrikā*" (2020) for a detailed review of laws on slavery in the Smṛti literature as systematized in the *Smṛticandrikā*.

treatment of both groups differ greatly. A law of slavery documented in Viṣṇugupta's

Arthaśāstra perfectly elucidates the issue. For example, the offspring of an *ārya*—an individual

belonging to one of the upper three *varṇas*—who sells himself into slavery should be

acknowledged as *ārya*, i.e., free. It seems that slavery in this case means indentured servitude,

because, according to Viṣṇugupta, an *ārya* could never be reduced to permanent and absolute

slavery (Olivelle 2013, 3.13.3). The offspring of an *ārya* who sold himself remains *ārya*.

Moreover, such an *ārya* shall rightfully own whatever he earns, as well as the family inheritance,

the *Arthaśāstra* maintains (ibid. 3.13.13-14). The text also decrees that the property of a slave

goes to his relatives. The master inherits his slave's property only if the latter has no relatives

(ibid. 3.13.22). It seems that the law Karṇa invokes to declare Duryodhana's ownership of

Draupadī on account of Yudhiṣṭhira's enslavement is not as straightforward as it sounds.

As one might expect, the law that Karṇa likely evoked—the master's right over his

slave's property—indeed dealt with hereditary slaves. That the master owns the possessions of

his non-hereditary slave, which the latter earned as a free citizen, that is, prior to becoming a

slave, or independently after becoming a slave, cannot be justified. This is how Nīlakaṇṭha

discredits Karṇa's claim (2.71.19).[26] Bearing in mind such laws, it would be appropriate to

interpret the ruling of Kātyayana congruously: a free woman becomes a slave only if she marries

a man who is a slave at the time of marriage. But her freedom remains incontrovertible if she

marries a free man, even if he later falls into slavery.[27]

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[26] *yasyaite tasya tad dhanam iti smṛtis tu dāsabhāve 'rjitaṃ dhanaṃ svāmigāmīty āha na tu tataḥ prāktanam apīti*.

[27] Black advances a similar conclusion but from a slightly different angle: "Draupadī implies that because she has had her social status since birth—and thus not through her marriage—then Yudhiṣṭhira losing his status should not equate to her losing hers" (2021, 124); and "[b]y referring to Draupadī as his daughter-in-law, he [Bhīṣma] supports her claim that slavery is not necessarily the default position for her if her husbands lose their freedom" (ibid. 127).

The matrimony between the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī came in force when they were free. So, just as the offspring of a free man remains free after the father's enslavement, Draupadī also retains her free status after her husbands' enslavement. The most important point in this matter remains that even Śakuni considers Draupadī an unwon bet, which demonstrates that if a man became a slave, the ownership of his possessions does not automatically shift to his master. There is yet another impediment in concurring with Karṇa's conclusion. In addition to Draupadī as their common wife, each Pāṇḍava had individually acquired another wife—Yudhiṣṭhira married Devikā, Bhīma Baladharā, Arjuna Subhadrā, Nakula Kareṇuvatī, and Sahadeva Vijayā—and had sons from them (1.90.81–89). If Draupadī is to be regarded as a slave of Duryodhana by virtue of her husbands' enslavement to him, then should the Pāṇḍavas' other wives and offsprings also suffer the same fate? Not even a single reference is found to this effect. Clearly Karṇa, as a political ally and friend of Duryodhana and ever hostile to the Pāṇḍavas, tries to bend the truth in favour of his friend.

6.1.2 Draupadī: a "promiscuous" woman?

Karṇa justifies Draupadī's abuse on yet another account. By classifying Draupadī as a "whore" (*bandhakī*) (2.61.35), Karṇa rules out her sexual purity on account of her polyandrous marriage to the five Pāṇḍavas. Karṇa contends that as a *bandhakī*, she has no right to the honour and dignity that is accorded to virtuous women.[28] By typecasting Draupadī in this way, he not

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[28] Elsewhere Karṇa exhibits a relatively tolerant attitude toward Draupadī's polyandrous marriage. When Duryodhana hopes to cause a rift between the Pāṇḍavas by exploiting their affection for Draupadī, Karṇa sees no chance of success: "Women find it a desirable quality if one woman has many husbands. Draupadī gained just that; it will not be easy to alienate her" (1.194.8). Many viewers of the TV Series thought that her polyandrous marriage was difficult for her, but Pooja, a female viewer, says: "I have always liked the fact that Draupadi got married to five men... I really love that...because I think that is the best possible...I think that is the only way a woman can get everything...it is just not possible for one man to have all those things that those five men have...in the story it was like almost a punishment or a tragedy...but I always thought of it as... she was lucky and she had five...not get bored...the simple solution is to get five people" (Bandlamudi 2012, 148).

only validates her forced dragging into the Sabhā, but also instructs Duḥśāsana to strip her naked. Inasmuch as his suggestion to denude Draupadī is based on her sexual conduct, the resulting abuse should be viewed as sexual abuse.

The English term "whore" is not as specific as *bandhakī*, which Kuntī, Draupadī's mother-in-law, characterizes as a woman who sleeps with five men (1.114.65).[29] Vātsyāyana (4th or 5th century) introduces the opinion of the Bābhravīyas, who believed that a woman who has seen five men can be approached by others too (Vātsyāyana 1.5, p.70). Yaśodhara (13th century), a commentator on Vātsyāyana's *Kāmasūtra*, comments on the statement: "If a woman has been with five men, excluding her husband, she is a *svairiṇī* ("loose woman") and can be had by everyone who has a reason. To that effect, Parāśara [says], 'a woman who crosses the limit of five men is called *bandhakī*'" (ibid.).[30] Karṇa, therefore, finds nothing wrong if she is stripped naked in public. Because the unvirtuous forego moral claim to social honour and dignity on account of their violation of the moral code, they came to be known as "available" to all men. Their character plays a role in determining the nature of their encounters with other men. The notion of *guptā* (shielded) and *aguptā* (unshielded) is relevant here. The former denotes a woman who exercises self-restraint and whose guardians and law guard her moral character as per the social norms. The latter refers to a woman in the opposite situation. This is significant because even the criminal code distinguishes between men's conduct around a "shielded" versus "unshielded" woman. If a man engaged in a private conversation with another man's wife, that constituted a sexual offence (Manu 8.354), but similar conversations with women whose

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[29] *nātaś caturthaṃ prasavam āpatsv api vadanty uta, ataḥ paraṃ cāriṇī syāt pañcame bandhakī bhavet.*

[30] *svapativyatirekeṇa dṛṣṭāḥ pañca puruṣāḥ patitvena yayā sā svairiṇī kāraṇavaśāt sarvair eva gamyā. tathā ca pañcātītā bandhakīti parāśaraḥ.*

character was already assumed to have been compromised did not constitute such an offence.[31]

This might be an oversimplification of what might have been more complex in real life. But most

social perceptions and legal codes in the Dharmaśāstra literature do suggest a distinct treatment

of women perceived as chaste as opposed to those considered promiscious.

Even though Karṇa's justification of Draupadī's public humiliation on account of her

polyandrous relationship does not directly relate to her question, she does, albeit indirectly, seem

to have countered it too. Draupadī defends her right to nobility and sexual modesty by calling

attention to her morally virtuous conduct: she has never before been seen publicly except during

her marriage ceremony (2.62.4–5):

> What could be more pathetic than [the fact] that, in spite of being a virtuous woman, I am being made to enter the Sabhā. Whatever happened to the *dharma* of kings? We have heard that virtuous women were not brought into the Sabhā in the past; that ancient perennial *dharma* lies in ruin among the Kurus. How can I, in spite of being a wife of the Pāṇḍavas, a sister of Dhṛṣṭadyumna, and a friend of Kṛṣṇa, enter the Sabhā! (2.62.8–10)[32]

Draupadī asserts her claim to nobility and moral virtuousness by calling attention to her conduct

that she has so far maintained in accordance with her noble background and married state. She

further emphasizes the legitimacy of her married state by claiming a social rank equal to her

husbands (2.62.11). The distinction between a wife and a "whore" is of paramount importance in

this context. So, how could Draupadī claim her sexual virtue?

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[31] It would be naïve to think that such prejudices existed only in connection with women. A general image of a virtuous or unvirtuous person was an important factor in determining the nature of their conduct. For example, it was not considered a sexual offence if a man with no previous record of illegitimately seducing women conversed with a woman in privacy (Manu 8.355).

[32] *kiṃ tv ataḥ kṛpaṇaṃ bhūyo yad ahaṃ strī satī śubhā, sabhāmadhyaṃ vigāhe 'dya kva nu dharmo mahīkṣitām. dharmyāḥ striyaḥ sabhāṃ pūrvaṃ na nayantīti naḥ śrutam, sa naṣṭaḥ kauraveyeṣu pūrvo dharmaḥ sanātanaḥ. kathaṃ hi bhāryā pāṇḍūnāṃ pārṣatasya svasā satī, vāsudevasya ca sakhī pārthivānāṃ sabhām iyām.*

Draupadī: A Noble Sailboat

Draupadī's polyandrous marriage, as the epic shows, begins with controversy. After Arjuna wins her in the *svayaṃvara*, and she arrives at the Pāṇḍavas' residence, their mother Kuntī unwittingly instructs them to share the "alms" (1.182.2). As soon as the mother realizes that the "alms" she instructed her sons to share is the princess, she is terrified: if her sons follow her instruction and collectively marry the princess, it would push Draupadī into an unlawful relationship; but if they do not share her, Kuntī would suffer the guilt of speaking a lie. At the same time, Yudhiṣṭhira observes how all brothers are attracted to Draupadī. Afraid of the potential fraternal conflict, he suggests that all brothers marry her (1.182.12–15). But, neither the local conventions nor scriptural injunctions approve of a polyandrous marriage. After a lengthy debate, it is decided that Draupadī's marriage with the Pāṇḍavas is preordained. Later Vedic scholars struggled to validate the marriage (for example, Kumārila Bhaṭṭa on Jaimini's *Mīmāṃsādarśana* 1.3.7). But Nīlakaṇṭha finds no fault with how Draupadī marries. He quotes the *Gopathabrāhmaṇa*, "one woman should not have many husbands simultaneously" (2.195.29).[33] Because the scripture specifically mentions "simultaneously," Nīlakaṇṭha interprets that a woman can have many husbands at different times. In order to avoid violation of scriptural injunctions, Draupadī's marriage ceremony with the five Pāṇḍavas is performed on different days. She is said to have regained virginity, or maidenly status, after each marriage (1.190.11–14). If this was not enough, the Pāṇḍavas make an agreement to maintain each other's right to absolute privacy with respect to their relationship with Draupadī: if anyone would encroach on another's privacy, he would spend twelve years as a celibate (1.204.28–30). According to this, because Draupadī is properly married, she cannot be condemned as a sexually "promiscuous"

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[33] *naikasyai bahavaḥ sahapataya iti śrutyā saheti yugapad bahupatitvaniṣedho vihito na tu samayabhedena.*

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woman. Yaśodhara also supports a similar interpretation. Even though Draupadī had relationship

with five men, she could not be labeled as a "whore," because she was married to them.

> But because Draupadī had Yudhiṣṭhira and others as her husbands, she was not available
> to others. How could one woman have several husbands? Ask the historians about it.
> (Vātsyāyana 1.5, p. 70)[34]

Yaśodhara's reservations about Draupadī's polyandrous marriage are consistent with the anxiety

that her family expresses in Vyāsa's epic (1.157, 1.182–87). What is obvious from Yaśodhara's

commentary is that it upholds the sanctity of the marital institution, even if it violates

conventional moral sensibilities. As a wife of five men, Draupadī is not "promiscuous" and

cannot be considered potentially "available" for any man interested in her. In addition, she

cannot be considered *aguptā* (unguarded) because her character as a married woman remains

uncompromised. A woman could be considered as "promiscuous" and "available" to other men

only if she displayed promiscuity by transgressing the covenant and conventions of marriage.

Two other men—Jayadratha and Kīcaka—try to force Draupadī into marriage on separate

ocassions. Despite the fact that both are aware of her polyandrous marriage, neither justifies his

assault on account of her "whore"-like character. In fact, Draupadī's defence against Kīcaka's

seductions shows that she would become a loose woman (*kāmavṛttā*) if she contravened marital

restrictions by agreeing to have a relationship with him (4.14.12). It seems that a woman, even if

married to more than one man, was considered to be as respectable as any wife who follows the

convention of marrying a single man.[35] Draupadī enjoys such a status of wife, so much so that

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[34] *draupadī tu yudhiṣṭhirādīnāṃ svapatitvād anyeṣām agamyā. katham ekā saty anekapatir iti caitihāsikāḥ praṣṭavyāḥ.*

[35] Draupadī's polyandrous marriage is no doubt exceptional, but Yudhiṣṭhira justifies it: "*Dharma* is subtle, O great king, and we do not know its course. We tread the path that people before [us] trod one after the other" (1.187.28). He later supports it with an example of Gautamī, whose marriage to seven sages is described in the Purāṇas, he

even Kṛṣṇa's wife Satyabhāmā learns from her the virtues of a good wife (3.222–23; Patton

2007, 97–109). Moreover, when the Pāṇḍavas enter Hastināpura after the war, the women of

Hastināpura shower Draupadī with high praise:

> O king, the women [of Hastināpura] praised Draupadī in the following manner: "You are
> blessed, Draupadī (princess of Pāñcāla), because you serve the very best of men, as
> Gautamī served the great sages. Your deeds and performance of vows have not been
> barren, resplendent woman." (12.39.5–6)[36]

In addition, Draupadī also occupies a place among five "chaste" women (Bhattacharya 2006,

107–36). Given such views on marriage and the absolute lack of condemnation of Draupadī's

polyandrous marriage in Vyāsa's epic, Karṇa's statement holds no weight.

The gravity of Draupadī's experience can be best understood by contrasting her pre- and

post-gambling status. Before the gambling match, she was not just a woman; she was a woman

of high rank. She was born into a royal family and also married into one. She had just been

installed as the queen of the most powerful kingdom in the region, and she had never been seen

in public except during her marriage rituals. She lived a secure life. But one bet by Yudhiṣṭhira

devastated her world of protected nobility, and she was then called a slave and dragged into the

hall. But Draupadī's question about her status reveals the complexity of the situation, that is,

whether she deserves to be treated like a noble woman or a slave, like a "whore" or a virtuous

wife.

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claims (1.188.14). The Vulgate edition contains another verse which describe Vārkṣī's marriage to ten sages of the
same name (1.188.14 *1910; Nīlakaṇṭha 1.196.15). The *Viṣṇumahāpurāṇa* describes the story of Vārkṣī, whose
given name was Māriṣā, at 1.15.66–73. It seems that even if a marriage contravened established customs, it was still
respected as a marriage.

[36] *dhanyā tvam asi pāñcāli yā tvaṃ puruṣasattamān, upatiṣṭhasi kalyāṇi maharṣīn iva gautamī. tava karmāṇy
amoghāni vratacaryā ca bhāmini, iti kṛṣṇāṃ mahārāja praśaśaṃsus tadā striyaḥ.*

Draupadī: A Noble Sailboat

Thus, Draupadī not only challenges the validity of her bet, she also stands firm and demands noble treatment in the Sabhā. The impasse created by her arguments and the sympathetic feelings that her unjustifiable abuse arouses are instrumental in pressuring Dhṛtarāṣṭra to intervene and grant her two wishes, through which she secures the freedom of her husbands.[37] It is Draupadī who rescues her helpless husbands from the slavery of Duryodhana, as a sailboat rescues people drowning in the sea (2.64.1–3).

One last important point to note throughout the debate and Draupadī's humiliation in the Sabhā is that the Kauaravas never justify their abusive behaviour on account of Draupadī's past behaviour. Duḥśāsana once taunts the Pāṇḍavas: "Defeated and deprived of their wealth, the Pāṇḍavas, who, drunk on power, mocked the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra [in Indraprastha], are about to depart to the forest" (2.68.5). Evidently, while the Kauravas still remember Duryodhana's mockery by the Pāṇḍavas and others and feel cathartic pleasure in avenging it, they express no bitterness towards Draupadī, an important reminder that the Kauravas had no personal vendetta against Draupadī, once again suggesting Draupadī's innocence. She is, as I demonstrate above, neither a slave nor a "whore"; she is a noble woman who deserves the honour and respect that the society of the epic accorded to other royal married women. During the gambling match, she proves to be a vital sailboat that rescues her flailing husbands.

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[37] Dhṛtarāṣṭra offers three wishes to Draupadi but mindful of her social rank, she proudly declines the third wish (2.63.33–36).

6.1.3 Draupadī: a noble sailboat

Draupadī's challenge to the legality of her bet becomes the saving grace for her and the Pāṇḍavas. Karṇa, a bitter enemy of the Pāṇḍavas and responsible for aggravating Draupadī's abuse, nevertheless applauds her accomplishment: saving her husbands.

> We hear of no such achievement by any woman of all the women—known for their beauty among people—about whom we have heard. When the Pāṇḍavas and the Dhārtarāṣṭras were filled with extreme rage, the dark-skinned Draupadī brought peace to the Pāṇḍavas. As the Pāṇḍavas went down and continued to sink in shipless and bottomless waters, this Pāñcālī became the sailboat that sailed them ashore. (2.64.1–3)[38]

Karṇa's laudatory comparison of Draupadī with a boat seems to have been well received. For example, Sūta admires Draupadī: "Draupadī rescued [the Pāṇḍavas], who were drowning in the sea of gambling, like a sailboat from the ocean" (1.2.102). Similarly, Kṛṣṇa admonishes Saṃjaya, who advises Yudhiṣṭhira to avoid the conflict:

> You did not appeal to *dharma* in this manner in the Sabhā, and now you want to lecture the Pāṇḍava! It was Draupadī who, having come to the Sabhā, carried out this right deed, through which she rescued the Pāṇḍavas and herself like a sailboat from the currents of the ocean. (5.29.35)[39]

Yudhiṣṭhira also expresses gratitude for Draupadī's role in rescuing them (3.35.6), and Duryodhana taunts the Pāṇḍavas' masculinity by alluding to their deliverance thanks to Draupadī. Bhīma too is fully aware of this fact, when he resentfully concedes that a woman was

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[38] *yā naḥ śrutā manuṣyeṣu striyo rūpeṇa saṃmatāḥ, tāsām etādṛśaṃ karma na kasyāṃ cana śuśrumaḥ. krodhāviṣṭeṣu pārtheṣu dhārtarāṣṭreṣu cāpy ati, draupadī pāṇḍuputrāṇāṃ kṛṣṇā śāntir ihābhavat. aplave 'mbhasi magnānām apratiṣṭhe nimajjatām, pāñcālī pāṇḍuputrāṇāṃ naur eṣā pāragābhavat.*

[39] *anuktvā tvaṃ dharmam evaṃ sabhāyām athecchase pāṇḍavasyopadeṣṭum, kṛṣṇā tv etat karma cakāra śuddhaṃ suduṣkaraṃ tad dhi sabhāṃ sametya, yena kṛcchrāt pāṇḍavān ujjahāra tathātmānaṃ naur iva sāgaraughāt.*

the saving grace of the Pāṇḍavas (2.64.4). No other person who witnessed the Pāṇḍavas'

inability to rescue themselves and Draupadī ever receives such commendations.

