CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

Myths have a meaningful presence in Indian social life. The harikatha-tradition enlivens the significance of certain morals and ideals to be followed in our day-to-day life. Mythological archetypes underlie most cultural beliefs and practices and even language and idiom. They have a hold on the contemporary Indian consciousness and sensibility. The novels discussed above have myths as either an explicit or an implicit context or even basis. However, sometimes the myths are re-interpreted and re-shaped to suit the author's sensibility, though they drive home the fact that they cannot be neglected in the contemporary Indian situation. They become an artistic method and poetic prop; an empty form to be filled with the author's discourse. They act as a connecting link between the known and the unknown around which the entire culture exists. R.K. Narayan in his essay "English in India: The Process of Transmission" asserts:

With the impact of modern literature, we began to look at the gods, demons, sages and kings of our mythology and epics, not as some remote connections but as types and symbols, possessing psychological validity even when viewed against the contemporary background [...]  

(Narayan 206)

According to Nila Shah, the Mahabharata has been a source of imagination to almost all artistic genres down the ages. It is not simply a text, but a tradition in itself (Shah 81). Therefore, it is no wonder that the Indian novelists would derive several of their ideas from the Mahabharata, which is a storehouse of stories and morals. The
novels discussed above have taken their source of inspiration from the *Mahabharata*. Nila Shah further notes that the *Mahabharata* “is the content of our ‘collective consciousness’” (Shah 82). An extreme, pietistic position would maintain that the whole of India’s philosophy, religion, culture and the code of conduct is enshrined in this epic and that there is absolutely no room for any mistake in its teachings. However, a number of writers have discovered the subtle discrepancies, gaps, silences and debatable issues in the epic. Such writers have cut across languages and genres. There are works of prose, fiction and drama that have adapted, re-told, interrogated and critiqued the ancient Hindu epics. Increasingly, *Mahabharata* and, perhaps to a lesser extent, *Ramayana* are coming to be seen not as enshrining rigid or absolute creeds or morals but as throwing up a number of crucial issues that need constant review.

Thus, for example, in Irawati Karve’s book of essays *Yuganta* (1994), the silences in the epics (both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*) have been given a voice. The characters have been given a sensibility to understand their situations and their feelings have been recorded accordingly. As one reads the *Mahabharata*, one is hounded by several questions. These questions have been taken up in *Yuganta*. For instance, one of the significant questions taken up for study is, why Bhishma had to suffer a lot in his life despite having sacrificed his life for the sake of the other characters in the epic? Bhishma had been born a cursed one. He was the only one among the eight Vasus who had to remain on earth while all the others had escaped mortality. Bhishma, because of his extreme sacrifice, even got a boon to die when he wished, but it was his fate that he had to live to see the disgraces of his younger generation and finally die at the hands of a woman. Thus, his sacrifices have become ‘fruitless’ (Karve 8). Apart from this, Bhishma
has never shown that he is a protector of womankind. His attitude towards women has always been questioned. When Draupadi was dragged to the court by Dusshasana, Bhishma could have stopped him as he was the most elderly person in the court. But, he chose to remain silent and let things take their course. In royal societies, women were treated with a lot of respect. But, Hastinapura and its royalty was different. Even in the case of Amba, Karve says, Bhishma is to be blamed. When she returned from Salva’s kingdom in search of justice, she was not provided justice by Bhishma. Kunti, being the elder son’s wife, was sent to the forest every time, either with her husband or her sons or the other members of the family. She had hardly enjoyed being the royal wife. Bhishma, being the elder and the wise, could have reverted these incidents in favour of the womankind. But that did not happen. In the chapter “Father and Son?” Karve tries to highlight the differences in the character of Bhishma and Vidura. Vidura, though a Suta, was sensible and acted according to his own conscience and never gave himself up in spite of the incidents happening in the kingdom. Bhishma, at times was silent and would be neutral in his judgements towards the Kauravas and the Pandavas. But, Vidura’s judgements were more in favour of the Pandavas. This is evident in several episodes in the epic. For instance, when a fight was imminent between Kama and Atjuna in front of Kunti, Vidura intervened and stopped the fight for the good of both. When the Pandavas were on the thirteen years exile, Vidura provided shelter for Kunti. Vidura also argued in the assembly openly for the justice of the Pandavas and thus enabled them get a part of Hastinapura for themselves. However, Karve raises the question of the strong bond between Dharma and Vidura in her book. She suggests that there are enough evidences in the epic that can prove that Vidura and Dharma are father and son, though not very
obvious for a casual reader. The first God that Kunti called for her conception was Yamadharma, and Vidura was an incarnation of the same God. Therefore, there are possibilities that she could have called Vidura, but since he belongs to the Suta caste, the whole proceeding might have been kept a secret for the good of Dharma. Also during the final journey, as Vidura was moving into oblivion, Dharma was closest to him like a son close to the father at the time of his death.

