



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 3. Issue.2.,2016 (April-June)

ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

MEN WITH MACES IN *THE MAHABHARATA*: HYPER-MASCULINE AND MARGINALISED

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ABSTRACT

Composed ages ago, *The Mahabharata* still continues to be retold in various literary, graphic and visual media. In the hands of the postcolonial Indian English novelist the mythological past takes different shapes. Unlike retellings of previous centuries, these novels do not view the epic as a mere tussle between *dharma* and *adharma*. They re-narrate their past but from a different perspective. They demolish authority, stereotypes, icons and sexist values. This paper seeks to examine how notions of gender are subverted and notions of victimhood and agency are playfully dealt with, in these modern retellings of *The Mahabharata*. This paper will be dealing with two hyper-masculine characters from *The Mahabharata*, namely Duryodhana and Bhima. Pushed to the brink of half-existence, both these characters seem to share their frustrations in being misunderstood, half-understood. Beneath all the masculinity, the massive strength, the oozing machismo, we get two marginalised men waiting to be heard. Our reading of these novels reveals how rewriting epics gives voice to the subordinated speaker and also analyses the ways in which individuals of this age resist hegemonic notions of gender and class.

Keywords: Agency, Mythology, Retelling, Hyper-masculinity, Marginalisation

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“In all history, it is victors who write and record their life and times...The vanquished get doubly disappeared. Once by exclusion from the national saga, next by the avalanche of blatant partisanship commemorating the oppressors as heroes.” (Shukla, 2016)

It is the standard social norm to privilege one group of people over the other. One glance at history reveals how one group has always enjoyed the center stage, while the other is slyly pushed to the periphery. The White/ Coloured discourse, the Man/ Woman discourse – we have innumerable instances where this difference is played out. The dominant discourse muffles, sometimes even quietly effaces the voice of the marginalised. Postmodernism, however, questions these binaries and deconstructs all received meanings. It attempts at retrieving marginalised voices in textual, visual and material sources. *The Mahabharata* has always been seen as a tug of war between two groups of cousins – the righteous Pandavas against the wicked, scheming Kauravas. Over the years, this sprawling epic has been retold several times, in textual, visual and even in graphic media. But what has remained uniform throughout is the uni-dimensional black and white depiction of the characters. This paper focuses on bringing out hitherto unperceived grey shades of the characters from the

epic. It deals with three books – *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* (2013), *Ajaya: Rise of Kali* (2015) by Anand Neelkantan and *Epic Retold* (2014) by Chindu Sreedharan.

Ajaya, authored by Anand Neelkantan significantly, is a story of the vanquished. “It is the narrative of the others – the defeated, insulted, trampled upon...” (Neelkantan, 8). Arguably, Neelkantan is an author who has set a new trend in Indian writing – the counter telling of mythology. His books view mythological stories through a new prism. As he says in an interview:

I have always found that the villains are more believable and humane than our mythological heroes. A Ravana or Duryodhana looks refreshingly modern in their values. Their naked materialism, honest ambitions and even their flaws make them likeable. There are two sides to any story. So far we have been spoon fed one point of view only. It is fascinating to see how the same story changes when the view point changes (Devika, 2015).

While *Jaya*, as *The Mahabharata* was initially known as, is the story of the Pandavas, told from the perspective of the victors of Kurukshetra, *Ajaya* is the tale of the Kauravas, who were completely decimated. The central protagonist in Anand Neelkantan’s novel *Ajaya*, significantly, is named Suyodhana, not Duryodhana, the name by which he is better known. Duryodhana, a derogatory term meaning one who does not know how to use weapons or power, is a name given to him by his detractors. Known as the arch villain, Suyodhana, however, gets delineated in a very sympathetic and humane light in this novel. In this novel he is not just an out-and-out Machiavellian villain but has several facets to his character. A spurned lover, a loving husband, a doting father, a loyal friend, a just ruler – the shades are innumerable. He is a skeptic questioning scriptures; a man ardently fighting social inequalities. He evidently is born far ahead of his times. Given the rigidity of his times, these traits are viewed as nothing better than vices threatening the collapse of the society. The battle of the Pandavas against a hundred Kauravas is often seen as a fight between *dharma* and *adharma*. But these black and white boundaries get blurred, once one gets to know of the unheard story. *Ajaya* is, therefore, an attempt to view *The Mahabharata* from the side that lost the war. The epic revolves around the question as to who is the rightful heir to the throne of Hastinapur. Denied kingship on account of his blindness, King Dhritarashtra has to let his impotent younger brother, Pandu reign. While Dhritarashtra has to step back because of a physical impairment, it seems odd that his younger brother is deemed fit to rule. This fight over property worsens when Yudhishthira (though not the biological son of Pandu) claims the crown. His claim rests on the fact that “he is considered Pandu’s son, has divine lineage, and is older than Crown Prince Suyodhana by a day. The whole *Mahabharata* hinges on this accident of birth” (Neelkantan, 9). *Ajaya* recounts this tussle for power and recognition from the perspective of the underdogs. It traces the story of Duryodhana as a tyrannised child, a forlorn lover, a good ruler, an affectionate father and finally a self-willed man, willing to fight for what he believes in. It also recounts the story of Karna, Ashwathama, Ekalavya, Shakuni, Iravan, Khatotkacha¹ – the otherwise marginalised sidekicks.

