CHAPTER – V
MODULATION OF THEME

The *Mahabharata* is a human narrative constantly governed by ethical questions. The epic's deep human concern has conserved its universality throughout all the epochs. The epic conveys a relevant and redemptive message for modern man through its teachings as a *Dharma Sastra*. This message is conveyed through the humanistic significance of characters and the insight into man's destiny, whose interconnection is explained in the concept of Karma, expounded in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

The *Mahabharata* expounds the myriad themes it deals with, employing various literary devices such as *Upakhyanas, Samvadas*, philosophical and spiritual discourses and simple narratives. The metaphysical expositions of the *Upanishads* and the ethical thinking of the *Dharmasastras* are thus conveyed effectively to the readers of the epic. It also deals with the mundane and the divine, touching upon almost all subjects under the sun – history, philosophy, ethics, politics, law, science, geography, genealogy, astronomy and innumerable other subjects.

The *Mahabharata* narrates noble and ignoble deeds and there is a constant enquiry into the questions of right and wrong and into moral and social issues. The epic deals with several themes which include day-to-day issues such as action (*Karma*), ethics (*Dharma*), marriage, honour, love, family relationships, death and life-after-death.

Though the epic foregrounds the fratricidal war on the field of *Kurukshetra*, the basic concern of the epic is with the four *Purusharthas* – *Dharma, Artha, Kama* and *Moksha*. The spiritual essence of the epic is contained in the innumerous didactic passages and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Thus, the epic contains three plateaus of understanding – the political, the ethical and the spiritual. The personal struggle expanding into a political combat
between the *Pandavas* and the *Kauravas* representing dharma and *adharma* respectively is commemorative of the mythical *deva-asura yuddha*. On the spiritual and the transcendental plane, the *dharma-adharma* battle could be comprehended as a battle between the good and the evil. On the ethical plane, the significance of dharma is propounded throughout the epic.

While dharma is embodied in the *Pandavas* (symbolized by Yudhishtira), Duryodhana and the *Kauravas* represent the aspect of *artha sans dharma*. *Kama*, the extreme of mere lechery, is manifest in the callous Duhsasana, Jayadratha, Kicaka and the like, who are immersed in unbridled self-indulgences. The concept of *dharma* takes a quantum leap to the path of *moksa* in the *Bhagavad Gita* when Krishna the advocate of *dharma*, reveals his cosmic personality (*visvarupa*).

Modern retellings pick any one or some of the themes recurrent in the epic. In the modern age of rationalist thinking, many of the ideologies upheld by the epic are either discarded or questioned by the writers. New themes are evolved as the epic is viewed in a modern context where human relations have undergone a change due to changed thoughts, customs and practices. Modern writers foreground problems like adultery, incest, broken marriages, guilt, caste consciousness etc that are brought forth in the novels under discussion. Further, the writers choose to foreground only some of the characters and events and this makes them adopt a thematic deviation in order to project the protagonist of their preference or a situation of their choice, in the contemporary perspective.

I

As discussed in the earlier chapters, Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* is a retelling on the *Mahabharata*. It is a Draupadi narrative which brings out the inner agony of the heroine of the novel. Besides the theme of marriage and honour associated with the image of epical Draupadi, Pratibha Ray also links
Draupadi to the image of the ‘suffering woman’ which figures prominently in modern literature.

In *Yajnaseni*, Pratibha Ray paints the picture of a woman toiling in a male-dominated society, where she does not have any say of her own. Her father, brother or husbands decide all the events in Draupadi’s life. Pratibha Ray portrays a Draupadi who rebels internally when decisions are thrust upon her but is unable to make concrete her preferences or likings. This idea is brought forth clearly in the very beginning of the novel when she is seen blindly believing that she was destined to be Sri Krishna’s bride due to her father’s constant exhortations to that effect. The same Draupadi who has given her heart to Krishna has to repaint the portrait in her heart with the picture of Arjuna, whom she has not seen so far, at the words of Krishna. She silently bears the pain of rejection by Krishna and mentally accepts Arjuna as her lord, without exhibiting her disappointment. Again, when her father announces her *swayamvara*, it turns out to be an exercise conducted for its namesake. Even in the *swayamvara mantapa* Draupadi does not have the liberty to garland the prince of her choice, but has to abide by the stipulation laid down by her father and accept the person who would emerge victorious in the competition. But even then, if the competition were to be conducted without any pre-established prejudices, she would have been the wife of the valourous and handsome Karna. But the question of social hierarchy in the form of ‘varna’ denies her this opportunity. The ‘male’ who intervenes and decides that Karna is not fit to marry Draupadi, is none other than her own brother Drishtadyumna. Without waiting for Draupadi’s opinion, he announces that: “However great a hero Karna, the son of charioteer Adhirath and Radha, might be, he cannot have the right to win my sister” (*Yajnaseni*, 42). Draupadi, a woman endowed with right thinking, feels guilty and silently begs to be forgiven.

Even after the *swayamvara*, she is not able to lead a happy married life with Arjuna because she is considered not as a woman with normal desires,
but a cohesive force in keeping the *Pandavas* together. Both Kunti and Yudhisthira cling on to the so-called notion of *dharma*, and to preserve the sanctity of the words uttered by Kunti unknowingly, compel Draupadi to accept polyandry. Her opinion is not sought in this matter too and Draupadi wonders:

> Was it the integrity of my womanhood that was of greater moment to me or the mother’s words, the protection of my husband’s and his brother’s dharma? To sacrifice myself for self guarding the dharma of others – was that my duty, or was it my duty to choose one husband for the sake of my self-respect and happiness? (*Yajñaseni*, 60).

Draupadi meekly accepts the call of duty as befitting a married Indian woman, which prompts to look upon herself as an instrument for the happiness of her family. On the very first night of the *swayamvara* she spends the night in the hut in *Ekachakra*, not like a newly wedded bride, but as a cushion for supporting her husbands’ feet:

> My five husbands lay down on beds of grass and went to sleep one after another. Mother-in-law went to sleep at the upper portion of the bed, touching her son’s heads. My bed was at my husbands’ feet. Making a cushion of my body of five elements, all ten feet would be placed on it. This would be my appropriate *dharma* as a woman. (*Yajñaseni*, 65).

She finds herself in a dilemma not being able to give her heart to the husband, whom she loves. Instead she is forced to share her time, body and mind between five husbands of different temperaments. While Yudhishtihira wanted an intelligent companion, Bhima wanted an expert cook for a wife. Arjuna was a romantic lover but Nakula and Sahadeva demanded friendly
support and motherly love from her. As a wife she was compelled to fulfill the wishes of all the five.

Even in Hastinapura Draupadi is not a princess who enjoys all luxury in the palace but is a daughter-in-law, who has to shoulder the responsibility of the household. Kunti, the mother-in-law is insistent on Draupadi’s preparing the food and serving it with her own hands, be it to human beings or animals. She was expected to take food only after satisfying the hunger of all around her. Her role in the house was equivalent to that of a ‘dasī’, who found happiness in keeping others comfortable.