Some of the silences and gaps located by Karve have been taken up by authors like M.T. Vasudevan Nair in his novel, *Randamoozham*. This novel is a justification of the actions of Bhima, a voice is here given to Bhima, which is not found in the epic. In Nair’s novel, Bhima is the central character voicing his opinions to the other characters in the novel as well as to the readers. His feelings are recorded in a way that has never been done before. The whole epic is seen through the eyes of Bhima. His sensibilities have been examined to their fullest in this novel, and he has been projected as a larger-than-life hero. The same is being done by Kesava Menon in his novel in progress *My Game*, wherein Sahadeva, the youngest of the Pandavas, is given a chance to narrate the incidents of the *Mahabharata* according to his sensibility. In this novel, Sahadeva’s perspective is that of a political reporter. (Courtesy: An excerpt in the “The Hindu” magazine of a novel in progress.) Thus, we understand that the Indian epics have immense possibilities for a wide range of interpretations.

To cite another prose work, the question of *Dharma* in *Mahabharata* has been taken up well by Gurcharan Das, a former corporate czar, a retired corporate CEO in his book, *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma* (2009). With his vast experience in the field of business, he finds a parallel between the goings-on in the
corporate world and the epic *Mahabharata*. It is really very surprising that an epic like the *Mahabharata* can find echoes in several other areas, be it religion, politics or business. In this book, Das considers the fraud of Satyam Computers chairperson Mr. Ramalinga Raju to be similar to the failing of Dhritarashtra in the epic. Just as Dhritarashtra had excessive love for his sons, and would go to any lengths to provide everything for them, Raju had wanted his children to live in the lap of luxury which led him to cross the thin line from ‘healthy ambition’ to ‘selfish greed’. Similarly, Das equates the Anil-Mukesh Ambani feud in the business world to the envy of Duryodhana towards his cousins, which led to the war. Das considers this envy as *adharma* and he claims that the epic teaches *dharma* through *adharma*. However, Das also understands that the whole of the epic revolves around *adharma*, which is in perfect accord with the *adharma* prevalent in the Indian corporate sector and governance. There is *adharma* in Dhritarashtra’s court, in Duryodhana’s behaviour, in Draupadi’s disrobing, and in Bhishma’s failure to protect/uphold righteousness during several incidents. Similarly, Das points out that corruption is the quintessence of Indian business and politics. In fact, Draupadi rightly questions *dharma* during the disrobing incident and Bhishma gives this elusive answer

*As dharma is subtle, my dear, I fail*

*To resolve your question in the proper way*. (Das 36)

In his conclusion, Das also points out the irony that prevails throughout the epic with regard to the proper meaning of *dharma*:

Despite its dark, chaotic theme and despite ironic reminders about how difficult it is to be good, the *Mahabharata* is able to snatch victory in the
character of its ‘un-hero’, Yudhishthira. He teaches us that it is part of the
human condition to also aspire. He shows us that it is possible for good to
triumph ‘even in a time of cosmic destructiveness’, making us realize that
the theme of the Mahabharata is not war but peace. The king ‘who weeps
with all creatures’ demonstrates through his example that the epic’s
refrain—‘dharma leads to victory’—is not merely an ironic hope.
(Das 305)

Romila Thapar’s Sakuntala—Texts, Readings, Histories (1999) also brings out the
several nuances in the primary source, the Mahabharata which has been retold in
Kalidasa’s play written in fourth century A.D. The author points out that her intention is
to explore those “unexplored dimensions of both our past and our present” (Thapar 2) by
delving deep into both the narrative and the play, and examining how the different time
frames project Sakuntala differently which “not only allows a historical view on the
story, but also introduces a gender perspective” (Thapar 1). The author has clearly
explained how the treatment of women had been different in the times of the epic as well
as during the period of Kalidasa and how the social conditions can influence the re-
writing of a story. Thapar has also shown the various roles played by Sakuntala: “the self-
reliant woman of the Mahabharata, the romantic ideal of upper caste high culture in the
play by Kalidasa, as the child of nature in German Romanticism, and as the ideal Hindu
wife from the perspective of Indian nationalism and its perceptions of Hindu tradition”
(Thapar 257). Such wide range of interpretations helps keep the myth alive and not be
shelved as a dead relic of the past. However, the contemporary nature of the play is
achieved at the cost of de-mythification. This myth has been taken up for study in the
third chapter to project Avadesh Kumar Singh's nailing the theory of postcolonialism on Kalidasa's *Abhigyanshakuntalam* and again in the beginning of the fourth chapter to show the quality of timelessness of the myths as well as their adaptability.

