CHAPTER FOUR

CRITICAL ANALYSES OF THE NOVELS
IN RELATION TO THEIR USE OF MYTH – 1

The Indian novel is a borrowed literary form. It came from England and was new in every Indian literature. The Indian English novel and the novels in Indian languages made their appearance around the same time. The first Indian novel in English, Rajmohan’s Wife, written by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee appeared in serial form in 1864 though it was published in book form only in 1935. The early Indian novelists were part of the post-colonial project of national renaissance. Many of them therefore wrote historical novels in an attempt to re-live a glorious historical past. In the nineteen thirties and forties, the novelists were concerned with social reforms and political change. They started writing narratives of resistance. Their main aim was to subvert the colonizer’s view of India. Their writings also castigated the colonizer for exploiting the country. Later, during the nineteen fifties, sixties and seventies, there were psychological novels dealing with themes of self-identity and identity crisis. In this phase, however, two types can be discerned: one, the search for self-identity in a metaphysical or ethnic sense as in the novels of Raja Rao, B.Rajan and Kamala Markandaya, and two, the introvert’s probings into the sub-conscious mind as in Anita Desai’s novels. The influence of Western Existentialism propounded by Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus and of the Joycean technique of stream-of-consciousness is evident in the novels that probed an individual’s identity from a psychological point of view.
However, one cannot determine exactly where a literary trend begins and where it ends. An overlap of the previous phase on the current one is always possible. For instance, Indian novels have been preoccupied with nearly the same themes—history, social/political reform, and search for identity—though the technique and sensibility have undergone a major transformation in recent years. Nevertheless, Indian society and culture demanded elements and themes very different from the European model. The novelists realized this need and hence, the very Indian social background and set-up portrayed in the Indian novels. During the nineteen eighties, postmodernism was the dominant trend in European and American novels. Indian writers also started writing postmodern novels, but the similarities between the Indian postmodern novel and the Euro-American postmodern novel are mostly on the surface level.

Indian novelists have also successfully adapted Western forms of fabulist narratives and a postmodernist mode with local legends and popular fables as a means of mythicising contemporary reality. Indian myths have been found to have the power to treat and heal as well as interrogate man-woman relationships and relationships between the individual and society. Therefore, Indian novelists have used the myths as a therapeutic tool because they often point to a solution to the different contemporary problems and situations. Hindu mythology, despite being one of the most ancient, is a living mythology because it contains in essence a most vital property of the myth—“great antiquity combined with perpetual contemporaneity” (Sankaran 2). The chief storehouses of the Hindu myths are the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the Puranas, which are eighteen in number. The Ramayana, (750-500 B.C.) generally attributed to the sage Valmiki, is considered the oldest of the Sanskrit epic poems. It is divided into seven
kandas (sections) and contains about twenty four thousand lines. The Mahabharata, believed to have been composed over a long period and put together by Vyasa, is considered the longest epic poem of the world. It is divided into eighteen parvas (books) and contains about two lakh twenty two thousand lines. ‘Purana’ means an ancient legend or tale of olden times. The Puranic period succeeded the Ithihasa or epic period. The oldest of the Puranas, Vayu Purana, may date back to about the sixth century, and some of the others may be as recent as the thirteenth century. Besides these eighteen Puranas, there are eighteen Upa Puranas or subordinate works, which were written later. They include the Sthala-Puranas, which deal with the legendary histories of places, especially temples. Hindu mythology is dominated by the Devas ( Gods) and the Asuras (Demons) perpetually at odds with one another with the hapless Manusha (Man) placed at the centre of all.

A key difference between Indian and Western myths is the absence of guilt. Desire is not considered sinful in Indian myths as the world itself was created out of desire. In fact, Indian myths are about freedom and choice. However, different versions of the same myth are common in Indian mythology owing to the process of handing down a tradition from one generation to another and also from one language and literature to another. For instance, the depiction of Sakuntala in the Mahabharata version is different from that found in Kalidasa’s Abhijnana-sakuntalam. In the Mahabharata, Dushyanta meets Sakuntala at Kanva’s hermitage and they enter into a gandharva marriage on one condition posed by Sakuntala, that her son should be declared the heir to Dushyanta’s throne. After the marriage, he leaves and a son is born and after a few years, she takes the son to Dushyanta’s court. Dushyanta abuses her and she, in turn, defends
herself; and then, a voice from the heavens proclaims that the son is Dushyanta's legitimate child. He, then, states that he had merely pretended not to know her as he wanted his people to have proof that the child was indeed the legitimate heir to the throne. Thus, Sakuntala, here, is very assertive; she enters into a marriage on her own strength, and lays down terms and conditions. However, Kalidasa's Sakuntala is very docile and submissive. She is incapable of arguing for her rights. When Dushyanta fails to recognize her, she leaves the court quite dejected. She does not fight for her rights. She is shy, reserved and obedient. Nevertheless, when we talk about Sakuntala, the Kalidasa version easily comes to our mind rather than the Mahabharata version. One obvious reason for this is that from around the time of Kalidasa (active late fourth and early fifth century BC), our Indian society has been much happier with the idea that the Indian women are shy, docile and submissive rather than that they are assertive. Thus, the whole idea of womanhood changes according to the history. Such transformations are evident even in other Indian myths. Sometimes, the whole function of the epic might undergo a change. These changes happen due to the ever-changing social conditions and compulsions. What at one time was regarded as secular and recited at courts, festivals and assemblies, with their rewritings, may take on a sacred character and the hero would be completely transformed. Myths address the ideological concerns of a particular age/time. This indicates their quality of timelessness. From another point of view, this also shows that myths are historicized all the time and thus, they continue to live. Unless they are historicized, they might die. Consequently, their values undergo a change from time to time.
There are several Indian novels that are based on myth or exploit myth in one way or the other. The main objective of these two chapters (i.e. Chapters Three and Four) is to study a few Indian novels, which include both Indian novels in English and the translated versions of some regional novels, in relation to their use of myth. For this purpose, the novels are taken up in chronological order of their publication. The novels discussed are Raja Rao’s Kanthapura (1938), Krithika’s Vasaveswaram (1966), Sunil Gangopadhyay’s Arjun (1971), M.T. Vasudevan Nair’s Randamoozham (1977), Sethu’s Pandavapuram (1979), Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children (1981), Shashi Tharoor’s The Great Indian Novel (1989), Githa Hariharan’s The Thousand Faces of Night (1992) and Kiran Nagarkar’s Cuckold (1997). The selection of these novels is based on the criteria that they fit into the three phases of mythical interpretation and re-interpretation, that is, first, an adoption of myth wherein one can perceive the complete re-narration of a classical myth, secondly, a part of the mythology is taken and given a contemporary setting, and thirdly, the author claims or is claimed by the critics to have created a new myth. This is discussed in detail towards the end of the second analysis chapter.

Raja Rao, Kanthapura (1938)

Raja Rao is one of the most eminent early expatriate writers of Indian English literature. Kanthapura, his first novel, is a simple rural epic in which the coolies of a coffee plantation and other villagers of all castes stage a non-violent satyagraha. Though their movement is crushed, the novel succeeds in depicting the development of Swaraj and Gandhian ideals through Moorthy, the protagonist of the novel. Kanthapura is a historical Indian novel that follows the mythic or cyclical time perspective. Two obvious
mythical representations that can be discerned in *Kanthapura* are: one, when Jayaramachar in his *harikatha* speaks about the birth of Gandhi, he does so in mythical terms; and two, Moorthy, the hero, grows gradually from a brave and clean idealist to a mythical figure, an element of the supernatural being associated with his presence.

In a literal sense, *Harikatha* is the story of God. The performer relates a story from one of the Indian legends accompanied by music and dance. Sometimes, it is narrated in verse and sometimes, in familiar prose. During the festival Ganesh Jayanthi, the villagers of Kanthapura organize a *harikatha* and they invite the popular *harikatha-*man Jayaramachar. Speaking in an innovative as well as humorous vein, he mixes the story of God with history and contemporary politics.