Pratibha Ray highlights the conversation between Satyabhama and Draupadi in her novel. This is a reiteration of the Draupadi-Satyabhama Samivada in the Vana Parva of the Mahabharata (Chapters 232-234). This conversation which contains the advice given by Draupadi to Satyabhama foregrounds the life of an ordinary Indian woman who looks after her household with all dedication. Draupadi says: “Removing pride from within me, i-pour out my femininity like an offering of flowers before my husbands, made fragrant by the water of desireless action.... I never eat or lie down before my husbands eat and lie down. I am up before they get up. I am never lazy in their work...” (Yajnaseni, 314). This routine of Draupadi is the routine of any woman who lives in a society, where all the rules are well defined for a woman. Draupadi, even though educated, accomplished, intelligent and occupying the position of the Queen of Hastinapura, is but an ordinary woman who lives only for the sake of her husband and children.

Pratibha Ray, in her interview published in Women Writers: Literary Interviews says that she “concentrates mainly on delineating the plight of women who have suffered the most in our male-oriented society (Rangra 1998, 183). Yet, Pratibha Ray’s portrayal of Draupadi is not strictly from the feminist point of view. Ray, who calls herself a ‘humanist’ concentrates on social problems and writes for the cause of human beings. She establishes this thought of hers through the portrayal of Draupadi, not as merely a
princess bereft of all fortunes awaiting the day of vengeance, but as a woman who pleads for the welfare of mankind and raises her voice against moral decay and the degeneration of the ethical norms in social life. Even while enduring great personal tragedy of the loss of her children, suffering exploitation and humiliation and witnessing various kinds of social decay, she pleads for emotional integration, peace and harmony in the universe. Draupadi is seen to take bold steps against social evils like caste system, trying to bring the under-privileged into the mainstream. Draupadi is projected as a social reformer too, begging for a nuclear-free civilization. At one stage in the novel she is seen wishing that, like Devi Sita, she too could seek and find shelter inside mother earth. But she realizes that it would be the undoing of the mission for which she is born.

In the modern society, where the importance of the four ‘varnas’ has diminished and the performance of sva-dharma has changed in meaning, the Brahmin-Kshatriya style of life does not have any relevance any more. But India, which is still in the clutches of caste-system, where the upper caste enjoys all the privileges un-accessed by the lowborn, this image of Draupadi holds great relevance. She is a vociferous advocate of Aryan- Non-Aryan Integration and makes it a point to help the innocent foresters in the Kamyaka. She even adopts two young motherless children and breast-feeds them, not only to vent her motherly feelings in remembrance of her own young children left in Dwaraka, but also to put an end to the Aryan- Non-Aryan difference prevailing in Aryavarta. She is seen recommending to Kubera for the non-Aryans, in the following words:

Sir, on account of the absence of harmony and good relations between the city-dwelling Aryans and the forest-dwelling non-Aryans the discrepancy of that exists between the way of life and thinking of these two races bodes ill for the future.... If anything is done to create fellow-feeling in them then they will display friendship to the utmost. (Yajnaseni, 298).
She recommends for building of roads within the forest, proper formal education for the forest-dwellers and exchange of ideas between the city dwellers and the foresters. She even advocates for inter-marriages between the two groups. Thus Draupadi becomes the true advocate of the Post-Independence spirit that calls for equality among all people, irrespective of their caste, colour or area of dwelling.

Thus, Pratibha Ray delineates the growth of Draupadi from a young girl who blames fate for having thrown her into the unusual predicament of accepting five husbands simultaneously, to a mature woman who sees unity among all and finds pleasure in social service. Thus she assimilates greater meaning to her otherwise sorrowful life. Towards the end of the novel, Draupadi is seen craving for rebirth in the same soil of Bharata so as to repair the omissions committed by her in the present life, and also to spread the all-pervading spiritual consciousness of Krishna throughout the world.

Ray's Draupadi is not an ordinary feminist who rebels against the atrocities directed towards her in the male-dominated society. She does not show her rebellion by deserting her husbands or shirking her duties. But instead, she makes her life meaningful by adding newer dimensions to her life through her actions. She diverts her mind from her personal sorrow by seeking solace in social service and attains maturity in the joy of giving love to the less fortunate. Pratibha Ray, here, shows that she believes in the doctrine of 'karma', which urges men to act without desire for rewards thereof.

Ray also brings in the aspect of Bhakti in her novel. The supreme authority of Krishna over the lives of the protagonists is highlighted on several occasions to this effect. Draupadi herself says that whatever she does in her life is not for her but for Krishna, who is believed to be the incarnation of God, the 'Controller of human fate'. Deep-rooted belief in the ultimate supremacy of Krishna makes her action-oriented and the 'karma' performed by her is without 'phaleccha'. By foregrounding Draupadi's unstinted faith in Krishna and her love for him, the author brings to light an image of Draupadi
resembling that of Bhatka Mira, belonging to the bhakti cult of Indian poetry. Towards the end of the novel Ray projects Draupadi as a peace-lover who condemns war and advocates for peace. Contrary to her character in the parent epic, Draupadi is projected not as a warmonger, but as one who rightly understands war to be a bloody and painful evil that should be wiped away from the face of the earth. She says - “Having seen war, bloodshed, death, lamentation, all for kingdom, my mind’s attachment to throne, wealth; possessions had been broken. No delight was left in becoming queen” (Yajnaseni, 377). She learns the loftiness involved in forgiveness, and even forgives Ashwathama who had slaughtered her sons.

Sum up

Pratibha Ray’s portrayal of Draupadi in the novel does not apparently go in tandem with the image of the epical Draupadi. But by bringing in certain modern concerns into the theme of the novel (which have already been discussed), Ray paints a picture of the duty-bound woman in Draupadi, pushing into background the image of Draupadi as a princess. She is not able to accept polyandry with tranquility. She is also transformed into any ordinary woman bound by the norms of the patriarchal society. Though Ray violates the image of Draupadi as seen in the epic, she succeeds in gaining rapport for her heroine through introducing issues related to the modern world such as ahimsa, non-proliferation, caste system, etc. Thus, Draupadi in Yajnaseni appeals to the modern sensibility, which appreciates Gandhian ‘ahimsa’, and Biblical ‘forgiveness’.

II

In Second Turn, M.T. Vasudevan Nair recreates the picture of the second Pandava Bhima, who steers all events in the novel, to a natural culmination. In the epic, Bhima is pictured as a mighty hero who is able to perform wondrous feats with the help of both his strength and divine support.
But the retelling adopts a rationalistic view while depicting the epic-happenings through the modern-eye. In doing so, the author brings about 'de-mythification' and does away with all spiritual or divine interventions that are found in abundance in the parent epic. He re-interprets several incidents in his own way and even attempts to seek answers to many of the unanswered questions and situations in the epic.

M.T.Vasudevan Nair's Bhima is any other ordinary man who lives in the modern world where divine interventions and divine weapons are just confined to stories. Bhima is seen to be a man who is self-reliant, action-oriented and courageous. He openly states that he does not believe in any miracles and does not wait for any divine force to help him out of situations. He has the resourcefulness and courage to attain his ends and believes in doing his 'karma' to achieve his goal.