To conclude, Vidura receives some appreciation for his attempts to shield Draupadī from

slavery and abuse (5.29.33–34, 5.88.52); however, it is Draupadī alone who is said to have

effectively set the Pāṇḍavas and herself free. The cogency of Draupadī's challenge to the reasons

that the Kaurava party employ to assert their lordship over her is impressive. While the debate is

going on, the Kauravas abuse Draupadī physically and psychologically: she is called and treated

as a slave and a "whore." Despite this abuse, Draupadī remains composed enough to demand an

answer to her question. In the assembly filled with noble kings, heroes, and supposed experts in

dharma, Draupadī is left to defend herself, which she does with great success by drawing

attention to the complex nature of the situation. Even though Draupadī's abuse has been justified

on two accounts—(1) with the loss of the bet, she becomes a slave of the Kauaravas, who could,

as her masters, treat her as they wished; and (2) she is no less than a "whore," because she is

married to five men—in my analysis, both the reasons are flawed, and Draupadī's objections and

counterarguments effectively complicate the matter.

This suggests that it was Draupadī's insistence on having her question addressed from a

legal viewpoint that leads to the rescue of her and the Pāṇḍavas. It is also a powerful example of

how a women could take recourse to laws, even if they were formed and interpreted within the

framework of a patrilineal and patrilocal social system.

Uma Chakravarti discusses Draupadī's issue from a feminist perspective and asks the

question:

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> [W]hom does Draupadī speak for when she poses her question to the *sabhā*? Does she speak for all women, for women as a 'class' that calls into question 'two kinds of male lordship: that of kinship and family. [*sic*] and that of the dharmic politics of kingship in the *sabhā*'? Is Draupadī the ultimate feminist of textual traditions? Quite the opposite: she speaks for herself and she carefully limits the question to the legal validity of the stake, never even denying Yudhiṣṭhira's right to stake her. It is her own refusal to be a *dāsī* that leads her to ask the question in the way she does, framing it in a narrowly bounded way that works fully within a framework that accepts the master's right of lordship over his *dāsī*s, to do as they please. She never for a moment erases the difference between *Kṣatriya* princesses and *dāsī*s; she never once says, 'you cannot do what you are doing, this violation of a woman's personhood, to any woman!' Her question is not *the* woman's question, it is the *Kṣatriyānī*'s question, a question that divides women into those who have rights and others who don't. (2014, 150)

It is true that Draupadī consistently draws attention to her noble status as a daughter of noble parents, wife of the noble Pāṇḍavas, and a daughter-in-law of the noble Kurus and thus maintains a distinction between women of high rank and those of low rank. She also does not challenge the right of Yudhiṣṭhira to stake her. In my view, that is indicative of her perspicaciousness. If she can take recourse to *dharma*, or law, she must challenge the legality of her status within the framework of the legal codes of her times. We must not forget that her husbands have already been reduced to slavery. If a patriarchal law effectively permitted enslavement of noble men, in my view, challenging the law from a modern feminist perspective would have impossibly weakened Draupadī's case. What makes her case debatable in the first place is the fact that it is within the context of the law system of that time.

Therefore, unlike Chakravarti, I think Draupadī's assertion can be interpreted as a feminist critique of the patriarchal system if one pays attention to the fact that one's legal and conventional rights can be claimed within the existing framework of legal and conventional codes. My views in this matter align with those of Saptorshi Das:

> It was a step unimaginable for a woman of her time and setting. Draupadi's question is not an antiquated question of a wronged, virtuous queen whose integrity has been put on

stake. Rather, it holds as much importance and relevance now as it did then. It is a question of the protection of those who find themselves unprotected in a system. [...] A question every young woman would want to ask the established security system of the nation post the gang-rape, brutal assault and consequent death of the twenty-three year old paramedic student in Delhi on the 16th of December, 2012. A pioneer of feminism, she fought for her rights when her enslaved husbands lost her in a game of dice. In a court full of the most powerful kings of the time, here was a woman who dared to stand for herself and speak up, aloud, against male-perpetrated injustices. (2014, 228)

This forceful appreciation of Draupadī's challenge to her rights in an assembly full of powerful men could be a source of inspiration for the contemporary acknowledgement of women's rights. Draupadī might not appear to be a revolutionary woman who strikes at the roots of the social structure that made her abuse possible, and modern feminists might not embrace her fully; she nonetheless remains an impressive figure who can inspire women to fight for their legal rights in in a traditonally patriarchal society.

6.1.4 Was Draupadī's question answered?

I have so far discussed the complexity of Draupadī's bet and how her forceful challenge to its validity creates a deadlock. That her question remains unresolved until the end is also the most accepted conclusion. Mehendale is an exception to this. He sees "definite evidence" to conclude that "Draupadī's question was decisively answered" (1985, 182). According to him, Arjuna's reply (2.63.21) settles the issue for good, and the stanzas that describe how the bad omens seem to have scared Dhṛtarāṣṭra are an interpolation, otherwise "we have to assume that the basic question raised by Draupadī regarding her social status remained unresolved to the end" (1985, 181). Even though Hiltebeitel suggests that "the question hovers over the entire *Mahābhārata*: that no one ever resolves it, and that Yudhiṣṭhira will still be trying to figure it out at the very end" (2001, 241), and yet he does not seriously contend Mehendale's claim. I feel that an exhaustive refutation of the points that Mehendale raises is not necessary here. Much of it has

been said in my analysis above. I will focus on some main points that he advances to prove his conclusion right.

I should summarize the background for a better understanding of Mehendale's viewpoint. Vidura declares Draupadī free (2.59.4), Bhīṣma expresses his inability to resolve this complex issue (2.60.40–42), Draupadī refutes Bhīṣma's position (2.60.43–44), Vikarṇa defends Draupadī's freedom (2.61.19–24), to which Karṇa angrily responds and declares Draupadī a slave (2.61.28–33). While this debate is going on, most people in the Sabhā maintain a dead silence. Vidura finally pleads with them to settle Draupadī's question, but his plea falls on deaf ears (2.61–81). Bhīṣma once again confesses his inability to answer her question. This time he adds that in times of doubt, might is right (2.62.14–16). It seems that Duryodhana understands quite well the meaning of Bhīṣma's words. He seems to be convinced that he holds the power in the Sabhā and announces: if any of the Pāṇḍavas would testify that Yudhiṣṭhira was not authorized to stake Draupadī and declare him a liar or fraud, Duryodhana would free Draupadī. This Mehendale calls a daring proposal (1985, 187). Vyāsa, on the other hand, describes it as a hubristic move because Duryodhana throws a smile (2.62.23), which he does again when he, smiling and humiliating Bhīma, exposes his thigh to Draupadī (2.63.10–12). Bhīma promptly responds to it, which Mehendale considers "irrelevant." He translates: "If Yudhiṣṭhira had not been our master, we would not have tolerated all this (insult). But Yudhiṣṭhira is the master of our meritorious acts, our austerities and lives. If he considers himself won then we too have also been won in dice" (1985, 187). It does seem irrelevant, but a case could be made for its relevance to the context. True, Duryodhana's proposal was not about Yudhiṣṭhira's or the Pāṇḍavas' loss, it was specifically about Draupadī's bet. I see Bhīma's response as more like one would expect from a team member. He seems to be referring to Draupadī's bet: if Yudhiṣṭhira considers

himself won, i.e., that he lost Draupadī's bet, then we too agree with him. Note that the Pāṇḍavas never go against Yudhiṣṭhira's will, even if they vehemently disagree with him. The word "if" is crucial here. Bhīma does not say that they lost Draupadī's bet; rather, it depends on Yudhiṣṭhira's opinion. Like Bhīṣma, Bhīma seems to have thrown the ball into the court of Yudhiṣṭhira, who has maintained absolute silence ever since Draupadī had been dragged into the Sabhā. Does he concede his defeat? We do not know.

Mehendale's conclusion mainly rests on his interpretation of *jānīdhvam* (to be discussed). Duryodhana repeats his condition that if any of the Pāṇḍavas would declare Yudhiṣṭhira unauthorized to stake Draupadī, she would be freed from slavery. I quote two translations of Arjuna's reply:

> The king was our master when first he played us, Great-spirited Dharma, the son of Kunti: But whose master is he who has lost himself? *That* you should decide [*jānīdhvam*], ye Kurus assembled! (van Buitenen 1975, 2.63.21; emphasis in the original)[40]
>
> Our great-souled Dharma King, Kunti's son, was our master when he first played. But whose master is he whose soul has been conquered by another? That is for all you Kurus to decide! [*jānīdhvam*] (Wilmot 2006, 2.71.21)

Immediately after Arjuna's remark, bad omens follow, which many individuals hear. Vidura and Gāndhārī plead with Dhṛtarāṣṭra to intervene, which he does, and frees the Pāṇḍavas and returns their losses. This is how most scholars have interpreted the narrative. Mehendale objects to this ending: "We choose to give it [the credit for the Pāṇḍavas' freedom] to a jackal and an ass, who must have been blissfully ignorant of what was going on around them. The Indian tradition has touched a very low level in allowing the stanzas about the bad omens to remain where they are

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[40] *īśo rājā pūrvam āsīd glahe naḥ kuntīputro dharmarājo mahatma, īśas tv ayaṃ kasya parājitātmā taj jānīdhvaṃ kuravaḥ sarva eva.*

for so long. We are unaware of the fact that in doing so we have tarnished the fair image of an eminent person like Śrī Vyāsa" (1985, 193).

In the stanza quoted above, van Buitenen and Wilmot translate *jānīdhvam* as you should "decide." It means that Arjuna did not actually declare Yudhiṣṭhira not authorized; rather, he left it for the Kurus to decide. Mehendale does not agree with it. He contends: "The linguistic usage in the *Mahābhārata* will show that it is wrong to translate *jānīdhvam* with 'judge' or 'decide'" (ibid.). He corroborates this point by referring to the phrases in connection with Draupadī's question that Vyāsa employs to denote the sense of "decide," such as *praśnaṃ brū*/*vibrū*/*prabrū* and so forth. Then he reasons: "Hence the renderings in the above English translations of *jāinādhvam as if it was vibrūta*, are wrong" (ibid. 191; emphasis in the original). I disagree with Mehendale's suggestion that the phrases denote "decide" and *jānīdhvam* does not mean decide or judge. The phrases he quotes include "question" (*praśnam*) and thus literally mean "to answer, or reply, or respond to a question," which is exactly what Draupadī expects. She does not want people to "decide" her question; she rather wants them to decide her status by answering her question. Mehendale also seems to have mixed up Draupadī's question with Duryodhana's proposal. Note that Arjuna's statement is not a reply to Draupadī's question; rather, it is in response to Duryodhana's proposal: if any of the Pāṇḍavas would declare Yudhiṣṭhira unauthorized, Draupadī would be freed. In this case, such phrases as *praśnaṃ brū* and *vibrū* would be inappropriate as it is no more a question.

Mehendale suggests that "Arjuna wants the Kauravas to realize (*jānīdhvam*) that Yudhiṣṭhira, in the circumstances, could not be the master of any one; Arjuna is most certainly not asking them to decide the unsettled issue" (ibid.). Therefore, "realize" and "know" are the right translations because they convey Arjuna's decisive reply that Yudhiṣṭhira had no right to

stake Draupadī. Without doubt the verb *jñā* (which takes on the *jā* form in the quoted usages) means to know and realize. But one might ask, does Vyāsa use it to denote these meanings only. Does he use it to imply such meanings as to determine, to decide, and to find out? The following examples answer the question affirmatively.

Kadrū (mother of the snakes) and Vinatā (mother of eagles) once enter into a heated debate about the color of Uccaiḥśravas' (a horse) hair. Kadrū bets with Vinatā: "What color is Uccaiḥśravas, my dear? Judge [*jānīhi*] it this instant!" (van Buitenen 1973, 1.18.2).[41] In the following examples, *jñā* denotes making something certain that is not certain. After dodging Duryodhana's efforts to burn them in a house specially built with extremely combustible material, the Pāṇḍavas escape into the forest. As they fall asleep, Hiḍimba, a demon, smells human meat in the air and sends his sister Hiḍimbā to find out about them: "Go and find out [*jānīhi*] who they are who are lying in the wood" (van Buitenen 1973, 1.139.8).[42] After the second gambling match, the Pāṇḍavas are banished into the forest. Dhṛtarāṣṭra is worried that the citizens of Hastināpura, who are angry at him and Duryodhana for cheating the virtuous Pāṇḍavas, might overthrow him. Vidura warns Dhṛtarāṣṭra that the Pāṇḍavas are invincible, Duryodhana and his company should go and beg Bhīma's and Draupadī's pardon, and Dhṛtarāṣṭra should reinstate Yudhiṣṭhira as the king of Indraprastha. The advice infuriates Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and he expels Vidura. As he realizes his mistake, he asks Saṃjaya to learn Vidura's whereabouts: "Go, Saṃjaya, and find out [*jānīhi*] if my brother Vidura is still alive after the onslaught of my evil rage" (van Buitenen 1975, 3.7.7).[43] There are such many usages of *jñā*

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[41] *uccaiḥśravā nu kiṃvarṇo bhadre jānīhi māciram.*

[42] *gaccha jānīhi ke tv ete śerate vanam āśritāḥ.*

[43] *gaccha saṃjaya jānīhi bhrātaraṃ viduraṃ mama, yadi jīvati roṣeṇa mayā pāpena nirdhutaḥ.*

where it denotes to judge, determine, find out, and decide. Besides, Arjuna is not the only Pāṇḍava who makes a response to Duryodhana's proposal. As soon as Duryodhana first tables his proposition, Bhīma reacts and says if Yudhiṣṭhira thinks he has been won, we have also been won (2.62.33). But, by adding "if," Bhīma leaves the question open.

Mehendale advances a few arguments to corroborate his conclusion. For example, he says that until Arjuna's statement, Draupadī was treated like a slave: "As already announced by Duryodhana, the Kauravas accept Arjuna's verdict. Without a moment's delay, Dhṛtarāṣṭra speaks highly of Draupadī as the lawfully-wedded wife of the Pāṇḍavas and his own very special daughter-in-law. Until that moment Draupadī was addressed as a '*dāsī*' and was humiliated" (1985, 189). This is not true. As soon as Śakuni wins the bet, Duryodhana tells Vidura to go and fetch "the dear wife of the Pāṇḍavas" (*priyāṃ bhāryāṃ saṃmatāṃ pāṇḍavānām*) (2.59.1); Vaiśaṃpāyana calls her "the queen (wife) of the Pāṇḍavas" (*mahiṣīṃ pāṇḍavānām*) (2.60.3), "king's wife" (*narendrapatnī*) (2.60.21), and "princess" (*rājaputrīm*) (2.60.19); Prātikāmin addresses her as "princess" (*rājaputri*) (2.60.6, 12); and Bhīṣma addresses her as "*naḥ* […] *vadhū*, "our daughter-in-law" (2.62.18).

Mehendale reasons that if Dhṛtarāṣṭra's intervention was due to the bad omens, one should expect similar reaction from him to make peace with the Pāṇḍavas when they depart for the forest and the bad omens manifest in more terrifying forms (2.71.25–28) (1985, 193). In fact, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's reaction is similar. The description of events is more or less the same. In the gambling episode, the bad omens manifest, and Vidura and Gāndhārī, both terrified, plead with Dhṛtarāṣṭra,[44] and he reverses the results of the gambling match. Likewise, when the Pāṇḍavas

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[44] The text does not report the content of their plea.

go to the forest, Vidura describes the bad omens to Dhṛtarāṣṭra and warns him of the looming

extermination of his family. But Duryodhana intervenes and pins his hopes on Droṇa, who also

forewarns them about the upcoming disaster. He advises peace with the Pāṇḍavas. Dhṛtarāṣṭra

joins the conversation and instructs Vidura: "Steward, what the guru says is right. Have the

Pāṇḍavas come back. If they do not come back, let them go with due respect, with their weapons,

chariots, and footmen, as well as with luxuries; they are like my sons" (2.71.46–47).[45]

Mehendale proposes another logic. When Dhṛtarāṣṭra offers boons to Draupadī, she asks

for the freedom of her husbands, and not of herself. Had Draupadī's question not been resolved

by Arjuna's statement, she should have asked for her own freedom too. But her freedom without

being freed by Dhṛtarāṣṭra indicates that Arjuna had already secured her freedom. This could be

a compelling argument but only if her enslavement had been proven beyond doubt prior to

Arjuna's pronouncement. Since the validity of the bet was neither proven nor accepted by her, it

would be unnecessary to ask for her own freedom.

Mehendale believes that "Duryodhana kept his word although Arjuna's reply was not

what he had expected it to be" (1985, 192). He suspects that "[s]omeone in the line of the epic

transmission did not want this fairness on Duryodhana's part to be observed by the posterity.

Perhaps, he also did not want the posterity to know that a woman fought for her right and won"

(ibid.). At this point, it is impossible for me to deny the first part of the suspicion. But

considering Duryodhana's character, it is difficult to accept that Duryodhana would act fairly

toward the Pāṇḍavas. He is the same man who has made many attempts on the Pāṇḍavas' lives.

He eschews honesty as inimical to his ambitions to vanquish the Pāṇḍavas. One example should

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[45] *samyag āha guruḥ kṣattar upāvartaya pāṇḍavān. yadi vā na nivartante satkṛtā yāntu pāṇḍavāḥ, saśastrarathapādātā bhogavantaś ca putrakāḥ.*

suffice to illustrate this point. When Dhṛtarāṣṭra reverses the results of the first gambling match, the Pāṇḍavas depart for Indraprastha. Duryodhana, Karṇa, and Śakuni immediately rush to Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and Duryodhana provokes him to plan the Pāṇḍavas' destruction before they destroy the Kauravas. Duryodhana proposes another gambling match with the condition that the losing party would spend twelve years in the forest and one year incognito. If their identity is revealed in the thirteenth incognito year, they would have to repeat the game's terms. This would continue until the condition of the game is successfully fulfilled. Duryodhana is sure about his victory and hopes to gain political influence and assemble a powerful military in those thirteen years. He says: "We will be firmly rooted in the kingdom as we assemble allies and sustain a powerful, vast, and formidable army. If they complete the condition [of the game] in the thirteenth year, we will subdue them. Please accept it, enemy-torturer" (2.66.22–23).[46] Thus, from the conception of the second gambling match, Duryodhana's intention was to not comply with the condition of the game. It is no surprise that he refuses to accept that the Pāṇḍavas successfully completed the game's terms and chooses to go to war. Given this attitude, it is difficult to believe that Duryodhana would have acted fairly after Arjuna's statement.

The last consideration in this connection is the epic's description. Had Arjuna saved the day, his role in freeing the Pāṇḍavas would have been acknowledged in the narrative. But he never receives compliments in this respect. I have already elucidated the poignant accolades that Draupadī receives from Karṇa, Yudhiṣṭhira, and Vaiśaṃpāyana: like a boat, she rescues the Pāṇḍavas who were drowning in the endless waters of gambling. Even Vidura, whose passionate and unequivocal defense of Draupadī's freedom goes unheard, has been praised by Kṛṣṇa:

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[46] *dṛḍhamūlā vayaṃ rājye mitrāṇi parigṛhya ca, sāravad vipulaṃ sainyaṃ satkṛtya ca durāsadam. te ca trayodaśe varṣe pārayiṣyanti ced vratam, jeṣyāmas tān vayaṃ rājan rocatāṃ te paraṃtapa.*

"Dragged there [into the Sabhā], she [Draupadī] cried out pitifully but found no protector other than the Steward [Vidura]. […] It was the Steward alone who continued to explain the legal matter, and having understood *dharma* (the law), he retorted to the slow-witted [Duryodhana]" (5.29.33–34).[47] Even Kuntī admires Vidura's conduct in the Sabhā (5.88.52–53).