Myth criticism and feminist criticism have several common aspects between them. In the 1940s and 1950s many women writers began to use myth as a way of generalizing personal emotions and feelings. They introduced mythic symbols to defy traditional ideas of feminine passivity. They made use of the scriptures to provide precedents and role models. The Old Testament characters of Sarah, Rebecca and Esther together with the New Testament characters such as Elizabeth and Virgin Mary were frequently cited as a means to destabilize the argument that women were naturally sinful and weak. Strong and virtuous women from classical mythology, ancient Greek and Roman history, European history and Indian mythology were also cited who provided ideal examples for many women writers. However, though women in mythology are well documented and discussed, such studies are generally done from the male point of view. Feminists like Mary Daly tried to find, scrutinize and re-interpret a greater range of myth from a feminist perspective. In fact, in feminist criticism, myths are a series of stories from any tradition whose purpose is to specify and to explain the projected fears, hopes and desires of women and their relationships (Humm 91). The modern confusion about sex roles and the status of private life can be answered by the useful metaphors of myth. Thus myth criticism becomes much more enriched in the light of feminist criticism. For instance, the Bengali short story “Draupadi” by Mahasweta Devi. As the title suggests, the story is based on the *Mahabharata* myth. The ancient Draupadi is one of the most celebrated heroines in Indian mythology. In the myth, Draupadi provides an example of
polyandry. She is the cause for the crucial battle. When Dusshasana began to pull her sari in the court, she silently prays to Lord Krishna, who in turn helps her out of this predicament by clothing her “infinitely”, thus Draupadi cannot be disrobed in public. In the translator’s foreword, Spivak points out that Mahasweta Devi’s story rewrites this episode. The men easily disrobe her. Dopdi, here, is first placed in a monogamous marriage and then, in a situation of multiple rape. There is no divine or human intervention to save Dopdi and the story insists that, “this is the place where male leadership stops” (Devi 11). After being humiliated by the guards, and after having gone through the multiple rape, she refuses the piece of cloth given to her to cover herself by tearing it off and proclaiming, “What’s the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again?” (Devi 36). Thus, as Spivak points out, she emerges as the most powerful ‘subject’, who, still using the language of sexual ‘honour’, can call herself ‘the object of your search’, ‘an unarmed target’. While the Draupadi in the epic realizes that her modesty has been violated, Dopdi prefers to remain unclothed, much to the shock of Senanayak, the army commander, who experiences a terror in his soul for the first time. Thus, Dopdi is at once the mythical Draupadi (a hero) and what the mythical Draupadi cannot be (proof of male power) (Devi 12). Thus, when feminist criticism moves into the territories of myth criticism, a new wave of interpretation is possible.

Several other genres of literature have also exploited myths from a contemporary perspective. For instance, the play Pani-t-Thee directed by Mangai which has already been discussed in the thesis. This play is the celebration of Shikhandi who “was born a daughter but changed into a son” (Mangai 443) and successfully avenged Bhishma.
Shikhandi’s soliloquy in the play suggests the overwhelming happiness that is being felt and the reasons being rendered

I have killed today the Bhishma
Who destroyed the lives of
Young women
Born to wealth and beauty—
Those princesses of noble birth (Mangai 442)

There has been an attitude of interrogation and revaluation in this play through the words of Shikhandi. The reign of patriarchal norms during the period of Mahabharata has been questioned and asserted.

Here lies and tales reign supreme
And truth—even if acknowledged
Is seldom spoken.
This is how it works.
A norm.

Set by men. (Mangai 449)

The whole play questions the standards set by the male-dominated society of the time. The transformation of Amba from the princess kidnapped by Bhishma to the avenger Shikhandi and finally to the dreary river that “knock(s) down boulders, bring(s) down trees, overflows forests […] A wild river” (Mangai 460) is also discerned in this play.

