Chapter 5

Processional Protagonists in Mahabharata

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References
5.1 Introduction

As was discussed in Chapter 3, a detailed study of the mythic, folkloric and epic heroes in the Western epic tradition has been carried out by Levy, Fontonrose, Bowra, Wardropper, Bolgar, Goetinck, Crowe, Burkert, Davidson, Douglas, Carlyle, Campbell, and Miller. They have not only identified the characteristics, the special qualities and the distinct adventures of the hero but also traced the development of the hero character through the ages. A paradigm on the biography of the epic hero has emerged from such studies. Although some of these authors have quoted examples from Indian and some other Eastern epics, their focus is mainly on the Greek and other old western epics.

It has already been pointed out in Chapter 2 that the nuclei of the Indian epics were much older than Western epics. However, a study of the epic heroes of the Indian tradition, along the lines mentioned in the previous paragraph is hard to come by. This may be because of the relationship between the people and the epics in the Indian tradition. The Indian people did not treat the epics as literary works alone. They were the documentation of their history, their codes of ethics, a vital source for the performing arts, and a resource on which later poets – both folk and literary - depended on for their inspiration. The theoreticians of the Indian literary tradition have focused on categorising the hero and have given only the very superficial characteristics to identify him. These are discussed in Chapter 3. Going in search of the origins and dissecting the character into parts are not in Indian convention; in fact, age-old saying insists that the origins of the great rishis and rivers should not be sought after.

This chapter looks into the main characters of Mahabharata – Yudhishthira, Arjuna, Krishna and Vyasa - against the matter and methods of the typological analysis taken up to study the epic heroes of the Western tradition. One may question the applicability of such study to the heroes of Indian epics that are older than the Western epics used in the study. However, as seen in the previous chapter there is some universality in the make up of an epic hero and as the analysis presented in this chapter shows the heroic characters
of Mahabharata fit very well into such frame. The reasons for the exclusion of Bhima and Bhishma form this study are discussed at the end of this Chapter.

5.2 Yudhishthira

5.2.1 Prince and King

As befitting an epic hero Yudhishthira is born of the god of justice and Kunthi the wife of the king of Hastinapura. When Pandu who had become impotent because of a curse, learns of the boon that Kunthi had received in her youth, he requests her to use it in order that they get an offspring. He wants Kunthi to call upon the god of justice to give them the first born so that the world would consider his son as 'lawful' and 'legitimate'.

Kunthi summoned the eternal god of justice to obtain an offspring from him.... Then the god of justice arrived at the spot where Kunthi was seated, in his car resplendent as the sun. Smiling he asked 'O Kunthi, what am I to give you?' and Kunthi replied 'Thou must give me an offspring'. Then the handsome Kunthi was united (in intercourse) in his spiritual form and obtained from him a son devoted to the good of all creatures. And she brought up this excellent child who lived to acquire great fame (Mahabharata, 1.123.1-7).

Yudhishthira born of the god of justice and Kunthi, a mortal being, acquires the status of a semi divine being. This is in keeping with the Western epic tradition where the hero is a diogenes - 'of the blood of Zeus'. This, Miller refers to as 'a generic, not individual identification of a hero' (Miller, 2002, p70). Among Greek heroes, we have a host of them who come under this category. Aeneas's mother is Aphrodite, and Thetis, the divine nymph is the mother of Akhilleus. Theseus is the son of Poseidon. The divine lineage goes beyond one generation. Patroklos is the grandson of Zeus, and Nestor and Menestheus are the grandsons of Poseidon. Odysseus's divine lineage goes back to three generations; his great grandfather on his mother's side is Hermes. In some epics the hero's conception takes place not through a relationship with a divine being, but through the drinking of a magic or divine potion. Rama is born of the divine potion that was
given to his father by a celestial being that appears in the sacrificial fire. Gezar, the Tibetan epic hero, is conceived by his mother who drank a magic potion.

Yudhishthira, the eldest Pandava prince, is referred to as ‘Panduputhra’, as well as ‘Dharmaraja’; this brings out yet another quality of the epic hero, the god-begotten twice fathered hero. The semi divine hero born of a god is brought up by a mortal father. This is true not only of Yudhishthira but also of all the Pandavas. Theseus and Herakles in the Greek epics remain ideal examples of divinely born offspring who are nurtured by mortal fathers.

Bose (1986, p43) says,

...the identity of Dharma is deliberately obscured by Vyasa. (The god Dharma does not have) any particular image nor can we recall any past history relating to him ... there is no full fledged god by the name of Dharma in any of our ancient texts. At best he is part of God; sometimes he is the father of the eight vasus; sometimes even more surprisingly the responsibility of having fathered the self generated Kamadeva has been attributed to him.

Bose goes on to say that according to the creation narrative found in Bhavata Purana ‘Dharma is not a manifested divinity but impersonal right mindedness’. The name Dhramaraja also refers to Yama who is the god of death. He is the god who gave back the life of Satyavan to honour the request of his young wife who followed her husband’s soul; also the god who taught the young Markendeya the para vidya. (Bose, 1986, p45) Yudhishthira as well as Yama are referred to as ‘Dhramaraja’.