Usually remembered as the pampered and ever truculent Kaurava, Duryodhana, in this novel has been portrayed in a different light. He is a frail little boy, threatened and assaulted by his brawny cousins; a boy too “pale and wispy” (Neelkantan, 19) to even let out a whimper of protest. Denied the attention of his parents, who were too preoccupied with the intrigues and conspiracies of the palace, Duryodhana could only take recourse to his maternal uncle, the King of Gandhara, Shakuni. We come across the gullible facet of the Crown Prince in his interactions with Shakuni. Not for once does he see through the insidious ways of his uncle. He is vulnerable and kind – qualities not usually associated with men. When their *guru* Dronacharya asks them to shoot two birds sitting on a branch, Duryodhana quite poetically murmurs, “I see life. I see two souls, united in love. I see bliss in their eyes and hear celebration in their voices” (Neelkantan, 93). Seething in anger, Dronacharya replies, “I am trying to make you into a warrior and you talk like a woman” (Neelkantan, 93). In our social circumstances, as it stands, if aggressiveness is the trait of men, mildness must be the corresponding trait of women. Spurned by his suitor Subhadra who elopes with Arjuna, Duryodhana behaves lovelorn,

¹ Khatotkacha is usually pronounced Ghatotkacha while Iravan is also known as Aravan.

dejected. Even after years, he still harbours softness for his once beloved. In a world where men are seen abducting women (like Bhishma who abducts women for his step brother Vichitravirya), sharing them like a community cup (like the Pandavas sharing Draupadi), forcefully impregnating them (Sage Parashara violating Satyawati), Duryodhana with his otherwise feminine romantic yearnings, stands out. As Kate Millett writes in her *Sexual Politics*,

Implicit in all the gender identity development which takes place through childhood is the sum total of the parents', the peers', and the culture's notions of what is appropriate to each gender by way of temperament, character, interests, status, worth, gesture, and expression. Every moment of the child's life is a clue to how he or she must think and behave to attain or satisfy the demands which gender places upon one. (Millett, 31)