In view of the above-mentioned inquiry, I remain convinced that Draupadī's question was never answered. Bearing in mind that Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* gives the impression that it was already being performed (Varadpande 1990), I think the manifestation of bad omens is a dramatic means to portray a dire situation. I disagree with Mehendale that the *Mahābhārata* gives the credit to the bad omens for rescuing the Pāṇḍavas. It leaves no doubt that Draupadī sets them free. Despite the horrific abuse she suffers, Draupadī never loses her good sense and insists on having her question answered, which creates the deadlock in the Sabhā.

Conclusion

I conclude this section by recapitulating the main points. The Kauravas assert their right to mistreat Draupadī on two grounds: (1) with the loss of her bet, she became their slave, who could be forcefully dragged into the assembly hall, and (2) Draupadī's polyandrous marriage signaled her "whore"-like character; as per Karṇa's claim, she had no right to the honour that was accorded to chaste women. In the first case, even if the Kauravas' claim to their right to mistreat their slave as they wished were to be interpreted as legally valid, we must bear in mind that the Dharmaśāstras do not permit such a mistreatment of a slave. Moreover, Draupadī's status as a slave or free woman remains unresolved until the end. As such, they had no right to mistreat

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[47] *sā tatra nītā karuṇāny avocan nānyaṃ kṣattur nātham adṛṣṭa kaṃ cit.* […] *ekaḥ kṣattā dharmyam arthaṃ bruvāṇo dharmaṃ buddhvā pratyuvācālpabuddhim.*

her. In the case of polyandrous marriage, even though it contravened the conventional and scriptural formula of a woman's marriage with only one man, it was still a marriage performed with proper rituals, and the moral respectability of Draupadī's character is never questioned, except by Karṇa. Thus, the reasons claimed by the Kauravas are not valid.

Draupadī's presence in Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* is remarkably powerful. When many great heroes passively watch her humiliation, she firmly stands her ground and challenges the validity of the arguments that are advanced to advocate her slavery and condemn her moral purity. The fact that Vyāsa's Draupadī is fighting against the system that gave men authority over their wives and masters over their slaves proves her intellectual sharpness in matters of *dharma* (the legal and moral code) and *artha* (the socio-political structure). After Draupadī frees her husbands from slavery and they all depart to the forest in accordance with the conditions of the second gambling match, Vidura calls Draupadī "well-versed in *dharma* and *artha*" (*dharmārthakuśalā* 2.69.9).

6.2 TV Series*: Draupadī, a decent boat*

The Series' presentation of Draupadī and her challenge is oversimplified, perhaps to be intellectually undemanding and accessible to a wider audience. Even though one might expect the Series to reflect modern legal and social progress regarding the rights of women, it dilutes Draupadī's intellectual capabilities to a considerable degree. In this section, I will discuss Draupadī's question and her ill-treatment as a slave and a "promiscuous" woman. Her case reflects both caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy. Given that the problem of the abuse of some women on account of gender and caste prejudices, especially of so-called "low-caste" women, as well as judgemental perceptions of women's character still goes on in modern India, I think the

Series had an excellent opportunity to address the problem through Draupadī's case.

Unfortunately, it falls short in this regard.

6.2.1 Draupadī's question

In Vyāsa's epic, Draupadī's freedom is defended on four grounds: (1) because Yudhiṣṭhira had already lost himself in the game, he had no right to stake his wife; (2) he was maddened by gambling, and actions performed compulsively cannot be considered legally valid; (3) because Draupadī was a common wife of all the Pāṇḍavas, Yudhiṣṭhira alone had no right to stake her; and (4) because Yudhiṣṭhira was prodded by his masters to stake Draupadī, the bet could not be deemed as legally valid. As I noted above, Draupadī successfully deploys these arguments, except the third one, in different ways.

The Series attributes all these arguments to Draupadī, thereby giving the victim a powerful voice to challenge her abusers. She asks Bhīṣma in the Series:

> If a wife is a property of her husband, then when my husband lost himself, he also lost me. Then how was I staked? And if the wife is not a property of her husband, then how can my husband stake me without obtaining my permission? (47:21)[48]

The first argument is an extension of Karṇa's logic found in Vyāsa's epic. He insists that because a slave's property belongs to his master, Draupadī, as a property of Yudhiṣṭhira, automatically becomes a possession of Duryodhana. Draupadī in the Series adds: if she becomes a slave the moment her husband becomes one, then placing her as a bet is not possible. Only a thing that remains in the possession of its owner can be staked. But this argument appears to be a self-

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[48] *yadi patnī pati kī saṃpatti hotī hai, to jaba mere pati apane ko hāre to usake sātha mujhe bhī hāra gae. to phira maiṃ dāṁva para kaise lagī? yadi patnī pati kī saṃpatti nahīṃ hai, to mere pati merī ājñā lie binā mujhe dāṁva para kaise lagā sakate haiṃ?*

defeating one. That the wife is considered her husband's property, i.e., he can stake her in gambling as a property, is beyond doubt in Vyāsa's epic. The master is thought to be the owner of his slave's property. But the definitions and applicability of these rules depends on other rules on the same subject. I have shown their complex nature in my discussion of Vyāsa on this topic. An oversimplification of the application of this law, that Draupadī cannot be staked because she has already become a slave with Yudhiṣṭhira's enslavement, would no doubt render the bet illegal, and therefore null and void, but it would also uphold Draupadī's enslavement prior to the stake.

Bhīṣma answers this question in the Series. He speaks out: "Yudhiṣṭhira did not act well in staking Draupadī, but a husband's right over his wife is confirmed" (47:28). Bhīṣma accepts that a husband has a right over his wife, in other words, she is a property of her husband. Note that whereas the idea of rights is part of the legal framework, notions of duty and obligation belong to the moral fabric of a society. Consequently, actions carried out in violation of one's legal rights are decisively null and void, but immoral actions, if legally sanctioned, remain fully valid in the eyes of the law. Thus, Yudhiṣṭhira might have flouted his moral obligation to protect his wife, but he was within his legal rights to stake her. Thus, regardless of the moral reprehensibility of the bet, Draupadī's enslavement to Duryodhana remains legal. Accordingly, Draupadī's rebuttal to Bhīṣma's reply also appears to be superficial. She argues: "Right? What is the definition of right? Is it also not true, grandsire, that protecting the dignity of his wife is the husband's ultimate duty?" (47:29) Thus, the Series' Draupadī unfortunately counters Bhīṣma on moral grounds and not on legal grounds. The statements of Bhīṣma and Draupadī neither disprove nor complicate the validity of the bet; rather, they seem to confirm the legality of her slavery, even if the bet was morally deplorable. Even though I find Draupadī's questioning in the

Series inadequate, some viewers were impressed by her sensible arguments: "...very wonderful speech she gave...and then when he [Bhīṣma] turns [towards?] her she immediately says don't patronize me... words to that effect...the other thing I liked was I am not a property of my husband...she is a lawyer at heart...she is a fantastic lawyer... she plays the game" (Bandlamudi 2012, 108).

The second argument is simply a paraphrase of Draupadī's question in Vyāsa's text. Draupadī poses the same question before Vidura:

> What does the great (*mahātmā*) Vidura's law (*nīti*) say about it? You are famous for speaking out bitter truth. Please, you at least should not sit quiet. Does a husband have a right to lose his wife in gamble? Does a slave have a right to stake someone else's freedom? (47:25)[49]

Unlike Vyāsa's Vidura, who declares Draupadī's bet illegal even before the news reaches Draupadī, the Vidura of the Series expresses extreme agony, weeping and swaying his head convulsively, but says nothing. The Series could have defended Draupadī's freedom, and thereby condemn her abusers, more forcefully if Draupadī, or even Vidura, could expand their defense on the legal basis.

Draupadī further challenges her enslavement on account of her common marital relationship with all the Pāṇḍavas. She admonishes Śakuni: "Even if he had a right to lose his wife, I am not a wife of him alone! I am a wife of all the five Pāṇḍavas. And, he alone does not have an authority over me!" (47:25) This line of reasoning was used by Vikarṇa in Vyāsa's epic.

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[49] *mahātmā vidura kī nīti isa viṣaya meṃ kyā kahatī hai? āpa to kaṛave saca bolane ke liye prasiddha haiṃ! āpa to cupa na rahiye! kyā kisī pati ko adhikāra hai ki vo apanī patnī ko jue meṃ hāra jāe? kyā kisī dāsa ko adhikāra hai ki vo kisī aura kī svataṃtratā ko dāṃva para lagā de?*

Draupadī: A Noble Sailboat

Draupadī's questions are not answered in the Sabhā, and they seem to weaken Draupadī's case. The Series capitalizes on Kṛṣṇa's authority as a god incarnate. As such, it is he alone who knows the concept of *dharma* as it has been in the past, as it is in the present, and as it will be in the future. His definition of right and wrong is ultimate on any given matter. It is he who finally answers Draupadī's questions when he visits the Pāṇḍavas in the forest. He speaks about Yudhiṣṭhira:

> Being the eldest brother does not mean that he stake you all! Whatever he staked, none of that was his alone. Surely he was crowned, but you all contributed in transforming Khāṇḍavaprastha into Indraprastha. He performed the Rājasūya ritual, but you four are [were] the hearth of that ritual. Hence, he had no right to stake that crown. As for Draupadī, had she been his wife alone, even then he had no right to stake her. A wife is not a property, Pārtha, she is a life-partner. Therefore he [Yudhiṣṭhira] should repent. (52:7)[50]

This establishes the wife as a life-partner, an individual who cannot be treated like an object. This conversation in the Series replaces Kṛṣṇa's words in Vyāsa at 3.14.1–17. There, Kṛṣṇa speaks nothing of this sort. This is perhaps the most important dialogue that truly can be said to have contributed to the contemporizing of Vyāsa's story. Had Vidura defended Draupadī's case with these words in the Sabhā, the cruelty of her abuse would have come across as distinctly severe, a statement with which modern viewers could easily relate.

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[50] *jyeṣṭha bhrātā hone kā artha kyā ye hai ki ve tuma sabako dāṃva para lagā deṃ! unhoṃne jo kucha dāṃva para lagāyā usameṃ se kucha bhī kevala unakā nahīṃ thā. rājyābhiṣeka niḥsaṃdeha unakā huā. kiṃtu khāṇḍavaprastha ko indraprastha banāne meṃ tuma sabake pariśrama kā hātha hai. rājasūya yajña niḥsaṃdeha unakā huā, paraṃtu usa yajña kā havana kuṃḍa tuma cāroṃ ho. isalie usa rājamukuṭa ko dāṃva para lagāne kā unheṃ koī adhikāra nahīṃ thā. aba bacī draupadī, to vo akele yadi unakī patnī rahī hotī, taba bhī use dāṃva para lagāne kā unheṃ koī adhikāra nahīṃ thā. patnī sampatti nahīṃ hotī, pārtha, jīvana kī bhāgīdāranī hotī hai. isalie unheṃ prāyaścitta to karanā hī cāhie. aura tuma sabako bhī yuddha ke lie vyākula hone kā koī adhikāra nahīṃ. kyoṃki jaba bhrātā yudhiṣṭhira maryādā kā ullaṃghana kara rahe the to tuma sabakā ye kartavya thā ki unakā virodha karate. paraṃtu ye virodha draupadī ke atirikta kisī ne nahīṃ kiyā; kisī ne nahīṃ. isalie apamāna ke isa viṣa ko pīte raho, ki yahī tumhārā prāyaścitta hai.*

That the Series attributes all the arguments to Draupadī and shows men not even replying to her question, let alone defending her, might be interpreted as a reminder of how many times modern women feel abandoned by men in moments of abuse. Some viewers identified with the condition and expressed their frustrations: "It just shows that past experience wasn't at all of any help in absolutely new situation...and to fall back on elders for help...was a common mistake many of us make...it should be warning that elders are not right and perhaps as ignorant as us and it is only feeling of security that we have because of them" (Bandlamudi 2012, 205–6); "I couldn't believe even Vidhur sits there and watches this" (ibid. 207).

While the Series tones down the intellectual sharpness of Vyāsa's Draupadī, it compensates for it with a vengeful speech and emotional cries. This is perhaps because the Series' drama format relies more on emotional intensity than on intellectual acuity. Still, some viewers found it unseemly for the strong character of Draupadī. A viewer thought that she made a "fool" of herself by crying the way she did, and some viewers found it unacceptably melodramatic (ibid. 208–9). It seems to me that the Series failed to contemporize the force of Draupadī's legal case: not only did it not reflect Vyāsa's world, but it also missed a very crucial opportunity to introduce the topic of women's legal rights in modern India.

6.2.2 Draupadī, a chaste wife

In Vyāsa, it is only Karṇa who slanders Draupadī's character on account of her polyandrous marriage and advises Duḥśāsana to strip her naked. In the Series, the Kaurava group constantly taunts Draupadī as a woman married to five men (*pāṃca patiyoṃ vālī*), thereby insulting her for having "loose" morals in terms of sexual relationships. Even though the Series steadfastly maintains her sexual purity, the task of truly re-establishing marital innocence is left

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to Duryodhana's mother Gāndhārī. Do the creators of the Series wish to stress the trio's depraved nature, and thereby justify Draupadī and the Pāṇḍavas' avidity to revenge her humiliation, or do they wish to address a bigger problem associated with Draupadī's image? It is possible that the Series uses such hyperbolic condemnation of Draupadī's polyandrous relationship to attract viewership through melodramatic description and to underscore the Kauravas' unjustifiable evilness.

A point to note is that some have portrayed Draupadī as a woman of insatiable sexual appetite. For example, Ānandakumāra, a Hindi author who was openly antagonistic towards the Pāṇḍavas and admired Karṇa and the Kauravas, writes:

> Sītā lived a life of austerity, [but] Draupadī of pleasure, and only pleasure. Even Lakṣmaṇa could not see the face of Sītā, [but] Draupadī was a woman of five men. She did not believe in the Vedic decorum that a woman should not have many husbands. […] Even though married to five, she was especially affectionate toward Arjuna. If one believes in the Buddhist Jātakas, she had later become involved in an immoral relationship with a henchman too. […] Thus, she was neither a man's lawful wife, nor a homemaker, nor virtuous. She was an active whore. […] In the Rājasūya ritual, she had shamelessly taunted Duryodhana. The whole catastrophy transpired because of this wanton [woman]. (Ānandakumāra 1950, 20)[51]

Ānandakumāra's condemnation of Draupadī reminds one of Karṇa's disapprobation of her in Vyāsa. Whereas Karṇa's malevolence can be explained on account of his hostility towards the Pāṇḍavas and loyalty to Duryodhana, the reasons for Ānandakumāra's sentiments are unclear. Pratibha Ray, a novelist of Oriya, authored her national award-winning novel *Yajnaseni*

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[51] *sītā ne jīvana bhara tapa kiyā thā, draupadī ne bhoga aura kevala bhoga. sītā ke muṁha kī ora lakṣmaṇa taka nahīṃ dekha sakate the, draupadī paṃcāyatī strī thī. vaha isa śruti-maryādā ko nahīṃ mānatī thī ki eka strī ke bahuta-se pati nahīṃ hone cāhiye—"naikasyāḥ vhavaḥ [sic, bahavaḥ] sahapatayaḥ." pāṁca kī strī hokara bhī yaha arjuna meṃ viśeṣa anurakta thī. yadi bauddha jātakoṃ kā viśvāsa kiyā jāya to bāda meṃ eka kubaṛe naukara se bhī isakā anucita sambandha ho gayā thā. […] isa prakāra na vaha kisī kī dharmapatnī thī, na gṛhiṇī aura na dharmaśīlā. vaha to sajīva dharmaśālā thī. […] rājasūya yajña meṃ usane nirlajjatāpūrvaka duryodhana para kaṭākṣa kiye the. isa kāmacāriṇī ke kāraṇa hī sārā bhīṣaṇa kāṇḍa huā.*

[*Yājñasenī*] because she was pained by people's blatant slandering of a present-day woman whose name was Kṛṣṇā, a common epithet of Draupadī. Kṛṣṇā left her debauched, drunkard husband and later married a man in Germany. Ray quotes her denunciation by people: "Well! When her very name is Kṛṣṇā, how could she be satisfied with one husband? Kṛṣṇā [the *Mahābhārata*'s Draupadī] took five husbands, and still not being satisfied, was attracted to Karṇa and Kṛṣṇa" (2004 Ādyābhāsa, no page number).[52] By showing the wicked Kauravas' condemnation of Draupadī as a sexually immoral woman, the Series seems to chastise those who slander Draupadī's character. Draupadī's polyandrous relationship is repeated so frequently and in such a pejorative tone that her wifely chastity needs to be reinstated. Overwhelmingly proud of their unprecedented power over the Pāṇḍavas, Duryodhana, Duḥśāsana, and Karṇa pay little regard to the decency of showing respect to a noble woman as they persistently malign Draupadī's character. Because she is married to and lives with five men, they claim she is more a "harlot" than a wife, and hence deserves no respect. Although Vidura and Vikarṇa do take issue with such a vilification, their attempts are proven futile by the cruel-hearted tyranny of Duryodhana. Following the abuse and her miraculous covering by Kṛṣṇa, the outraged Draupadī spontaneously proceeds to curse her abusers.

Gāndhārī enters the scene to interrupt Draupadī's curse. When Draupadī has been shielded by Kṛṣṇa against Duḥśāsana's attempts of stripping her naked, the entire Sabhā is stunned. In that very moment, Draupadī rises to her feet, and after describing the "moral defect" of the Kurus which Dhṛtarāṣṭra allowed to prevail in the Sabhā—a perverse attempt was made to strip her naked in her own home before the very eyes of her own respectable kin—she seeks to

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[52] *nāmaṭi jete bele kṛṣṇā se goṭie svāmī pākhare saṃtuṣṭa rahantā kipari? kṛṣṇā ta pañca pati varaṇa kari madhya setikare saṃtuṣṭa na rahi, karṇa o śrīkṛṣṇāṃka prati anuraktā thile.* Thanks to my friend Narendra Pradhan for reading the Oria text for me.

settle accounts with the power of her speech: "Let you all hear [me] out! In this court, full of shameless cowards, I, Draupadī, the daughter of Drupada, the wife of the king of Indraprastha, and the daughter-in-law of Hastināpura's emperor, curse you all" (48:5). This is when a terrified Gāndhārī enters into the Sabhā with a resounding cry of "NO." Draupadī is, as Gāndhārī sees it, a *satī*, a chaste woman. That Draupadī's intent to curse throws almost everyone into a panic indicates that her speech would have been unfailingly effective. Gāndhārī is convinced that the power of *satī* Draupadī's curse could alter even the course of natural elements, and even the mighty army of Hastināpura could not cut her curse short. Draupadī of the Series evidently possesses such a power only on account of her devotion to her husbands. Thus, while Draupadī's character is much maligned by Gāndhārī's two sons and their friend Karṇa, it is restored by another woman (Gāndhārī), herself devoted to her husband, to the highest form of wifely chastity. In the first chapter of Vyāsa's epic, Janamejaya asks Sūta to explain why Draupadī, who was being abused by the wicked, did not burn the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra with her furious eyes, even though she could do it (1.56.7). Neither is the source of Draupadī's power revealed nor is the question ever answered. But just an allusion to her power in Vyāsa's epic might have inspired later authors to introduce an extra step in the narrative: that Draupadī wanted to curse her abusers, but Gāndhārī interrupted her.

One point to note here is that in the Series, Draupadī's abuse stops when Duḥśāsana, exhausted from pulling the *sārī* invisibly supplied by Kṛṣṇa, collapses on the ground. In contrast, in Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*, the miraculous covering of Draupadī does not deter the Kauravas and their abuse of her. In Vyāsa's text, it is the legal un-resolvability of Draupadī's challenge to her bet that ends her long abuse, but in the Series, the Kauravas are overwhelmed by the miracle.