In Mahabharata, the god of justice appears only in a few instances. First he appears before Kunthi ‘as resplendent as the sun’. At the end of Vana Parva, Yudhishthira encounters his father in the guise of a questioning crane and a Yaksha. At the end of the aswamedha sacrifice he goes to Yudhishthira in the form of a mongoose. Finally, he accompanies Yudhishthira in his last journey as a dog. Another incident where the god of justice is mentioned in Mahabharata is when Draupadi is insulted in the court of
Duryodhana. When Dushasana tries to disrobe Draupadi, Dharma comes to her aid says the text. ‘And while Yajanseni was crying aloud to Krishna, also called Vishnu, and Hari and Nara, for protection the illustrious Dharma remaining unseen covered her with excellent clothes of many hues. ...Owing to the protection of Dharma hundreds upon hundreds of robes of many colours came off Draupadi's person’ (Mahabharata, 2.68.46, 47).

It is peculiar that apart from the first instance the god of justice is quite ambiguous; he is always seen to appear in the guise of an animal or a bird — a crane, a mongoose and a dog. In the Sabha Parva though it is said that Dharma protected Draupadi, it is not mentioned that it was Yudhishthira's father who came to the aid of Draupadi. Later in Mahaprasthanika Parva when Yudhishthira refuses to abandon the dog which had followed him, the god Dharma reveals himself and says, 'Formerly, O son, thou wert once examined by me in the woods of Dwaita. ... (On) the present occasion thinking the dog to be devoted to thee thou hast renounced the very car of the celestials instead of renouncing him' (Mahabharata, 17.3.19,21). Only when Yudhishthira is ready to enter the heavens the god Dharma shows himself as before when he appeared to Kunthi.

Iravathi Karve argues that Vidura is the father of Yudhishthira and gives the following reasons to support her position. Vidura was one who strove like a father for the good of the Pandavas; though Vidura was the champion of the Pandavas he had closer relationship with Yudhishthira than with the other Pandavas; Kunthi lived in Vidura's household when the Pandavas were exiled by Duryodhana (Karve, 1969).

These arguments put forth by Karve seem to be difficult to accept. In Mahabharata there are numerous instances where children have been begotten through the practice of niyoga. Vyasa himself fathered Dhrtarashtra, Pandu and Vidura, so that the Kuru line may continue. If so, why should Vyasa be ambiguous or secretive of the fact that Yudhishthira is the son of Vidura? Further the Yaksha crane, after testing Yudhishthira, reveals his identity by clearly stating, 'Thou, O king, art born of me, and Vidura, of portion of mine' (Mahabharata, 3.314.22). Later at the gates of heaven the god of justice
shows himself to Yudhishtira. Vysampayana describes this incident to Janmejaya as follows. ‘While, O Kuru king, the chief of the gods was saying so to Yudhishtira, the deity of Righteousness, in his embodied form, then addressed his own son and said.... (Mahabharata, 18.3.30-31). Here Vyasa definitely states that Yudhishtira is the son of the ‘god of Righteousness’. Through his own words too Dharma, the god of justice, establishes that Yudhishtira is his own son. Regarding this point Hiltebeitel’s observation seems more logical. ‘Whereas Vidura is Dharma reborn directly, through Amimandavya’s curse Yudhishtira is the son of Dharma’ (Hiltebeitel, 2001, p194).

In childhood and youth, Yudhishtira is always overshadowed by Bhima and Arjuna and even by Duryodhana. The physical strength of Bhima makes Duryodhana jealous of him. Even though Yudhishtira is the eldest and the would-be rival for the throne of Hastinapura, it is Bhima that the young Duryodhana wants to destroy. And Arjuna is the favourite of Bhishma and Drona.

During the tournament arranged by Drona at the end of their learning, Yudhishtira is declared as an expert charioteer. But nowhere in the epic do we find this particular skill of Yudhishtira specifically elaborated. It should be noted that in the case of Bhima and Arjuna their skills in mace and archery respectively are always emphasised. In most of the battles Yudhishtira is not engaged in fighting. While the Pandavas goes to fight with the Panchalas in order to capture Drupada, Arjuna requests Yudhishtira not to join the battle; in the two battles with the Gandharvas, Yudhishtira doesn’t fight. When Draupadi is abducted by Jayadradha it is Bhima and Arjuna who go after him. While the Pandavas are in Virata’s kingdom Yudhishtira assists the king in the battle against the Trigartas and in the Kurukshetra too, Yudhishtira is actively involved in fighting. But in neither of these battles is Yudhishtira focused as an excellent charioteer.

The first time Yudhishtira’s personality gains special attention is when he is appointed as the heir to the throne of Hastinapura. It is mentioned in Mahabharata that Yudhishtira was installed the yuvrajap not only because he was the eldest Kuru prince, but also ‘on account of his firmness and unswerving honesty (of heart). And within a
short time Yudhishthira, the son of Kunti, by his good behaviour, manners and close application to the business, overshadowed the deeds of his father' (Mahabharata, 1.139.1-3).

In the lac house episode, Yudhishthira's character comes into focus. Here Yudhishthira takes on the role of decision-making. When Dhrtarastra asks the Pandavas to go to Varanavatha, Yudhishthira senses that there is something more than the festival of Siva in this request of the king; he understands that this is going to be more or less an exile that Dhrtarastra has planned for the Pandavas. ‘Yudhishthira fully understanding the motives of Dhrtarastra and considering that he himself was weak and friendless, replied unto the king, “So be it” (Mahabharata, 1.143.11).

Though many others in the court feel the same, it is Vidura who comes forward and secretly warns Yudhishthira of the impending danger in Varanavatha, and hints at the means of escape. Here Yudhishthira and Vidura confer in a coded language. ‘After the citizens have ceased to follow the Pandavas, Vidura, conversant with all the dictates of morality, desirous of awakening the eldest of the Pandavas (to a sense of his dangers), addressed him in these words. The learned Vidura who also was conversant with the jargon (of the Mlechchhas) addressed the learned Yudhishthira who also was conversant with the same jargon, in the words of the Mlechchha’s tongue, so as to be unintelligible to all but Yudhishthira’ (Mahabharata, 1.145.19-20).