Duryodhana, therefore, to a certain extent flouts societal assumptions about gender roles. What further distinguish him from others are his incessant baffling questions regarding the social status quo. He questions everything. The father-figures² try hard to quell his rebel spirit, to gag his voice. It is because of him that a lowly *sutaputra* like Karna or an untouchable *nishada* like Ekalavya gets their due recognition. It is none but Duryodhana who can see the worth of these wronged men, men who have always been pushed to the brink. Whereas in the epic, Ekalavya barely gets mentioned, Anand Neelkantan makes much more room for him in his novel. Following the mother text, the retelling too, pictures its male protagonist as a just and righteous ruler. He is someone who never discriminates amongst his subjects on lines of caste and creed. This morally upright prince, however, would be remembered down the line not for these qualities, but a heinous crime he would commit at the court of Hastinapur. As the original text narrates, Duryodhana had invited the Pandavas to a game of dice. Yudhishthir pawned and lost everything – including himself, his brothers and the wife they shared. Reduced to the status of petty servants, they were stripped off all their possessions, including their royal garb. A menstruating Draupadi, draped in her single cloth, too was not spared. She was publicly violated in front of her five husbands and the elders at the court, who watched everything with extreme passive resignation. In the retelling, we find Duryodhana doing the same, but with a completely different motive. It was not out of lust that he had asked Draupadi to be stripped in full public view, but out of personal reasons of vengeance. It was not to belittle the Pandavas that he ordered their woman to be dragged to the court, but to seek revenge against Draupadi herself. A day after the *rajasuya yajna* conducted by Yudhishthira, when Duryodhana was busy observing the palace of Indraprastha, he had tripped into a pool of water. He came out thoroughly drenched and naked, with Draupadi laughing hysterically at his predicament. Embarrassed and enraged, Duryodhana had vowed vengeance. He wanted Draupadi to undergo the humiliation of standing naked, with the world laughing at her. With a “face pale and withdrawn” (Neelkantan, 432), he therefore pays back every insult he had faced, double fold. He discerns the magnitude of every single word that he utters and yet does not wince from taking the responsibility of his deed. *Ajaya: The Rise of Kali*, the second volume, deals with the aftermath of the *vastaraharan* episode, the Kurukshetra War at large and also goes into the details of the family life of Duryodhana, Shakuni and Krishna. It offers a glimpse of the inseparable friendship of Duryodhana with men like Karna and Ashwathama. Shakuni, in the hands of Neelkantan transforms from a vile, scheming villain to a just ruler loved by his countrymen. He is a wronged man who has a personal vendetta against Bhishma. Shakuni fights on behalf of his slain father, brothers and sister³ who was forced into a marriage with the blind Dhritarashtra. Even Suhshala (better known as Duhshala), the daughter of Dhritarashtra and Gandhari, an otherwise-barely-mentioned character enjoys a meaty role in the novel. We come across Kumara and Suratha, the sons of Duryodhana-Bhanumati and Jayadratha-Sushshala respectively. They are considered nothing better than aberrations in the patriarchal scheme of things. While one is too soft-hearted for all the blood and gore of a battlefield, the other is diffident and afraid of facing the world. Interestingly, Kumara, Duryodhana's son

² The Grand Regent Bhishma, his uncle Vidura and his teacher Dronacharya all make sure through their advices and constant upholding the traditional values, that the rebellious spirit is assuaged.

³ Gandhari was the elder sister of Shakuni, abducted by Bhishma and forcefully married off to the blind king.

resembles the younger romantic Duryodhana, the one who could not even bear to watch someone hunt down a bird. But society has chiseled Duryodhana well. By the time he assumes the role of the Father, he has already learnt the societal edicts regarding gender roles. As he comments, "He [Kumara] is never going to be one [a warrior]. Look at his limbs. Is he a boy or a girl? Come back a man, a warrior, not a whining dreamer" (Neelkantan, 171). There is, as is evident, a rigid notion of what constitutes masculinity. The sense of manliness is a "continuous unbroken performance highlights the pressure on men to keep to the script, to follow the code – not to break character" (Sussman, 2012). In our society, usually activities like singing, reciting poetry are allotted to women alone Treading these areas can be threatening. It might end up in the castration of the symbolic phallus. Kumara, indeed, gets addressed as a symbolically castrate, a woman, a "sissy" (Neelkantan, 171). When he gets betrothed to Valsala⁴, the woman he is in love with, another catastrophe ensues. Valsala, evidently prefers the more manly Abhimanyu, the son of Arjuna and Subhadra to the rather soft-spoken Kumara. To get rid of him, Valsala and Abhimanyu seek Krishna's help. It is here that Khatotkacha, the son of Bhima from his wife Hidimbi comes to their aid. On the wedding day Balarama's daughter playfully invites Kumara to her room. He enters the room only to find himself embraced by a man disguised as a woman. He is tricked into the ploy, and is thereby deemed "an effeminate queer" (Neelkantan, 212). The wedding is called off. This entire scene reminds us of the Kichaka-Bhima episode of the *Virata Parvan* in the epic. Bhima, too, despite his heavy manly built, decked up like Draupadi had seduced the lewd Kichaka into his bed only to strangle him to death. Khatotkacha follows a similar trajectory. It is somewhat odd that in a homophobic society, a man who unconsciously falls for a trick, mistaking a man for a woman, is severely admonished, whereas the man-turned-woman deliberately embracing another man goes unscathed. *Ajaya* also narrates the predicament of Lakshmana, the beautiful teenage daughter of Duryodhana. Anand Neelkantan is his acerbic best when he describes how she had been stalked, publicly groped and finally raped by Samba, the son of Krishna. Each word drips irony as Neelkantan makes Samba utter, "Though she [Lakshmana] had cried and made a scene, he was sure she enjoyed his touch. Girls were like that, he thought, creating a fuss when someone gave them what they ached for" (Neelkantan, 216). What is worse is the fact that she, like a sacrificial lamb was offered to her rapist as a bride, in order to protect her honour and spare her country from a possible war. Kumara, Lakshmana, Suratha – all sacrifice themselves for the sake of honour, a web too abstruse and yet too powerful to tear through. They silently give in to the gender roles they are asked to shoulder. Kumara and Suratha die in the battle of Kurukshetra, trying to fight off enemies, something they had abhorred all throughout their lives and Lakshmana enters into a loveless marriage with the man who had assaulted her. Not just them but also Iravan and Khatotkacha deserve mention in this context. They were the sons of Arjun and Bhima respectively, from tribal women and hence considered pariahs. Their mothers were seen as nothing better than fertile wombs for Pandava scions. Treated as outcastes, they were only beckoned as soldiers to fight for the Pandavas at the Kurukshetra. Disregarding the perils, these characters willingly step out of the shadows of the mother to earn approval of the father. They exhibit great power of will in acting thus. But the one character which deserves mention in this context is that of the King of Hastinapur, Dhritarashtra. It comes as a great surprise that a character usually depicted as helpless and weak emerges with such a great strength of character. It is Karna who has always been labeled a wronged man. But how is Dhritarashtra to be perceived? Is he, too, not a wronged man? Being the first-born, it is he who deserves to be the rightful king. But he is deprived of everything that is rightfully his, and gets the throne to himself only after his younger brother passes away. He is considered a mere weakling to be sympathised with and helped out. Dhritarashtra, without the least hesitation, dexterously plays out the role of the fool. We come across his scheming Machiavellian side, only when he confesses to his wife