In Second Turn M.T. Vasudevan Nair places the protagonists in the modern context and their actions are weighed by contemporary parameters. Thus Yudhishtira, who is highly educated and well versed in moral ethics is not the one who is appreciated but Bhima, who is ready for action is considered the hero of the epic. Commenting on Bhima, the author says in the 'Preface' to the novel: "Bhima was a fighter who never tires. ....For me, Bhima occupies a central position in the Mahabharata." (Second Turn, xvii). This glorification of Bhima as the hero of the epic is a recurring theme in the oral and performing traditions of the epic, where episodes like Bakavadha, Kicakavadha, Saugandikapaharana and Duhsasanavadhā are thoroughly exploited by the artists. Besides this, Madhavacharya's Mahabharata Tatparya Nirmaya also extols Bhima as the real hero of the epic narrative.

Through the process of demythification, M.T. Vasudevan Nair succeeds in transforming the world of Mahabharata in a way palatable to the modern rationale. The novel, which opens with the incidents described in the Mausalaparva (depicting the destruction of the Yadavas and the end of Krishna), also describes the plight of the once-valiant Arjuna, silently and
sorrowfully witnessing the humiliation inflicted upon the *Yadava* women, by bandits who plunder the town. Arjuna realizes that he has been rendered helpless in the absence of Krishna; but his rational mind questions the divinity attributed to Krishna and he wonders: “Had Krishna who died by an arrow from an unknown hunter known of his impending death?” *Second Turn*, 2. Arjuna, here, reflects the temperament of the modern man suffering from lack of faith in the supreme power, even while knowing that he cannot survive without the it. He feels his self-respect drain away as he hears the cry of the helpless *Yadava* women who had earlier sighed in relief at the sight of Arjuna, believing that he had come to save them.

To Arjuna, the “*Mahaprasthana*’ (in *Mahaprastanika Parva*) on which they embark— as decided by Yudhishthira—is an escape route, “a final march to unload human burdens to take leave of the world” *Second Turn*, 3. Arjuna, bereft of his self-respect and ego, silently thanks Yudhishthira for having chosen this escape route that would enable him to run away from his duties. The theme is further developed in the concluding chapter of the novel, and reaches its culmination when Bhima abandons the heavenward journey and descends down the Himalayas. Unlike Arjuna, Bhima is not an escapist who spurns the call of duty. Seeing the fallen Draupadi, Bhima realizes that he has “not sublimated worldly desires” *Second Turn*, 249. Heaven was not a place for him, for he had not conquered emotions. His desire for Draupadi was still fresh in his heart, his hatred for his enemy still blazed in his mind and his appetite for worldly pleasure still unsatisfied. Bhimā, unlike Arjuna does not adopt the escape route towards heaven, but prefers to come back to earth and live his life to the full. Bhima is the representative of the modern man who does not look forward to fulfilling his dreams in a life-after-death but believes in achieving his goals through his actions.

K. Satchidanandan writing in *Indian Literature* (No.172) evaluates that as in M.T.Vasudevan Nair’s characters in other novels, Bhima also experiences neglect from all quarters, leading to seething indignation growing in him
(Introduction, *Second Turn*, ix). In *Second Turn*, the emphasis is shifted to the 'inner' thoughts of the protagonist, contrary to the emphasis on the 'outward' actions in the parent epic. Bhima of *Second Turn* is seen to be caught in the solitary moments of his encounter with his self. He, by virtue of his being the 'second born' to Kunti, is condemned to wait his whole life for his 'second turn', disregarding his natural abilities, which pre-eminently qualify him to stand first. This 'belatedness' inflicted upon him as the second born, condemns him to wait for his turn, to act.

The author picks out the gigantic Bhima out of the epic and endows him with a raging mind and a tormented spirit and ultimately re-reads the *Mahabharata* through his angle of vision. Thus Bhima, on whose physical power rests the hopes of the *Pandavas* (in the original epic), elicits sympathy in the novel on account of the characteristics attributed to him by pre-conceived notion — all brawn and no brain, a glutton, a wanton-destroyer. Even Draupadi, his wife by second turn does not understand the real Bhima. She is attracted only by the sheer physical power of Bhima who is the only *Pandava* capable of killing Jarasandha, Kicaka and the like. The author describes the incident in which Draupadi is excited enough to have a physical relationship with Bhima only when she is fed with the details of the gory incident of Jarasandha *vadha*. M.T. Vasudevan Nair writes: "Draupadi was gasping, her face close to mine. I felt she was half-conscious. Her nails dug into my skin. She entwined me. Her teeth sank into my neck. Where was the Draupadi who had lain idle and listless? Her body enveloped me, hurting me in several spots" (*Second Turn*, 115-116). Similar is the response of Draupadi, who witnesses Bhima putting an end to Kicaka who tries to ravish her. The incident is described as given below:

> Coming near me she saw the blood oozing from the shoulder and wiped it with her garment.
> In the midst of the flames that flared up, I saw her moist lips part.
Her finger nails dug into my arms and then my body.
I gave no thought to whose turn it was during our exile, that night.
The rags were about to burn out. But the fire in Draupadi's body was only beginning to spread. *(Second Turn, 175).*

The tragedy of the novel lies in the fact that Bhima unconsciously accepts the general perception of his physicality, which instead of being an accomplishment, proves to be a curse and a burden to him. This physical power brands him as a dim-witted warrior and curtails his assertion in any situation. He realizes with self-contempt that he fails to demand love and respect from Draupadi, as a husband. He surrenders to the fact that Draupadi sees him only as a muscle man who is handy when it comes to killing their enemies and helpful in running errands. Out of the five *Pandavas*, Bhima is the only one who shows enough guts to fight Kicaka, unmindful of disclosing their identity during their exile while they were living incognito. While the need to preserve the secret of their true identity kept the other *Pandavas* from openly confronting Kicaka, Bhima could not sit idle witnessing Draupadi being harassed by Kicaka.

The author narrates several incidents in the life of the *Pandavas* that reveal the role of Bhima in safeguarding their lives. Kunti and Yudhishthira rely on Bhima's strength to help them out of the wax-palace at *Varanavata*. Bhima is the only one who could cope up in Hindimba-*vana* for their survival. Later, it is he who puts an end to Baka and saves the villagers of *Ekachakra* from being sacrificed in the 'Purushamedha', performed by the ruler of Vetrakeeya. Again, it is Bhima who kills many of the *Kauravas*, including Duryodhana and Duhsasana, in the *Kurukshetra* war. He is the one who handles Kicaka, the brother-in-law of the Virata King, with intelligence and diplomacy. M.T.Vasudevan Nair here questions why Bhima was always sidelined when it came to important decisions in the family. Yudhishthira, who was generally
accepted by all brothers (according to the author) as a person who believed in inaction, is finally chosen to be the emperor of Hastinapura, while Bhima, whose contribution to the cause of the family was very large, is ignored. This is only because of the fact that he was the second-born of Kunti, only next to Yudhishthira. According to the author, the choice of Yudhishthira as the heir to the throne is not only by virtue of his being the first-born. It is more for the fact that he is the natural son of Vidura, a strategist himself, who is keen on his son ascending the throne. Bhima, inspite of his super-human power and unsurpassed intelligence has nobody to patronize him, since his natural father is only a giant forester, whose name itself is unknown to Kunti.