While they live in the lac house for an year Yudhishthira takes it upon himself the whole mode of action. He understands the fact that if they try to escape from the lac house from fear of burning to death Duryodhana will somehow kill them, for he has ‘rank, power, friends, allies and wealth at his command’. Therefore, Yudhishthira decides that they should continue to live in the house deceiving Prochana and Duryodhana. In the meantime Yudhishthira along with the other Pandavas keeps wandering in the forest under pretext of hunting, making familiar with the paths which will help them to escape when the time comes, also building a subterranean passage that will be their route of escape from the lac house.
At the end of the year, it is Yudhishtira who decides that the time has come for them to leave. Thus, he instructs Bhima to set fire to the house and they escape through the tunnel, leaving Prochana and the Nishada woman and her five sons to burn along with the house.

Though Yudhishtira is referred to as the king in *Mahabharata*, we see him functioning as a king only for a short time. When he is the king, the only aspiration that Yudhishtira has is the well-being of his subjects. *Sabha Parva* describes the rule of Yudhishtira in the following words:

For Yudhishtira the foremost of all virtuous men, always kind unto all, worked for the good of all, without making any distinction. Indeed shaking off both anger and arrogance Yudhishtira always said 'give unto each what is due to each' and the only sound he could always hear were - Blessed Be Dharma – Yudhishtira conducting himself thus and giving parental assurance to everyone, there was none in the kingdom who entertained hostile feeling towards him. He therefore came to be called Ajatasatru (one without enemy at all). The king cherished everyone as belonging to his own family (*Mahabharata*, 2.13.7-10).

Hiltebeutel (1992) lists the royal virtues that are mentioned in the ancient text of *Upanishads* and *Mahabharata*. He identifies them as: observance of obligations and truthfulness, non-cruelty, generosity, respect for kinsmen and fortitude, fame and glory, *tapas* and learning. In *Rethinking the Mahabharata*, he lists yet another seven excellences for a king; they are:

1. Kingship itself
2. Restraining the wicked
3. Administration of justice
4. Protection of subjects
5. Accepting the consequences of victory and defeat
6. Restraint and Vedic recitation
7. Retirement to the forest for royal sages (Hiltebeutel, 2001).
Yudhishtira’s character fits in very easily with these royal virtues. We see that Yudhishtira not only possesses these qualities but also strives to uphold them to the best of his ability even when he is not functioning as a king.

Yudhishtira hates war. He himself says that he does not wish to hurt even an ant. But because of his obligation as a king as well as for the welfare of his family, he forces himself to wage war against his own kinsmen. Though Yudhishtira has a weakness for gambling, it was his duty as a kshatriya as well as a king that compels him to accept the ‘challenge’ that Duryodhana sends in the pretext of an invitation to the dice game. This adherence to obligation always puts Yudhishtira in a conflicting situation. During the Kurukshetra war, Yudhishtira himself goes to Bhishma as well as Drona and asks how they could be killed. Drona’s reply is that,

...except when addrest for death, O king, having abandoned my arms and withdrawn (in yoga meditation) from surrounding sights, none will be able to slay me. This I tell thee is true. I also tell thee that I will cast off my arms in battle, having heard something very disagreeable from some one of credible speech (Mahabharata, 6.43.65-66).

Later on, Yudhishtira is forced to lie to Drona in order to save the Pandava army which is unable to withstand the onslaught of Drona’s attack. It can be concluded that, rather than the news about the death of his son (which Drona does not to accept), it (must be ?) is his realisation that Yudhishtira had spoken an untruth that makes Drona throw down his arms. For this untruth Yudhishtira speaks his chariot sank to the ground. It was this lie he uttered that took him to the hellish region before he enters heaven.

Yudhishtira refuses to enter the gates of heaven if he has to forsake the dog that had followed him throughout his last journey. He is willing to forsake the heavens for the sake of even a stray animal. This is another illustration of Yudhishtira’s adherence to one the royal virtues namely the observance of obligations.
Non-cruelty was something that Yudhishthira endeavours to practise all through his life. This was also interlinked with his quality of giving protection to all. As a king, it was his duty to protect his subjects. When he is exiled, he was concerned about how he was going to feed all the *brahmanas* who had followed him into the forest. He tells his priest Dhaumya,

> The *brahmanas* versed in the Vedas are following me who am imparted to the forest. Afflicted with many calamities I am unable to support them. I cannot abandon them nor have I the power to offer them sustenance. Tell me O holy one, what should be done by me in such a pass’ *(Mahabharata, 3.3.2-3).*

He is advised by Dhaumya to implore Surya, the sun god. Surya moved by the prayers of Yudhishthira gives him the copper vessel saying,

> Thou shalt obtain all that thou desirest. I shall provide thee with food for five and seven years together. And, O king, accept this copper vessel which I give unto thee and, O thou of excellent vows, as long as Panchali will hold this vessel, without partaking of its contents, fruits and roots and meat and vegetables cooked in thy kitchen, these four kinds of food shall from this day be inexhaustible’ *(Mahabharata, 3.3.71-73).*

Not only does Surya give him the means of sustenance but also the promise of becoming a king, once his exile is over.