Do you know why I act like a weakling? The moment I show I can stand on my own without their support, they will conspire against me. I play a part so they can imagine it is they who are running the kingdom. I humour him [Bhishma] by saying foolish things and posing as if I cannot take decisions, so

⁴ Valsala is the daughter of Balarama, the King of Dwarka.

that he feels powerful and important. In this way I keep the courtiers at bay so that they do not replace me with someone else (Neelkantan, 149).

Thus, we come across a range of characters, the author playfully deals with. While there are characters like Duryodhana and Duhshala who in certain aspects passively yield to the edicts of society, there are also characters like Dhritarashtra and Shakuni, who under the ruse of victimhood exercise agency, thereby engineering the flow of events. From subtle hints to scathing commentaries, the author has endowed this counter-narrative with layered meanings.

The second book that has been dealt with in this section is *Epic Retold* by Chindu Sreedharan. What is interesting about this text is its narrative form. The epic *The Mahabharata* has been condensed into a mere two-hundred fifty paged novel. This is an example of flash fiction, a style known for its brevity. Here, the entire story gets narrated through tweets, a social media, where a sentence cannot exceed one hundred and forty characters. A trend that originated in Japan, Twitter fiction has now caught the fancy even of Indian authors. More and more writers are publishing fiction on Twitter, embracing the challenge of the character limit and coming up with creative new storytelling techniques. Told from the perspective of Bhima, *Epic Retold* is a complex experiment that was originally microblogged on the internet: a grand epic reinterpreted for this generation. The author, Chindu Sreedharan, a former journalist, teaches journalism at the Bournemouth University, England. He worked for The Sunday Observer, Rediff.com, and India Abroad before moving to the UK in 2003. The collection of tweets under the handle @epicretold got published by HarperCollins later. As he says in an interview,

This was not reimagining *The Mahabharata*, but reimagining *The Mahabharata* for Twitter. It was a storytelling experiment on a new medium, which called for an adaptation of the epic.... In this retelling, you may find there is silence about some incidents, simplification of others. Amplification and extrapolations, too. What I was attempting was fragmented storytelling, a narrative distributed across weeks, even months (Nathan, 2016).

Bhima, in the traditional narrations emerge as one-dimensional, a shadow-character eclipsed by the presence of his brothers Yudhishthira and Arjuna. Remembered for his bulky size, huge appetite, immense physical strength, the tender facets of his personality get completely overlooked. He plays the armour of the family, never, however, getting fully recognised for it. In this novel we get a glimpse of a different Bhima – a man, who underneath his mammoth body nurtures a child-like innocence. He is soft-hearted and vulnerable to all sorts of manipulations. *Epic Retold* narrates *The Mahabharata* from the perspective of Bhima; this novel traces his life right from his childhood at the forest and at the Hastinapur court, his acrid relationship with his cousins, the cataclysmic Kurukshetra battle to finally the moment when he learns his true identity.