Draupadī: A Noble Sailboat

I view this discrepancy between Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* and the Series as a shortcoming in the Series' creators' goal to contemporize the story. Had the Series not relied on secondary sources and taken Draupadī's legal challenge to her bet and the notion of *dharma* (law and morality)—which is said to have protected Draupadī against disrobing—more seriously, it could reinforce a more realistic idea that the law must protect women against abuse. By adding Kṛṣṇa as the divine protector and Draupadī's supernatural ability to curse her abusers, the Series advances not only the traditional idea of the wife's dedication to her husband, but it also sends a demoralizing message to women who face abuse. Because Draupadī, who called out to Kṛṣṇa with pure heart and intentions, was saved by him, in the instances when God does not appear to save the honour of a woman suffering abuse, one could denounce the victim as impure. That would amount to blaming the victim. The infallible power of Draupadī 's curse also can be said to have negative impact. It is an indirect judgement on those women's character who fail to punish their abusers by uttering "curses." The fact that neither God came to their rescue nor could they inflict infallible curses on their abusers suggests that either their prayers are not genuine or they lack sexual/marital chastity. Such an implication serves as a painful reminder to women of their lack of power and seems to "blame the victim," even if only indirectly. What Vyāsa's Draupadī accomplishes with her intellectual acuity and knowledge of the law, which women of all periods can put to practice, is undermined by the suggestion that supernatural powers are needed to solve problems. Renuka, a female viewer, reacts: "I would have killed my husband... I would have killed every one...so what if you lose a dice game... I mean everyone does not have Krishna to save [them]..." (Bandlamudi 2012, 203).

One could indeed argue the same in the case of the law, which sometimes fails to uncover the truth and leaves the victim vulnerable to further harassment. There remains a difference

between pure prayers and one's demand for justice in accordance with the law. Whereas the law is part of one's ordinary experience and can be challenged (it was by Draupadī in Vyāsa's version), prayers remain beyond others' reach. Draupadī's supernatural ability—acquired through her pure dedication to her husbands—to effectively destroy her abusers might also be construed as blaming the victim. Indeed, Draupadī draws attention to her marital status in Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*, but that is only to counter the Kauravas' assumption that she was a slave and a "whore." One could argue that the portrayal of such superhuman intervention could be discouraging to modern women seeking better laws and reforms, and that the Series makes the presentation of Vyāsa's story considerably less relevant in modern times.

The Series maintains a silence about Draupadī's maltreatment on account of her polyandrous marriage, too. As I showed in my analysis of Vyāsa's narrative, even though a man was advised to avoid sexual relationships with women other than his wife/wives, approaching a sexually free woman was not seen as a crime.[53] True to their viciously vindictive nature, the Kauravas take it to a step further and feel that there would be no offense if they stripped Draupadī naked. They consider her a "promiscuous" woman who has no claim to an honorable treatment. Even though the Series consistently disparages the brutality of the Kauravas' moral attacks on Draupadī (the woman with five husbands), it also emphatically pronounces Draupadī as the *kulavadhū*, a woman married into a respectable family. This juxtaposition of being a slave or "promiscuous" versus *kulavadhū* asserts Draupadī's right to honourable treatment because she is married into a good family. It leaves the problem of sexual abuse of the "low-caste" women and of those who might be seen as "promiscuous" unaddressed. Once again, I believe that the

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[53] Such relationships implied the woman's consensus. Yājñavalkya stipulates penalties for men who engage in sexual relations with a female slave by force (Olivelle 2019, 2.295). As I noted above, even sex workers were protected against sexual abuse under the law.

Series fails in accomplishing its goal to contemporize the epic narrative. This is especially

pronounced because a good part of the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s were marked by

strong campaigns in support of women's right to secure legal justice in rape cases.[54] In 1972,

Mathura, a sixteen-year-old girl, and her brother filed a case against two policemen who

reportedly raped her while she was in their custody. Whereas the court accepted that one of the

policemen had sex with her, the court dismissed the rape case because she was presumed to be

"habituated to sexual intercourse" (Baxi 2014, 13) and no marks of violence were found on her

body. The local court's case was reversed by the Bombay High Court, but the Supreme Court

later acquitted the accused policemen of rape charges because the post-rape medical report noted

no signs of violence. Baxi concludes:

> The notion of a 'good' or 'innocent' victim who is chaste and bears undisputable marks
> of violence—in this case, death—underpins this historic judgment. Rameeza Bee or
> Mathura, by contrast, who lived to testify, were not constructed as *good* victims and
> positioned as *habitué*s or prostitutes who could never *really* be raped. Judicial
> interpretation of who is a *good* victim continues to underlie the outcome of the cases even
> today. (2014, 16)[55]

The idea of a "good" versus "bad" woman echoes in some ways what the Dharmaśāstra literature

refers to as the "guarded" versus "unguarded" woman.[56] While determining the appropriate

forms of incognito living in the thirteenth year, Draupadī proposes to take on the guise of a

sairandhrī, a maidservant, who lacked protection (4.3.16). Women of three "upper castes" who

abide by the socially acceptable code of sexual conduct of a good woman are viewed as

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[54] The case was not lost on B.R. Chopra, the main producer/director of the *Mahabharat* series, for he addressed this issue in his *Insaf Ka Tarazu* (*The Scale of Justice*) (1980).

[55] In 1978, Rameeza Bee, an eighteen-year-old Muslim girl, was gangraped by four policemen, who were acquitted of the rape charges because Rameeza's character was painted as that of a sex worker (Baxi 2014, 12).

[56] For the complexity of this issue, see my discussion above under the sub-heading "Draupadī: a "promiscuous" woman?"

"guarded," and women who violate the code of sexual conduct and belong to the Śūdra caste fall in the category of "unguarded." The Mathura case was thus a turning point from a legal perspective. It drew attention to how even the courts invoked past sexual history of rape victims to discredit their claims of rape.[57] Women of "low caste" have usually been condemned as characterless. Hence, violence against such women by "upper-caste" men has often been downplayed or even scrapped in both society and the legal system. Chakravarti's 2018 book records how women of "low caste" have suffered because of such prejudices. But, with the rise of awareness about women's freedom from the traditional norms of patriarchy, which stipulated certain behaviour for a so-called "good" woman (being polite, obedient, loyal to her husband and his family, and "properly" dressed) and a "bad" woman (being arguementative, individualistic, and modern), the perception that the conduct of "low-caste" women was not as strictly monitored as of "upper-caste" women suggests that they enjoyed more freedom. Given such a situation about the time of the Series' production and broadcasting, Chopra's claim that he wanted "to convey its message in modern context and to emphasize what a modern man could and should learn from it. Our constant aim in bringing this serial to the tele-viewers the world over has been to discover the relevance of its values to the turbulent times in which we are living today" (Chopra 1999, no page number marked) seems unfulfilled. That they sought to stress the issues of women sounds hollow. Were they unable to escape the frameworks in which they understood their own work? It is difficult to say. Most people remain unaware of the unconscious prejudices that persist in their society.

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[57] See also Mrinal Satish's *Discretion, Discrimination and the Rule of Law* (2016) for how the caste prejudices and rape victims' history of sexual relations influence the court judgements.

6.2.3 Draupadī: noble versus slave

Draupadī defends herself, albeit indirectly, against forced slavery. In Vyāsa's epic and the Series, Duryodhana's lewd display of his naked thigh to Draupadī and the attempt to strip her naked could be viewed as acts of sexual abuse of a woman.[58] The notion of women's empowerment and their emancipation from the traditional social system has become increasingly more pronounced in modern India. In the years before the *Mahabharat* series, issues of domestic violence and sexual assault drew considerable attention, which led to the enactment of some legal measures. Women can now hold personal property and are also entitled to inherit family property[59] and are protected against domestic violence.[60] Neither the structure of society nor the legal institution in modern India are as hierarchical as they seem in Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*. The creators of the Series, who claimed to have underscored the issues of women and the caste system, had an excellent opporunity to focus attention on violence against women through Draupadī's abuse or the misogyny against women. But their portrayal of Draupadī's image as a rude, haughty woman, who disdainfully insults her guest, weakens her claim to honourable treatment.

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[58] Not only does Duḥśāsana declare his "right" to treat Draupadī as he wished (2.60.27), Draupadī, too, laments before Kṛṣṇa that the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra were hellbent on treating her like a slave woman (3.13.56).

[59] "Under the Hindu Succession Act, 1955, Hindu women were granted equal rights to parental self-acquired property in the case of intestate succession, but not ancestral property. Widows had an absolute right over affinal property (Kishwar 1993). However, under an amendment made to the Hindu Succession Act in 2005, Hindu women have been extended equal coparcenary rights to ancestral property" (Gangoli 2007, 2).

[60] Legal judgements "attempted in theory to bury the concept that the wife is the legal property of the husband" (Gangoli 2007, 59); and "Sec. 498A ruled that 'Whoever, being the husband or the relative of the husband of a woman, subjects such a woman to cruelty shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may exceed to three years and shall also be liable to fine'. Under this section, 'cruelty means (a) any willful conduct which is of such a nature as is likely to drive the woman to commit suicide or to cause grave injury or danger to life, limb or health (whether mental or physical) of the woman: or (b) harassment of the woman where such harassment is with a view to coercing her or any person related to her to meet any unlawful demand for any property or valuable security or is on account of failure by her or any person related to her to meet such demand" (ibid. 105, note 4)

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The society reflected in Vyāsa's text included social and legal structures that rest upon the theory and practice of slavery and caste-based hierarchy. But the world of the Series is, or rather is supposed to be, remarkedly different in this context: both slavery and the caste-based descriminations in society and legal settings are against the law. The practice of slavery in its traditional form seems to be non-existent, but caste-based prejudices, even though illegal, continue to exert influence in intersocial dealings. The Series without doubt provides a criticism of the caste system in connection with Karṇa's treatment—it exhibits extraordinary sympathy towards Karṇa— but its deficiency in contemporizing Draupadī's abuse as a slave to address the issue of sexual exploitation of and assaults on women in general is painfully clear.

The Series makes Draupadī's experience universally applicable to Indian women. Draupadī admonishes Bhīṣma for silently watching her being humiliated: "Your apologetic silence cannot be a reply to my question, because it is not only Draupadī asking this question. It's womankind asking this question; it's the earth, mother of all beings, asking this question; it's the future of this country, which earned its name from your ancestor *cakravartī* (universal king) Bharata, asking this question" (47:20). And yet, the Series draws no attention to the abuse of women belonging to the disadvantaged sections of the society.

What Draupadī endures as a "slave woman" in Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* is reflected in the treatment of "low-caste" women in modern India. Pratima Pardeshi describes the caste-based exploitation of tribal and Śūdra, especially Dalit, women in contemporary India:

> Within this frame of caste, the exploitation of Dalit and Adivasi women is more intense; a majority of them are landless agricultural labourers. More of these women become victims of rape and sexual assault; the number of mass rapes of Dalit women in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh are cases in point. Moreover, the state takes no notice of such sexual crimes, as it is assumed that men from privileged castes are entitled to sexually exploit women from underprivileged castes. That the women of the Atishudra castes have no

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honour and that they are but commodities for the pleasure of men of the higher varnas is an old injunction of the Dharmashastras. (2021, 131)

I think it is an overstatment that the state takes no notice of sexual crimes committed by "high-caste" men against "low-caste women," but it does happen. Pardeshi's conclusion that such a notion goes back to the Dharmaśāstras seems reasonable, but it is based on a very oversimplified perception of what the Dharmaśāstras say. Indeed, that is exactly how Draupadī's abuse is justified by the Kauravas in the Series. Its silence about the sexual abuse of women belonging to the "low caste" is disappointing, and the claim that the creators of the Series sought to contemporize the narrative seems untenable.

In Vyāsa's text, Karṇa, and later others, compare Draupadī with a sailboat which, despite being battered in a storm, takes its sailors, as they floundered and continued to drown in the turbulent ocean of the gambling match, ashore. Karṇa also praises Draupadī in the Series, but his compliment is so vague that it can hardly be considered a tribute to her intelligence. He says: "I swear by Lord Mahādeva (Śiva), uncle, I have seen many beautiful women, but no one is as sharp as she [Draupadī] is" (47:14). The sharpness here alludes to her fiery character, rather than her keen *understanding* of *dharma* and *artha*.

Conclusion

Vyāsa's Draupadī demonstrates an intellectual acuity to challenge the validity of her bet. True, she could not prove that the bet was invalid, but she effectively argues against its validity on three grounds: (1) Yudhiṣṭhira was left no choice as the gamblers ganged up on him, and he was challenged, (2) Yudhiṣṭhira's acceptance of the defeat cannot validate what is invalid according to the law, and (3) and Yudhiṣṭhira had already lost himself. She also opposes her

maltreatment on account of her Kṣatriya background—she was born into a Kṣatriya family and was a chaste wife of the five Kṣatriyas. The Series gives prominence to the anger and vengeful feelings of Draupadī towards her abusers and those who watch her passively, which makes her look strong, but it significantly minimizes Vyāsa's description of Draupadī's intellectual abilities and expertise in *dharma* and *artha*, which effectively allow her to challenge her abusers' intent to mistreat her. Draupadī's portrayal in the Series' fails to capture her intellectual strength. Even though one might feel emotionally stirred or disturbed by her cries for help, one might not be able to offer help if there is no legal framework to support the defense. The Series without doubt highlights the Kauravas' wickedness as they brutally terrorize her, but it misses an excellent opportunity to contemporize the episode by asserting the rights of all women to honour and respect, be they "low-caste" or sexually independent.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

This dissertation has focused on two tellings of India's major narrative, the Mahābhārata: Vyāsa's Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* (2nd century BCE–1st century CE) as reconstructed by the Critical Edition and my textual rendering of the oral Hindi narrative, especially the dialogues, of the televised *Mahabharat* series (1988-1990), produced and directed by B. R. Chopra and his son Ravi Chopra. I analyzed each text with a focus on the gambling episode, especially the figure of Draupadī, whose portrayal is very different in the two works.

The first major comparative study of Vyāsa's epic and the Series, this study is important not only because these two tellings bookend approximately two millennia of the epic's long history and help us determine continuities and discontinuities, but also because of the Series' claim that Vyāsa's text represented by the Critical Edition is its basic source, which gave it legitimation (along with the claims of the narrator Cosmic Time who asserts he saw it all happen).

The analysis was organized in four major chapters: (1) Stirring up the Storm: From Duryodhana's Jealousy to "Blame the Woman"; (2) Sailing into the Storm: From Yudhiṣṭhira's Heroism to Damage-control; (3) A Battered Boat: Draupadī's Humiliation; and (4) Draupadī: A Noble Sailboat. In Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*, the gambling episode is compared to the ocean in which the Pāṇḍavas, who had lost everything, were drowning. In the final bet, Yudhiṣṭhira, provoked by Śakuni, stakes Draupadī, as if launching a boat. Draupadī's assertive defense of her freedom eventually results in the Pāṇḍavas' emancipation from slavery. I examined key themes

Conclusion

related to Draupadī's treatment in the Sabhā in the two epic tellings and their respective contexts, compared their similarities and differences and, in the case of the latter, tentatively postulated when and where the changes had occurred in the epic's long history.

In my discussion of these texts, I also brought in key contextual information. In the case of Vyāsa's text, this included an investigation into the Kṣatriya culture of honor, which involved vows never to turn down a challenge for war or a gambling match, and an examination of Dharmaśāstra rules relating to gambling, slavery, prostitution, and the marital responsibilities of a husband and wife.

Consider first my contribution to studies of Vyāsa's epic. Following the phenomenological principle "back to the things themselves," I went "back to the text itself." For that, I followed Śaṅkara's advice: do not ignore what the text says, and do not imagine what the text does not say. This way of approaching the text has been crucial for addressing several points that have unfortunately been misunderstood. In Vyāsa's text, Yudhiṣṭhira repeatedly states that he decided to participate in the gambling match because of his vows never to turn down a challenge and never to disobey Dhṛtarāṣṭra. He thought that the game was predestined because he would not on any condition betray his vows. But many scholars rejected these as actual reasons. Rather, they proposed two "real reasons": (1) Yudhiṣṭhira's Rājasūya ritual would not have been complete without the game, and (2) Yudhiṣṭhira was addicted to gambling. I was not convinced by the first view because Vyāsa's text never suggests a link between Yudhiṣṭhira's Rājasūya and the gambling match. This led me to explore many ritualistic texts, and I was surprised to learn that even the ritualistic stipulations do not endorse this view. The second view unwarrantedly relies on Śakuni's partial and minor statement and ignores Yudhiṣṭhira's repeated justifications. I argued that there is no contradiction between Yudhiṣṭhira's honest, truthful, and

kind-hearted nature and his participation in the inherently conflictual and dishonest game of dicing. We must distinguish between Yudhiṣṭhira's reasons to play the game and the nature of the game. His reason to participate was not to play the game, but to remain true to his own vows. He disastrously failed in the game but marvelously succeeded in keeping his resolve.

Another point that has been misunderstood is why the Pāṇḍavas did not protect Draupadī. Brockington maintains that the concept of menstrual pollution prevented the Pāṇḍavas from intervening as Draupadī, then menstruating, was suffering abuse. By touching her or talking to her, the Pāṇḍavas would be ritually impure, a more disastrous outcome than to avoid contact with her and just watch her being abused. This, too, is never even hinted at by Vyāsa's text. Moreover, I demonstrated that Brockington's opinion stems from a basic misunderstanding of the concepts and practices associated with menses. Vyāsa's text states that the Pāṇḍavas were held back by the then prevailing legal framework, which Brockington elsewhere rightly acknowledges: as slaves of Duryodhana, the Pāṇḍavas could not defy their master, especially when Draupadī's question could not be answered. Sutherland advances another theory: the Pāṇḍavas' attempts to protect Draupadī would reveal their affection for her in the presence of their elders/seniors, which the social conventions did not allow. Not only is this conspicuously absent in Vyāsa's text, but it also is based on a misinterpretation of cultural prohibition of coming in contact with a menstruating woman.

My emphasis has also been to foreground Draupadī's influence in the Sabhā. For that, I went beyond her question about the validity of her bet. I paid special attention to her rejoinder to Bhīṣma's two-fold befuddlement: (1) Śakuni did not force Yudhiṣṭhira to stake her, and (2) Yudhiṣṭhira accepted his defeat. Draupadī disputed such a simplification because Yudhiṣṭhira had no choice but accept the challenge. She argued that Yudhiṣṭhira's acceptance of his defeat

does not legally validate an illegal act. The argument for the illegality of the bet rests on the fact that Yudhiṣṭhira staked her when he himself had become Duryodhana's slave.

As part of my analysis of the Series, I examined several Sanskrit, Hindi, and Marathi tellings of the Mahābhārata, legal changes regarding the caste system and women's rights, and sensational events in India that occurred just before or as the Series was being made. Moreover, In Appendix I, I assessed three major theories dealing with the origins of Vyāsa's text: first, that he himself composed it based on incidents he personally witnessed and participated in and then taught it to five disciples who gave their own versions; second, that the epic originated as a bardic, oral creation; and third, that the story is pure fiction. In addition, I analyzed the scholarly debates over the merits of the Critical Edition. In Appendix II, I studied the lives and outlooks of two key people on the team that created the Series—B. R. Chopra and Rahi Masoom Reza— including their family background, political and religious orientations, prior writings, and film production, to detect their orientation to contemporary social and political issues that might have informed their decisions regarding their adaptation of the story to their times. I complemented this study with my own informal discussions with three of the Series actors—Mukesh Khanna (Bhīṣma), Puneet Issar (Duryodhana), and Pankaj Dheer (Karṇa)—as well as Lavanya Shah, daughter of (now deceased) Pandit Narendra Sharma, who was responsible for "concept, advice and lyrics."