Duryodhana comes to show off his wealth to the Pandavas in the Dwaitavana. There the Gandharvas wage war against him and capture him as a prisoner. The soldiers of Duryodhana run to the protection of Yudhishthira. Yudhishthira insists that Bhima and Arjuna go and rescue Duryodhana. His attitude is the same with Jayadratha who had abducted Draupadi. When Bhima brings Jayadratha in chains, with his hair cropped as a mark of servitude to the Pandavas, Yudhishthira sets him free. He tells Jayadratha, ‘Thou art a free man now. I emancipate thee. Now go away and be careful not to do such a thing again’ *(Mahabharata, 3.272.21).* One can see that, Yudhishthira bestows his protection even on those who had inflicted serious harm to himself and his family. Thus he displays the magnanimity of his nature.
During the latter part of their exile in the forest, Yudhishtir has a dream (Mahabharata, 3.258.2-9). He dreams that the deer of the Dwaita forest came to him and requested him to move to another part of the forest. The leader of the deer tells Yudhishtira in his dream that their species was becoming extinct as the Pandavas have been hunting these animals to maintain themselves and their retinue. In response to this dream, Yudhishtira decides to move to another part of the forest. This shows that he considered himself the protector not only of his subjects but also of the natural world that came under his rule. His compassion transcends the human plane and he is conscious of the balance that has to be maintained in the natural world.

5.2.2 Yudhishtir's Quest

Although Yudhishtira is a king, his quest does not involve the kshatriya prowess. The quest of Yudhishtira is very different from that of a conventional epic hero. He does not travel in the four directions conquering nations or go into the underworld and the celestial regions to obtain celestial weapons. Neither does he roam the forest fighting and destroying the asuras and demons. Throughout the vanavasa Yudhishtira is seen listening to the puranic legends. He has the opportunity to listen to the varied discourses of great rishis like Lommasa, Brihadasva, Markendeya and Vyasa. The vanavasa prepares the Pandavas to confront the Kurukshetra war. While the other Pandavas are enhancing their physical and martial prowess Yudhishtira prepares himself morally to face the war. Throughout the exile we find him concerned with the various aspects of dharma, be it the arguments he has with Bhima and Draupadi or listening to the rishis.

One of the characteristics which Miller (2002, p163) attributes to the questing role of the hero is: ‘The hero is detached from cultural and social places... As a figure of extraordinary celeritas he is thus easily capable of taking up the challenge posed by time and distance either in this world or another’. Yudhishtira fits into this idea of the questing hero of Miller perfectly. During the vanavasa not only is Yudhishtira isolated form the ‘cultural and social places', but is also delivered from his duties of governing his
kingdom. Therefore, he spends all his energy in his quest to know and understand dharma.

He refuses to move out of the forest abiding by the vow, when Duryodhana's messengers come to invite the Pandavas to the vaishnava sacrifice Yudhishtthira says, 'We should certainly repair thither; but cannot do now; for till (the thirteenth year) we shall observe our vows' (Mahabharata, 3.256.14). Again when Duryodhana is imprisoned by the Gandharvas he tells Bhima 'O Vrikodhana, if the vow in which I am engaged had been over, there is little doubt that I would myself have run to his aid' (Mahabharata, 3.243.15). Thus, he isolates himself in the forest where he probes deeper into the subtle nature of dharma.

Campbell (1993, p329) states,

The conclusion of the childhood cycle is the return of recognition of the hero, when, after the long period of obscurity, his true character is revealed. This event may precipitate a considerable crisis; for it amounts to an emergence of powers hitherto excluded from human life. Earlier patterns break into fragments or dissolve; disaster greets the eye yet after a moment of apparent havoc, the creative value of the new factor comes to view, and the world takes shape again in unsuspected glory.

This motif, which Campbell detects in the life cycle of the hero, can be seen in Yudhishthira too. Each of the two forest exiles that take place in his life are is followed by a crisis. The first one results from the burning of the lac house where Yudhishthira has no responsibility to the crisis; after this he and his brothers along with their mother lead a life of obscurity. Their life style changes from that of royal princes to that of mendicant brahamanas. Once During this period Vyasa comes to tell them about Draupadi and urges them to go to the Panchala kingdom. Their marriage to the Panchala princess makes Dhrtarastra recognise the Pandavas and give them a part of the kingdom to rule. Yudhishthira is established as the king of Indraprasta. Soon Yudhishthira conducts the rajasuya sacrifice and gains the title 'king of kings'.
Yudhishthira's life follows this same pattern again, but with a few differences. Yudhishthira goes into obscurity the second time through his own fault. The game of dice brings about disaster not only to Yudhishthira but also to the other Pandavas and Draupadi. From a position of a king, he is reduced to that of a forest dweller. He loses everything to Duryodhana and leaves for the forest to live in exile for twelve years and a year of incognito. By the close of the thirteen years, the inevitable war breaks out at the end of which Yudhishthira emerges as the king. 'Yudhishthira begins his just rule displaying anrsamsya (noncruelty) by protecting the war widows and mothers who have lost their sons, as well as the poor, blind and helpless' (Hiltebeutel, 2001, p210). But the 'unsuspected glory' crowns Yudhishthira at the end of his life, when he refuses to enter the heavens on account of the dog and when he chooses to be in hell with his brothers and Draupadi rather than in heaven without them.

Yudhishthira is tested thrice in his life by the god of justice. Just before the end of the twelve-year exile, the god of justice tests him. Satisfied by his answers the Yaksha crane asks Yudhishthira to select from among his brothers one he would like to be resurrected. Yudhishthira chooses Nakula so that both Kunti and Maduri, the two wives of his father, will each have a son living. The god of justice is pleased not only with his understanding of dharma - by the answers he had already given - but also with his practice of dharma in choosing Nakula. Yudhishthira does not choose Bhima or Arjuna on whom he would depend to win back his kingdom.