M.T. Vasudevan Nair places Bhima in a world where rationalistic thought obliterates divine and spiritual colouring that is often attributed to epic characters. Bhima learns the strategies of war and survival from the Nagas who lived in the forests on the banks of the River Yamuna, and from Hidimbi his forest wife. The Nagas who rescued Bhima from drowning in the Yamuna, after Duryodhana and his associates had pushed him into the river binding his hands and feet, had taught him to rely on his own strength than in divine arms. The naga chieftain had also advised him as follows: “Don’t show mercy to enemies. The enemy strengthens with mercy, and when confronted again, becomes invincible. That’s our law. You can free animals. Don’t ever give a second chance to men” (Second Turn, 37). This advice of the Nagas proved very valuable to Bhima in all the duels and wars he fought. The laws of the jungle that Bhima learnt from Hidimbi also helps him to survive in the jungle during their vanavasa.

Bhima is portrayed as a person with a rational thinking, a true representative of a modern man. He is seen criticizing the scriptures, including the Bhagavad Gita. It is seen that Bhima muses over Krishna’s explanation to Arjuna on the indestructible nature of soul. Sarcastically he blurts out: “Death is a change of dress for the body. Tell it to the grieving Virata sitting with misty eyes and bowed head” (Second Turn, 200).
While retelling the epic story in a manner discernible to modern sensibility, the author engages himself to destroy several myths and avoids including the role of divinity, which is present in the novel. While portraying Karna, there is no mention about the kavacha-kundala. Similarly the author does not include the incident in which Krishna helps Draupadi with an incessant flow of clothes, described in the Dyuta-parva (Chapters 55-73 in SabhaParva). The dyuta-scene is depicted in such a manner that the readers see a courageous and headstrong Draupadi winning back the freedom of her husbands, by confronting and arguing with Dhritarashtra.

In the portrayal of Guru Drona too, the author presents him as an ordinary human being. He is a Brahmin, who lives like a Kshatriya forgetting his 'sva-dharma'. He is capable of partiality, and promotes only his preferred students among whom were Aswathama, his son and Arjuna. He does not have any qualms in curbing the talents of unwanted students. His attitude towards Ekalavya is a glaring example for this. Bhima, an all-rounder in using weapons, also suffers due to this attitude of his master who wants him confined to mace-wielding.

In Second Turn, M.T. Vasudevan Nair portrays Bhima as a person who had the qualities that would be appreciated in any age. But the tragedy in his life lay hidden in the secret of his very birth. Though commonly known as Vayuputra, he was the natural son of an unknown forester and had nobody to promote him. His being born as the second son of Kunti denied him the opportunity to be at the forefront, for he was always destined to stand second in the line, curbing all his strengths.

Sum-up

The author reiterates the portrayal of Bhima, in his modern novel, Second Turn strictly conforming to the epic narrative. But even though the incidents are re-worked in the novel, an attempt has been made by the author to re-interpret the events and characters in a manner acceptable to
modern rational thinking. Bhima of Second Turn is denuded of all supra-human qualities, personifies an understanding heart, possesses a tenacity of purpose and equanimity of mind. M.T. Vasudevan Nair succeeds portraying the tragedy of neglect suffered by Bhima by virtue of his being the second-born, thus eliciting the sympathy of his readers.

III

Shivaji Sawant’s *Mrityunjaya* is a Karna-narrative justifying Karna’s actions and thereby glorifying him. Karna of the epic is a much-discussed character, due to the peculiar situations faced by him in life. Shivaji Sawant has fashioned the novel as a tragedy of a man who has been denied all achievements in life by the play of cruel fate. The themes of pride, humiliation, loyalty and charity relating to Karna in the original epic are followed by the author of the modern times. The character of Karna deserves sympathy as he is seen to suffer for no apparent fault of his. The victory of the protagonist Karna lies in the fact that though he suffers, he does so nobly.

Shivaji Sawant picks up the theme of identity crisis as faced by Karna. Even as a small boy, he always felt that he stood apart from the other village boys in some manner or the other. His resplendent natural coat of mail and flesh ear-rings made him feel unique. He was seen wondering: “I had flesh-ear-rings that no one else had. Glittering ear-rings” (*Mrityunjaya*, 23). He is unable to place himself among the ordinary boys, as his oddities rendered him apart from the crowd. Shivaji Sawant portrays Karna as a lonely man who, inspite of having parents, brother, wife and friends was forced to live a solitary life, psychologically and spiritually. The only re-assurance he got was from the Sun-God, whom he thought had a special bond with him. Karna says: “I looked at him. I felt at peace. Almost unconsciously I scooped water in my cupped palm. With closed eyes, I slowly offered the arghya-water to the sun, and returned home” (*Mrityunjaya*, 25).
Shivaji Sawant develops the theme of the divine intervention in human life through the affinity Karna has for the Sun God. To Karna, the Sun God is not only his father but also his spiritual guide whose very sight filled him with courage and self-confidence. All events in the life of Karna depended on the resplendence of the Sun. This is obvious in the incident on Vasant Purnima, when Drona's disciples display their skills in the arena, before the citizens of Hastinapura. Shona, Karna's brother points out to him that the Sun God had not given darshan to him that day. He exclaims to his brother that his "flesh-ear-rings have lost their radiance today. They're ringed by dark circles" (Mrityunjaya, 83). He makes Karna promise that he would not compete till the Sun God grants him darshan. Karna is heart-broken at not being able to enter the arena but is bound by his word to Shona. He feels the uncontrollable urge to exhibit his skills in the arena, just as Arjuna has done. Suddenly the Sun God appears from behind the clouds, renewing Karna's urge. Karna shouts joyfully: "Shon, look, The Lord of the sky, my guru has come to save me. He is scattering the thick clouds as if they were a herd of goats" (Mrityunjaya, 87). Karna gains confidence and courage to exhibit his skills, and his flesh-ear-rings start shining with a red hue. Karna looks up into the sky to pay his respects to his Gurudeva. He thinks: "Countless dazzling sun-rays were smiling in the sky. It seemed that my Gurudeva had reined in his thousand-horsed chariot and was showering his blessings on me" (Mrityunjaya, 88). And that turned out to be day Karna was anointed the Raja of Anga. Shivaji Sawant portrays the Sun God as a mute spectator to Karna's rise and fall till the end of his life.

The novel deals with the theme of suffering -- born out of the rejection and humiliation -- associated with Karna. As a young boy, he had to suffer rejection by Guru Drona, who taught only the princes of Hastinapura. When Adhiratha requested the Guru to accept young Karna as his student along with the princes, the Guru replied: "With the princes? Adhiratha, war-skills are a kshatriya's prerogative. You can get your son admitted here, but you cannot
expect him to learn with the *kshatriyas.*" (*Mrityunjaya*, 42). Thus, Karna who started his career as a military student in *Hastinapura*, had to face discrimination at the very beginning on account of being a non-*kshatriya*. He had to face humiliation on the question of lineage, on several occasions, throughout his life. Achievements, which would have been to his credit, which he had gained by his valour, were snatched away from him in the name of his lineage. Kripa, Drona, Draupadi, Bhima, Bhishma and several others humiliate him in open assemblies questioning him of his ancestry. The tragedy of Karna’s life is that he is born a *kshatriya*, lives like a *kshatriya*, under the patronizing love of Duryodhana, but is never accepted as a *kshatriya*. His own mother Kunti and *Pitamah* Bhishma who know the secret of his birth witness his humiliation in agony, but never venture to throw light on the secret.