This comparison of Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* and the Series *Mahabharat* revealed continuities and discontinuities. I think the *Mahabharat* Series provides strong continuity with Vyāsa's text on the narrative's very pivot: the gambling episode. The Pāṇḍavas are good-natured and predisposed to virtuous conduct. For instance, during the most harrowing misfortune of their life, they abide by rules of slavery and do not launch an attack on the abusers of Draupadī. By

contrast, Duryodhana and his enablers are self-absorbed and hell-bent on destroying the

Pāṇḍavas. They cross all boundaries of decorum and derive sadistic pleasure in cruelly

tormenting the Pāṇḍavas, especially Draupadī. The Series' description of the Pāṇḍavas' inability

to protect Draupadī also agrees with Vyāsa. As slaves of Duryodhana, they could not revolt

against their master, especially when Draupadī's bet was apparently already lost. But unlike

Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata,* the Series never condones Yudhiṣṭhira's decision to wager Draupadī. In

fact, the Series not only consistently fulminates against Yudhiṣṭhira's decision, but it also pours

scorn on the other Pāṇḍava brothers for not remonstrating with him when he wagers Draupadī.

This is a matter of adaptation, as the narrator Cosmic Time comments that every story is adapted

in accordance with the society's framework. Later, he declares that the present must always

attend to the past like a gardener—preserve the living parts and get rid of the dead, for no matter

how honorable the past might be, it cannot be accepted as it is. It must be assessed. The Series

could not afford to alter the core incident of the gambling episode, but it could contemporize the

story by condemning what is not acceptable in modern times: As we were told: "By accepting

Yudhiṣṭhira as a precedent, one cannot now stake his brothers and wife in gamble."

Even though many scholars rejected how Vyāsa presented Yudhiṣṭhira's justifications to

accept the challenge for the gambling match, the Series maintains continuity by basing

Yudhiṣṭhira's decision, even if partially, on his intent to accept a challenge due to his Kṣatriya

identity. For instance, in the Series when Duryodhana doubts that the Pāṇḍavas would agree to

gamble, Śakuni consoles him, saying that they will surely come because no Kṣatriya can ever

reject an invitation for war or gambling, which is a Kṣatriya obligation, and because this

invitation will go at the behest of their older uncle. Similarly, Vidura expresses his helplessness

in advising Yudhiṣṭhira to reject the challenge because of the Kṣatriya obligation, a point

repeated by Yudhiṣṭhira and later by Draupadī. Yudhiṣṭhira also declares his inability to disobey his uncle. Thus, the Series maintains that Yudhiṣṭhira's decision to accept the challenge was part of his vow not to ever disobey his uncle and never turn down a challenge.

I concluded that the Series team realized that the ideas of the vow and Kṣatriya *dharma* were so central to the storyline that it could not be changed in a major way. Moreover, even if the specific details of Kṣatriya *dharma* are no longer relevant, even understood, one could argue that the Series' team probably realized that the story conveys something universal that still engages the audience. For instance, there is a universal appreciation of being true to one's word. In India, this sentiment is widely held in high esteem, as suggested by a very popular stanza from Tulasīdāsa's *Rāmacaritamānasa*: "This has always been the way of Raghu's lineage: one may lose one's life, but never breach one's word" (2.28).

I also found that the core characteristics of Yudhiṣṭhira, the protagonist, and Duryodhana, the antagonist, correspond to Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*. Yudhiṣṭhira is kind, honest, just, and devoted to truth and peace, whereas Duryodhana is presented as a greedy and viciously jealous prince, who remains under the sway of his nefarious uncle Śakuni and militant friend Karṇa.

Next consider the case of Draupadī. According to Vyāsa's story, Draupadī is a blameless noble queen who becomes the victim of male rivalry so that her husband stakes her. The victors abuse her like a slave and humiliate her like a "whore" and even try to strip her naked. Nevertheless, she preserves her marital chastity and has courage to confront powerful men. But when I compared Vyāsa's portrayal of Draupadī with that of the Series, I found several major differences, which I organize and summarize here around five key questions.

Conclusion

1) Who makes fun of Duryodhana?

   Vyāsa: The younger four Pāṇḍavas and palace attendants laugh at Duryodhana; Draupadī's name does not occur in this context. But in Sūta's version, Duryodhana accuses her of laughing at him. Notably, Duryodhana's accusation stands in stark contrast with the remaining text of Vyāsa.

   TV Series: Draupadī alone makes fun of Duryodhana and remarks "like father like son—both blind." This is perceived to be disastrous for the Bharata dynasty (*Bharata-vaṃśa*) by both the narrator Cosmic Time and Yudhiṣṭhira. Duryodhana is consumed by an urge to retaliate.

2) Why did Duryodhana want to gamble?

   Vyāsa: Duryodhana wants to appropriate the Pāṇḍavas' kingdom and wealth; the fact that some, including Draupadī (as per Duryodhana's accusation), make fun of him plays no role in his decision to challenge Yudhiṣṭhira to a gambling match.

   TV Series: Duryodhana is not interested in seizing the Pāṇḍavas' kingdom and wealth; Draupadī's laughter alone is responsible to challenge Yudhiṣṭhira to a gambling match.

3) Why does Yudhiṣṭhira decide to accept the challenge?

   Vyāsa: Yudhiṣṭhira considers gambling evil, but his vows to never turn down a challenge and to never disobey his uncle compel him to accept the challenge and obey Dhṛtarāṣṭra. His obligation to the Kṣatriya code of honour also forces him to accept the challenge. Despite his best efforts to avoid the game, Śakuni and Duryodhana do not take their challenge back,

and Yudhiṣṭhira feels trapped and concludes that the game was
preordained.

TV Series: Yudhiṣṭhira's naivety is foregrounded. He thinks that friendly games
do not cause any harm; he wants to prove his excellent skills in gambling;
and, to minimize the damage caused by Draupadī's mockery, he wants to
make Duryodhana happy. As a Kṣatriya, he must accept the challenge.

4) Why is Draupadī abused?

Vyāsa: Draupadī's abuse in the Sabhā has nothing to do with either her mocking
of Duryodhana or her rejection of Karṇa during her *svayaṃvara*
ceremony; she is a noble, innocent queen who becomes a victim of male
rivalry.

TV Series: Draupadī's mocking of Duryodhana and her crushing rejection of
Karṇa are the primary causes of her abuse. She is responsible for
provoking them.

5) How does Draupadī fight back?

Vyāsa: Draupadī's challenge to the legality of her bet saves her and her husbands:
(1) Yudhiṣṭhira could not turn down the challenge, (2) he had already lost
himself, and (3) Śakuni cheated in the game. Thus, her knowledge of the
law is the saving grace. Vyāsa's text extols her as a sailboat that rescues
her husbands and credits *dharma* for saving her against disrobing.

TV Series: Draupadī voices the same arguments as in Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*, but
they are so oversimplified that they have lost their legal force in modern
times. Instead, the Series relies on her supernatural powers to curse her

abusers, powers that she acquired through her chaste devotion to her

husbands. She is helped by Kṛṣṇa who miraculously covers her when she

is stripped in the Sabhā.

In short, there is a major difference between the two tellings. In Vyāsa's story, it is the

Pāṇḍavas (except Yudhiṣṭhira), some Sabhā attendants, and Draupadī (as per Duryodhana's

unreliable accusation) who laugh at Duryodhana. However, the Series shows Draupadī as the

sole culprit in reviling Duryodhana. Her cruel laughter and stinging remark "like father, like

son—both blind" wound him so deeply that avenging this humiliation becomes the sole purpose

of his existence, and he is single-mindedly determined to wreak revenge on her. Yudhiṣṭhira's

decision to accept the invitation for the gambling match is to a certain degree influenced by his

wish to placate Duryodhana. Duryodhana abuses her because she had insulted him. The same is

true about her abuse by Karṇa. Thus, the Series depicts Draupadī as the *agent provocateur*, who

reaps the fruits of her actions. Moreover, her laughter and insult drastically change the nature of

the events in the gambling episode. The image of Draupadī ridiculing and insulting a relative has

enormous negative consequences. The mockery episode convinces most audiences that her abuse

by Duryodhana and Karṇa was a result of her own doing.

I argued that the Series' portrayal of Draupadī's character as malicious creates a major

discontinuity with Vyāsa's story. It cannot be considered an adaptation because blaming an

innocent woman for men's misdeeds is in no way justifiable; in fact, it goes against modern

attempts to empower women. Because the Series' creators claim a woman's low status is a sign

of her society's degeneracy and morality, falsely accusing a woman weakens her entitlement to

honorable treatment and contradicts their goal to address modern women's issues. The Series

also downplays Draupadī's intellectual astuteness as it oversimplifies her legal challenges. Had

the Series really focussed on Vyāsa's story and avoided dependence on more proximate sources, it would have been able to adapt Vyāsa's portrayal of Draupadī as a strong intellectual woman to the modern context that was reforming the position of women on many fronts, including education.

These findings led me to analyze why, when, and where the tradition came to assign the guilt of mocking Duryodhana, which in modern tellings is identified as the cause of the great war, to Draupadī alone. My research offers the following tentative historical reconstruction, though much more research on the various Mahābhārata texts remains to be done.

1) Vyāsa's own description has a faint narratorial seed for this development. Draupadī's birth is followed by a prophecy that she would assist the gods in destroying Kṣatriyas. Because the Mahābhārata war decimated the Kṣatriya population, and the Pāṇḍavas are consistently goaded by Draupadī to avenge her humiliation, she came to be known as the cause of the war. Vyāsa's text also contains a brief reference to Duryodhana's accusation that Draupadī made fun of him. I analyzed how Sūta's description of Duryodhana accusing Draupadī of laughing at him is contextually incongruous, and hence it might well be an interpolation.

2) Ānandatīrtha, a prominent philosopher and religious leader from South India, composed in the 13th century an interpretative telling of the *Mahābhārata*. There, he directly connects the episode of Duryodhana's mockery by Draupadī, Bhīma, other Pāṇḍavas, and Kṛṣṇa's wives with Kṛṣṇa's objective to reduce the burden of the earth. Thus, the objective of Draupadī's birth and God's plan are one and the same: to wipe

out the wicked Kṣatriyas. This relationship might have gradually limited the role of mockery to Draupadī.

3) I found further support for this South Indian origin in Hiltebeitel's study of the cult-rituals focused on Draupadī in South India. In these Draupadī is shown as guilty of mocking Duryodhana. Hiltebeitel suggests that the cult of Draupadī was probably influenced by Villiputturar's *Villipāratam,* a Tamil work of the 15th century. Further light on when her villification might have happened requires further research, especially on the *Villipāratam*.

4) Given that it is probably the South Indian tellings of the Mahābhārata that single out Draupadī as the mocker of Duryodhana, I tentatively suggested that Draupadī's role in mocking Duryodhana, might have originated in South India and gradually found its way back into Vyāsa's text as in Sūta's account.

5) I surmised that this South Indian telling also influenced North Indian tellings, which had a major effect on subsequent vernacular tellings. To the best of my knowledge, the first reference in a Hindi dialect to Draupadī taunting Duryodhana as "like father like son—both blind" is found in Cauhāna's *Mahābhārata* in the 17th century.

6) The *Mahābhārata Nāṭaka* is a Hindi drama by Nārāyaṇaprasāda Betāba, a famous theatrical personality. First performed in 1913 in Mumbai and subsequently performed all over India, it made Draupadī's role in mocking Duryodhana popular, especially among the Hindi-speaking people. Betāba likely drew from a South Indian telling or a source influenced by the South Indian telling.

Conclusion

7) Śivājī Sāvaṃta's novel *Mṛtyuṃjaya* in Marathi, which was published in 1967 and subsequently translated into Hindi in 1974, was an important contribution to modern portrayal of such characters as Karṇa, Duryodhana, and Draupadī. It shows how deeply Draupadī wounds both Karṇa and Duryodhana, and why they could not forgive their insults by her. This work was very influential, receiving several literary awards in India. Its radio version was broadcast by a Pune radio station. In the larger context of the Series, Sāvaṃta seems to have influenced it noticeably.

8) The evolution of cinema in India is influenced by those involved in theatre. For instance, Betāba's *Mahābhārata* drama seems to have been adapted by the cinema world. The 1965 movie *Mahabharat*, produced by A. A. Nadiadwala and directed by Babubhai Mistry, presents Draupadī in even darker light than Betāba's *Mahabharat* drama. All movie or theatrical versions that I came across follow Betāba's drama and the *Mahabharat* movie.

9) Thus, despite its claim simply to retell the *Mahābhārata* of Vyāsa based on the Critical Edition, the Chopras' *Mahabharat* Series is in fact based in significant ways on Betāba's Hindi drama *Mahābhārata*, Babubhai Mistry's 1965 movie *Mahabharat*, and Sāvaṃta's novel *Mṛtyuṃjaya*. And, given the continuity in the portrayal of Draupadī's laughter and taunt "like father, like son—both blind," an especially notable point in this regard is that Babubhai Mistry, the director of the movie *Mahabharat,* was also involved in the Series as the director of special effects.

So, the most important question to ask in this case is: is Draupadī's character in the Series within the boundaries of the Mahābhārata tradition as shaped by Vyāsa's narrative? Or is it outside its boundaries? Or does it fall on the boundary? I would argue that it is on the boundary

because her overall character conforms to Vyāsa's description, but her role in mocking Duryodhana reveals discontinuity with Vyāsa's character that cannot be explained by adaptation because it changes the focus from her integrity, intellectual acumen, and courage, which would create a good model for modern Indian women, to a guilty, melodramatic vengeful woman. Besides, Draupadī's image as presented in the Series appears to perpetuate the patriarchal system and convey that it is a woman's connection with a powerful figure, and not the law, that saves her in times of abuse. But, as one viewer commented, "not everyone has Krishna."

Now consider the case of Karṇa. In the Series, Karṇa's overall character is an adaptation in response to modern assertions for the upliftment of persons belonging to marginalized sections of the society. His evil attitude is seen as a result of psychological frustration due to the society's constant dismissal of his heroic qualities. He is a victim of caste-based social hierarchy. But the amelioration of Karṇa's character has negative consequences for Draupadī's abuse in the Sabhā. In the popular account, Draupadī disdainfully rebuffs Karṇa as a husband on account of his "low" social standing. This incident is found in very few and late manuscripts of Vyāsa's text; it describes "a *palpably faked and thoroughly unreal* situation" (Sukthankar 1933, LXI, emphasis in the original). I carefully analyzed Vyāsa's text and argued that Karṇa was not rejected by Draupadī; rather, he had failed to hit the designated mark, the necessary condition for marrying Draupadī. By following the popular version, the Series unfairly accuses Draupadī of disdaining Karṇa, which justifies his retaliatory insults of her during the gambling match.

Assessment of continuities and discontinuities is difficult. Whereas some aspects of the narrative and characters might qualify for adaptation, others might indicate appropriation. These should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis to determine whether the telling is inside the tradition, outside it, or on the boundary.

Conclusion

Through this research, I joined the latest discourse in the Mahābhārata field of studies, namely, the "Many Mahābhāratas" approach indebted to the "Many Rāmāyaṇas" approach first articulated by A. K. Ramanujan and then developed by Paula Richman and several other scholars. I found many aspects of this approach valuable, especially the insistence on approaching each text and context carefully on its own terms, which I understood as akin to the phenomenological methods of epoché, empathy, and to the thing itself. In addition, I found the "Many Mahābhāratas" idea of proximate sources (related to time, place, and language), which might have influenced a telling in a major way, to be an important part of understanding how a telling came to be. In my case study, this led me to Betāba's Hindi drama *Mahābhārata Nataka* (1913), the movie *Mahabharat* (1965), and Śivājī Sāvaṃta's novel *Mṛtyuṃjaya*, all extremely important proximate sources that had to be highlighted for an adequate understanding of Draupadī's character in the Series.

But I have also departed from the "Many Mahābhāratas" approach in significant ways. These relate especially to the concepts of *Ur* text, boundaries, adaptation versus appropriation, and the idea that all tellings are equally valid.

I demonstrated that the philological approach to Vyāsa's text helped me to understand the limitations of some current scholarly approaches. The two major arguments proposed to make sense of Yudhiṣṭhira's participation in gambling are: (1) Yudhiṣṭhira was compelled to gamble by the ritualistic stipulations of the Rājasūya, and (2) he was addicted to gambling. Based on the ritualistic texts and the *Mahābhārata*'s own description, I reasoned that both these arguments are nothing but conjectures, and that the reasons articulated by Yudhiṣṭhira make sense within the context of Vyāsa's epic. In addition, philology helped me to assess some later tellings and to trace the historical evolution of the Mahābhārata. Moreover, philology and comparison helped

me to determine continuity of narratorial and characterological traits among many tellings, which have defined the epic as a tradition with real boundaries over the centuries. I argued that even when adaptations were so dramatic that they seemingly cast the epic as a fundamentally new story, they still showed fidelity to the basic narrative and characters on closer examination.

To shed light on this phenomenon, I discussed ancient Indian theories in literature and current Western ones in media studies encapsulated in the idea of copyright and trademark, which define boundaries and set limits for what is permissible in the act of adaptation. I argued that adaptation seeks to make the source text 'relevant' or easily comprehensible to new audiences and readerships through the processes of proximation and updating, by modifying the source amicably, and by establishing a source and product relationship between the two as if it were a commentary on the source text. Adaptation stays within boundaries to uphold the idea that this is a genuine telling, but it also contextualizes the epic to make it meaningful to new audiences. An adaptation therefore avoids turning the epic story into a new cultural product that cannot be reconciled with its tradition.

By contrast, I found that some colonial tellings not only ignored the tradition's boundaries, these tellings also reversed the basic epic narrative so that the hero became the anti-hero and the anti-hero the hero. I argued that these were cases of appropriation because these tellers appropriated the epic tradition for their own purposes, which involved a willful or fallacious distortion to convey an antithetical statement, putting it outside the tradition. In short, adaptation stands for continuity and appropriation for discontinuity. Analysis of such works of appropriation led me to the conclusion that not all tellings of the epic are equal. One must approach each initially with a scholarly openness to its distinctiveness, but one must also assess whether it belongs to the epic tradition, whether it is outside it, or whether it is on the border. In

short, I depart from what seems to me to be the underlying premise of the "Many Rāmāyaṇas"
and "Many Mahābhāratas" approach: that all tellings are equal despite the occasional lip service
to authoritative versions or boundaries.

I end this summary of the dissertation's contributions with a question and several
musings. The Series presents itself as continuous with the Critical Edition of Vyāsa's story.
Moreover, its narrator Cosmic Time claims emphatically that it is continuous with the original.
This raises the question: was the Series' team aware of how some important aspects of its telling
were outside traditional boundaries, especially its approach to Draupadī, a key character? It is
possible that they were not because they did not realize that they had received this negative view
of Draupadī through contemporary dramas, novels, and films. Pandit Narendra Sharma, the most
knowledgeable member of the team about the Mahābhārata, had passed away several months
before the episodes on the gambling match were filmed. His last poem concluded episode 24,
whereas the content of this comparative study begins in episode 44. Other members of the
creative team were neither known as experts on the Mahābhārata nor were they learned in the
Sanskrit language. This suggests that the creative team did not read even the Vulgate
Mahābhārata. For the Vulgate edition would have impressed on them that Draupadī alone was
not responsible for mocking Duryodhana. In Vyāsa's telling, the Pāṇḍavas and palace attendants
are more frequently accused of mocking Duryodhana, even where Draupadī's name is included.
It is also possible, although I am not convinced of this option, that they intentionally abandoned
Vyāsa's description to add melodramatic effects.