A similar revisionist perspective is seen in the play Madhavi, originally written in Hindi by Bhisham Sahni and translated into English by Alok Bhalla in 2002. This play is
again an interpretation of the *Mahabharata*, which involves the episode of Galav, the disciple of Vishwamitra, who insisted on providing *gurudakshina* to his guru and Vishwamitra wanted to teach the disciple "a final lesson about the dangers of willfulness" (Sahni vii) and asked him for eight hundred *ashwamedhi* horses as *gurudakshina*. The epic version of this episode is as follows: Galav goes to the king-turned-sadhu Yayati who is helpless at that moment as he does not have so many horses in possession, but he is renowned to be a generous person and to safeguard his own reputation for generosity, he gifts his only daughter Madhavi to Galav. Madhavi carries certain special powers with her—*chirkaumarya* (the ability to regain her virginity) and giving birth to *chakravartis* (great kings) (Sahni vii). She is given to three kings to beget sons for them in return for two hundred horses from each and things ensue in such a way that for the remaining two hundred horses, she is given to Vishwamitra himself and thus Galav’s *gurudakshina* is offered. Galav is happy that he could fulfil his guru’s wish, Yayati is still the unparalleled generous person, Vishwamitra gets both a male child and the horses and finally Madhavi is the ideal daughter who obediently carries out both her father’s and Galav’s wishes. However, there are some smaller nuances in the treatment of the whole episode in the epic, which have been taken up by Bhisham Sahni. For instance, the sensitivities of Madhavi, which has no reference in the epic, are taken up in a detailed manner in this play. She is merely a puppet in the hands of the men around her, be it her father or her lover or the kings for whom she was ready to provide male heirs or the sage Vishwamitra, in short she is a victim of the male dominated society. Though in the myth, she accepts her fate and goes according to the plan laid out to her by the men around her, in the play, she walks out on everyone. At the end, after discharging all her duties, that of
a daughter as well as a beloved, she realizes that she is no longer an object of gratification for the men and therefore, she puts in her own terms to her lover Galav during the swayamvara organized by her father. Galav, after seeing that Madhavi had lost her charm after her duties to the kings as well as the sage, asked her to regain her youth with the boon given to her, but she refused to do so telling that she had to undergo those transformations for the sake of Galav's promise, but now that everything was over and they were free, she no longer found it necessary to become youthful again, and added that she thought Galav would accept her the way she was and did not need a transformed Madhavi. Besides, she also emphasized that it was an ordeal for her to go through the terrible experiences she was put to in order to fulfil Galav's promise. However, Galav was unimpressed and offered the excuse that since she lived with his guru, he was unable to accept her and therefore, he did not want to marry her. Madhavi, though terribly shattered that Galav showed no respect for her, was strong enough to make the final decision of her life that did not involve any of the men around her. She realized that she had done enough sacrifices to gratify the pride of her people, and now, she would live life according to her own terms. And thus, she walked out on them finally much to the surprise of everyone who had assembled for the swayamvara. This play emphasizes the fact that the women here move from an object to a subject position and succeed in having agency and initiative.

In this play, the myth functions as an agency to create awareness among the readers that a woman's feelings or sensitivities, which find no place in the epic are examined at its fullest here. For instance, every time Madhavi gives birth to male heirs, her maternal instincts are aroused, but she is unable to give vent to them. Galav never
realizes this and tells her that her “function” is over and she should concentrate on her next assignment. This happens three times and after the third one, she goes on her own to Vishwamitra unlike in the epic, wherein she is handed over to the sage in return for two hundred horses. She wanted to finish off her “functions” so that she can be on her own along with Galav. However, she finally realizes that she was a mere function to Galav too; Galav was more in love with his duty and goal than with Madhavi. This did not come as a surprise to Madhavi because she knew all men were made of the same material, but here, she wanted to be a rebel and not conform to the rules laid out by the so-called protectors of the society.

The Indian mind is always obsessed with the myths of their land. They try to identify the happenings of the present with those told in their epics. In fact, they justify the actions of the present with those found in the epics. For instance, the central character in Sethu’s Pandavapuram finds refuge in the actions of Draupadi. If Draupadi can have five husbands, why cannot she? Shashi Tharoor has used the plot of the Mahabharata to portray the Indian political situation. In this attempt, he has satirized both the epic and the Indian political system. For instance, the liberation of Goa from the Portugal rule is represented by the defeat of Hidimba by Bhima. The creation of Bangladesh by dividing Pakistan finds a parallel in the myth of tearing the body of Jarasandha into two. However, the most interesting of these parallels could be found in the misrule (dusshasana) of Indira Gandhi as represented by the disrobing episode of Draupadi by Dusshasana.