Sawant foregrounds the theme of love and loyalty in the life of Karna through his novel. His relationship with Duryodhana is one of love steeped in indebtedness, while his love for Aswathama rises from mutual understanding and like-mindedness. Karna is depicted as a man who has deep affection for his family, especially towards his wife Vrishali and brother Shona. These two characters that are not seen in the epic *Mahabharata*, find a place in the novel and help in the characterization of Karna as a loving husband and brother.

Fate plays a decisive role in the novel, when both Kunti and Karna are victims of destiny. The portrayal of Kunti as an unwed mother, forced to part with her child, soon after its birth, elicits sympathy from the reader. Her childhood in the home of her foster-father, her rejection by her natural father, her unhappy life as the royal bride of Pandu are all portrayed as the cruel play of destiny, and casts her in the mould of the ‘wronged-one’. This portrayal, to a great extent, justifies her action of deserting the child born during her maidenhood. The widely accepted picture of Kunti as an erring mother is rendered baseless in the novel. Kunti, here, is only a victim of her circumstances, an unhappy woman, who always longs for the union with her first-born. This thematic deviation gives Shivaji Sawant ample scope to
develop the relationship between Kunti and Karna. She is portrayed as a mother who always tries to establish a link with her son, without revealing her identity. She showers her love on him by visiting him regularly and bestowing gifts upon him. Her chariot drawn by five horses instead of six and the painting of a young girl crying on the bank of a river, with a basket afloat on the waters, adorning the walls of her palace, are symbolic of her guilty love for Karna. Karna feels only bewilderment at the interest the Pandava-mother shows in him, and returns respectful regards to the Queen Mother. Though they are seen moving in a close circle, they are unable to communicate effectively with each other. This inexplicable tension between the two has its culmination in the scene where Kunti discloses Karna’s true identity to him, in the face of the imminent war. But Karna is unable to accept her pleading, since he values his loyalty towards Duryodhana higher than his new-found relationship. However, his loving and sympathetic nature makes him recognize her love for him, though he does not concede to join the Pandava side.

If fate puts an end to the relationship between the mother and son at the very time of his birth, the pleasure of winning Draupadi at the svayamvara is negated by the malicious words of Draupadi herself. Draupadi, who is portrayed as an arrogant, but sensitive and intelligent woman, fills Karna with the humiliating sorrow of rejection. His ego is badly hurt by her words, and he settles the score with her by openly humiliating her in the Kaurava Sabha. Shivaji Sawant describes a love-hate relationship between Karna and Draupadi, in the novel. Though they exchange harsh words during their encounters, both of them brook guilty feelings towards each other. Karna’s urge to cover the body of Draupadi with a garment (described in the novel) while she was being disrobed in the Kaurava Sabha bears testimony to this. This thematic deviation helps to bring out the character of Karna as an egoistic, self-respecting man, who is at the same time sensitive and understanding.
Shivaji Sawant also foregrounds the aspect of Karna’s nature as a ‘hero of charity’, a characteristic of Karna that makes him stand tall in the epic. Karna who begins with giving away alms to needy Brahmins, goes to the extent of donating his natural coat-of-mail and ear-rings to Indra, who comes in the disguise of a Brahmin. Even though warned beforehand, Karna does not deter from his path of charity and gives away his kavaca-kundala to Indra. He does not stop by this. Even on his deathbed, he proves to be a hero of charity by donating his gold teeth to a poor Brahmin in need of money. Shivaji Sawant elaborates this character of Karna to bring out the egoistic nature of Karna. Karna, who had always got an answer for ‘no’ in many stages of his life, knows the sense of humiliation associated with it. He decides that he would not give a negative answer to anyone. So, jeopardizing his own life, he gives away his kavacha-kundala to Indra who had come with the secret mission of destroying his invincibility. Even though his spiritual Guru Sun God warns him of this, he does not send Indra empty-handed, because he regarded his fame as the ‘hero of charity’ too valuable to be discarded at any cost. The nobility of his birth, which he could not prove by his life, he wanted to prove by his death. This ego and false-pride of Karna was the tragic flaw in the character of Karna, which ultimately leads him to defeat and death. It is this same ego and false-pride which makes him stand by Duryodhana in his wrong deeds, even while knowing that he should not do so. To him, his friend who had boosted his ego and saved his face by crowning him the Raja of Anga was more important to him than the moral ethics discerned by the dharma sastras.

Shivaji Sawant introduces a spiritual angle to the story of Karna by portraying a deep, spiritual relationship between Karna and Krishna. Unlike his friend Duryodhana, who sees Krishna as a strategist who plans the war-moves, Karna realizes that Krishna is not an ordinary mortal. The incident of Shishupala vadha confirms Karna’s impression about Krishna, as he witnesses the Vishwarupa darshan by Krishna. Krishna intervenes in Karna’s life at
several points, as a well-wisher and a spiritual guide. The incident of Karna shooting Krishna’s toe in Draupadi Svayamvara is illustrative of such a secret undercurrent flowing between the two. Finally, when Krishna reveals Karna’s true identity to him and asks him to call off the war by announcing himself as the First Pandava, Karna is unable to accept his words for the same reasons for which he rejected Kunti’s plea. He valued his own image as a loyal friend of Duryodhana more than the throne of Hastinapura.

Shivaji Sawant, thus thematically makes Mrityunjaya a tragedy, where Karna suffers for no fault of his. The incident of Karna incurring the curse of Parasurama for not disclosing his true identity and the incident in which he is subjected to a Brahmin’s curse for inadvertently killing his cow are examples of the play of cruel fate in Karna’s life. Karna also possessed a tragic flaw in his character resembling a Shakespearean tragic hero and the flaw of character – his false pride and ego arising from the identity crisis, which he suffered from childhood-- makes his life truly tragic.

**Sum-up**

Sawant, without deviating form the epic narrative, gathers sympathy for his hero. All the criticisms directed against the epic character of Karna are rendered meaningless when Sawant narrates the story of Karna supported with new explanations to Karna’s actions. Thus, the Kaurava hero in the epic becomes a towering personality with his in-born qualities of love, benevolence, loyalty and dedication to charity.

**IV**

The novel And Now Let Me Sleep by P.K. Balakrishnan, reconstructs the disillusionment and misery associated with war depicted in the Sauptika parva and Stri Parva of the epic. The author highlights the frustration and exhaustion, which comes upon the Pandavas at the end of the war. The exhilaration felt at the victory, is not seen in the novel. As Irawati Karve
rightly points out: "The war in the *Mahabharata* was a real war bringing grief to the victor and the vanquished alike" (Karve 1991, 91). P.K. Balakrishnan embarks upon retelling the story of *Mahabharata* as a story of the horrors of war, the guilt associated with fratricide and the vacuum created by death.