In any case, this comparative study has shown that just because something is temporally
close to us and has gained currency in the general population does not prove that it is always
more aligned with our times or ideals than its ancient version. Moreover, not all changes

contribute positively to the story. Sometimes, wrong interpretations of either the source, the

proximate telling, or the context can lead one to alter a story in a negative way. Even if this is

inadvertent, it can be disadvantageous for tellings that should keep the epic alive and meaningful.

The Series' portrayal of Draupadī as the sole malicious mocker of Duryodhana can be cited as

the representative case of such a misconstruction, which places the portrayal of Draupadī on the

boundary. It is up to future epic tellers and their audiences to decide what to do with such

scholarly insights should they move beyond the ivory tower. As we learn from the great Sanskrit

poet Kālidāsa:

> Not every [poem] is good just because it is old, nor is a poem bad just because it is new. The wise appreciate one or the other after assessing [them], but a fool's mind is persuaded by the opinions of others (*Mālavikāgnimitra* 1.2).[1]

Or in Arthur Schopenhauer's words:

> No greater mistake can be made than to imagine that what has been written latest is always the more correct; that what is written later on is an improvement on what was written previously; and that every change means progress. (1892, 293)

Why not let Vyāsa have the last word here:

> Some possess right knowledge; others possess false knowledge. It is only after considering this properly that [people should] embrace the wisdom of the virtuous. (12.140.10)[2]

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[1] *purāṇam ity eva na sādhu sarvaṃ na cāpi kāvyaṃ navam ity avadyam, santaḥ parīkṣyānyatarad bhajante mūḍhaḥ parapratyayaneyabuddhiḥ.*

[2] *samyagvijñāninaḥ ke cin mithyāvijñānino 'pare, tad vai yathātathaṃ buddhvā jñānam ādadate satām.*

Appendix I

Reflections on the Origins of Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*
and the Merits of the Critical Edition

The life of Vyāsa and his Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* are intertwined. According to the story, not only is Vyāsa the biological grandfather of the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas, and as such he is constantly interacting with his grandsons, especially with the Pāṇḍavas in crucial moments, he is also the author of the book. Thus, we learn about Vyāsa from the *Mahābhārata* and about the *Mahābhārata* from Vyāsa. As per the text, Vyāsa composed the *Mahābhārata* and then taught it to his five disciples, one of whom was his own son Śuka. These five disciples are said to have authored their own versions of the story. I will below examine some theories about the *Mahābhārata*'s evolution, which has confounded—both in terms of size and textual diversity—many modern scholars. This led to the creation of the Critical Edition, which has become the basis of all modern studies.

The issue of authorship

The epic's extraordinarily large size and a variety of content have compelled some modern scholars to hold that the epic is not composed by one person. There are at least three major theories about this.

(1) The epic's own view. Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* says that Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa composed the *Mahābhārata* in three years and taught it along with the four Vedas to his five disciples: Sumantu, Jaimini, Paila, Śuka, and Vaiśaṃpāyana (1.57.73-74,

12.327.16-18). The epic claims that these five disciples of Vyāsa implored him not to have another distinguished disciple (12.314.37-38), and each of these disciples promulgated his own version of Vyāsa's story (1.57.75). What was the content of Vyāsa's teachings to his disciples? Did he have them commit his own composition to memory? Or did he further explain and interpret his original composition? The text discloses, at least on one occasion, the content of Vyāsa's teachings: "interpretations of the Vedas and of the *Bhārata*" (12.337.13-15; 1.1.48). (c) It is reasonable to surmise that Vyāsa's teachings included both his own poem and its explanation. This account leaves enough room for further expansion of the poem that might have resulted in five different editions, that is, if we believe the epic's account. We know of no other version of the epic than that of Vaiśaṃpāyana from the same era.[1] Edgerton, one of the editors of the Sabhāparva's Critical Edition, observes discrepancies regarding Draupadī's arrival in the gambling hall and surmises that "clearly we have here parts of two entirely different versions of the story" (1944, XXXI-XXXII). I hypothesize that Vaiśaṃpāyana's version might have become exceptionally popular, and it gradually absorbed parts of other versions. This is, however, only a hypothesis based on the text's own description and diversity noted by several scholars.

(2) Oral to written text. The epic was composed by generations of poets including Brāhmaṇas, but also bards who professionally sang the epic in Kṣatriya gatherings and contributed to its monumental growth by adding context specific sub-histories.

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[1] Scholars date Jaimini's version of the Aśvamedhaparva, which is quite different than that of Vaiśaṃpāyana, quite late, but not later than the 12th century.

Hence, the current epic text is a result of three compositional developments: (a) the

oral composition, (b) Vyāsa's literary rendering of the oral composition, and (c) later

interpolations (Thapar 2013, 147).

(3) Hiltebeitel proposes an alternative theory. The epic is a production of "*composite*

authorship: by a committee, group, équipe, syndicate, symposium, *saṅgam, sattra*, or

whatever one wants to call it." It accomplished the composition in a comparatively

much shorter period "of one or two generations." For him, orality in relation to the

Mahābhārata is "*a literary trope*" and a historical core behind the narrative is

dispensable. He corroborates this point by referring to internal evidence, namely,

Vyāsa's teaching of the *Mahābhārata* to his son Śuka, whom he has "*before* his three

other sons Dhṛtarāṣṭra [the Kauravas' father], Pāṇḍu [the Pāṇḍavas' father], and

Vidura. That is, he imparts the *Mahābhārata* to Śuka and the other four disciples

before it could have happened. This would be a sign of fiction" (2011a, 12–14).

The evidence from Vyāsa's text directly contradicts Hiltebeitel's interpretation of select

inexplicit stanzas that he employs to demonstrate the *Mahābhārata*'s fictionality. Rather, the

evidence cited in the footnote indicates that Vyāsa composed the *Mahābhārata not before* the

story unfolds but *after* Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Pāṇḍu, and Vidura had died.[2] Even though Pāṇḍu dies in the

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[2] The scope of this dissertation prohibits me from critiquing Hiltebeitel's inference in detail. His conclusion is based on the interpretation of select stanzas, but it contradicts Vyāsa's explicit disclosures about the epic's composition. For example, the text explicitly states that the epic was not composed before the Pāṇḍavas went into exile. After the successful completion of their exile, the Pāṇḍavas demand that Duryodhana abide by the conditions of the second gambling match and return their kingdom. Duryodhana refuses. So, both parties decide to resolve the issue in a battle. When Vyāsa offers faculty of sight to blind Dhṛtarāṣṭra so that he himself could watch the war, the king refuses but expresses a desire to listen to the reports of the war. Vyāsa appoints the king's attendant Saṃjaya for the job and bestows on him the ability to witness all events of the war. Vyāsa then comforts Dhṛtarāṣṭra: "I will, moreover, bull of the Bharatas, make the glory of all these Kurus and Pāṇḍavas widely known; do not worry" (*ahaṃ ca kīrtim eteṣāṃ kurūṇāṃ bharatarṣabha, pāṇḍavānāṃ ca sarveṣāṃ prathayiṣyāmi mā śucaḥ*) (6.2.13). That this assurance of Vyāsa to Dhṛtarāṣṭra refers to the *Mahābhārata* seems convincing because at 1.56.25-26, the text explicitly states that Vyāsa spread the glory of the Pāṇḍavas and other warriors through this epic. From Vyāsa's

first book of the epic, Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Vidura die at least thirty-six years after the war—in the fifteenth book. In view of these intratextual testimonies, I can say that Hiltebeitel's theory of a literary origin is not convincing.

At this stage, I hold no opinion on the matter of the origins of the epic. In lieu of irrefutable and indisputable evidence, the historicity or fictionality of the epic story cannot be proven beyond doubt.

A critique of the Critical Edition

The commonly recognized text of the *Mahābhārata* is that of Nīlakaṇṭha, a 17th-century scholar who also commented on the *Mahābhārata*. Nīlakaṇṭha recognized the diversity of the textual tradition and therefore collated many manuscripts from different regions and produced a version based on them (Pollock 2006, 230). It is Nīlakaṇṭha's text that is now known as the Vulgate edition.

The Vulgate's sheer size and seemingly bewildering variety of content convinced many early Indologists to look for a more consistent and systematic text. The need for producing a "correct" version of the epic was first clearly articulated by M. Winternitz in 1897. He remarked "that a critical edition of the Mahābhārata 'was wanted as the only sound basis for all Mahābhārata studies, nay, for all studies connected with the epic literature of India'" (quoted by

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comforting words to Dhṛtarāṣṭra, one can conclude that the composition of the *Mahābhārata* had not occurred before at least the war. Moreover, the *Mahābhārata* discloses the chronology of its composition. It states the following. "After having fathered Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Pāṇḍu, and Vidura, the wise [Vyāsa] returned to his *āśrama* to perform austerities. When they had grown old and made their final exit, the great sage composed (literally narrated, *abravīt*) the *Bhārata* in the mortal world" (*utpādya dhṛtarāṣṭraṃ ca pāṇḍuṃ viduram eva ca, jagāma tapase dhīmān punar evāśramaṃ prati. teṣu jāteṣu vṛddheṣu gateṣu paramāṃ gatim, abravīd bhārataṃ loke mānuṣe 'smin mahān ṛṣiḥ*) (1.1.55-56). Shulman alludes to this statement but does not quote or give reference to the epic text, which leads Hiltebeitel to pause and question the basis of this claim (Hiltebeitel 2001, 285, n. 17).

Sukthankar 1933, I). In 1918, Sukthankar initiated a colossal project at the Bhandarkar Oriental

Research Institute, Poona. He led a team of Indian and foreign scholars to produce a Critical

Edition of the epic, which would serve as the "authentic" standardized text. The editors of the

Critical Edition, which is said to include stanzas from the 2nd century BCE to the 2nd century

CE, produced "*a version of the epic as old as the extant manuscript material will permit us to*

reach and which is the most ancient one according to the direct line of transmission"

(Sukthankar 1933, CIII, emphasis in the original). It relegated the "later interpolations" to

footnotes, known as the star passages, or to appendices if many stanzas displayed coherence but

did not fit the editorial criteria. One of the primary criteria to distinguish genuine manuscripts

from those not so reliable was based on the age and the content of the manuscript. The older and

shorter manuscripts were considered more reliable, and the text therein was believed to be

genuine (ibid. XLVII). Since its completion in 1972, the Critical Edition has become the

favourite of university-educated scholars, and nearly all contemporary scholarly literature

dealing with the epic prides itself for having used this version. That same year, van Buitenen

categorically declared that the Poona project has yielded "as clean a text as will probably ever be

within our reach." The reputation of the Critical Edition as the relatively least adulterated text

seems to have been the reason why the Series claims to have used it.

But the purpose and methodologies used in producing the Critical Edition also drew

criticism from both Indian and foreign authorities on the epic. Sukthankar himself described the

Critical Edition as a "mosaic of old and new matter." All forms of narration—composition and

transmission through performance including singing, dancing, and puppetry—are by nature fluid.

The *Mahābhārata* is a prime example of this fluidity even in a written text: "This written

transmission was vastly complicated by the fact that the text circulated as part of a living culture

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and grew and changed as dramatically as any living cultural phenomenon has ever done, producing a text-critical problem as large and intricate as any in world literature" (Pollock 2006, 224).

Considering this view, Biardeau questions the purpose and very existence of the Critical Edition: "because of oral transmission and relative creativity of each narrator of either epic, we shall never have access to the authentic text—the *Urtext,* and that we shall not even try to reconstitute it" (1997, 87). As might be expected, she is critical of editorial methodologies too. She finds no reason in justifying the argument that the shortest and the earliest dated manuscript should be considered more authentic: "There is no reason to hold that one version is more authentic than the other because its manuscript is shorter and earlier" (1997, 86). For similar reasons, she disapproves of the Critical Edition of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*. Biardeau, however, does not entirely invalidate the Critical Edition. She appreciates its formation only because it incorporates "almost all the known versions in the critical apparatus and the appendices" (ibid. 86).

Vidya Niwas Mishra, a notable scholar of Sanskrit and a Hindi literary critic and essayist, uses similar arguments to denounce the Critical Edition, although he seems to have no awareness of Biardeau's line of reasoning. He does not believe that we must go looking for the "original" text of the epic just because several generations of poets from varying geographical backgrounds contributed to its monumental growth. Like Biardeau, he argues that "even if these changes have occurred, how is the unity of the *Mahābhārata* ruled out" (Mishra 1985, 18). He believes that "all efforts—the dissecting of the *Mahābhārata* including its textual arrangement and search for its original form—are made by people untouched by the spirit of the *Mahābhārata*" (ibid).

B.K. Matilal concludes that the Critical Edition cannot be considered the "epic nucleus" because "stripping off whatever one or the other scholar regards as interpolations cannot lead to a pure and unalloyed 'core' (peeling off onion-skins does not lead to any core, as we all know)" (1989, 4).

Hiltebeitel questions the validity of the "reconstituted" text by labeling it "a twentieth-century reconstruction, and not proof of an 'original.'" In the context of the gambling match, he criticizes Edgerton's choice to discard Kṛṣṇa's role in covering Draupadī's nakedness as "the eagerness of the Critical Edition's editors to excise Bhakti by stripping the text. […] What makes certain manuscripts 'excellent' in the eyes of the Critical Edition's editors is not any proof of their antiquity, but precisely their relative usefulness in shortening the Critical Edition text" (2001, 251). Hiltebeitel dismisses such an approach to shorten the text by advancing a counterargument. He sees a possibility that "late sectarian copyists might have omitted Kṛṣṇa's part in rescuing Draupadī to rescue *him* from 'textual contact' with her impure single garment" (2001, 251).[3]

Pollock, who believes that the epic was "expanded and contracted in one recension or another" (2006, 229) is convinced that the Critical Edition was not the first deliberately created version of the epic. He substantiates his claim of conscious construction of the epic's text with Nīlakaṇṭha's own admission that "he gathered 'many manuscripts from different regions and critically established the best readings.'" He did a substantial amount of editing in the process, since his text differs markedly from that of Devabodha of the 11th century (2006, 230; 2015, 13).

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[3] The two verses he cites to discredit the reconstituted text make direct allusion to Draupadī's call to Kṛṣṇa (5.58.21, 5.80.26), which, Hiltebeitel believes, contradict Edgerton's rejection of Kṛṣṇa's role. I find his conclusion unconvincing and have analyzed it in the fifth chapter.

The foregoing reservations about the Critical Edition point to Sukthankar's objective assessment of what he and his associates were able to produce. The following appraisal sums up my opinion about it:

> It is but a modest attempt to present *a version of the epic as old as the extant manuscript material will permit us to reach* with some semblance of confidence. It is, in all probability, not the best text of the Great Epic, possible or existing, nor necessarily even a good one. It only claims to be *th*e *most ancient one according to the direct line of transmission,* purer than the others in so far as it is free from the obvious errors of copying and spurious additions. (Sukthankar 1933, CII)

It offers the cleanest text, but it also includes material that some scholars, including Edgerton, the chief editor of the Sabhāparva, believe comprises of different versions of some accounts, such as that of Draupadī's appearance in the Sabhā. Even so, the textual growth seems to have been congruous enough that the core identity of the story and the text of the *Mahābhārata* remains consistent.

Appendix II

Reflections on the *Mahabharat* TV Series and its Creators

Television technology in India first began experimentally in Delhi in 1959 and aired only educational programs directed towards intermediate and high school students with an aim to supplement classroom-based education. It was under the authority of the central government, which aimed to propagate, in addition to educational programs, nationalistic ideologies to unite the nation. From 1972, the technological advancements and varieties of programs including sports, news, feature film-based music programs, and television plays rapidly gained popularity as India's one and only television channel with the name "Doordarshan" went public in 1976.

After the arrival of film technology in India in 1910s, many movies were based on episodes from the epics and Purāṇas. In 1959, television was introduced in India, but its availability was limited mostly to big cities. In the latter half of the 1980s, Ramanand Sagar, a well-known Hindi film producer-director of Sagar Arts based in Mumbai, created a TV series. Titled as *Ramayan*, it was telecast on the Indian national television channel Doordarshan in 1987-1988. It showed Lord Rāma's life as described not only in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, the earliest textual portrayal of Rāma's biography, but also later texts including vernacular editions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The TV series brought revenues beyond imagination as corporations jumped at the opportunity to reach the maximum number of customers through commercials.

The National Broadcaster—the administrative section of the Indian government responsible for Doordarshan affairs, now known as Prasar Bharati (Prasāra Bhāratī)—asked B.

Appendix II: The *Mahabharat* TV Series

R. Chopra (1914-2008)[1] to produce a Hindi TV Series based on the *Mahābhārata*.[2] Avowedly

based on the Critical Edition, it was titled as the "*Mahabharat.*" While the nation watched the

Ramayan with a rapt expression, B. R. Films' B. R. Chopra and his son Ravi Chopra were busy

making their TV Series on the *Mahābhārata*, and its telecasting began even before the *Ramayan*

series concluded. It was broadcast between 1988 and 1990.

Chopra first consulted with Pandit Narendra Sharma (1913-1989) to develop the concept

of the Series. In addition to his role as advisor, Sharma composed the lyrics[3] and shaped the

concept of the storyline.[4] As Mukesh Khanna, Pankaj Dheer, and Lavanya Shah pointed out,

Sharma's role was more definitive than the words "concept, advice, and lyrics" convey. Even

though the Chopras and Reza are said to have read the Mahābhārata before the Series, they were

neither scholars of ancient Indian culture and mythology nor did they have any knowledge of

Sanskrit. Sharma, on the other hand, was the Hindi film industry's most prominent authority on

Indian mythology, especially on the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata, and is also sometimes claimed

to have some knowledge of Sanskrit. Long before the Series, he had composed a long poem on

Draupadī (*Draupadī* 1960), in which the story of Draupadī and other main characters is

expounded metaphorically, the Pāṇḍavas being the five natural elements (Yudhiṣṭhira as ether,

Bhīma as air, Arjuna as fire, Nakula as water, and Sahadeva as earth) and Draupadī the life force

(*jīvanī śakti*) that consolidates the five elements and breathes life into them. Ramanand Sagar,

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[1] His son Ravi Chopra (1946-2014) became the co-director but in this discussion my mention of "Chopra" refers to B. R., not Ravi.

[2] It must be noted here that when a decision to broadcast the TV Series based on the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata was made, Rajiv Gandhi, Indira Gandhi's son, was leading the central Congress government.

[3] His last poem used in the TV Series was included at the end of episode 24.

[4] After Narendra Sharma's demise in 1989, Bhring Tupkari, an acquaintance of Sharma and associated with All India Radio, succeeded him as a lyricist for the television series.

the producer and director of the *Ramayan* series, once recounted how Sharma used to explain

"subtle meanings" of Tulasī's *Rāmacaritamānasa*, "However little or more I have been able to

understand the "Rāmāyaṇa," that I understood only after sitting in intimate (meetings) and

listening to such eminent scholars as Pandit Narendra Sharma" (Sagar 1995, 238). With respect

to Sharma's role in the *Mahabharat* Series, B. R. Chopra wrote: "It was 'Mahabharat' which

really brought us together. And in 'Mahabharat' he soon became an inspiration. A great guiding

force. He became the guide and adviser. He was in fact, the pilot of the Team. Both, as a scholar

and as a man he was just superb" (1995, English section, 11).[5]

Rahi Masoom Reza (1927-1992), a noted Muslim Urdu and Hindi poet and an active

movie scriptwriter since the early 1970s, wrote the screenplay and dialogue. Although Reza was

responsible for writing the script, he regularly consulted others, especially Sharma, to avoid

misrepresenting the epic. Satish Bhatnagar (1922-2010), an academic and scriptwriter,

assembled research material and prepared scenario descriptions.