The narrator of *Kanthapura* explains:

"Today", he [Jayaramachar] says, "it will be the story of Siva and Parvati [...] Siva is the three-eyed [...] And Swaraj too is three-eyed: Self-purification, Hindu-Muslim unity, Khaddar." (Rao 16)

Thus, Jayaramachar narrates the story of God in terms of Swaraj. Myths are blended with politics through the *harikathas*. The *harikathas* have a sprinkling of Gods and mythological figures, a junction of past and present as juxtaposition of God-figures with mortals of history. On one particular day, Jayaramachar started talking about Brahma, the creator, in whose court, the sage Valmiki enters with a plea that Brahma’s daughter Bharatha (India) is enslaved by people who “have come from across the seas and the oceans to trample on our wisdom and to spit on virtue itself” (Rao 17). Therefore, Valmiki requests Brahma to send someone to free Bharatha from this slavery. Thus was born Mahatma Gandhi in a family in Gujarat. Jayaramachar continues:
You remember how Krishna, when he was but a babe of four, had begun to fight against demons and had killed the serpent Kali. So too our Mohandas began to fight against the enemies of the country. (Rao 17-18)

The story goes on. Jayaramachar brings in a parallel between the life of Krishna and that of Mahatma Gandhi, thus raising the individual Gandhi to the level of a supernatural being. Raja Rao makes use of the Shiva and Krishna myths to portray the condition of the country in general.

However, the dominant myth of Kanthapura is that of Ram-Sita-Ravan, which is a national myth and is here used to describe the fight between the Mahatma and the British. It is a tug of war between good and evil, hegemony and slavery, and exploitation and assertion. The followers of the Mahatma represent humankind in its poignant struggle against the alien rulers who had enslaved the country. Mahatma Gandhi embodies a divine power who strives to redeem religion and regain the lost freedom. His quest is the universal quest of the slave for liberation. The coolies of the Skeffington coffee estate embody the same yearnings for deliverance from drudgery, slavery and tortures. The Mahatma will bring Swaraj from the Round Table Conference:

He will bring us Swaraj, the Mahatma. And we shall all be happy. And Rama will come back from exile, and Sita will be with him, for Ravana will be slain and Sita freed, and he will come back with Sita [...] and brother Bharatha will go to meet them with the worshipped sandals of the master on his head. And as they enter Ayodhya there will be a rain of flowers. Like Bharatha we worship the sandals of the Brother Saint.

(Rao 183)
Moorthy, the hero of the novel, is also elevated to the position of the supernatural. When Moorthy, once, had the opportunity to be near the Mahatma, “the very skin of the Mahatma seemed to send out a mellowed force and love [...]” (Rao 39). Moorthy had the vision of God beaming unto him at that instant. This inspired him to follow the footsteps of Gandhiji and fight for Swaraj. At another point in the novel, Moorthy talks of his own invincibility and associates himself with another mythical hero, Prahlada. It was just after the riot at Skeffington coffee estate for which he held himself responsible; he wanted to slip into meditation and he realized that he was moving through a “vital softness” that he had once experienced in his childhood:

[…]and he remembered the child Prahlada who had said Hari was everywhere, and he said to himself, ‘I shall see Hari, too,’ and he had held his breath hushed […] (Rao 69)

The mythical Prahlada is the son of Hiranyakasipu and an ardent worshipper of Vishnu. When the father tries to kill his son, Vishnu comes to the son’s rescue. In the novel, Moorthy identifies himself with Prahlada. The happiness that Moorthy encountered as he visualized Prahlada in his childhood is the same happiness that he now comes across whenever he has the holy vision of Gandhi.

Raja Rao also used the local or regional myths of South India in the form of ‘Sthalapurana’, that is, the regional tales relating to the legendary history of a place or village. Kanthapura purports to be about an eponymous village, with its own legendary history, now caught up in the Gandhian movement as told by an old woman. Raja Rao himself conveys his ideas in the Foreword:
There is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich sthalapurana, or legendary history, of its own. Some god or godlike hero has passed by the village—Rama might have rested under this pipal-tree, Sita might have dried her clothes, after her bath, on this yellow stone, or the Mahatma himself, on one of his many pilgrimages through the country, might have slept in this hut, the low one, by the village gate. In this way the past mingles with the present, and the gods mingle with men to make the repertory of your grandmother always bright. One such story from the contemporary annals of my village I have tried to tell. (Rao 5)

What is remarkable here is the ease with which Raja Rao makes Gandhi as much a mythical figure as Sita. Thus, “the conflation of myth and history” is found here. “Raja Rao creates a village by his own imagination and gives it a sthalapurana” (CIEFL course materials).

One of the local myths prevalent in this village is the henotheistic myth surrounding Goddess Kenchamma. The villagers believed that there was a demon so many ages ago who used to kill their children for his food and take their young women as his wives. Sage Tripura did penances to bring Goddess Kenchamma to earth so that she would fight and defeat the demon and save their village. The blood that was shed during the battle made the Kenchamma hill red in colour. After the battle, she settled down in their village to take care of the villagers and they believe that she has never deserted them during their sorrows or any problems. She gives them rain for their fields and cures their children whenever they have chicken pox or small pox. Everything that happens in that village is by the grace of Goddess Kenchamma. Nothing escapes her eyes. She watches
over all the happenings in Kanthapura. Finally, the same goddess would save their village from the hands of the British rule too.

Here, “myth operates in the religious consciousness i.e. as a transaction between human beings and supernatural beings.” In Hindu religion, “such transactions are regularly carried out in the form of rites and rituals... [which] imply not just worship, not just adoration, but transaction, something is offered to a God and it is believed to be accepted by the God” (CIEFL course materials).

Then there was cholera. We gave a sari and a gold trinket to the goddess, and the goddess never touched those that are to live. (Rao 3)

Thus, myth is integrated with history, and realism with fabulation. An Indian sensibility is revealed through these mythical representations. Rajeev Taranath in his essay “Raja Rao and Kanthapura” observes: “Moorthy’s actions [...] develop from being located in the normal day-to-day world towards being located in a world where the action itself takes on a rare definiteness and the connection between his action and himself and his people is not any more in physical or merely interpersonal terms” (Taranath 70). He is the spirit himself; inspiring his fellow villagers. His quality and character remain inseparable. He does not change; but he attains perfection. The idealist Moorthy becomes an ‘ideal’ towards the end of the novel; thus his elevation from the literal to the symbolic. Taranath further notes that Moorthy’s speciality is also emphasized by bringing in several parallels in the background “of mythical heroes, of Gandhi the myth and behind them the eternal and simple war of Good and Evil. Moorthy grows into his proper mythical stature against these quantities, implicit criteria and backgrounds” (Taranath 104).
There is, however, a basic difficulty at the heart of the novel. The villagers of Kanthapura are completely under the influence of religion and myth and they are more attuned to archetypal convictions than to rational explanations. Moorthy, however, is different because he exists, and has to operate, at both the mythical and worldly levels. Moreover, he has to play the role of a political leader, expounding and propagating the ideology of Mahatma Gandhi. His mythical nature is strongly rooted in his religious beliefs; he is not just a blind follower of religion and myth, but also a thinker capable of taking decisions against an established code. The narrative sketches the evolution of Moorthy from a conventional village youth bound by ancient custom to a radical social reformer.

However, he has to undergo many difficulties for this evolution. His fellow villagers do not easily accept his evolution. Thus, there is a constant struggle between his mythical and religious consciousness on the one hand, which is also burdened by the conventions of Brahminical orthodoxy, and the radical mind, on the other. For instance, when Harijan Rachanna’s wife invites him into her house, he is undecided because his orthodox Brahminical mind, conditioned by centuries of religious and mythical lore, forbids him to enter the house of a Harijan, but his rational mind forces him to think that all are equal. Moreover, his mentor, Mahatma Gandhi, never discriminated against anyone. Thus, his mythical mind paves the way for a higher call of Gandhi and the Gandhian principles, which he considers a part of the rational mind. In addition, he escapes the retribution of the Gods for what his conservative mind would classify as a sin. He grows further away from his mythic origins and his intuitive sense of right and wrong is now reinforced by his political and social beliefs. It is Moorthy who suggests
that they invite the famous harikatha-man Jayaramachar, who happens to be a committed Gandhian himself. Jayaramachar, in his turn, uses the religious platform for instilling political awareness in the villagers of Kanthapura. Moreover, Achakka, the narrator, also plays a significant role at the mythical level. She is the outwardly naïve interpreter of a culture that is deeply embedded in myth. Her tonal variations in narration indicate the subtle and powerful influences that are exerted upon a group of people who possess archetypal sensibilities.

There are two other ways in which the mythical mode operates in the novel. One, in the way the characters are conceived and presented. In myths, “we do not find any significant change in the composition of a character taking place in the course of a narrative” (CIEFL). For instance, Rama in the Ramayana does not undergo any change in his character in the course of the epic. Similarly, we do not see any change in the characters in Kanthapura. They are all flat characters. For instance, Moorthy is introduced to the readers as “corner-house Moorthy, who had gone through life like a noble cow, quiet, generous, serene, deferent and brahmanic, a very prince”, however, as the novel proceeds, he only becomes more serene, nobler and more idealistic. (CIEFL). Nevertheless, this point—that characters in a myth do not undergo change—can be debated with reference to the Mahabharata, in which the characters do undergo several changes in the course of the epic.