Where the goal of the hero's effort is the discovery of the unknown father, the basic symbolism remains that of the test and self-revealing way... the hero is blessed by the father returns to represent the father among men (Campbell, 1993, p347).

The conclusion of the quest brings the hero back from the perils of the search to take up a prize won by his success, says Campbell (1993). Often the prize is 'rightful kingship'. This is promised to Yudhishthira by his father, the god of justice, at the end of the Vana Parva. Then twice again he is tested by the god of justice at the entrance to
heaven, as discussed above. On all three occasions, Yudhishtira proves that he has succeeded in his life-long quest: adherence to dharma.

Usually the epic hero is accompanied by a companion. But Yudhishtira stands alone in his quest. He passes all his tests as a solitary hero. Even though Yudhishtira is always surrounded by his family throughout his lifetime, he stands by himself alone in his unconventional quest.

5.2.3 Magical Powers

A certain amount of magical aura surrounds Yudhishtira from his youth. Bhima and Arjuna are men of superhuman prowess. But Yudhishtira’s abilities are those that are associated with a supernatural nature. He was not able to shoot directly at the given target and win the praise of his guru; he does not conquer the Rakshasas or bear on himself the entire family with his physical might; on the other hand Yudhishtira understands Vidura’s secret coded language which no one else can. It is this understanding that helps Yudhishtira save his family from the disaster of being annihilated in the lac house conflagration.

When the Pandavas leave for the forest after they have lost their kingdom in the game of dice, Vidura reports to Dhrtarastra that Yudhishtira leaves Hastinapura with his face covered with his cloth. Yudhishtira does so because he feels that if he looks at anyone with his eyes filled with anguish he might burn those on whom his eyes rests. ‘Dhrtarastra asked, ‘tell me, O Vidura, why is it that the Pandavas are leaving Hastinapura in such varied guise.’ Vidura replied,

‘Though persecuted by thy sons and robbed of his kingdom and wealth, the mind of the wise king Yudhishtira, the just, hath not yet deviated from the path of virtue. ... Though deprived (of his kingdom and possessions) by foul means, filled with wrath as he is, he doth not open eyes.’ ‘I should not burn the people by looking at them with angry eyes,’-thinking so the royal son of Pandu goeth covering his face’ (Mahabharata, 2.80.10-12).
Yudhishthira had the power to reduce his foes to ashes not through his martial prowess but by an intrinsic natural ability, he had within himself.

At the commencement of the vanavasa it is Yudhishthira who merits the boon of the copper vessel from the sun god Surya. This would provide an inexhaustible supply to all those who came to him for food as long as the vanavasa lasted.

During the early years of vanavasa Vyasa comes to Yudhishthira and imparts to him the visionary knowledge called Pratismriti. Vyasa feels that it is Yudhishthira who has the mental and spiritual competence to receive this knowledge from him.

That foremost of speakers then, the son of Parasara, taking Yudhishthira to a corner, began to address him in words of deep import, saying, ‘.... Uttered by me and like unto success personified, accept from me this knowledge called Pratismriti that I impart to thee, knowing thou art capable of receiving it...’ (Mahabharata, 3.36.28,30).

Though Arjuna is the one who would finally use this knowledge to obtain the celestial weapons Vyasa feels that Yudhishthira is the one ‘capable of receiving it’. Vyasa identifies in Yudhishthira that acumen to imbibe this visionary knowledge.

At the last stage of the incognito once Virata, in annoyance, happened to hit Yudhishthira hard. Blood flows down Yudhishthira’s nose; immediately Draupadi brings a golden vessel to hold the blood. Yudhishthira tells Virata, ‘Had this blood from my nostrils fallen down on the ground, then, without doubt, thou, O monarch, wouldst have been destroyed with thy kingdom’ (Mahabharata, 4.68.64). It was believed that the land in which Yudhishthira’s blood was spilt (otherwise than in war) will be deprived of rain and face severe famine for twelve years.

Another supernatural gift that Yudhishthira had was that his chariot always rode four fingers’ breadth above the ground. Yudhishthira loses this privilege that he had enjoyed throughout life, when he utters to Drona, the lie about the death of Aswattaman. While
Vyasa gives divine sight to others, Yudhishthira acquires this power through his own ascetic merits. He tells this to Dhrtarastra in Stree Parva. We find that while others receive from gods and sages many supernatural gifts, Yudhishthira seems to have inherited various mysterious powers in his own nature.

5.2.4 ‘It is ordained that thou shalt go thither in this very body’

While the procession of the seven—five Pandavas, Draupadi and the stray dog—trudges along the path of the Meru, one by one they begin to drop to the earth. But Yudhishthira goes on without a backward glance. Bhima asks Yudhishthira what cause was there for each of them to fall. The answers that Yudhishthira gives bring out the main flaw in each person's character. Draupadi falls because of her partiality towards Arjuna, Sahadev because of his pride in his own wisdom, Nakula’s pride in his personal beauty was the cause of his fall, and Arjuna had said that he would ‘consume all his foes on a single day. Proud of his heroism, he did not, however, accomplish what he said. Hence had he fallen down’ (Mahabharata, 17.2.6-22).