The novel opens with the prayer of an exhausted Draupadi, her mind heavy with the tragic events suffered by her throughout her life. She is seen praying to God for sound sleep after her strenuous journey through life. She prays:

> Oh God! I have endured thousands of sleepless nights, with my hair left untied and mind smouldering. In the rigors of my penance, I have spent several years with my husbands, my womanhood struggling within me all the time. I am one who has never enjoyed the comfort of sound sleep with which thou hast blessed all living beings. Thou hast today bestowed victory to our side, saved our people and granted me total gratification. Hail of Lord! Bless me with sound sleep sans any scare or nightmare. (And Now Let Me Sleep, 2).

But even the smallest of her prayers is not granted, since that happened to be the night when Aswathama set fire to the tents, killing Draupadi’s son and brothers.

The narration of the novel is through the thoughts and memories of Yudhishthira and Draupadi. The other narrators who appear in the novel are Sage Narada and Sanjaya. The disillusionment and frustration of war has its culmination in Kunti’s revelation about the true identity of Karna. The Pandavas and Draupadi find it difficult to digest the fact that they had committed fratricide in order to win the throne of Hastinapura. The guilt experienced by Yudhishthira for having committed fratricide and the sorrow experienced by Draupadi for having insulted Karna, form the central theme of the story.
The greater part of the novel is the entire story of Karna, who is suddenly elevated to a high pedestal, in the eyes of the Pandavas, albeit posthumously. The author weighs the lives of both Karna and Draupadi, the two characters in the epic, who were wronged against by everyone. If Karna was wronged at birth by his mother, Draupadi’s life turned topsy-turvy by the inadvertent words of Kunti. Both Draupadi and Karna struggle through life, trying to successfully fulfill the roles entrusted to them. Even in adverse situations, both Karna and Draupadi try hard to preserve their pride and glory through their courage.

Karna is projected as the real hero of the epic Mahabharata, who believes in action steeped in honesty. Inspite of many temptations, which include the proposal of sharing Draupadi as the eldest Pandava (Ref. words of Krishna vide V.140.15), Karna does not deter from his path of loyalty to Duryodhana and remains in the Kaurava camp. He is ready to give up the opportunity to lay claim to the throne of Hastinapura because he considers it ‘adharma’ to let down Duryodhana at the last moment. He prefers to die a heroic death in the war, rather than die a coward’s death. Karna explains to Krishna why he is not tempted by the offer of the kingdom in the following words:

Oh! Vasudeva! I am not one who covets wealth. This Karna cannot be purchased by money or riches. You must understand that I won’t estimate the kingdom and glorious status awarded to me by Suyodhana on their mere value. But through the gift of that country, he had returned my self-respect. Krishna, he has returned to me my life by helping me to regain self-confidence and honour. (And Now....85).

The author is here echoing the words of Karna to Krishna in Udyoga Parva (V.141.22).
The moral dilemmas of Yudhishtira, Karna, Draupadi and Kunti are dealt with in the novel. Yudhishtira passes through a phase of deep sense of guilt after the war. He embodies the tension between the performance of sva-dharma on one side and inaction induced by guilt on the other. Even after the war he is unable to reach a conclusion whether the war was necessary or not. He suffers from an acute guilt for having committed the sin of fratricide by killing Karna, even though unknowingly. Yudhisthira is completely dejected and frustrated with life and feels that none of his brothers nor his wife understand or appreciate him. He visualizes himself as “a bird shorn of wings; How can that bird ever fly?” (And Now...17). This finds echo in the words of Yudhishtira in Stri Parva when he says that “I am burning with grief, like a person thrown into a burning fire” (XI. 27.14-25). His sense of guilt is so strong that he cannot bear the sight of the young child widows mourning their husbands’ death at the battlefield. Unable to come to a compromise with his guilt, he decides to renounce the kingdom and retire to the forest.

Yudhishtira is a man disillusioned by his own victory, witnessing the destruction his victory has caused to humanity. He calls himself a sinner, a person who is responsible for all the deaths in the battlefield. He too suffers from sleeplessness like Draupadi and even in the slightest of slumbers, is disturbed by nightmares. His sense of guilt is sharpened when he realizes that Karna had spared him along with the lives of Bhima, Nakula and Sahadeva, knowing that they were his brothers and to preserve the promise he had made to Kunti. He recalls that the war which he had won was nothing but “zeal for fratricide - the evil desire of all brothers to kill the totality of brothers” (And Now..., 165). Yudhishtira remembers with misery the day he denounced Arjuna as a coward, provoking him to the extent of wanting to kill Yudhishtira. He also remembers his joy on seeing the beheaded body of Karna, not knowing that they had killed the true heir to the throne of Hastinapura.
Draupadi, in the novel, is representative of the suffering woman in the aftermath of war. She, like any other woman presented in the 'Stri Parva' is seen lamenting the death of the near and dear ones, proclaiming the hollowness of war. She is immersed in a kind of stupor, unable to bear the devastating effect of war. Draupadi’s laments continue as she remembers her svayamvara, where she, refusing to accept a suta for a husband, had insulted the valorous Karna(I.189.23). In her depressed and disturbed state, Draupadi tries to analyze her position in the family. She wonders whether the war was fought for her honour, which she had lost in the Kaurava Sabha. Bitterness fills her heart as she remembers the reluctance of Yudhishtihira to wage the war against the Kauravas, at the end of their exile. Even Bhima and Arjuna who were slaves to their filial loyalty to their elder brother, had vacillated at Yudhishtihira’s indecision. She recalls with bitterness that at the words of Yudhishtihira, her husbands had let go of Jayadratha, who had tried to dishonour her (In Draupadi Harana Parva of Vana Parva). Similar is the situation when her husbands had shown reluctance to punish Kicaka, lest their true identity be revealed before the term of the 'ajnata vasa' was over (Chapters 14-24 of Virata Parva). The question which kept reverberating in her mind was: “Draupadi, were you ever loved for yourself, entirely for your sake?” (And Now..., 72).

Realization now dawns upon her that her life has been always incomplete and that she was unable to live like a normal woman. She compares herself to the widows of war, who were praying for their husbands’ salvation and the author writes: “there might have been at least one moment in their lives when they gratified themselves in consummating their womanhoods. Perhaps they could look back to that moment of total gratification throughout their lives – that moment when all the science of morals converge itself simply to the brightness of love and the man and woman blend together forgetting in that brightness all the responsibilities of life and all the rights and wrongs. But she has never known that moment in her life” (And Now..., 181)
The author brings out the uniqueness of Draupadi's dilemma by stating that Draupadi, who could never live like a wife, cannot also become a widow. Her agony is doubled when she realizes that the lives of her husbands, except Arjuna are alms from the righteous Karna. Draupadi scornfully evaluates that fate had shaped her life and that of Kunti in a similar mould. "Fate created a single wife for all the sons of a mother by different husbands. Draupadi, destiny was composing a humorous story by your life and that of Kunti" (And Now..., 174).