Another mythical mode of operation is the absence of point of view or perspective. In Kanthapura, like in a myth, “there is a singular absence of perspective” that is, “there is no conflict of voices or points of view” (CIEFL). For instance, “Bhatta or the police does not approve of Moorthy’s actions, however, the responses of these are
clearly ‘placed’ in the overall perspective of the novel and there is no doubt whatever in
the reader’s mind about what perspective he/she should follow” (CIEFL).

Thus, as Chitra Sankaran remarks, Raja Rao is “attempting to combine a deeply
mythical community and a radical reformist movement and trying to portray the
combination without undermining the authencity of either” (Sankaran 46).

What is remarkable about Kanthapura is the way it historicizes myth and
mythicizes history; history is not only associated or blended with myth; history becomes
myth. This is part of the national Renaissance that postcolonial Indian writers were
attempting to bring about. For instance, as mentioned earlier, Jayaramachar, in one of his
harikathas, represents the birth of Gandhi as if it were an avatar or incarnation of Lord
Shiva or Lord Krishna. Later, in another harikatha, he parallels Gandhi to Rama and
Moorthy to Hanuman. Rao combines myth with the contemporary history of the nation.
“In the process, he [Rao] not only recreates myth but also merges it with his account of
the contemporary Gandhian movement. The result is that the present history acquires the
dignity and glory of myth. Thus, he writes history but not only history of the past but also
that of the present. He retells a myth but also historicizes it. He uses the novel form,
which is an import from the colonizer’s land, but adapts it by transforming it to
incorporate a myth” (CIEFL).

What is even more striking is the fact, even while highlighting a great past—e.g.
the long line of rulers that Jayaramachar lists—as a reminder to both the colonizers and
the colonized, Raja Rao, like Gandhi himself, also tries to free that past from what was
unhealthy and embarrassing about it, e.g. the caste system. Though the novel constitutes a
brahmanical narrative, the effort to remove the narrow-mindedness of the caste system is
found in the novel, for instance, in the coming together of all the people for the freedom struggle. When Moorthy was out of prison, his speech to his fellow villagers was:

Meanwhile, Brothers and sisters, let us get strong. The congress men will have to swear again to speak truth, to spin their daily one hundred yards, and to put aside the idea of the holy Brahmin and the untouchable pariah.[...] whether Brahmin or bangle-seller, pariah or priest, we are all one, one as the mustard seed in a sack of mustard seeds [...] we are yoked to the same plough [...] Let us be silent for a while and be united in the One. (Rao 123-124)

*Kanthapura* can also be viewed as a novel that fits into the concept of literary resistance discussed with respect to postcolonial criticism. There has been a conscious attempt on the part of the author to produce a narrative that can help achieve an identity. To reinforce this identity, Rao makes use of the familiar myths of the land and also creates a new myth, the myth of Gandhi. This, in turn, helps the author to cleanse the society of its narrow mindedness. The resistance also consists in the fact that he adapts the western novelistic form itself into a native mythical, *harikatha*-like form.


Krithika’s *Vasaveswaram*, originally a Tamil novel, has a setting quite similar to *Kanthapura*: a South Indian village which has its own *Sthalapurana*, the villagers deeply involved in their agricultural activities as well as devotion to God, the *harikatha* tradition touching the lives of the people, and the village itself having a mythological hold. The *sthalapurana* of the village is that the village belonged to the Pandya age and that it was
Lord Indra, “who installed the crystal linga idol known as Vasaveswara in this garden of many flowers. This was his place of penance. It was in this place that Iswara (Lord Siva) revealed Himself to Indra and granted him deliverance from the curse” (Krithika 5).

“Vasaveswaram” itself means “Iswara (Lord) worshipped by Vasava (Indra, the Lord of celestial beings). Vasaveswaram is then the place where Lord Vasaveswara dwells and is worshipped” (Krithika 137).

The novel is in three parts, the titles themselves an echo of myth: (1), ‘The Sport of the Creator’, (2), ‘Indra’s longing’, and (3), ‘Mandava’s curse’. In the Introduction to the English translation of Vasaveswaram, C.T. Indra points out that the author has taken liberties with the original myth. The original myth in the Ramayana is about Indra’s passion for Ahalya, the wife of sage Gautama. One day, when sage Gautama was away, Indra comes to Ahalya in the guise of the sage and Ahalya yields to his desires. When Indra was leaving the hut, sage Gautama enters and he is outraged. He curses both of them. He curses Indra that he would become a eunuch and Ahalya that she would remain in a forest turned into a stone till Rama, the son of Dasaratha, will bring her back to her original form. In this novel, Krithika retains the figure of Indra also named Vasava but changes Gautama into Mandava, the imaginary sage; but the name of this sage’s wife is not given. She is referred to as the rishi’s wife. Thus, the structural framework of the novel is a reflection of a myth.

However, the modified myth is narrated in the form of a harikatha, Subrahmanya Sastrigal, popularly known as Subbukutty Sastri, being the harikatha-man. There are three harikathas, one in each part of the novel, which in turn indicate the incidents happening in those respective parts. In the first part of the novel, ‘The Sport of the
Creator', Subrahmanya Sastrigal starts narrating the story of Harichandra; the part where Chandramati mourns the separation from her husband. He goes on to talk about chastity being woman’s only ornament and that “even men who do wrong shall suffer the plight of Indra” (Krithika 3). And then, he narrates the story of Indra’s passion. As he describes the celestial ‘fire of love’ that ‘burnt Indra’, the author brings in a parallel with the earthly ‘fire of love’ that draws Picchandi towards Rohini, the wife of Chandrasekhar Iyer. Nevertheless, as the story proceeds, in the first part itself, one can notice the effect of the harikatha upon all the villagers. As Sastrigal concludes his narration with sage Mandava’s wrath and Vasava’s slipping from devaloka to bhooloka, which is an indication of ‘The Great Fall’, Picchandi’s unease is clearly visible; his head down, due to his guilt, and disappearance into the darkness. Sastrigal goes on to give a lecture on how one should have control over one’s senses, how not to stray from virtue, and how the force of lust always declines. However, he does not practise what he preaches because; we notice that he rushes away from the temple after his harikatha narration straight to his mistress Ananda.

The second part of the novel ‘Indra’s longing’ offers another harikatha ‘Satyabhama Kalapam’, a contest between the two wives of Lord Krishna, Satyabhama and Rukmini, in fact, it was a serious fight between them to win the love of Krishna. A similar contest was found in Vasaveswaram between the communist ideologist Picchandi and the agriculturist Chandrasekhar Iyer to be a member of the Panchayat; and between Subbaiah and Chandrasekhar Iyer psychologically from Subbaiah’s point of view alone, as his wife Vicchu was forever comparing him with the latter; which ultimately forces him to murder Chandrasekhar Iyer. In addition, Picchandi’s longing for Rohini, a
reflection of Indra’s longing, takes the shape of words finally, as both of them meet for
the first time and talk to each other. Though Rohini tries to hide her passion for
Picchandi, Picchandi tells her: “Your eyes say how much longing there is in your heart”
(Krithika 91). However, the second part ends with Picchandi’s realization of his follies
and his trying to wash his hands off everything. He realizes that his ideals of communism
will not survive in Vasaveswaram, as the people had no courage to march forward and
sacrifice their lives for such ideals.

The third part of the novel ‘Mandava’s Curse’ is the unfolding of evil in
Vasaveswaram. Chandrasekhara Iyer is murdered and Picchandi, who happens to be at
the scene, is held the suspect though he pleads his innocence; a bus accident takes place
and a lot of passengers are either killed or injured, including Rangan, the elderly Periya
Paatta’s grandson; Subbaiah, who murdered Chandrasekhara Iyer, overcome by guilt,
commits suicide, however leaving behind a note admitting his guilt; and finally,
Vasaveswaram is flooded.

Trees came crashing down. Creepers slid down to the earth. The wind
blew roofs off. Cowsheds collapsed. Banana groves were destroyed [...] 
Terror-stricken, the people huddled and hid within their houses [...] had
sage Mandava returned and cursed the place? (Krithika 131)

This concluding part of the novel also hosts a *harikatha*; and this time, Sastrigal
narrates “Sita Parinayam” (the wedding of Sita with Rama). This *harikatha* is like a
perfect fairy-tale ending as Vasaveswaram is apparently reborn the next day to a new
dawn as the floods subside. Picchandi becomes mature and decides to leave the village
without tarnishing the image of the villager Subbaiah or hurting Periya Paatta. However,
Sastrigal also talks about Mandava's curse and after his narration, he hastens to his mistress without losing any time. Thus, the story of the novel runs parallel to the harikathas narrated by Sastrigal. Each harikatha marks the progression of the story and finally "they lived happily ever after" after the curse of the gods taught the necessary lessons to the villagers.