Finally Bhima falls because of his lack of consideration for others as well as his pride in his physical strength. Yudhishthira had never been partial towards any one, pride which is the very quintessence of a heroic fibre, never touched the heart of Yudhishthira and he was never boastful nor insensitive to others’ needs. These qualities which Yudhishthira has been striving to uphold throughout his life makes him worthy of a deathless state.

As Yudhishthira moves on with the dog as his only companion now, Indra comes to Yudhishthira and asks him to ascend his car in order to enter the heavens. He informs Yudhishthira that his brothers and Draupadi have already gone to heavens, and that only he is privileged to enter the heavens without death. After a sequence of events that cause Yudhishthira much consternation and consequent deliberation he enters the heavens. Unlike the other epic heroes Yudhishthira does not need to face death. ‘(The) hero usually but very dramatically dies in the earnest hope of a kind of survival or even a
persistence close to immortality, as a name to live on in fame and glory. ...' (Miller, 2002, p131).

But Yudhishtira bodily ascends to heaven as a glorification of his adherence to *dharma* for which he strove all his life. Thus, Yudhishtira attains immortality of a unique character achieved by no other epic hero.

There are some characteristics of the traditional epic hero Yudhishtira does not possess. Yudhishtira has never had an 'other world experience' which is one of the important feature in the biography of the epic hero. He is even ready not to enter the heavens if he is not allowed along with the dog. While Bhima and Arjuna have one or more 'other world experiences' Yudhishtira stays very much rooted in this mundane world, involved in an unusual quest – the quest for *dharma*.

It is quite surprising that a person like Yudhishtira who always sought after *dharma* should have a weakness for gambling. In Vana Parva and Virata Parva, both Bhima and Draupadi repeatedly point out to Yudhishtira, this weakness of himself. Yudhishtira himself bemoans of this weakness throughout the twelve years they spend in the forest. However, on the thirteenth year, he goes to the court of Virata with the dice fondly wrapped in cloth held under his arm.

Presenting myself as a *brahamana*, Kanka by name, skilled in dice and forms of play I shall become a courtier of the high souled king. And moving upon the chess boards beautiful pawns made of ivory, of blue and yellow and red and white by throws of black and red dice I shall entertain the king (*Mahabharata*, 4.1.24-25).

More than once Draupadi in her abandonment calls Yudhishtira a 'desperate gambler', pointing out this weakness of Yudhishtira.

The epic hero always faces a threat to his life. Yudhishtira's life is threatened twice and that too is surprisingly by his brothers both the times. When Draupadi is dragged into the court of Duryodhana the infuriated Bhima says, 'I shall burn those hands of
thine. Sahadeva! Bring fire' (Mahabharata, 2.68.6). But he is restrained by Arjuna. During the Kurukshetra war Arjuna is about to kill Yudhishtira for insulting his Gandiva but Krishna’s intervention prevents the catastrophe.

Hemachandra denotes, 'He who enjoys the benefit of all the efforts .... And in whose interest all the movements are directed is the real hero' (Dasarupaka, 1.12). According to this definition Yudhishtira is the hero of Mahabharata. For, it is Yudhishtira who is crowned as the king at the close of the war and it is to this end that the whole battle is directed. He achieves the most exalted position as the king and, at the end of his life, Yudhishtira acquires the most glorious seat in heaven.

5.3 Arjuna

5.3.1 Birth and Childhood

Arjuna, like the other Pandavas, is born as a semi-divine being. But we find that Vyasa pays special attention in narrating the events concerning the birth of Arjuna. In the Mahabharata we see that the birth of Arjuna is described with much more detail than that of the other Kuru princes. After the birth of Yudhishtira and Bhima, Pandu thinks, 

How am I to obtain a very superior son who shall achieve worldwide fame. ...I have heard it said that Indra is the chief of the gods. Indeed, he is endued with immeasurable might and energy and prowess and glory. Gratifying him with my asceticism, I shall obtain from him a son of great strength. Indeed, a son he giveth me must be superior to all and capable of vanquishing in battle all men and creatures other than men. I shall, therefore, practise the severest austerities, with heart, deed and speech (Mahabharata, 1.123.20, 22-24).

While Pandu asks for a son possessed of virtue in Yudhishtira and one who is of great strength in the birth of Bhima, it is for Arjuna that Pandu asks for a son of great fame. Fame is one of the most important elements in the make up of an epic hero. ‘A
hero must be someone who has attained fame – immortal and always remembered fame – ’, says Miller in his overview of the hero (Miller, 2002, p5).

Pandu decides that it will be Indra who would give such a son. And in order to attain such as son both Pandu and Kunti undertake to do great penance for a period of an year. ‘After this, the Kuru king Pandu, taking counsel with the great rishis he himself commanded Kunti to observe an auspicious vow for one full year, while he himself commenced... ...to stand upon one leg from morning to evening, and practise other severe austerities with mind rapt in mediation for gratifying the lord of the celestials’ (Mahabharata, 1.123.25-27). For none of the other Pandavas’ birth do neither Pandu, Kunti nor Madri make such penance.

We find that even in his desire for another son Pandu yearns for a son who would fulfil one of the vital characteristics of an epic hero, namely the one who achieves fame. Fame is the only thing that will bring the immortality the hero desires, even though the hero has to face physical death, fame gives him immortality. So when Pandu wishes for a son ‘who shall achieve worldwide fame’, he is in reality wishing for a son who will possess the essential qualities of an epic hero.

There is another exceptional quality in the birth of Arjuna; when he is born the whole universe seems to rejoice in this birth.