Draupadi also tries to assess the maternal instincts of both herself and Kunti. Kunti, she realizes has a loving and dedicated mind of a mother towards her sons, except Karna. Kunti, in her blind love towards her five sons, did not have a maternal heart towards Karna and could not wish for his fame. The author, through Draupadi's words analyses that Kunti, "In her blind love towards other sons, her power of discretion, her sense of righteousness, nay, even one side of her motherly aspect was dissolving into nothingness" (And Now..., 174). The author blames Kunti for rejecting her first born out of false pride and for disclosing her secret to Karna only for her selfish ends. The same mother who inspires Yudhishtira to fight like a heroic kshatriya to regain his kingdom and safeguard the honour of his fore-fathers, advises Karna to forsake Duryodhana after the battle lines had been drawn. Draupadi recalls that Kunti, Bhishma and Krishna had tried to goad Karna to the path of ingratitude. Draupadi, now bereft of any hopes or longings, muses: "What difference is there between Draupadi attending Yudhishthira ruling the country and Yudhishthira living in the forest renouncing all?" (And Now..., 19). She has no desire left in her to adorn the Queen's throne of Hastinapura. The author also tries to draw a comparison between Draupadi and Gandhari, both of whom had lost all their sons in the war.

Thus, the central theme of the novel concentrates on the misfortune of Karna who was not loved by anyone. Every body around him tries to take advantage of his benevolent nature. To Duryodhana, Karna was the trump
card, the warrior who could put an end to Arjuna and the other Pandavas. Indra was able to take advantage of him because of his unwavering ‘dana shilata’. Parasurama, disregarding his unsullied ‘guru bhakti’, slaps a curse on him instead of blessing him for his endurance. Kunti too, takes advantage of this sterling quality of Karna and begs for sparing the life of her five sons in the battleground. Thus, through the thought processes of Yudhisthira and Draupadi, the story of Karna as the glorious hero of the epic, is presented to the modern reader.

Sum-up

There is an all-pervasive silence reverberating throughout the novel, resembling the eeriness pervading in a battlefield after the war. The author has succeeded in bringing out the morbidity of war, the sense of vacuum associated with death and the dejection of guilt that are reflected in the actions of the protagonists. Thus, P.K. Balakrishnan succeeds in presenting before the reader, word-pictures of grief and guilt of the victorious survivors of the war.

V.

V.S. Khandekar adapts the sub-narrative of Yayati (Yayatopakhyana) occurring in the Adi Parva (Chapters 76-85) of the epic Mahabharata into a modern love story involving the characters of the narrative. Khandekar foregrounds the theme of love and adultery in the novel, pushing into secondary importance the theme of the exchange of youth, the extraordinary situation which forms the central concern of the Yayatopakhyana in the epic.

V.S. Khandekar in his novel Yayati, portrays King Yayati as the representative of common man- the modern man who forgets his sva-dharma in his blind pursuit for pleasure. Khandekar writes about the theme of the novel as follows: “Yayati is the accredited representative of the common man in the times gone by. In spite of much varied happiness, he is always discontented – and is blindly running in pursuit of new pleasures. He does not
know the difference between happiness and enjoyment” (Introduction, *Yayati*, 7).

V.S. Khandekar has chosen the story of Yayati as a medium to expound the theme of the discontentment in man, for the peculiar incident in the story – the incident of the exchange of youth for old age. This unprecedented incident provides ample scope for the author to portray the protagonist at par with the modern man, groping in the darkness of the world bereft of spiritual values, for happiness and peace of mind.

The story of Yayati, as told in the *Mahabharata* centers around King Yayati, husband to Devayani who is the daughter of Shukrachary. The only mistake that Yayati commits is that he takes Sharmishta, the maid of Devayani as his second wife and incurs the curse of Shukracharya and inflicts upon himself the curse of untimely decrepitude. Yayati, who still has a yearning for worldly pleasures exchanges his old age for the youth of his son Puroo and enjoys life to the full. Later on attaining wisdom, he gives back the youth to his son and retires to the forest with his two wives.

Khandekar has extended the theme of the story of Yayati and has linked it with the predicament of the modern man who is never satisfied with the carnal pleasures of the world. Yayati is portrayed as a man whose eternal pursuit of pleasure destroys his peace of mind. His father King Nahusha and his brother Yati who renounces the kingdom for an ascetic life remind him of the curse on the family: “the children of King Nahusha will never be happy” (*Yayati*, 36). V.S. Khandekar generalizes this statement and drives in the idea that not only Yayati, the son of Nahusha, but every man in pursuit of worldly pleasures, would never find happiness or satisfaction in life. This curse has its effect on Yati and Yayati in exactly diverse ways. Yati embraces a spiritual life, rejecting all worldly pleasures and retires to the forest. Yayati, as if to disprove the prediction, immerses himself more and more in carnal pleasures, only to find himself still unhappy. Yati, who attains spiritual enlightenment and acquires an inner peace and happiness is symbolic of the author’s vision,
which conveys that spiritual enlightenment is more surer a way to everlasting happiness contrary to carnal pleasures, which provide only transient joy.

In the novel, Devayani is symbolic of the worldly pleasures of the flesh, while Sharmishta is symbolic of the joy of spiritual achievement. Devayani, the arrogant, selfish queen of Yayati is not able to provide her husband the sense of gratification gained from true love. Yayati, love-starved, turns to Sharmishta, the embodiment of selfless, true love. He continues his secret relationship with her for quite a long time and has an enriching experience of pure, spiritual love. Out of their union is born Puroo, selfless and loving as his mother.

The author makes changes in the epic characters to suit the theme of the novel. Hence Devayani, who is symbolic of transient worldly pleasures, appears as arrogant, egoistic, ambitious, spiteful and disappointed in love. She finds satisfaction in mentally torturing Yayati, the husband whom she had married not out of love, but out of ambition. Disillusioned by her arrogant nature Yayati is literally driven to Sharmishta, whose character is diametrically opposite to that of Devayani. In the novel, Sharmishta acts as a foil to Devayani. Sharmishta, by her loving care enriches the life of Yayati but is unable to protect herself from the clutches of Devayani, who decides to remove Sharmishta from her life. Yayati has his revenge on Devayani by drowning his sorrows in liquor and turns a womanizer.

In the parent epic, Sharmishta is a woman who approaches Yayati to beget children so that her youth will not go wasted. Even though the epic mentions the curse of Sage Shukracharya inflicting Yayati with early decrepitude, the epic does not give the evidence of any bitterness between Devayani and Sharmishta. It is also seen that at the end of the story, Yayati retires to the forest with his two wives. V.S.Khandekar has modulated the story line and theme and has created a love-story centering around Kacha, Devayani, Yayati and Sharmishta. Being rejected by Kacha, Devayani is embittered and wreaks vengeance on him by marrying Yayati, the powerful
king of Hastinapura. Yayati finds himself caught in a trap in his relations with Devayani when he discovers after marriage that there is no rapport between them. His love for Sharmishta is so intense; but he engages in a secret relationship with her, fearing Devayani's wrath. Sharmishta herself is caught between intense love and guilt. Kacha embodies detached love, born of spiritual enrichment. Every thing culminates in the self-less love of Puroo, who sacrifices his youth for the satisfaction of his father.

The theme of the exchange of old age for youth represents modern man's insatiable yearning for physical pleasure. In the Mahabharata, Yayati begs of Shukracharya for the regain of his youth on the pretext of enjoying life with his wives. But Yayati of the novel, embittered in love, does not focus on discharging his duties; instead indulges in carnal pleasures, as it with a vengeance. Kandekar writes in his Introduction to the novel:

The idea of pleasure in case of Yayati of mythology was limited to that with a woman. Not so today. The whole modern world, made the more beautiful and prosperous by science, machine and culture is spread before him. The various instruments of pleasure are tempting him at every step all the time. Every moment, his passions are being moved and roused. (Yayati, 8).