The characters of Rohini, Chandrasekhara Iyer and Picchandi can be seen in the light of colonizer-colonized relationship, which happens to be one of the binary sets of postcolonial theory. Rohini's father had been a lawyer in the city and he wanted to educate his daughter so that she would be independent in her life. She responded well as she was interested in studies and did well. However, her father died prematurely and her mother could do nothing to help her daughter finish her studies; therefore, she got her married to Chandrasekhara Iyer. Thus, Rohini is the colonized here and her colonizer is her destiny. She was supposed to have been like a city-bred woman, enjoying her life by being a working woman, having her own money and being independent. However, circumstances forced her to be a housewife, taking care of her husband and his home. Thus, Rohini is colonized by the community as a whole, which obviously happens to any woman in the village, and she is no exception. Nevertheless, her role as a colonized woman continues in her relationship with her husband. She would question her husband's attitude towards her; his unromantic ways always irritated her. She expects her husband to fondle her like a child, as she does not have a child of her own even after so many years of marriage to Chandrasekhara Iyer. However, her husband is a busy man. Chandrasekhara Iyer suffered from 'emotional lethargy' (Krithika 9). He could do his morning ablutions and his agricultural work very efficiently, but he is very niggardly in
his expression of love towards his wife. She, in turn, tries to find fault with everything that he does; for instance, when he chews betel-leaves, she scolds him “How many times have I told you to stop this disgusting tobacco habit [...]” (Krithika 12). This irritates Chandrasekhara Iyer and he retorts:

[...] precisely because you say so, I refuse to stop it. [...] You must rule over me, everyone must dance to your tunes, right? [...] You want to enslave me because you are a beautiful woman and I want you?

(Krithika 12-13)

This is the colonizer’s pride that shows its ugly face here. He is the colonizer and he is wary of the colonized’s threat to his own dominance. He absolutely does not want to reverse the roles between himself and his wife; that is, he wants to remain the colonizer and his wife should remain the colonized. He would do anything to retain his role.

The other binary sets that can be traced here are Good versus Evil and Boon versus Curse. The Evil attacks Vasaveswaram in such a way that the villagers are not able to sort out for themselves what is to be done. The villagers have a sense of morality that has been taught to them in their scriptures, but an element of irony and ambivalence pervades the novel. The periodic harikathas, so eloquently performed, should ideally serve the purpose of uplifting the villagers’ moral sense and keeping them away from the path of sin. However, harikatha recitals had become a common ground not for the removal of sin, but for the accumulation of sin. The harikatha-man himself seeks a young woman after the recital and he disappears round the corner. And the way he narrates tales of desire and punishment seemed to induce and incite desire rather than eradicate it. The desire that Rohini and Picchandi nurtured for themselves also started during these
Harikatha sessions. This shows how shallow their moral sense had been. The gods were
obviously angry and wanted to teach the villagers a lesson and hence the curse on the
village. Thus, people started fighting with each other, revolts happened, Chandrasekhara
Iyer was murdered, a bus accident took place, and the people were forced to believe that
Lord Mandava had cursed the whole village. The villagers learnt their lessons and special
rites were performed to please their god. Thus, Vasaveswaram was given a boon to be
born to a new morning the next day, and the last harikatha of the novel ‘Sita Parinayam’
lucidly denotes a happy ending.

By and large the use of myth in the novel seems to bear an ironic symbolism. If
Vasaveswaram means the place where Indra (Vasava) worshipped Iswara, the village
bearing the name seems to be dominated by the former rather than the latter; or perhaps
Indra’s penance still has to go on as neither he nor the people of the village have been
completely freed from the flames of desire. This irony pervades even the narration of the
harikathas: the author notes with amusement that Subrahmanya Sastrigal tends to dwell
rather elaborately on the temptations of the flesh and she asks, ironically, how else could
these temptations be overcome if they are not first described well?

Apart from this, we can consider the character of Periya Paatta, the elderly person
in Vasaveswaram, without whose knowledge nothing happens in the village. He stands
strong and courageous in spite of all the misfortunes that strike the village. He is
considered the caretaker of the village as well as its people. He is equated to Arjuna:

[…] in the midst of this rag-heap, this race of worms that passed as human
beings, there emerged once in a long while a figure like this […] Grey, Six
feet tall […] A steely chest […] the stick he carried in his hand was not for
support but to wield and whirl about proudly. On his face sat patience and in his eyes determination [...] A warrior among men, he would fight any odds; he would lay siege on fortifications fearlessly and smash them to smithereens. (Krithika 134)

The reference to Arjuna is explicit as found in the thoughts of the police inspector: “It was only because such Arjunas appeared now and then among ordinary mortals that the world went on [...]” (Krithika 134). Perhaps an even more appropriate parallel, since Patta is the patriarch of the village, would be with Bhishma, the patriarch of the Mahabharata myth. Also relevant is the fact that on the whole it is finally the Establishment, the patriarchal order, which prevails. The threats to the stability of that order, in the form of both Picchandi’s political revolutionary ambitions and sexual impulses and the murderous instincts of Subbaiah have been purged and the old order remains intact.

A feminist interpretation to this novel would highlight the feminist position on female sexuality and frustration seen in the character of Rohini. Rohini, the girl of many dreams is forever entangled in the “mesh of custom” (Krithika 6). Her frustration was given vent once when she questioned her husband on his fulfilling the duties of a husband towards her and she threatened him that she would spoil the good name that he has earned in his village by telling the people that her husband is quite a different person from inside. Later, Rohini moved from the clutches of one colonizer, that is, her husband, to another, that is Picchandi, due to a fleeting sense of passion, however, she did not allow the passion to prolong itself and she was well guarded. Her deeper instincts made a fortress around her that nobody could penetrate. Rohini is doubly colonized here, one at
the hands of her husband and the other, at the hands of Picchandi. Chandrasekhara Iyer stands for male aggression, and Rohini, for resistance, an act, in the postcolonial stance, that thoroughly portrays the experience of living under oppression. Another study in sexual frustration is the pair Subbaiah and his wife where the former is clearly shown to be impotent.

**Sunil Gangopadhyay, *Arjun* (1971)**

The legacy of Arjuna continues in this Bengali novel *Arjun* written by Sunil Gangopadhyay. As the title suggests, the myth considered here is that of Arjuna taken from the *Mahabharata*. The novel is in twelve sections of which the first section alone is the authorial narration wherein he introduces all his characters. The other sections are narrated from the protagonist Arjun’s point of view. Arjun Raychoudhury, the main character in the novel, faces the dilemma of whether he really needs to fight his own people; similar to Arjuna’s plight in the *Mahabharata*. Several incidents lead to this situation in the novel. In the first section itself, we come to know that some unknown assailants had injured Arjun in the head with a crowbar. His neighbour Labonya had discovered him lying unconscious in his room. She at once raised an alarm and he was immediately taken to a hospital. Arjun survived the attack. His doctor and his friends constantly asked him questions about himself only to check if he had not lost his memory. He was fine and through his memories, the author acquaints the readers with his past. One of the major incidents of his past related to the India-Pakistan partition, which brought several families as refugees to India; Arjun’s family was one among them.
Soon after the partition, the story revolves around Arjun who lost his father and is forced to move across the borders to India and settle down in Bengal. Later, he lost his insane brother too. His own childhood was a deprived one. His much-loved Navy Uncle had brought him gifts from Germany when he once met Arjun and that red and blue pencil and silver harmonica were his prized possessions. However, he lost both in school when some boys fought with him and forced him to part with his favourite gifts. He could never forget this incident in his life. He was too young to acquire survival instincts. However, he did not lose hope, he studied well and took his Master's degree in Science and pursued research in Sciences, thanks to his professor Abanish. He also received a monthly scholarship with which he bought a sewing machine for his mother so that she could earn money as a seamstress.

The author cleverly makes use of myth to describe the happenings in Arjun’s life. Their exodus from Pakistan to India is similar to the one the Pandavas had to suffer due to their wicked cousins. Arjun’s family too went through several struggles in their life. The first one was the death of Arjun’s father due to apoplexy; soon after, their house was burnt down; then several families were forced to leave Pakistan. He remembers:

I left my country at the age of eleven. Yes, my country. I cannot remember the time of partition very well. But my earliest memories do go back to an awareness of belonging to Pakistan. My father’s generation spent time lamenting the glories of the past. (Gangopadhyay 33)

They did not even get a proper place to settle down until they had come to the suburb of Dum Dum. It was here that Biraj Thakur provided them with property. They settled down in this place and named it ‘Deshpran Colony’, that is, the colony of patriots.
Here, Arjun and his mother had to struggle a lot for their survival. Arjun recounts: “It is hard enough to forget the sorrow of forcible eviction and not being able to return. Over and above, there is another sorrow, that of having been treated like beggars and destitutes here. No one showed us any kinship, any closeness” (Gangopadhyay 103).