The sound of the (invisible) drum filled the entire welkin. There were shouts of joy, and the whole region was covered with flowers showered down by invisible agents. The various tribes of celestials assembled together, began to offer their respectful adorations to the son of Pritha. The sons of Kadru (Nagas), the son of Vinata, the Gandharvas, the lords of creation and the seven rishis, viz Bharadwaja, Kasyapa, Gautama, Viswamitra, Jamadagni, Vasishtha and the illustrious Atri who illumined the world of old when the sun was lost, all came there. ... The various tribes of Apsaras, decked with celestial garlands and every ornament, and attired in fine robes came there and danced in joy, chanting the praises of Vibhatsu (Arjuna). All around, the great rishis began to utter propitiatory formulas. And Tumburu accompanied by the Gandharvas began to sing in charming notes. ...Many Apsaras also of large eyes decked with every
ornament came there to dance and sing. ... large eyed dancing girls of heaven, - came there and sang in chorus. ... (the) twelve Adityas came there to glorify Pandu’s son. And the twin Aswins, the eight Vasus, the mighty Marts, the Viswedevas and the Sadhyas came there. ...and the great Naga Takshaks, ... and many other Nagas came there,... And only great rishis crowned with ascetic success and not others saw those celestials and other beings seated in their cars or waiting on the mountain peaks. The best of munis beholding that wonderful sight became amazed...’ (Mahabharata, 1.123.49-75).

The inhabitants of the celestial world, the ancient rishis, and those from the underworld are assembled to bless the new born. There is great rejoicing with song, dance and music and the blessings of the great sages. No other Kuru prince’s birth is celebrated with so much pomp.

The semi-divine birth is common to all the Pandava brothers. But it is Arjuna who brings out this characteristic powerfully throughout the epic. We also notice that it is Arjuna, among all the Pandavas, as well as the other semi-divine characters, who has a close relationship with his divine father. Arjuna communes with his divine parent more than anyone else does. Yudhishthira’s encounter with his divine parent is always in an ambiguous manner. There aren’t any encounters of importance of Bhima or the twins with their respective divine parents.

The god of justice comes in disguise and then reveals himself to his son, Yudhishthira. But with Arjuna it is not so. We find that Indra invariably shows himself in his true form to his son and very much like a human parent he expresses his pride in the accomplishments of his son, rewards him, protects him, and instructs him in the use of weapons and acts for the welfare of his son. It is only Arjuna who resides with his divine father and learns the skill of not only weaponry but also the art of dancing and music form the inhabitants of his father’s celestial world. As in the Indian epic tradition of identifying with one another, Arjuna is repeatedly identified with Indra in the epic. Arjuna like Indra is a chariot warrior. The sound of Arjuna’s bow is often referred to the sound of thunder reminding one of the thunderbolts of Indra, the god of storm.
5.3.2 Youngest and Most Favoured Son

The theme of the youngest son being the hero is common in folktales, ballads, myths, fables and Mediaeval Romances. In most of the folk narratives, it is the youngest son who succeeds in the quest. The youngest brother usually emerges as the victorious hero, while all the other brothers are defeated or unsuccessful (Thompson, 1955-58). ‘The hero who appears as a younger son seems likely to display a deeper, even three dimensional pattern of heroic action especially as compared with an older less complex brother’ (Miller, 2002, p101).

The role of Arjuna in Mahabharata becomes very vital in more than one plane. Throughout the epic Yudhishthira is always portrayed as passive and controlled; others often scorn him for such behaviour. Bhima on the other hand is brutal and uncontrollable. Arjuna combines the qualities of both Yudhishthira and Bhima. ‘He (Arjuna) takes the best from the ideal extremes presented by the epic in the persons of his older brothers’ (Kartz, 1990, p36). At this point Kartz further discusses how Arjuna establishes his identity with his divine father Indra. Just like Indra, Arjuna represents both the brahmanical and warrior roles.

Miller points out the many instances where the last-born takes on the heroic role:

The successful, triumphant last-born appears very frequently in the folk tale’s vast narrative corpus, and reasons are easy to point to. ... (The) perception of the younger son as a superior rather than inferior creation also reaches far into the ideology of kingship, especially in the Near East, where we have the biblical story of Esau and Jacob, the tradition that Davidic (archetypal) Israelitic kingship was constructed on image of the last-born of the sons of Jesse,... Roman tradition (as caught in the Aeneid) had Silvius, who would be the last -born descendant of Aeneas, identified as ‘king and father of kings’ (Miller, 2002, pp101-102).

The youngest son of Kunti fits into the ‘ideology of kingship’ which Miller refers to. As the son of Indra, the king of the gods, Arjuna represents more than anyone else, the kingly role by his support of dharma and his heroic role.
The most distinctive feature of the childhood of Arjuna is the education he and the other Kuru princes receive from Drona. Very little is said about Yudhishthira’s education; Bhima’s childhood is described with reference to his physical strength and enmity that grew because of it between the Kauravas and Bhima; even less about the twins. From the very beginning, Arjuna becomes the favourite of Drona. At the commencement of his tutorage, Drona asks his pupils to fulfil the desire of his heart. While all the others remain silent, Arjuna promises to do so even without knowing what it is (Mahabharata, 1.132.6-8). This shows the unconditional and true devotion Arjuna had for his Guru. From this moment onwards, Arjuna becomes the choicest pupil of Drona. The perseverance of Arjuna, his mastery of the skills of weaponry, the great devotion he has for Drona combine to build a special relationship between Drona and Arjuna. This love and devotion that Arjuna had for Drona, remains unchanged throughout his life. There is equal admiration between the two.