The second in line, this Pandava is always execrated owing to his massive size. “Fat, slow and stupid” (Sreedharan, 16) – this is precisely how he is looked upon. His physical uninviting appearance is equated with an overall unappealing character. As George Hajiam writes, “Our views about bodies aren’t just aesthetic, they’re moral judgments at the same time. When someone’s body is inconsistent with the prevailing social convention, as in weight, height and/or shape, that person is viewed as lacking in self-control and [therefore] self respect” (Hajiam, 2016). The first woman in the narrative to have fallen for him is Hidimbi, a tribal girl. Whereas in the original epic, Hidimbi is a *rakshashi*, Sreedharan, in his retelling transforms her into an innocuous tribal girl – almost as tall as Bhima, and her skin, the colour of copper. In a society where intermingling amongst castes was severely frowned upon, this liaison definitely deserves mention. It must also be remembered that Hidimbi was never really approved by the Pandava family. She was never acknowledged as the first wife of the Pandava clan. She was only viewed as a fertile womb for a Pandava successor who might prove to be of some help someday. For Bhima, however, she would always be his beloved. Smitten by lust, and bound by Kunti’s words, when Yudhishthira insists that all the five brothers get married to Arjuna’s lawfully wedded wife, Draupadi, Bhima is the only one to express outright contempt for the proposal. It is only he who bothers asking Draupadi her opinion regarding such a decision. “I already have a wife”, claims Bhima, “and possibly a child. Mother might not think they are good enough for our clan, but count me out of this alliance.

First Hidimbi, now Draupadi. Pawns in the Pandava game for power” (Sreedharan, 78). Sreedharan brings about an interesting flip in the story by making his protagonist seem uninterested in an alliance with the sultry Draupadi. Whereas, the original text and almost all the retellings⁵ narrate Bhima’s profound love for her, here we find him proclaiming his feelings for another. Even when he gets married to the Princess of Kasi, Balandhara, he views her as a mirror-image of his first love, “a Hidimbi in finery” (Sreedharan, 74). The second Pandava seems to be sensitive to the issues of women – their deep felt sufferings, their tears and sacrifices. When Gandhari chides both him and Duryodhana for their bitter fights, she reminds, “The men of this palace have cared little for the tears of their women. Women who have sacrificed so much – for blind or impotent men” (Sreedharan, 33). Gandhari and Kunti, unlike in *The Mahabharata* and its retellings are not seen hatching plots and brewing conspiracies here. On the other hand, they seem to share a cordial relationship. Bhima, responding to his aunt’s pleas, decides not to get into trouble with his cousin anymore. He, on his part, tries to let go of the animosity, though situations do not seem quite favourable for that. Again, at the dice episode where Yudhisthira wagers and loses everything to Duryodhana, including himself, his brothers and even Draupadi, we get to see another facet of Bhima. He is the only one who apart from vowing to wreak havoc on the Kauravas, openly condemns Yudhisthira and his love for gambling. A child-like innocent and simple creature that he is, Bhima gets manipulated very easily. Whenever, the other Pandavas sense danger, and a brute display of physical prowess is required, Bhima is summoned. Irony rings clear when Bhima narrates, “Yudhisthira says we must carry her. By ‘we’ Yudhisthira means me” (Sreedharan, 121). The protagonist not merely displays a huge bulky physique, but an equally large heart as well. Unlike his mother and his brothers, who viewed Hidimbi and his son Ghatotkacha as nothing better than outcasts, he embraces his first-born with great warmth. Though labeled a blockhead, Bhima shows a sense of judgment that far surpasses that of his other brothers. When a forester Jata lays his hands on Draupadi, during their exile in the Kamyak forest, a word is immediately sent to Bhima to help save her. Bhima rains blows on Jata and almost hammers him into a pulp. Just then, Yudhisthira yells at Bhima asking him to knock Jata down with a fatal blow. One who has dishonoured Draupadi must die, says the elder brother.