The postcolonial concept of subaltern is evident here. The families are a victim of the political implications of the British rule. They are forced to accept their fate and not complain. They have been subjugated to the position of the marginalized. They have lost their identities and they are denied access to any kind of power. The dismembering of identities at the wake of the India-Pakistan partition is evident here. Arjun’s childhood memories only give him the picture of being deprived, he lost his priced possessions of the pencil and the harmonica, and he also says that along with those he “lost the red and blue and silver dreams” of his childhood (Gangopadhyay 40). However, with limited opportunities at hand, Arjun and the rest were keen on improving their condition on their own. He was keen on pursuing his studies and completing his thesis. Everything moved on smoothly until Kewal Singh came to this colony, wanted to establish a factory, and promised to provide employment opportunities for the people of the colony. He, in fact, started a factory; however, later, he wanted to acquire an extra piece of land to expand his factory. This meant that five families would lose their homes. Grandfather Nishi, the elderly one in the colony, immediately called a meeting so that they could discuss this matter. It was in this meeting that Dibya, the strongest one in the village in terms of physical courage, voiced his allegiance to Kewal Singh. Grandfather Nishi could be equated to the Great Bhishma of the Mahabharata, the elder in the community whose opinions are usually adhered to. However, he too is helpless in the face of the new
troubles that had brewed within the community, similar to Bhishma’s plight in the *Mahabharata* who is not able to stop the growing enmity between the Pandavas and the Kauravas and thus stop the Great War. The war could have been easily averted by him, but the Gods had other plans. Similarly, here, Grandfather Nishi could have easily stopped the battle between Arjun’s faction and Dibya’s faction by advising them in the right way. However, the might was in the hands of the young men, not in the hands of the old.

Dibya is a reflection of Duryodhana, the eldest son of the Kaurava family in the *Mahabharata*. The mythical events take the same course in this novel in the life of Arjun. Though Dibya and Arjun grew up together in the same circumstances, and studied in the same school, Arjun came up in studies and Dibya was a failure. Arjun was doing his research and he would have a good job for himself soon, but Dibya is jobless and this was reason enough for him to bear a grudge towards Arjun. This resentment increased in magnitude during this meeting. Arjun tried to make Dibya understand the plight of those five families who have to be evicted, but in vain. It was like a war between Dibya and his party, very obstinate revolutionists, and Arjun and his party, calm and reasonable communists. Thus, the unity among the members of the colony had been destroyed. Arjun tried his best to bring about an amicable solution to this problem by approaching Mr. Chakrabarty of the Refugee Rehabilitation Department, but in vain, because the property did not belong to those five families legally. One could solve such property-based issues only by taking it to the court. However, Arjun was aware of the procedures of the court; the case would not be solved in the next four or five years.
Meanwhile, Shantilata, Arjun’s mother, (who could be equated to Kunti of the Mahabharata) who was very worried over the state of affairs in Deshpran Colony, especially, the war of words that ensued between Arjun and Dibya, tried to talk to Dibya and solve the differences between them. She pleaded,

Please listen to me, Dibya. Arjun is like your younger brother. Don’t you remember how you used to play together as children? Aren’t you supposed to look after him in times of trouble? (Gangopadhyay 186)

But Dibya, the obstinate one, only advised Shantilata to move out of the colony along with Arjun to some other place to avoid any conflict. Therefore, realizing that her son is in danger, she tells him to search for a new house in the city. When all these incidents were happening, another disaster struck the colony. The five houses of those families that were supposed to be evicted were burnt down. There may be a parallel here to the burning of the wax house in which the Pandavas were lodged. Immediately after this disaster, Kewal Singh built a wall to protect the area. This increased Arjun’s fury and he called all his friends; they marched towards the factory to break the newly built wall. However when they got there, Arjun found his own people on the other side and was overcome by sorrow: “No, let it be […] Let’s just go back […] shall we fight our own people?” (Gangopadhyay 193). This was exactly the same plight that befell Arjuna in the Mahabharata when he was in the battlefield and he found his own people on the other side. Arjuna did not like, “the idea of fighting his way to a kingdom through the blood of his kindred, and declared that he would rather be killed himself than continue to fight them” (Garrett 73). Krishna advised Arjuna that he belonged to the military caste and that his duty was to fight. Krishna also convinced Arjuna that he was sent to the earth to
perform certain duties and he should not refrain from them. This instills courage in Arjuna and he fights bravely from then onwards to bring victory to the Pandavas.

Similarly, in this novel, when Arjun had to confront his own people, doubts arose in his mind. He remembered how they used to play together in the colony as children. They even would have their food together on so many occasions. For Arjun, it was better to beg for alms for the rest of his life than kill his own people: “Doubt paralyzed Arjun with a trembling helplessness” (Gangopadhyay 194). However, when his friend Kartik was hurling abuses in return to his opponent’s abuses, they threw a brick, which narrowly missed Arjun and hit his dog Becharam on the head. The dog lay writhing on the ground. This was the turning point for Arjun. All doubts left him and he geared up to match his opponents. The fight went on and they won. Kewal Singh was literally thrown out of their community. The government too came to their rescue by giving everyone registered deeds of ownership to the land within that particular month.

The author, thus, successfully projects the predicament that the Mahabharata’s Arjuna faced when he met the Kauravas on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, upon his character Arjun in the novel. However, in the Mahabharata it was Krishna who advised Arjuna about his duty as a warrior and Arjuna realizes that he should sacrifice his personal feelings of attachment and fight to the best of his ability for a noble cause; thus the war, and in the end, victory for Arjuna; a victory for righteousness and justice. Here, in this novel, Arjun’s will to face challenges sags for a minute and then, when he sees his pet dog Becharam being killed by Dibya and his friends, Arjun musters courage, “[...] is roused to become the fearless, rage-filled, larger-than-life hero who will fight, and fight to win” in the words of the translator Chitrita Banerji-Abdullah (Gangopadhyay 10). The
novel, however, ends in a psychological assertion that Arjun makes throughout the novel: “I will survive. Yes, certainly, I shall” (Gangopadhyay 204).

The character of Labonya is also quite important in the novel. She is representative of those women who would not simply accept their fate to be written by the men of their society. Labonya is a beautiful girl and an unwilling prey to the hungry eyes of several men of her colony. She was very interested in studying and she would go to Arjun’s house often to seek his help in her studies. This was not liked by one of the boys of her colony, Sukhen, who was very intent on marrying her. He brings her by force to Dibya whom he requests to try and make her accept his proposal. But matters got ugly in that meeting; she angers Dibya and she was injured in the neck when Dibya forced himself on her. She tried to run away; but Dibya was not ready to let her go. She lay still “like an injured animal” (Gangopadhyay 170). Sukhen was completely shattered at the turn of events and sincerely apologized to Labonya. But, Labonya never recovered completely from the incident. She could not write her exams well. She was in a delirium for a few days. She stopped talking to people. She was not ready to talk even to Arjun. There were indications of insanity in her too, much to the anguish of her family. When Arjun tried to take her to a doctor, she refused to go. She was very adamant and Arjun tried in vain to help her out of her situation. However, in the wake of the other events in the colony, he gave up on her and concentrated on the other major issues of the colony.

Nevertheless, Labonya had her revenge fulfilled by plunging a knife into Dibya’s arm on the day of the fight between Arjun’s faction and Dibya’s faction. She had been the colonized at the hands of the colonizer Dibya and she gathered her courage for the day when she could take revenge on the colonizer without anybody’s help, all by herself.
Labonya’s character in the novel could be equated to that of Draupadi in the *Mahabharata*. The scene in the *Mahabharata* wherein Draupadi’s hair was pulled by Dusshasana and she was brought into the court is similar to the scene wherein Labonya was trying to run away from Dibya and he caught hold of her hair to get her. Her sari falling of her shoulders is again reminiscent of Draupadi’s illtreatment in the court by Dusshasana. Finally, her husbands fulfilled her vow of revenge to have her hair soaked in the blood of Dusshasana. Here, Labonya, the new age woman, seeks her revenge alone.

Thus, an episode of the *Mahabharata* becomes contemporary in the backdrop of India-Pakistan Partition and the struggle for survival in the twentieth century.