Although creating the general outline of the screenplay involved five individuals,

including the Chopras, the composition of the script and its interpretative relevancy to modern

India mainly depended on Reza. The decision as to what episodes the *Mahabharat* series should

include was made after three years of regular meetings between the Chopras and their team of

writers—Reza, Sharma, and Bhatnagar. For instance, it was due to Sharma's advice that Kṛṣṇa's

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[5] The fellowship was cut short by Sharma's demise on February 11, 1989. Sharma's last verse used in the TV Series was composed on February 9, 1989, the conclusive stanza for episode 24, long before the episodes on Yudhiṣṭhira's Rājasūya ceremony and gambling were filmed. Sharma was known as an expert in the field of the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata and four out of his five poetic works are based on the Mahābhārata: *Draupadī*, a metaphorical and philosophical interpretation of Draupadī (1960); *Uttarajaya*, based on the post-war assassination of Draupadī's five sons by Aśvatthāmā (1965); *Suvarṇā*, based on a folklore that highlights Karṇa's kindheartedness toward women (1970); and *Suvīrā*, a portrayal of Kuntī's galvanization of the Pāṇḍavas through the story of Vidurā and her son Saṃjaya (1972).

life received special attention in the Series. His birth and growing up in Braja town including

romantic dances (*rāsalīlās*) with cowherd girls are given prominence, although Vyāsa's epic has

little to say about Kṛṣṇa's life other than his involvement in establishing *dharma* on earth by

supporting the righteous Pāṇḍavas. Sharma also insisted that the *Bhagavadgītā* section of the

epic should receive special attention. With this background in mind, I take a closer look at the

main director (B. R. Chopra) and chief screenwriter (Reza) of the Series.

B. R. Chopra

B. R. Chopra, a director/producer of Hindi films who earned the Dadasaheb Phalke

Award (the highest award given to a cinema personality) for his contribution to Hindi cinema,

was the chief director of the *Mahabharat*. He was born in 1914 in Ludhiana (Punjab) but later

moved to Lahore, a culturally vibrant city of British North India (now in Pakistan), where he

earned an M. A. degree in English literature. The British Punjab was a major centre of

revolutionary and reformatory activities lead by prominent leaders associated with the Arya

Samaj. Chopra was born and raised in a family that followed the teachings of Swami Dayanand,

the founder of the Arya Samaj, a major socio-religious Hindu movement of the 19th- and 20th-

centuries. Dayanand argued that India's Aryas controlled all the kingdoms on earth until the time

of the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas.[6] It was due to the devastating Mahābhārata war that India

descended into such a perpetual political and cultural chaos that it could not regain its former

glory. As a result, India had suffered defeats at the hands of foreign powers (Dayanand 1983,

213, 259-66). Although Chopra's family professed to be followers of the Arya Samaj, they were

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[6] Dayanand vehemently opposed the theory that Aryans arrived in India from other lands, more specifically from Iran (1983, 212).

by no means traditionalists.[7] Chopra joined as editor the prestigious film magazine *Cine Herald*.

This allowed him to express his opinions about the quality and orientation of the Indian cinema

industry. As he informed Rachel Dwyer, "producers were wasting their time with comedies and

mythological dancing and songs, thus avoiding dealing with any serious social issues" (Dwyer

2002, 29). Even as late as 1981, he diplomatically rebuked Indian film producers for being "anti-

social monster[s]" because they were "selling [themselves] to the box-office" (Chopra 1981, 65).

Chopra considered film production a means to communicate his opinion about social issues to

millions of people. According to Dwyer, his "religious background, as a keen Arya Samaji, made

him anxious to address issues of social reform as a form of religious duty" (2002, 42; 25-26).

His first directed movie *Afsana* (1951) expresses concerns over the death penalty

approved by the Indian justice system. *Ek hi Rasta* (1956) tackles the widow-remarriage issue.

Naya Daur (1957), most likely inspired by Gandhi's opinion that industrialization was

detrimental to indigenous craft and would leave millions workless, confronts the growth of

industrialism. *Gumrah* (1963) describes how a married woman resumes her pre-marital love

affair, and the dismayed husband announces: "One day you had sacrificed your love for my

happiness; today, I will sacrifice my love for your happiness. If you will be able to live happily

with Rājendra [her pre-marital love], you must go to him. I will never come in your way. If you

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[7] As a teenager, he had seen "daring pictures" (*Anarkali* and *Zarina*) that showed kissing scenes, *Zarina* (circa 1931) being at the top with eighty-six kisses. Although the government did not censure the film, people protested until its screening was discontinued. But Chopra "did not mind it" because it was a "new experience" for him. Although he never showed kisses in his films, he justified the kissing scenes in *Zarina*, "What is more, Indian artists did display the art of kissing" (all quotes are from Pendakur 2003, 163). In an era when most traditional communities considered cinema as cheap and vulgar entertainment, Chopra's movie-viewing is a testament to his family's progressiveness.

wish, I can bring you to him" (*Gumrah* 1963, 2:31).[8] Although daringly ahead of their time about

the issues women face, Chopra's movies always culminate in maintaining family norms. The

sanctity and purity of marriage and the duties and sacrifices for the sake of family are given

preference to matters of the heart. For instance, the deviant heroine of *Gumrah* dares to

recommence her pre-marital love affair, but when she faces the need to choose one of the two—

her husband or lover—she returns to live with her husband. The films nonetheless succeed in

giving voice to some social issues that were often pushed aside. Just as a married woman must

maintain the sanctity of her relationship, a man has no right to violate a woman's sanctity. He

released a film in 1980, *Insaf Ka Tarazu* (*The Scale of Justice*), inspired by the American rape

and revenge thriller *Lipstick* (1976). Unlike many other films, it foregrounds the criminal nature

of rape and challenges the prejudices that allowed the court to dismiss Mathura's claims of rape.

A reviewer wrote:

> The court depiction of the rape trial made the two main points very forcefully—one, that
> it is impossible for a woman to prove that she did not consent and meaningless to ask her
> to prove this, and two, that the court atmosphere reeks of anti-woman prejudice and the
> woman's sexual history is dragged out to unjustly defame her and justify the rapist.
> Though there are many contradictory statements in the film and its overall assumption is
> that woman's place is in the home as wife and mother, yet it is a step forward as a
> statement against violence against women. (quoted in Young 1995, 181).

Chopra continued to produce and direct movies on social themes, and in 1982 released *Nikaah*, a

very successful movie on the issue of divorce in the Indian Muslim community. The film opens

with a strong condemnation of women's ill-treatment by misogynist men. A female voice

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[8] *eka dina merī k̲h̲uśī ke liye tumane apanī muhabbata k̲urabāna kī thī. āja maiṃ tumhārī k̲h̲ūśī ke liye apanī muhabbata k̲urbāna karatā hūṁ. agara tuma rājendra ke sātha sukhī raha sakatī ho to zarūra usake sātha calī jāo. maiṃ kabhī tumhāre rāste meṃ nahīṃ āūṃgā. cāho to maiṃ k̲huda tumheṃ usake pāsa jākara choṛa sakatā hūṁ.*

representing womankind declares that all accolades sung in praise of women are nothing but a

farce, for

> every moment this fear frets me that who knows when I might be knocked over from this
> height, when I might be pushed into a brothel, when I might be staked in gambling, when
> I might have to scorch in fire to prove my chastity, when I might be put to death
> immediately after being born, when I might be auctioned in the high market of lust, when
> I might be accepted through marriage and be abandoned through divorce, and when man,
> the protector of my honour, might disgrace me; because I am a woman. (opening
> remarks, *Nikaah*)[9]

This anxiety about women's ill-treatment was not a recent development in Chopra's attitude. As

early as 1961, Chopra produced a movie titled *Dharamputra*, in which he condemned women's

maltreatment in the name of tradition. The young hero insists that he would marry a righteous

Hindu girl who would read the *Rāmāyaṇa* to his mother, bathe before sunrise, worship the gods,

pay homage to her elders, and abide by the precepts of the Hindu religion, which he defines in

terms of 16 sacraments, five fire rituals, pilgrimage, fast, holy chronicles, and donation. But the

mother lovingly admonishes her son to adapt new ways, for the ancient ideals would not be

useful in modern times. When the son stresses the virtues of Hindu *dharma*, the mother rebukes

him:

> You see no flaws at all? Are all merits only? Do you remember? Woman was considered
> like a slave in Hindu *dharma* (religion). At some point, she was burnt with her dead
> husband, and that was described as the way of a virtuous woman. When [re]marriage of
> an eight-year-old widow was thought to be a sin, man used to get married ten times.
> [Man] used to sell his women in the market like sheep and goats, used to stake her in

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[9] *hara lamhā mujhe yahī ḍara satāye rahatā hai ki na jāne kaba apanī ūṁcāī se maiṃ girā dī jāūṁ. kaba kisī koṭhe
pe ḍhakela dī jāūṁ. kaba jue meṃ dāṁva para lagā dī jāūṁ. kaba apanī pākīzagī kā sabūta dene ke liye mujhe
śoloṃ meṃ jhulasanā paṛe. kaba maiṃ janamate hī māra ḍālī jāūṁ. kaba havasa ke mīnā bāzāra meṃ nīlāma kara
dī jāūṁ. kaba nikāha karake apanāyī jāūṁ, to talāḳa dekara ṭhukarāyī jāūṁ. aura kaba merī asmata kā rakhavālā
marda apane hī hāthoṃ mujhe beābarū kara ḍāle. kyoṃki maiṃ eka aurata hūṁ.*

gambling. Have you not read the stories of Hariścandra and the Pāṇḍava kingdom? (1:34)[10]

These deep and constant concerns regarding how some Indians' insistence on maintaining the tradition at the cost of women's wellbeing demonstrate Chopra's commitment to champion the cause of women in modern India. The quotes from *Dharamputra* (1961) and *Nikaah* (1982) indirectly refer to Yudhiṣṭhira's staking of Draupadī, which is, according to Chopra, part of manyfold ill-treatments that women suffer. It is important to keep these statements in mind when analyzing the gambling episode in the *Mahabharat* Series.

Chopra professes that every producer dreams of filming the Mahābhārata, but its gigantic story has proven to be prohibitive. However, the medium of television gave Chopra the opportunity to produce a long series without pruning the story to an unjustifiable extent. It was an opportunity for him to address social issues through a story so well-known to many Indians. It would allow him, moreover, to focus on contextualizing the epic to make it relevant for audiences today. He calls his efforts of producing the TV *Mahabharat* a "colossal effort" and says:

> When we were asked by the information and Broadcasting Ministry of Government Of [*sic*] India, to make a T.V. Serial of Mahabharat for Doordarshan we were attracted to it for two reasons. One, it could be a challenge and a mission. Two, we could project the great cultural message of the great epic to the people. Our main concern therefore in presenting this huge epic was to convey its message in modern context and to emphasize what a modern man could and should learn from it. Our constant aim in bringing this serial to the tele-viewers the world over has been to discover the relevance of its values to the turbulent times in which we are living today.[11] I hope that in our humble effort to do

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[10] *tujhe koī k͟harābī dikhāī nahīṃ detī? saba guṇa hī guṇa haiṃ? yāda hai, hindū dharma meṃ strī ko dāsī kī taraha samajhā jātā thā! kisī zamāne meṃ murdā pati ke sātha jalā diyā jātā thā, aura use satī dharma kahā jātā thā! jaba āṭha sāla kī vidhavā kā vivāha pāpa samajhā jātā thā, usa vaḳta marda daśa-daśa śādiyāṁ karatā thā! apanī aurata ko bheṛa-bakariyoṃ kī taraha bājāra meṃ beca detā thā! jueṁ ke dāṁva para lagā detā thā! tūne hariścandra aura pāṇḍava rāja kī kahāniyāṁ nahīṃ paṛhīṃ?*

[11] See the last section of Appendix II.

so we have succeeded to some extent. The popularity of the serial bears proof of this assumption. (Chopra 1990, front matter)

The main issues affecting the prosperity and growth of India were, according to Chopra, those related to the nation, women's rights, and casteism. One sees that many episodes of the narrative bear upon one of these issues. As the quotes above demonstrate, Chopra considers the treatment of Draupadī as an example of the atrocities that men have traditionally inflicted on women.

Rahi Masoom Reza

Rahi Masoom Reza belonged to a landlord Shia Muslim family in the Gazipur district of eastern Uttar Pradesh. His father, Sayyed Bashir Hussain Abdi, was a renowned advocate and politician affiliated with the Congress Party. Although Reza received instructions in the Qur'an and keenly participated in religious and cultural activities, he soon turned to communism after witnessing the poor population of his village suffer starvation and death. The almighty God who failed to provide for the villagers dying of hunger and poverty was not worth it, he decided (Singh 2004, 25). Reza's disenchantment with religious beliefs and affiliation with communism was instrumental in the development of his viewpoints on religion, society, and politics.

Reza was also critical of how women were treated in Indian society. Most traditional Indian communities, regardless of their religious and geographical backgrounds, emphasized supervision of women who were considered the principal constituents of familial stability and the very honour of family and community. Reza condemns the ill-treatment that some women suffer under the name of family honour. Their marriage with men of other communities or castes was often considered disgraceful by the girl's family. On the contrary, it was tolerated, even glorified at times, if a man married a woman of different caste or religious background. The

women in his long poem *1857: Kranti-Katha (The Story of the 1857 Revolution)* demonstrate their organizational capacity, bravery, and sacrifice. The poem describes the first armed attempt to overthrow British rule in India, when several military battalions rebelled against foreign rule and several local rulers joined them. In Reza's description, India represented Draupadī, Sītā, and even Mariam, the mother of Jesus whom the Qur'an revered as a great woman. By contrast, the British represented the evil personalities of Duryodhana, Duḥśāsana, and Rāvaṇa: "Our Sītā, our Mariam, stand with their bodies concealed [in shame]; Draupadī stands, with her hair loose and eyes turned down" (Raza 1999, 157). The theme of Draupadī's disrobing and loose hair, which she would bind up only after her culprits have been vanquished, is easily recognizable (ibid. 40, 125,156).

Before taking up the "challenge" of writing the script for B. R. Films' *Mahabharat*, Reza had composed dialogues for *Hum Paanch* (*We Five*) (Bapu 1981). It was a remake of *Paduvaaralli Pandavaru* (1978),[12] a Kannada movie based on the main narrative of the *Mahābhārata* but set in contemporary pastoral India, where Vīrapratāpa Siṃha, the landlord and village-chief, symbolizes Duryodhana. He sexually exploits townswomen, reduces the villagers to penury in gambling, and, finally, becomes an accomplice with his son and his Westernized, crafty girlfriend in swindling villagers out of their assets. He could be subdued only when five young men of diverse background—a slave (as Bhīma), two untouchables, a merchant, and the chieftain's nephew (as Arjuna) whose father commits suicide after losing everything in gambling—join hands by leaving their social identities behind. Because Kanagal, the story planner of *Hum Paanch*, aimed at addressing contemporary political and social issues as

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[12] *Paduvaaralli Pandavaru* was directed by Puttanna Kanagal, a prominent Kannada film director.

recognizable in everyday life by occasionally referring to familiar character names and episodes from the Mahābhārata, it remained a movie set in modern times. The author was thus free to interpret the epic story as he wished, and therefore Reza's involvement as dialogue writer provoked no religious sentiments on account of him being a Muslim. However, writing a script for the Mahābhārata proper involved more serious challenges for both the producers and Reza himself.

Reza had been a close associate of Chopra in several film productions. On one occasion, Reza attended a meeting for the *Mahabharat* series and read the statement of his creation, the narrator Cosmic Time (see the discussion in the next section), which "floored" the others present in the meeting. Despite several limitations including foreseeable public reaction to a *Muslim* writing the script for what was often claimed to be a *Hindu* epic series, he was nominated for the task. It is possible that, like Chopra, Reza too had reservations as to how Muslims and Hindus would react to his rendition of the epic, a concern that was soon realized as Chopra started receiving letters of objection from many Hindus, including a member of Parliament. Nevertheless, Reza accepted the challenge of writing the script to prove that he understood the epic as much as any Hindu did (Singh 2004, Bhūmikā). Asked about difficulties which his Muslim background might have posed in writing the script and dialogues of the *Mahabharat*, Reza said, "Mr., I am Indian (*Hindostānī*) first, and Muslim second. As for the question of the *Mahābhārata*, it is an ancient work of India, and it is as much mine as yours" (Grevāla 2004, 279). Some Muslims also expressed their concerns over Reza's involvement in the *Mahabharat* series and accused him of converting to Hinduism. They were puzzled as to why a respected Muslim would write the script for a series based on what they believed to be a Hindu narrative. Reza did consider the issue serious enough to take precautions in writing the script and often

consulted Narendra Sharma, the lyricist and concept advisor for the series (Durugakar 2006, 35-

6). Reza, respecting the religious sentiments associated with the Mahābhārata, is said to have

retired to Aligarh, a city in northern India, to focus on the script for the episodes on the Gita

section. According to Singh, Reza was influenced by an Urdu translation of the *Mahābhārata*

that he had read several times in his childhood (Singh 2004, 25). In addition, he, along with

Sharma and Bhatnagar, set out to collect as many books as possible on the epic in Hindi, English,

Urdu, and other languages.

The challenge of narrative voice in the Series

Vyāsa's text narrates the story in two formats: (1) a description of events by the

narrator—e.g., "The Wolf-Belly saw it and, widening his bloodshot eyes, spoke up in the midst

of the kings, willing the assembly to listen" and (2) the dialogues spoken by the characters—e.g.,

"May the Wolf-Belly never share the world of his fathers, if I fail to break that thigh with my

club in a great battle!" (van Buitenen 2.63.13). The Series, however, employs three components

to relay the subject matter: Cosmic Time as the main narrator and interpreter of events, the

speakers, and visual representation of the ambience and moods of speakers.

While ostensibly subscribing to the historicity of the Mahābhārata, the creators of the

Series treat it as the story of a war that each "era" must fight within its own context to shape a

better future. This concept of the epic suggests that they aim to "shape" a "present" by selecting

elements of ancient Indian civilization accountable for India's achievements and still relevant

today.

This explains a phenomenon that is debated hotly in scholarship. Whereas academics

continue debating the historicity or fictionality of the epic, the creators and the majority of

viewers of the Series understood it as real history. For them, the events and the characters of the epic were as real as the towns associated with them. In their opinion, the Bharata clan ruled in Hastināpura, a town still in existence located about 120 kilometers northeast of Delhi. Indraprastha, the capital of the Pāṇḍavas' new-founded empire, is assumed to be where Delhi stands now. Kurukṣetra, where Kṛṣṇa gave his spiritual-philosophical sermon to Arjuna and the final bloodshed occurred, is located about 160 kilometers north of Delhi. Thapar's words that "irrespective of whether what is described is factual or not, there is a sense of the past" are in full force in the case of the Mahābhārata. The events, characters, and towns of the Mahābhārata are assumed to be of real historical significance by most Indians. One effect of such a sense of past is that the narrative gains a reputation of documented history, which is lost if the narrative is believed to be fictional. Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* is the earliest extant and developed telling and the ultimate extant source of later major retellings. It is narrated by three raconteurs—Vyāsa, Vaiśaṃpāyana, and Sūta. Their authority as writers of the true incident is ostensibly validated not only by their affiliation with the characters and their descendants but also by their uninterrupted role as narrators specializing in the *Mahābhārata*. Thapar writes that "although Ugraśravas claims he is reciting it exactly as his father learnt it[, i]t is described as an ancient narrative and its diverse forms. This gives the story a flavor of the historical" (Thapar 2013,158). This is how the epic has been treated in India for centuries. Consequently, Indian intellectual traditions including religio-philosophical texts (Śāstras) and poetic works (Kāvyas) often quote excerpts from the epic to support religious, philosophical, socio-cultural, and legal views.