My elder brother had thought nothing of Draupadi’s honour when he pledged her for another throw of dice. He had looked away when Duhshasana dragged her half-dressed into the royal assemblage, then attempted to disrobe her. The king [Yudhisthira] had not ordered a kill then. Yet, when a forester who knows no better touches Draupadi, he wants revenge (Sreedharan, 133).

Engulfed in revulsion, he suddenly sets the offender free, thereby marking a silent protest against Yudhisthira and his blinkered notions. This rebellious spirit, this never yielding attitude and protective nature of Bhima, perhaps gets best exemplified in the *Virata Parvan*. Stalked by Kichaka, Draupadi, dressed as a maid⁶ in the palace of King Virata, seeks help from Bhima. Despite his heavy built, he decks himself up like a woman, a victim coyly giving in to the dictates of Kichaka, seduces him into his bed and then squeezes him to death. As Hildebeitel puts it,

...it is in their disguises that the Pandavas and Draupadi reveal their deepest symbolism. Yudhisthira chooses to be a dicemaster and Brahmin, Bhima a cook and part-time wrestler, Nakula and Sahadev cattle tenders respectively, all occupations easily in keeping with their already established proclivities as characters. Arjuna’s, then, is striking...a eunuch, a transvestite, a transsexual?” (Cited in Brodbeck and Black, 2007)

Does Bhima, too, then with his otherwise feminine traits like kindness and sensitivity bare out the deepest recesses of his mind in dressing up like a woman? Is his hyper-masculinity, his martial prowess all “overcompensation for this latent effeminacy?” (Brodbeck and Black, 212) It is all worth noticing that

⁵ Retellings like *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *Yajnaseni* by Pratibha Roy, *Bhimasena* translated by Prem Panicker, and more—all write about Bhima’s immense love for Draupadi.

⁶ According to the rules of the dice-game, the loser had to live twelve years in exile and another year incognito. The Pandavas chose the Palace of King Virata to spend their last year. Draupadi played the role of a maid, and Bhima, a cook. Kichaka was the brother of Sudeshna, the queen of the kingdom of Matsya.

throughout the entire exiled period, not for once do we see him craving for a sexual liaison. He refuses the constant approaches of other women, including Draupadi. He abstains from physical proximity with woman. On the contrary, we find him waiting for Kichaka in his bed, all decked up (though with murderous intentions). Wendy Doniger, in her book *Transsexual Transformations of Subjectivity and Memory in Hindu Mythology* (2014), reads this episode as masked homosexual desire. A mace fighter, Bhima literally strikes down his opponent using his mace, a phallic symbol. In the battle of Kurukshetra, when he hits the final blow on Duhshasana, blood spurts out and he tastes it with great relish. This entire scene where a bodily fluid spurts out and the other revels in it bespeaks of a complex and layered symbolic meaning. This scene seems to be pregnant with hidden possibilities. When in the last duel, Bhima strikes Duryodhana down with his mace, that too below the waistline, another possibility gets unfurled. The symbolic phallic comes in proximity with the literal phallic. It becomes all the more layered when we learn that Bhima (as Chindu Sreedharan has interpreted) was the son of Dhritarashtra himself. It echoes the possibility of a muffled up incestuous homosexuality. The mere suggestion would have been blasphemous for our homophobic society. The scene, thus very significantly, ends with the death of Duryodhana. To the utter horror of everyone watching the duel, Bhima blows a smack into his thigh – below the waist. Even when his own brothers reprimand him for the sheer unrighteousness of his deed, he defends himself saying, “I vowed to kill this man. And I will” (Sreedharan, 267). Sreedharan brings a great twist to the fiction when he makes Kunti finally confess to Bhima that he was the son produced out of a liaison with the blind king Dhritarashtra. “They laughed at you. Called you the fool, the idiot. But it was you Dhritarashtra feared the most. Not because of your strength. But because you were the bind. The one force that holds the brothers together” (Sreedharan, 276). Bhima, in spite of his oozing machismo, was always jeered at, manipulated, looked upon as a glutton and a fool. He never got his due recognition. He was always sidelined. It is only at the fag end that he realises beneath all the mockery and ridicule, there is a different story. It was to hide their fears that they treated Bhima in that manner.

In both the stories the authors have breathed in new perspectives. In a society where machismo is equated with power and disability with meekness, the reversals we come across in these retellings are pretty interesting. While hyper-masculinity does not necessarily fetch power, putting up a façade of feminine meekness might help procure it. The usual neat equations therefore get completely disarrayed in the hands of these two novelists.

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