Another episode of the *Mahabharata* that involves the character of Bhima and the incidents in his life is re-presented in M.T. Vasudevan Nair’s Malayalam novel *Randamoozham*, with its English translation rendered by P.K.Ravindranath and entitled *Second Turn*. The plot and the characters of the novel correspond to those in the *Mahabharata*, but the point of view is that of Bhima. Bhima is the central figure in this novel. Except for the first chapter ‘The Journey’ and the last part of the last chapter ‘Heritage’, all the other chapters are a first person narration by Bhima. This could have been a deliberate attempt by M.T.Vasudevan Nair to retain the epic perspective in the beginning and the end alone; but in-between, the author presents a familiar setting, a down-to-earth family situation wherein Bhima and the others are not epic heroes, but common folk who are very contemporary. They have their own limitations of character.
that might go unnoticed when the *Mahabharata* is read as an epic, divinely inspired. The author himself says in his note in the beginning: “I have read between his (Vyasa’s) lines and expanded on his pregnant silences” (Nair xvi).

The incidents narrated in *Randamoozham* are in perfect correspondence with those found in the *Mahabharata*. The names of the characters have also been retained. Bhima here is considered a block-head, an idiot, in his childhood. He only has a massive body that was ready to fight and defeat anybody, but deep within he was very innocent. As a child, he is very much ashamed of his own build. He would ask himself. “Compared to other children, was my build so different?” (Nair 15). He is always very conscious of his body too. He says: “When my body grew larger, my neck looked smaller” (Nair 43). His love for eating earns him a pet name Vrikodara (the wolf-bellied) by his mother that was later used by Duryodhana and his friends to tease him! He never acknowledges Pandu as his father. He always meditated on Vayu. He would ask; “Do you hear my prayers, my Lord, in that unknown distance?” (Nair 23). And immediately, several ripples are found in the river. A soft wind ruffles his hair and unseen hands with tiny droplets of water embrace him and someone whispers into his ears, “I am listening, I am listening” (Nair 23).

However, towards the end of the novel, when he learns of Karna’s and Yudhishtira’s origins (that Karna was the son of a Sutha and Yudhishtira was the son of Dharma, the god of justice); he doubts his own and asks Kunti who he was. Kunti, though very angry to face such a question, tells him that she asked the Wind God for a strong son and “He (Bhima’s father) came out of the forest. Like a giant unfettered. I did not know his name” (Nair 247).
The author has endowed the character of Bhima with a high degree of sensibility. This sensibility nurtures his critical thinking. Several instances in the novel give a clue that Bhima is highly critical of the incidents happening around him. In the first chapter itself, we come to understand that Bhima is very different from his other brothers. On their last journey, when they were crossing Mount Meru along with Draupadi, all of them were tired because of their long and tiring journey. At one stage, Draupadi fell down and when Bhima raised an alarm, his brothers did not show any concern towards her. Bhima could hear Yudhishtira’s words as they floated with the wind:

She loved only Arjuna. As she sat in the durbar with me, her eyes were fixed on Arjuna. Continue the journey, without waiting for those who fall down. (Nair 6)

Bhima was astounded at Yudhishtira’s words. How can one neglect his duties towards his wife? Next, he tried telling Arjuna; however, Arjuna too did not turn back to show his concern. Even Sahadeva went on with his journey without waiting to help Draupadi. Bhima considered this outrageous and he turned around and went to Draupadi to help her. However, as he got near her, he could hear the wheels of a divine chariot that was coming to take Yudhishtira and the others to heaven. Even at this point of time, he could not abandon his dear wife and go to heaven. However, as she closed her eyes and became motionless, he got up and waited for the divine chariot to take him to heaven. The conflict here is between spirituality—which lays down salvation for the individual soul as the highest good—and humanism—which attaches importance to human relationships and care and concern for fellow human beings. Bhima, generally regarded as the most insensitive of the brothers, is here presented as the most human.
Bhima loves his elder brother Yudhishtira, but he detests Yudhishtira’s principles. According to Bhima, Yudhishtira is very impulsive and this behaviour has put them in trouble several times. Yudhishtira’s stubborn nature led all the Pandavas to the forest and even during the war, when the Kauravas were breaking all the rules of combat, Yudhishtira stuck to those rules. Yudhishtira’s righteousness was also the reason for having lost so many good warriors and their own sons in the war. According to Bhima, rules are rules, but they can be bent to one’s own convenience. Bhima narrates instances where the law-givers themselves become law-breakers.

All devout people have violated rules. All the seers who formulated the rules. Most of them weaklings whose resistance dropped at the intoxicating sight of a nude woman. Sharadwan, at the sight of the disrobed mother of Kripacharya forgot his meditation. Dronacharya’s father Bharadwaj, another sage who lusted for the bathing Ghritachi. Later, seeing the same woman, our grandmother, Krishnadwaipayana’s withered body was energized and he succumbed to temptation, according to another legend. Krishnadwaipayana, who approached Vichitraveerya’s widows reluctantly, had a son born of Ghritachi. No one talks about him.

The fact remains that we have yet another uncle somewhere. (Nair 138)

Bhima is also very critical about the concept of polyandry practised by his people. He was very angry with Yudhishtira when Yudhishtira suggested that Draupadi should be shared only because their mother made a casual remark “Share and enjoy it among yourselves” (Nair 88), without even looking at the alms that they had brought that particular day. Bhima believed that Draupadi deserved to be the wife of Arjuna alone
because it was Arjuna who won her through his skill and bravery. Bhima says, “I thought how contemptible he [Yudhishtira] was” (Nair 91). However, he did not have the power to control the events that followed and Draupadi was wedded to all the five Pandavas. And she was supposed to spend one year with each one of them and Bhima’s turn would be the second.

Desire for women among the kshatriyas was one matter that Bhima considered quite despicable. He knew that most of the kshatriyas had more than one wife. He too had many wives and had several children by them as well. However, he does not forget what the Brahmins taught him about desire: “[...] desires were flames of fire meant only to be reduced to ashes. Or mere ornaments to be exhibited at the time of victory” (Nair 2).

Another issue that Bhima considered highly contemptible was the game of dice. When Yudhishtira was invited to a game of dice against Duryodhana, in spite of Vidura’s request not to go for the game, Yudhishtira boasted of his being a great Kshatriya and that he would not refuse to play a game of dice if he had been invited to it. Bhima was not very clear about the game, but when Sakuni was to play for Duryodhana, it did not appear to be correct. He said, “I always regarded Sakuni with mingled fear and aversion” (Nair 121). However, when Yudhishtira went for the gambling game, “I understood that danger had enveloped us in a manner I had never anticipated” (Nair 123), said Bhima. But he could not do anything as he was younger to Yudhishtira. As Yudhishtira was losing everything to Duryodhana, Bhima was indignant. Especially, when Draupadi was pawned and he lost again, and she was dragged into the court by Dusshasana, Bhima’s anger turned into a sense of outrage:
We have to endure it. For the righteous Yudhirshtira, for his word is supreme. We are all slaves [...] There are prostitutes in the streets of the gamblers. Even those squanderers would not pawn their women.

(Nair 126)

Two women who really loved, pampered and troubled Bhima by their affection were his mother and Draupadi. They were his weaknesses, though they had extreme confidence in him and his muscular feats. Even otherwise, Bhima has extreme respect for womankind unlike the other Kshatriya men. He would do anything for his mother. He would never argue with her. Kunti’s confidence in Bhima is best expressed in the Ekachakara episode where his mother says, “If only one person has to be sent, I have a son who is very strong. He will go [...]” (Nair 75). In the encounter with Baka, Bhima first used one of the rules of battle, that is, verbal duel which can unnerve the enemy. He told Baka that he was the one who killed Hidimba in a duel. Later, it was very easy for him to kill Baka and Bhima himself was surprised that a person who almost terrorized the people of Ekachakara, had offered very feeble resistance.

He could not deny Draupadi anything. Though he had other wives (Hidimbi and Balandhara), he always showed special care and concern for Draupadi. She always loved listening to the description of any contest that Bhima had been to and Bhima showed great interest in narrating it to her. She, once, expressed her desire to have Saugandhika flowers, which grew in Kubera’s garden, and Bhima risked his own life to get them for her. Moreover, when they had come to the forest after having lost the game of dice, she had hardly anything to cover her body with except for the bark of the trees. It was Bhima who had killed a wild animal and thought it right to take the skin of the animal and make
a good robe out of it for Draupadi. His other brothers never gave a thought to these small issues, which might have been quite important for a woman. Thus, the author has elevated Bhima to a position much higher than that of the other characters presented in the novel.