The temptations of the world are so great that Yayati feels no qualms in accepting his own son's youth in exchange for his decrepitude, in order to enjoy the carnal pleasure of the world. This decision of Yayati's is representative of the degree of moral depravity suffered by modern man.

By introducing the character of Kacha in the storyline, the author succeeds in bringing in a spiritual angle into the theme. The Kacha of Mahabharata who returns to heaven after taking away the power of Sanjivani is never again seen in the original. But Kacha in the modern novel not only leaves an indelible impression in the minds of Devayani, Sharmishta and Yayati, but also intervenes in crucial junctures to help out the
protagonists from their dilemma. While Yayati and Sharmishta are receptive to Kacha’s spiritual teachings, Devayani resists his influence and degrades herself spiritually. Khandekar elevates Kacha to the level of a life-giver who, having achieved powers at par with Shukracharya is able to revoke the Sage’s curse on Yayati. Thus Yayati gains both youth and life through Kacha, and becomes a changed man. The trio who represent the benevolent in the novel – Kacha, Sharmishta and Puroo – are able to bring about a realization and change in Yayati. Puroo’s selfless love has its influence on Devayani too. “Devayani who had never before yielded to anyone or anything melted at this love, affection and sacrifice of Puroo” (Yayati, 250).

The novel thus drives in the fact that common man who is incessantly in pursuit of riches and pleasure is finally left discontented. The modern man too like Yayati, is groping in darkness in a world in which old spiritual values have been swept away and new spiritual ones are yet to be discovered. Blind pursuit of pleasure, which is his ultimate aim, corrupts his mind and leaves him dissatisfied. It only succeeds to bring out the animal instinct in him. Khandekar here tries to establish that the growing crime in society is closely linked to this pleasure-hunt of man. The author says that if the growth of this ‘poison-ivy’ is not curtailed, the society will only be drawn into more misery and disillusionment.

*Sum-up*

V.S.Khandekar essentially violates the Yayati-narrative in the epic, to transform it into a story of love and guilt. The extraordinary characters and situations are rendered ordinary in the modern novel. Thereby, the author succeeds in not only introducing a moral aspect into the story but also brings in a happy ending by altering the epic denouement which enables both Yayati and his son Puroo to retain youthfulness.
Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, as discussed earlier, is a subverted retelling of the epic *Mahabharata*. Among the innumerable themes dealt by the epic, Tharoor only chooses the theme of power struggle from the epic and finds a parallel to it in Indian politics.

Dhritarashtra, Pandu, Priya Duryodhani, the *Pandavas* and Karna are the aspirants for power in independent India. They make strategic moves to gain and sustain the governing power of the country. Dhritarashtra, though blind, has an eye on the throne of Hastinapura initially, and later on the Prime Ministership of India. He, with his British upbringing and education, succeeds in striking a rapport with the British Raj, and brings forth Draupadi Mokrasi as a child born out of his relationship with Lady Drewpad. This young girl born on 15th August 1947 is the personification of democracy or mockery on democracy. She suffers from several diseases including Asthma, and needs intermittent administration of vitamins and tonic to stay healthy.

The *Pandavas*, who represent the citizens of India and who marry Draupadi Mokrasi are not able to protect her and she is insulted and humiliated by Priya Duryodhani and her men, who symbolize power. But they are unable to disrobe her, however much they try. Krishna, a *Kaurava* Party member is able to gauge the situation and convey the real message to all and says: “However hard you try, Priya Duryodhani, you and your men will never succeed in stripping Draupadi Mokrasi completely. In our country she will always have enough to maintain her self respect” (*The Great Indian Novel*, 382).

Shashi Tharoor also brings in the theme of freedom struggle in India, in the initial part of the novel. Ganga Dutta or Gangaji whose character runs in a close parallel with that of Gandhiji is the *satyagrahi*, who initiates the people into the struggle for freedom through *ahimsa*. He brings the British government to its knees through his hunger strike and non-cooperation...
movements. But finally he is assassinated by Amba, now changed to Shikhandin through a sex changing operation.

Tharoor also humorously presents the issues faced by India at the time of partition. Thus, the Salt satyagraha and the manufacture of indigo by the locals under the initiative of Gandhiji find their way into the novel. The painful partition of the country into India and Pakistan and the further bifurcation of Pakistan into Bangladesh are also humorously depicted in the novel. Tharoor compares the partition of Pakistan to the tearing apart of Jarasandha by Bhima.

Instead of glorifying and deifying the characters, Tharoor uses humour, irony, sarcasm and hyperbole to direct criticism against the national leaders. While narrating the story of the great Indian power struggle, Tharoor maintains a tongue-in-cheek attitude. He also refers to current issues, mythologies and even film stars like Amitabh Bacchan while narrating the story.

**Sum up**

Tharoor picks out the theme of power struggle in the Mahabharata and draws a parallel between the Kaurava-Pandava animosity and the tiff between the ambitious leaders of the Indian Political Scenario. As Iyengar writes in the essay *The Mahabharata: An Epic of Universality and Deep Human Concern*, "The tragic division of the country, the sub-division of Pakistan, the current pulls and pressures in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh(and even Sri Lanka), all seems to re-enact with a wearisome and wasteful persistence the Pandava-Kaurava fratricidal dialectic..."(Dandekar 1990, 177). Tharoor too, finds a parallel to these current issues in the Mahabharata.

**Conclusion**

The above-discussed novels bring about a modulation in the various themes contained in the epic Mahabharata. The social, political and the psychological
atmosphere of the contemporary society influence the authors while choosing an appropriate theme to foreground through the novels. While Pratibha Ray opts to project Draupadi as a modern women struggling in a patriarchal society, P. K. Balakrishnan portrays the grief of Draupadi at the loss of her sons. While Pratibha Ray's Draupadi is a spirited woman who speaks about eradication of caste system and nuclear non-proliferation, P. K. Balakrishnan's Draupadi is a deserted woman who believes that her husbands have not loved her enough. The novel by P.K. Balakrishnan also foregrounds the grief and guilt of the survivors of the Kurukshetra war. Pratibha Ray clearly shows that she has been influenced by the image of the 'suffering woman' that is being projected by women activists in the present century.

Shivaji Sawant paints a glorious picture of Karna, adhering closely to the epic narrative, while M.T. Vasudevan Nair glorifies Karna by employing the technique of demythification in the epic narrative. Both the authors elicit sympathy for their protagonists, through a realistic and psychological portrayal of the epic characters and situations. V. S. Khandekar treats the epic story of King Yayati as a medium to convey a moral to the readers. He strives to establish the transience and futility of worldly pleasures, through the epic story, though by deviating from the epic narrative. Shashi Tharoor completely subverts the epic text to bring out the theme of power struggle in modern India. He employs the device of sarcasm and makes use of the image of the epic characters to drive in the central theme of his novel. All the authors modify the themes suitably selected, to make it acceptable to the value system of the modern society.