But there is a problem with the narrative presented through a Series, which could render it untrustworthy for the audience. The issue is significant as from the beginning, cinema was perceived to be a "sinful technology," Mahatma Gandhi being one of the most prominent figures

to condemn it (Kaushik 2020, 5–14). Television as an extension of the same technology was often stereotyped as *buddhū baksā*, most likely a Hindi translation of "idiot box" (Newman and Levine 2012, 14-23). Even though the *Ramayan* series had already garnered much admiration from audiences, some of whom were so moved that they performed religious rituals before the TV sets when Rāma or Sītā appeared, the Mahābhārata is another story. Firstly, despite the religious values it imparts or can impart, it is not known as a religious story (despite the religious success of the *Bhagavadgītā*). It is considered political and historical. Secondly, it is seen as an inauspicious story, and a good number of Indians believe that one should neither read nor listen to the Mahābhārata story in sequence. This view was extended to the published volumes of the *Mahābhārata*, which were not to be shelved sequentially. Betāba, who wrote the first modern drama of the story, performed religious rituals to prevent the bad effects of the story but still riots erupted, which he attributed to the Mahābhārata's inauspicious thematic content (Betāba 2002, 74; Hansen 2006). The cinema and television industries are known not for their genuine perception of India's cultural history but for their creativity that often exhibits the impact of modern Western culture. Their perception of the epic, therefore, could hardly be considered reliable by the viewer. Although both the playwright and the lyricist were scholars and enjoy enormous fame within Hindi and Urdu literary community, their presence in the Series remains secondary to the medium and the objectives of the directors and producers. Besides, they were not widely known amongst audiences as their literary creations and scholarship were accessible only to those educated and interested in Hindi and Urdu literature. It was the Series that introduced Reza and Narendra Sharma to the common public.

Consequently, the creators of the Series must have felt a sincere need to establish their version of the epic as genuine and reliable. To that end, Reza introduces a unique narrator,

Appendix II: The *Mahabharat* TV Series

Cosmic Time, who has been an objective witness to the past from time immemorial, continues to witness the present, and will remain a witness to the future as well, because nothing is beyond the omniscience of Cosmic Time. Accordingly, the very first episode of the Series opens with Cosmic Time's statement intended to legitimize Reza's interpretation of the epic:

> I am Time, and today, I am going to tell you the story of the Mahābhārata. […] And no one else but I can narrate this story as I alone saw it happen as history. I know each of its characters and have witnessed each of its incidents. I am Duryodhana, I am Arjuna, and I am Kurukṣetra, the battlefield also. […] I prepare each generation to fight this battle by narrating this great epic, at times as a teacher, at times as a mother, and at times as a *ṛṣi* (sage). (1, opening statement)[13]

Cosmic Time takes it upon himself to tell the epic saga to humanity so that it can learn to follow the light and avoid paths leading to darkness. While a voice-over unfolds the otherwise not shown episodes of the story, the television screen displays images of a wheel, the planets, and a sage-like figure. These are recurrently smitten with rising vapour, all emerging and merging into the galaxy of stars. Narrator Time is portrayed as a rotating four-spoked[14] wheel that implies the cyclical—hence never-ending—concept of time and the universe as interpreted in Indian symbolism;[15] orbiting planets, especially Saturn with its magnificent rings, likely implies the epic story's extraterrestrial scope conveyed in the epic itself (*Mahābhārata* 1.1.15). The sage-like figure, posed as if to hold discourses, might reasonably be accepted as a symbol of Vyāsa

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[13] *maiṃ samaya hūṁ, aura āja mahābhārata kī amara-kathā sunāne jā rahā hūṁ. ye mahābhārata kevala bharata-vaṃśa kī koī sīdhī-sādhī yuddha-kathā nahīṃ hai. ye kathā hai bhāratīya saṃskṛti ke utāra-caṛhāva kī, ye kathā hai satya aura asatya ke mahāyuddha kī, ye kathā hai andhere se jūjhane vāle ujāle kī, aura ye kathā mere sivā koī dūsarā sunā bhī nahīṃ sakatā. maiṃne isa kathā ko itihāsa kī taraha guzarate dekhā hai. isakā hara pātra merā dekhā huā hai. isakī hara ghaṭanā mere sāmane ghaṭī hai. maiṃ hī duryodhana hūṁ, maiṃ hī arjuna, aura maiṃ hī kurukṣetra.*

[14] Traditionally the time-wheel (*kālacakra*) is equipped with six spokes that usually imply six seasons.

[15] The classical text evokes such a manifestation of Time: "The cycle of Time, manifest through existence and non-existence, is without beginning and end and pervades all three worlds. It goes round and round in the living beings" (12.203.11). The epic regards the world as cyclical too, marked by birth and rebirth (12.9.32). For a detailed analysis on cyclical and liner aspects of Time in India, see Sharma, 1974, 26-35 and Thapar 2005, 19-31.

himself. Thus, the complete depiction involving the narration of the epic establishes all three components of the Series—the original composer of the saga, the narrator, and the narrative—rising above the mundane world.

The issue of legitimizing the new version

Because the television version is a highly reinterpreted version of the story and contains a fair amount of content not found in the Critical Edition and the Vulgate versions attributed to Vyāsa, it must convince audiences to accept its version as a legitimate presentation of Vyāsa's epic. This too is not very different from how some scholars understand the development of the epic's text. Once again, Thapar writes: "It was possible to appropriate the literature of the earlier stage and adapt it to contemporary needs through interpolations. The continuity of the text required the retention of some sections so that an ancient authenticity could be claimed" (2013, 168). In the Series, the main narrative's congruity with Vyāsa's narrative allows the creators to adapt the epic in the modern context and interpolate material that they seemingly considered important for modern audiences. However, they must present it all as valid without creating a suspicion about the content's validity in viewers' mind. Just as the interpolations in the epic text were subtly inserted to avoid suspicion in the reader's mind about their validity, in the same way, Cosmic Time assures the audience that he is not explaining this story, he is only narrating it. The story is left for the viewers to interpret for themselves. Cosmic Time continues: "I am a poet who can see reality simultaneously from [all] four angles. […] I am telling you the story of the

Mahābhārata conflict. I am not explaining it, because all people will have to learn this story at their own level" (30, opening remarks).[16]

To offset potential criticism of the Series, the creators have Cosmic Time say that modern historians "bear the pages of history like corpses on their shoulders. […] But I am Time, and such sham intellectuals of today cannot throw dust in my eyes" (61, opening remarks). Thus, narrator Cosmic Time, backed by powerful rhetoric, seeks to constitute the Series' credibility.

The audience is reminded again and again of the television version's legitimacy to demonstrate the relevance of the classical story to the modern social and political environment of India. The story cannot be learned in the vacuum left by hundreds of centuries. Cosmic Time explicitly professes his objective behind telling the story: "And I am telling this story to you so that you may learn to live a life of righteousness. If you cannot learn even this much, then I have wasted my time" (71, opening remarks). The Series concludes with an exhortative and dehortative address to "mankind":

> Now you hold the torch of this eternal story and face the darkness within and without, because this story is your armour, as well as weapon. The torch of this story will help you in identifying the Dhṛtarāṣṭras, Duryodhanas, and Śakunis of your own time. In the light of this torch, you will be able to see that injustice is as intractable even today as it was in ancient Hastināpura. You will be able to see that *dharma* is veiled in a shroud of *adharma*, and that your Droṇācāryas have ensconced themselves in the camp of *adharma* and injustice and are chopping the thumbs of Ekalavyas. Furthermore, their hush is a testimony to the fact that they are complicit in Draupadī's disrobing. O mankind, make your way apart from them. Otherwise, they will drag you, like Karṇa, the son of sun, into their darkness. Be the successor of light, be the successor of justice, be the

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[16] *maiṃ eka kavi hūṁ, aura vāstavikatā ko eka sātha cāroṃ āyāmoṃ meṃ dekha sakatā hūṁ. maiṃ eka darpaṇa hūṁ. paraṃtu loga ye darpaṇa dekhanā bhūla gaye haiṃ. yahī kāraṇa hai ki unheṃ vāstavikatā sapāṭa dikhāī detī hai, ikaharī dikhāī detī hai. aura isīlie loga usakī vyākhyā karanā cāhate haiṃ, usa para ṭippaṇī lagānā cāhate haiṃ, tāki vāstavikatā ko samajha sakeṃ. paraṃtu mere lie aisā karanā āvaśyaka nahīṃ hai. maiṃ mahābhārata kī saṃgharṣa-kathā sunā rahā hūṁ, samajhā nahīṃ rahā hūṁ. kyoṃki ye kahānī hara vyakti ko apane taura para alaga-alaga samajhanī paṛegī.*

successor of *dharma*, and transform your inner Kurukṣetra (battlefield) into an arena of *dharma*. This alone is [your] salvation. (94, concluding remarks)[17]

Reza considered his literary compositions not to gratify intellectual or emotional longings of readers, but rather a blissful instrument of raising awareness about social issues. He extended this notion to visual media too: "Just as a poem, novel, story or literary composition that does not fulfil the responsibility [of making a society healthy] is useless, in the same away a film that does not fulfill this responsibility is flawed" (Raza 2004, 369).

According to Reza, composition is a window into the mind of its author. As early as 1957, in the preface to his long poem *1857-Kranti-Katha*, he emphasizes that an author must remain diligent about the content of his composition; not only about what the composition should include and exclude, but also why? So, Reza chooses the content of the Series diligently. He expresses the same view in the Series (43:29). Even though Reza suggests that he chose the content diligently and responsibly, he also exhorts the audience to be responsible in deciphering its message:

> The present should look after the past like a good gardener—it should preserve the green leaves and living branches; there is no reward in fertilizing the lifeless branches. The past surely is respectable, but it cannot be endorsed as it is. It is essential for the present to evaluate the past. Today, five brothers cannot take Draupadī as an example and marry one girl. No one can take Yudhiṣṭhira as an example and stake his brothers and wife [in gamble]. Picking out something from the treasury of the past involves great risk and responsibility. Therefore, listen to the story of the past carefully, and choose your future

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[17] *isa kathā kī maśāla apane yuga ke dhṛtarāṣṭroṃ, duryodhanoṃ, aura śakuniyoṃ ko pahacānane meṃ terī sahāyatā karegī. isa maśāla ke prakāśa meṃ tū ye dekha sakegā ki anyāya āja bhī utanā hī ḍhīṭha hai, jitanā prācīna hastināpura meṃ thā. tū dekha sakegā ki dharma ne adharma kī cādara oṛha rakhī hai. aura tere droṇācārya bhī adharma aura anyāya ke śivira meṃ baiṭhe ekalavyoṃ ke aṃgūṭhe kāṭa rahe haiṃ. aura unakā mauna sākṣī hai ki vo draupadī-vastra-haraṇa meṃ bhāgīdāra haiṃ. he mānava, tū inase haṭa kara apanā rāstā banā. nahīṃ to ye sūryaputra karṇa kī bhāṃti tujhe bhī apane andhakāra meṃ ghasīṭa leṃge. tū prakāśa kā uttarādhikārī bana. tū nyāya kā uttarādhikārī bana. tū dharma kā uttarādhikārī bana, aura apane bhītara ke kurukṣetra ko dharmakṣetra banā. yahī mokṣa hai.*

path. In fact, if you ask me, I am relating this eternal story of the Mahābhārata for that very reason. (52, opening remarks) [18]

As the narrator of the Series, Cosmic Time voices the objectives of its creators. Even though he leaves the possibilities of different interpretations of the Series, it establishes its authority to tell the story, Cosmic Time insists that he alone witnessed its events. Over and above that, Cosmic Time claims that it has always been himself who has told this story over the generations, sometimes as teachers and other times as parents or grandparents. Through this expression, he seems to claim that the story being told through the Series is more reliable than earlier tellings.

As I have shown above, Chopra's and Reza's continual concerns for women's issues have been consistently present in their cinematic and literary productions, which they also wish to convey through the *Mahabharat*. Consequently, one would expect a more noble portrayal of Draupadī's image. But, either a lack of knowledge of Vyāsa's narrative or unwitting dependence on popular melodramatic scenes of Duryodhana's mockery seems to have weakened Chopra's goal to highlight the ill-treatment of women.

Making the story contemporary

The creators of the Series wanted to make the story relevant for a new nation-wide television audience. Chopra's "main concern" in producing and directing the *Mahabharat* was "to convey its message in modern context and to emphasize what a modern man could and

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[18] *vartamāna ko eka acche mālī kī taraha atīta kī dekha-rekha karanī cāhie. jo pattiyāṁ harī hoṁ, jina ṭahaniyoṁ meṁ jāna ho, unheṁ to rahane de; bejāna ṭahaniyoṁ ko khāda dene se koī fāyadā nahīṁ. atīta ādaraṇīya avaśya hai, kiṃtu jaise-kā-taisā svīkāraṇīya nahīṁ hai. vartamāna ke lie atīta kā mūlyāṃkana āvaśyaka hai. draupadī ko dṛṣṭānta māna kara āja pāṁca bhāī eka hī kanyā se byāha nahīṁ kara sakate. Yudhiṣṭhira ko dṛṣṭānta māna kara āja koī apane bhāiyoṁ aura patnī ko dāṁva para nahīṁ lagā sakatā. atīta ke kośa se kucha nikālanā baṛe jokhima aura zimmedārī kā kāma hai. isīlie atīta kī bāteṁ dhyāna se suniye, aura bhaviṣya ke lie mārga kā cunāva kījie. aura saca pūchiye to maiṁ āpako mahābhārata kī ye amara kathā sunā bhī isīlie rahā hūṁ.*

should learn from it. Our constant aim in bringing this serial to the tele-viewers the world over

has been to discover the relevance of its values to the turbulent times in which we are living

today" (Chopra 1990, page number not marked). Reza also discloses the reason why he accepted

to write the *Mahabharat* Series: "If we could not make this 4000 years-old story contemporary,

if we could not relate it to the present (*āja*), then it was not worth making it. […] I accepted to

write it because I knew that I could make it contemporary and could connect India's bygone era

(*guzare hue kala ko*) with India's today. This was the challenge" (Desi Raita, 6–7 minutes). The

epic's "message" that Chopra wanted to convey and Reza's idea of making it "contemporary" is

obvious in some cases, but it is not so in other cases. They brilliantly exploit the political conflict

of the Mahābhārata story to concentrate on the importance of national integrity and unity, the

root cause of which seems to lie, according to the *Mahabharat*, in political corruption and

nepotism as well as gender- and caste-based inequities.

The focus on making it contemporary is evident in the first three episodes, wherein the

Series furtively criticizes political dynasticism by crediting Bharata as a founder of meritocracy

over nepotism (Mankekar 1999, 227). In the larger context of the story, the Series upholds the

idea of continuity, especially with regards to issues related to the problems women faced in the

1980s. I will take the example of a woman's autonomy in marrying. That Kuntī chooses Pāṇḍu

out of many suitors in her *svayaṃvara* ceremony is clear from Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* (1.105.1-

2). The Series uses this opportunity to assert woman's right to marry a man of her choice.

Kuntī's father Kuntibhoja addresses the kings: "By coming here, you have given your support to

this ancient tradition of Arya royal society, this tradition that gives the Arya princess an

opportunity to select her husband on her own accord. […] The time when Arya girls will be

deprived of their right to voluntarily select their husbands will be a tragic time" (7:18). In

Appendix II: The *Mahabharat* TV Series

Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*, Gāndhārī's voice is not heard at all when her parents decide to marry her to Dhṛtarāṣṭra (1.103.12). In the Series, however, her father (Subala) and brother (Śakuni) are against her marriage with Dhṛtarāṣṭra, but Gāndhārī protests: "Traditionally, I hold the right to the marital garland (*varamālā mere hātha meṃ hai*). It is my right to decide whom I will marry. Do you want to take even that right of mine from me?" (7:10) The Series was thus able to express the genuine concerns of Gāndhārī's father and brother about her happy marital life as well as assert Gāndhārī's right to choose her husband. Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* does not describe Kṛṣṇa's marriage with Rukmiṇī. But in the Series, Rukmiṇī writes a love letter or rather an invitation to rescue her from being forcibly married to Śiśupāla. The narrator Cosmic Time points out the significance of this:

> If viewed in the context of social science, the importance of Rukmiṇī's letter to Kṛṣṇa becomes greater. Today's India has forgotten that Indian culture had granted marital right to the girl, but today's India has converted it from a girl's right into a boy's right. If Rukmiṇī does not want to marry Śiśupāla, she shall not be married to him. And if the need be, even god [Kṛṣṇa] will be compelled to intervene [to establish] that society has no right to take this right from a woman. Upon receiving Rukmiṇī's letter, Kṛṣṇa's going to Kuṇḍinapura [to rescue her] proves that women were not dependent (subordinate) in Indian society. They had a complete right to decide about their life. (28, Cosmic Time's statement)[19]

Rukmiṇī thus declares her absolute independence from family members and defies their will to marry the man of her choice. Considering that no other aspect of women's life was as controlled in traditional families as their marriage, emphasis on their right to marry the man of their choice is indicative of the Series' creators' progressive attitude to women's issues. In no circumstance is

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[19] *śrīkṛṣṇa ke nāma rukmiṇī ke patra ko samājaśāstra kī pṛṣṭhabhūmi meṃ dekheṃ to usakā mahattva bahuta baṛhā jātā hai. āja kā bhārata ye bhūla cukā hai ki bhāratīya saṃskṛti ne varamālā kanyā ke hātha meṃ dī thī. aura ise bhāratīya vartamāna ne varamālā se vadhūmālā banā diyā hai. yadi rukmiṇī śiśupāla se vivāha karanā nahīṃ cāhatī to usakā vivāha śiśupāla se nahīṃ hogā. aura yadi āvaśyakatā ā paṛe, to svayaṃ nārāyaṇa hastakṣepa karane para vivaśa ho jāeṃge, ki nārī ke hātha se samāja ko ye adhikāra chīna lene kā adhikāra nahīṃ hai. rukmiṇī ke patra para śrīkṛṣṇa kā kuṇḍinapura jānā hī ye siddha karatā hai ki bhāratīya samāja meṃ nārī adhīna nahīṃ thī. use apane jīvana ke viṣaya meṃ nirṇaya lene kā pūrā adhikāra thā.*

a woman's ill-treatment by a man ever shown as a pardonable behavior. This is true about Draupadī's humiliation too. As Cosmic Time poignantly sings: "Whosoever insults womankind in this way, God surely destroys him" (episode 47, closing verse).

Despite Chopra's progressive criticism of historical ill-treatement of Indian women and a forceful condemnation of women's abuse, his views in certain respect are what many feminists would perceive as traditionally patriarchal. While he defends a girl's right to marry the man of her choice, he upholds in no uncertain terms the sanctity and purity of marital life, which no one has a right to violate. But the *Mahabharat*'s immediate Indian audience did not for the most part uphold feminist viewpoints. There, too, tradition and modernity flowed together.[20] As Mankekar observes, "public debates on the plight of oppressed women […] have become sites not for an inquiry into the structural conditions that make women vulnerable, but for discussions on civil society, 'tradition,' and nationhood" (1999, 252).

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[20] See *South Asian Feminisms* (2012) by Ania Loomba and Rittya Lukose (editors) about how South Asian cultures embraced and redefined feminism within their communities.

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