However, towards the end of the novel, after the Pandavas had won the Great War, there was a meeting in the palace as to who should rule Hastinapura. Dhritarashtra no longer wanted to be the ruler, “The stench of blood hangs heavy. Nightmares keep me awake at night. I have decided to go into the forest and lead the life of an ascetic. I don’t want Hastinapura” (Nair 238). The other Pandu brothers looked at each other. It was obvious that Yudhishtira had to become the king, but he recommended Bhima’s name because it was Bhima who killed Duryodhana and won the war for everybody. Bhima was elated for a moment; however, he spoke his views on this proposal:

It is the king who wins. Even while you were in the forest, you were still king. This last great war was to win back your right to rule, not for the sake of Panchali’s loosened tresses. (Nair 239)

However, Yudhishtira left the matter in the hands of Bhima and left the place. Nakula and Sahadeva were pestering Bhima to accept the proposal. Bhima told them that he wanted some time to think about it. As he was thinking about it, Draupadi first came to him and provoked him by saying that if Bhima becomes the king, Balandhara would be the queen and that perhaps Panchali was born to remain a palace maid for ever. This utterance left Bhima in a trance. He could obviously understand that Draupadi did not like the idea of Bhima becoming the king. As he was pondering on the issue, his mother Kunti came to him and begged of him:
Your elder brother himself should become king. You, unaccustomed to statecraft and scriptural laws are unfit to be king. You must therefore firmly tell him that you are not ready. I am conveying to you your uncle’s views also. (Nair 241)

This reduced Bhima to despair. He never expected such words from his mother whom he had held in such great respect. He, in fact, wanted Draupadi’s and Kunti’s support in becoming the king of Hastinapura. After all the love he had showered upon them, if this was the kind of support that they could offer him, he had nothing else to do, but weep. However, he knew that strong men do not weep. He knew that he could do nothing against his mother’s wishes. Therefore, he persuaded Yudhishtira to accept the throne and accordingly, the coronation ceremony took place, though it was an austere affair. During the ceremony, Bhima occupied the seat next to the king. It was the place for the Second Man, the Yuvaraja. Draupadi was seated as the royal consort. She looked extremely happy and Bhima says: “No recollection of her dead sons bothered her now” (Nair 242). Thus, Nair makes the character of Bhima, a very down-to-earth one, a person who could have his own sensitivities and wishes in life, who formed his own judgement of people and events but is downplayed by his own dear ones.

For Bhima, death was in the form of a lady too. He believed that Death was a creation of Brahma, in the form of a beautiful girl, who had “light red eyelids, deep red lips and was decked in jewels” (Nair 210). Whenever he saw his dear ones killed in the war, he would feel that the girl had her victim. When his son Ghatotkacha was killed in the war, “The woman with the tawny red complexion, adorned with brilliant ornaments and a smile on her deep red lips—that beauty had today sought Ghatotkacha” (Nair 218).
At the end of the novel, Bhima says that his story does not end there. He has some, unfinished jobs too. He wants to conquer two persons: one, Ashwathama, who is still alive after torching many of the Pandavas and their allies after the war was over, and two, “the black beauty” (death) (Nair 249) who, according to him, still roams somewhere. Only after conquering them, he can have his second turn to the throne. The title “Second Turn” is a reflection of Bhima’s position in the Mahabharata, though he is considered the central figure in M.T. Vasudevan Nair’s novel. Bhima has to wait for the “Second Turn” to have access to Draupadi—or to the throne. However, Bhima believes that he has a lot to accomplish before he could accept his “Second Turn” as far as the throne is concerned.

M. T. Vasudevan Nair has taken liberties with the epic in depicting Bhima’s point of view. The real Kurukshetra victor is recounting the ups and downs of the Pandavas and Kauravas. The novelist is quite meticulous in giving essential details. He makes every superhuman character essentially human. Thus, a process of demythification takes place. In the process of re-rendering the original story, the novelist takes liberties to glorify selected characters from the original work; and these characters are presented on a natural plane without a mythical or superhuman halo. V.C. Harris, in his Introduction to the novel says that the novelist, in fact, wants to bring the story closer to the Nair taravad (household) in Kerala and examine the complex issues of colonial/cultural modernity and to relocate it within the emerging global economy of power and desire. (Nair ix-x). For instance, Bhima’s questioning polyandry could be a reflection of the polyandry that had once existed in the form of ‘sambhandans’ in the Nair taravad. In the novel, we notice that Bhima could never accept the idea of Draupadi being shared. He tried his level best
to convince Yudhishtira against sharing her because he thought Arjuna had lawfully won her through his skill and bravery.

Though Bhima is portrayed in this novel as a marginalized character, his sensitivities and imagination, which have no relevance in the *Mahabharata*, are given full play in the novel. Probably, only when the characters are brought down from an epic and superhuman to a naturalistic plane, can their sensitivities be captured. The novelist also includes a tinge of humour in Bhima's narration. For instance, when Arjuna breached the law of not entering another's bedroom, he went on a pilgrimage. It was like a torture that he had inflicted upon himself. But, here, Bhima says with humour: "[...] may be he thought the pilgrimage would be greater fun than sitting idle in Khandava forest" (Nair 97).

Thus, M.T. Vasudevan Nair has portrayed the incidents of the *Mahabharata* through a revisionist reading of Bhima's character. The novelist glorifies Bhima for accepting his fate, that is, to wait for his turn, the 'second turn'—be it for the throne or Draupadi. He is forever only the second best, or second highest, but the second best is represented here as nobler, in very human terms, than the best.


*Sethu*’s Malayalam novel *Pandavapuram* is similar to M.T. Vasudevan Nair’s *Randamoozham* in one respect: the epic proportions are not maintained in either novel. However, *Pandavapuram* is a contemporary rural story with echoes from or references to the *Mahabharata*. As the title suggests, there are references to the epic the *Mahabharata*. *Pandavapuram* is, in fact, a psychological novel with elements of fantasy, giving
importance to a woman’s perspective. It could be seen as a woman’s protest against the patriarchal norms of the society. The novel centres on the character Devi, who suffers from a psychological disorder; she lives in an illusory world. She is the creator of this town called “Pandavapuram” and she has the power to invoke all the paramours of Pandavapuram in her house. She invokes them to take revenge on the species called “men”. She hates men because she was deserted by her husband. She is a victim of a typical patriarchal society. She was forced to marry a person who had been living a very wayward kind of life; with the expectation that she might reform him. Though they were happy for quite a while, evil started creeping up; he started suspecting her of infidelity and finally he just left her to fend for herself and her child. She imagines that he was working in Pandavapuram and that she had been there to stay with him for a while. It was then that she met all these paramours, especially the one who comes in search of her to Kerala.

The novel begins with Devi’s illusory pictures of Pandavapuram, which she has developed on her own. Pandavapuram has “small houses with their red tiled floors and yellow tin roofs. [...] yellow-coloured buildings of the same type [...] the people’s faces had turned reddish yellow from breathing the poisonous air which the long chimneys of the factories belched [...] the colony had lamp posts which spat yellow light into the night” (Sethu 1). According to her mood, the shape and form of the place and the people changed. Sometimes, it was the demon set free by the fishermen; sometimes, it became Lord Durga, the destroyer; and sometimes, it became the quiet Mother deeply engrossed in meditation. Thus, Devi had the means of changing the place and its people. She was the creator of the town. She was the absolute Goddess. When she is in Pandavapuram,
she does not have to worry about anything because it is her world and everything happens according to her choice.

Devi also created several paramours in her imaginary world of Pandavapuram. She would also destroy them at her own will. She believed that,

The paramours of Pandavapuram fell into that fire [the fire of meditation] one by one and burned like moths. She took those ashes and marked the forehead of those unfortunate women who had lost their husbands. She was the protector of the sumangalis of Pandavapuram. Every girl who married and came to Pandavapuram prayed: ‘Devi, O goddess, protect us from the paramours of Pandavapuram. Give us the strength to evade their spells. (Sethu 2)

Thus, she believes that she has been assigned the task of protecting all the married girls from their husbands as well as their paramours. And she would not abstain herself from her duties. She would do her best to avoid any bad confrontations. This is exactly why she makes constant trips to and from Pandavapuram. Thus, we have the continuous shifts in the novel from reality to the illusionary world. She waits everyday for one of her paramours to arrive, but he never seemed to arrive. Therefore, to put an end to her anticipation, she decides to “give definite shapes to [her] fantasies and fill them with colours and smells” (Sethu 6). He gives this shape to her paramour:

Long loose saffron kurta. Black trousers. Strong hands with prominent veins. Eyes that burn in a weary face. He does not come through the sky. His feet always touch the earth. He was born to snare and enslave.