However, the colonized remain the same, be it in the myth or a real situation. Resistance is very rare in mythical situations. There are a few exceptions to this. For instance, Shakuntala and Amba in the Mahabharata are assertive. They fight for their
rights and question the wrongs done to them. Nevertheless, they have to go through a
tough process of questioning or even overthrowing the male-dominated society. But
usually in myths, it is the men who take the decisions of life and the women have no
access to these royal decisions. Women are simply spectators to the process of law
making and not participants in it. Therefore, the colonized remain the same and they have
no means to voice their disapproval of any rule or law. If any wrong is done to them, they
are told that it is their destiny. And destiny cannot be changed.

One major area of similarity in a postcolonial situation and a mythical situation is
identity crisis. Salman Rushdie views this crisis strongly in his *Midnight’s Children*. The
protagonist Saleem’s identity crisis is similar to the nation’s identity crisis. And in the
efforts of the narration of the events that lead to this crisis and in the description of its
effects, the novel takes shape. Rushdie, in fact, uses a number of mythical characters and
incidents in order to solve the identity crisis, both of his own and of the nation’s. Some of
the characters assume the identities of the mythical archetypes. For example, Saleem
relates himself to Lord Ganesha on account of his long nose and ears. Shiva and Parvati
are true to their mythical characters, Shiva, the Hindu god of procreation and destruction
and along with Parvati bears a child. Therefore, myths play a significant role in the
contemporary Indian political situation. And authors take advantage of their meaning in
narrating events closest to their hearts.

Tharoor uses the myth of *Mahabharata* to portray the India that is close to his
heart, he himself explains this in the article published in *Littcrit*, vol.20, titled “The Novel
Entertains in Order to Edify”, “The Great Indian Novel [...] speaks for an India of
multiple realities, and of multiple interpretations of reality. Throughout the novel runs an
acknowledgement of the multiplicity of truth, and a conscious evocation of the many truths that have helped give shape and substance to the idea of India. My fiction is infused, in the sense, with the “greatness” of India’s cultural heritage, of Maha Bharata, a greatness that has emerged from the fusion of its myths with the aspirations of its history” (Tharoor 6-7).

Indian novelists have sought to go back to their myths to seek clarifications in a chaos-ridden land. The myths available in our country are used to deconstruct the colonizer’s ideologies as found in novels like Kanthapura and Midnight’s Children. On the other hand, mythical stories themselves sometimes highlight the colonizer-colonized attitude as found Randamoozham and Cuckold, though not strictly in terms of political colonization, but in terms of an individual or a group exerting authority over the other. Therefore, the novelists provide them a voice to articulate their victimization. Such novelists also consciously use myths to show the contemporary attitude or morality present in the society. However, the novels discussed above prove to accommodate the author’s intentions in unearthing the myths from the past and giving them a new life, though not with the same meaning, but catering to the needs of the contemporary society.

Thus, myths are a highly significant part of human life and creative writers bring them to life by reworking them in their writings. The writers try to present the myths in its relation to the present condition of the society, be it political, economic or cultural. In this process, the sanctity of the myth may be lost; however, it serves the purpose of enlightening the people that they do have relevance in the society. Myths have also been constantly regenerated in different societies because they serve as an invitation to a way of life and as a model for the orientation of self development. The creative writers, by
reworking the myths, ensure that myths are never frozen. In fact, they were forced to respond to the ideas prevalent during their times; therefore, they ingeniously engaged myths to be located in these newer ideals and beliefs of the contemporary times, and thus myths are alive in the hands of these creative writers. It was also perceived that such interpretations of myths were crucial for growth, both for the individual and for the nation. However, human beings are so much a part of the modern mythic environment that they often fail to perceive it. Sometimes myths provide an opening and a way of seeing as well as a symbolic solution and resolving of political impasses and sometimes myths are so vague that they can be articulated in a variety of ways. Myths are also treated as receptacles for potential communication, communication between the present and the past. Perhaps it is the quality of timelessness of myths that helps the creative writers to re-value them in myriad ways.