(Sethu 6-7)
She gives him this shape so that she could be familiar with him, she would befriend him, take him into her confidence and then finally, when she finds the right time, she would kill him as she had killed the other paramours of Pandavapuram. This is the revenge that she would take for all the troubles she had endured at the hands of her husband. She would also like to protect the other women from such potential dangers. However, the readers do get enough evidence to believe that most of the incidents narrated in the novel are Devi’s illusions. For instance, every time Devi has a conversation with this paramour who drops in from Pandavapuram, the author reminds the readers that Pandavapuram is not a reality, through these following phrases: “Pandavapuram which takes form in the minds of those who seek consolation” (Sethu 33), “Now, after last night, Pandavapuram had become a startling reality” (Sethu 54), “Pandavapuram is a consolation” (Sethu 56), “All stories are just stories. Yours, mine, and that of Pandavapuram and even of this world […]” (Sethu 85), and “Pandavapuram is an enormous need” (Sethu 90).

One of the stories narrated in the novel about the name “Pandavapuram” given to the town deals with the Pandavas of the Mahabharata. Though the story is about the five brothers with their mother and wife, a few distortions from the original mythical story can be noticed. For instance, “On a new moon night, he (Arjuna) brought her (Draupadi) away from her village without the knowledge of her family” (Sethu 72). This account is not the same as found in the Mahabharata. Here, Draupadi’s causes of concern were her husbands who were fighting with each other for winning her affection. She was very angry and turned all her anger towards Kunti: “You have destroyed these men. It is you, mother, who have made them neither men nor women” (Sethu 74). Kunti, having realized
her mistake, decided to undergo a penance. She ran away from home in disguise and "sat on a flat rock surrounded by huge trees [...] Her senses were awaiting the coming of another awakening [...] years later, a temple came up around her. She had turned into a golden statue by then. She became the protector of the virgins and sumangalis of Pandavapuram" (Sethu 74).

Though this story is told by the paramour to Devi’s children Raghu and Shyamala, Devi takes refuge in this story. Draupadi was allowed to take on five husbands; and therefore, she too can have her own paramours. She, at first, only imagined these paramours. Later on, they almost became real; and thus this novel takes shape. The author is very skeptical about the thin line of partition between illusion and reality. He mentions in several places that Pandavapuram has almost become a reality. Devi also mentions in between; “This is the curse of human life, this ability to dream” (Sethu 77).

In order to give credibility to the town called Pandavapuram and its paramours, Devi takes refuge in another story. Even before the factories came up in Pandavapuram, there had been a blacksmith and his wife who had settled down in Pandavapuram. They had come from a far-away village and were new to this place. The blacksmith was very rugged looking. Therefore, the people of Pandavapuram were very wary of him. Also, the way he sharpened and used his tools increased the fear in the minds of the people that he might not be the person whom one could befriend. His wife was very good looking. But, people were very scared of even looking at her because of her tough husband. However, the couple had no children and this weighed heavily on them. He found that he was losing his strength too. His wife was also mentally disturbed because she could not give
him a son. This only increased when she found out that he was coming home late and there was talk of him having secret liaisons with other women. She tried provoking him with questions, but he would not respond. Whenever he came home, he would go off to sleep and start snoring. His wife thought that she should teach him a lesson. She drew sketches of footprints on the ground; one day it was the prints of a big man, the second day, it was that of a lame man, and on the third day, it was that of a blind man. The husband noticed these prints, but he would not ask his wife for any explanation because he did not want to be humiliated on terms of jealousy. A few days later, when the wife noticed that her husband seemed to take no notice of those footprints, she went and told him that she was pregnant and that she was carrying his baby. “Don’t be stupid” (Sethu 63) was his first reaction. He could not believe that he was the father of the child. He, however, wanted to know who the father of the child was. So, he went searching for the paramour.

A slim man with a medium complexion, who had lips that pouted a little more than usual, a thin moustache and bright eyes—the features of a paramour. (Sethu 64)

This was the description of the paramour given by the blacksmith, the blacksmith’s own visualization of the paramour. And he went in search of this paramour everywhere. At last, he found one answering to this description; the paramour was brought to the village and in front of the other villagers, he was nailed to a tree and was burnt to death. However, the wife did not deliver a child, as she was not pregnant at all. Thus, “The poor young man who had been cursed to bear the burden of a paramour became a martyr” (Sethu 65). And he became the first ever paramour of Pandavapuram.
The villagers would sing his tragic story for a very long time. After him, several paramours sprang up in Pandavapuram who would “spread nets to capture the women of the outsiders, destroyed the families of the outsiders. And Pandavapuram became a nightmare for outsiders” (Sethu 65). Devi was one such victim.

Nevertheless, the name of the paramour is never mentioned in the course of the novel. Probably, the name does not matter. He could be one among the several paramours whom Devi invokes at will. Devi invokes them to satisfy herself. In fact, this man whom she had invoked, took some time to win her trust and finally, he surrendered to her whims and fancies:

Though she knew that he was a coward, she had expected at least a token of resistance, or the desire to escape. He had surrendered without any sign of resistance, like some cold frozen creature. (Sethu 88)

After one paramour’s role was over, the second one would be invoked. Her work was always unfinished. “But there were more paramours in Pandavapuram. Wait, I shall invoke each of them. I shall extract their poison fangs and throw them out at night” (Sethu 109), says Devi to herself. Devi, here, in this novel, assumes two roles. One, that of the colonized; colonized by the rigid rules of her community that forced her into marriage to a wayward person, who, in turn, colonized her and finally left her. She had been accused of infidelity when she was very true to her husband and had not even thought of anybody else in her life. Now, she is left all alone in the world and she has to take care of her children on her own. Her choices are not given any importance. Therefore, she breaks away from her system and chooses to live her own way of life. Thus, she creates this make-believe town of Pandavapuram and satisfies her thirst for her
freedom. Since Pandavapuram has a history of paramours lurking in the background (by means of her own story), she goes there to invoke all the paramours one after the other to wreak vengeance on them. Now, in her own world, she assumes the role of a colonizer. She is the master of her universe. She gives shape to the people of Pandavapuram according to her own wishes. The first paramour was also given a shape according to her imagination. She would invoke them whenever she chooses to and she would teach them a good lesson in life never to set their eyes on married women. This is how she would protect the sumangalis. Her responsibility is not over with one paramour. After one paramour is killed, she would seek another one and the process would go on till the last one is killed.

Various myths relating to the goddess ‘Devi’ are found scattered over nearly the whole range of Hindu literature. The goddess is represented with ten arms trampling upon the demon, who is also attacked by her lion, and wounded in the chest by her spear. She has also laid hold of him by the hair, and is about to chop off his head. This representation of ‘Devi’ can be found during the festival called Durgapuja, which is annually celebrated in West Bengal and elsewhere. When Devi, the character in the novel, is victimized by the male chauvinistic society, she takes on this garb of the Goddess, invokes her paramours, satisfies herself in a game of seduction and then throws them away and waits for her next paramour to arrive. Sethu, in fact, uses the myth to suit the purpose of representing female sexuality as it operates within the specific context of the Nair community. Polyandry as an institution in the contemporary society is justified in terms of the same found in the myth. The character Devi walks out on her quarrelsome
husband and ultimately becomes a goddess ‘Devi’. Thus, the text seeks to invent a past and a history that seems to be essentialist in character, but also contemporizes them.

Devi is the subaltern here, subject to the hegemony of the male dominated society. She goes through a double colonization, one at the hands of the society, and two at the hands of her husband. She wants to fight herself out of her predicament, and she does that with the help of the myths around her. She takes refuge in the mythical characters of Draupadi and the goddess Devi. She achieves her freedom, identity, and individuality through the meaningful (according to her) parallel that she draws with these myths.

The novel ends on such a note: “Perhaps tomorrow. If not tomorrow, the day after that” (Sethu 109). This shows the plight of the woman who suffers at the hands of destiny. She is accused if her husband runs away; she is accused if a stranger stays in her house; she does not have the freedom to do anything. “The chains that fell on one’s freedom were so many” (Sethu 108). Devi tries to break herself free from these chains, ultimately becoming a psychological wreck and takes refuge in the Mahabharata myth to give an explanation to her actions. The author has cleverly used the Panchali myth of the Mahabharata to explain the actions of the character Devi in this novel. Devi’s actions required a justification and there was no better explanation than the myth of Panchali. In the Mahabharata, Panchali was highly critical of the custodians of morality of the kingdom who showed no respect to womankind. When she had to undergo all the troubles in the Hastinapura kingdom, not even the great Bhishma, the protector of morals, could protect her. Similarly, in this novel, Devi was highly critical of the custodians of
morality of the community. They never respected womankind. That is why she had to assume the role of a Goddess to protect the women of her community.