However, Drona tries to restrict the learning of Arjuna on two occasions, but he fails on both the occasions because of the keenness of Arjuna.

(While) he gave unto everyone of his pupils a narrow-mouthed vessel (for catching water) in order that much time may be spent in filling them, he gave unto his own son Aswatthaman a broad-mouthed vessel so that filling it quickly, he might return soon enough. And in the intervals so gained, Drona used to instruct his own son in several superior methods (of using weapons). Jishnu (Arjuna) came to know of this, and thereupon filling his narrow-mouthed vessel with water by means of the Varuna weapon he used to come unto his preceptor at the same time with his preceptor’s son. And accordingly the intelligent son of Pritha, that foremost of all men possessing knowledge of weapons, had no inferiority to his preceptor’s son in respect of excellence. Arjuna’s devotion to the services of his preceptor as also to arms, was very great and he soon became the favourite of his preceptor. And Drona, beholding his pupil’s devotion to arms, summoned the cook, and told him in secret, ‘Never give Arjuna his food in the dark, nor tell him that I have told thee this’. A few days after, however, when Arjuna was taking his food, a wind arose and thereupon the lamp that had been burning went out. But Arjuna, endued with energy, continued eating in the dark, his hand, from habit going to his mouth. His attention being thus called to the force of habit, the strong-
armed son of Pandu set his heart upon practising in the night (Mahabharata, 1.132.21-25).

In the first instance, Arjuna uses his intelligence and succeeds in winning his teacher's favour. In the second one Arjuna realises by chance the art of shooting in the dark and practises till he masters it. By the end of their training Arjuna proves to be the best of all Drona’s pupils. ‘Arjuna, however, outdistanced everyone in every respect – in intelligence, resourcefulness, strength and perseverance. ...Indeed, in weapons as in devotion to his preceptor, he became the foremost of them all’ (Mahabharata, 1.132.13-15). In recognition of these qualities of Arjuna, Drona gifts him with one of the most powerful weapons, the Brahmasira, with its methods of hurling and recalling; a weapon which he had withheld from even his own son Asvatthaman, till afterwards. The rashness with which Asvatthaman uses this weapon at the end of the Kukukshetra war seems to justify the reason for Drona doing so.

The tournament gives them an opportunity to reveal to the public, the skills they have acquired from Drona. In the tournament, Arjuna is celebrated more than anyone else is. Unlike for any other prince, Arjuna is formally introduced by his teacher. Mahabharata describes this incident as follows.

And Drona himself entering the yard of the arena commanded the musicians to stop, and with a voice deep as that of the clouds addressed these words, ‘Behold ye now that Partha who is dearer to me than my own son, the master of all arms, the son of Indra himself, and like unto the younger brother of Indra (Vishnu)! (Mahabharata, 1.135.6-7).

An interesting parallel can be noted here with the Western epic tradition. ‘Once the hero is named, described and physically present ready to advance the action of the narrative, a king of other sovereign figure typically appears’ (Miller, 2002, p201). In Culhwch and Olwen, Arthur is challenged by young Culhwch. The boastful Unferth challenges Beowulf.
It is in this tournament that Arjuna is challenged by Karna for the first time. Moreover, true to the heroic temperament Arjuna takes this challenge as 'a personal insult'. From this point onwards the Arjuna – Karna opposition begins. Duryodhana befriends Karna at once and Karna accepts it with the words, 'I only long for thy friendship. And, O lord, my wish is even for a single combat with Arjuna' (Mahabharata, 1.136.15). At this point Arjuna too, in the true heroic manner, vows to slay Karna.

5.3.3 Father and Son.

A common mythical and epic motif is the fight between father and son. In the Persian epic, Shahnama, Rustam fights with his son Sohrab and kills him; in the Irish Celtic Tain Bo Cuailnge (The Cattle Raid of Cooley) Cu Chulainn slays his son Connla; in the Germanic epic (The Song of Hildebrand, only a fragment of which is available now), the hero Hildebrand kills his son Hadubrand. However, in the case of Arjuna, he defeats his father and his son defeats him. In the Kandava episode, Arjuna fights with his father. While Arjuna and Krishna aid Agni in burning the Kandava forest Indra, aided by the other gods, fights against them. The Kandava episode helps to prove Arjuna's heroic power. Unable to stand the onslaught of Arjuna, Indra withdraws from the battle. Pleased with his son's heroic deeds, Indra promises that all his weapons will be Arjuna's when the time comes.

In the Aswamedha Parva, Arjuna encounters his son Vabhruvahana, in battle. On this occasion too there is a reversal of the usual father son theme. Here Arjuna challenges his son who is unwilling to fight with his father. When the battle begins, Vabhruvahana is able to cut all the arrows shot by Arjuna. This battle is almost a reiteration of the Kandava episode where Arjuna fights with his father. Arjuna does not withdraw from the battle like Indra. Is it because Arjuna is a semi divine being unlike Indra that Arjuna has to die at the hands of his son?
5.3.4 Heroic Companion

The hero and his companion is a frequent theme in the epic tradition. The hero is usually encircled by a group of supporting characters or a single character. The friendship of the hero and his companion forms important motifs in the fabric of the epic. The hero is generally accompanied by his companion in his quest. The adventure of the hero is usually undertaken with the help of his partner who is at times older and presumably more experienced or equipped with trickish talents or more powerful than the hero (Miller, 2002).

Some of the most popular pairs of companions are Achilles and Patroklos; Roland and Oliver; Gilgamesh and Enkidu, and finally, Arjuna and Krishna. The friendship of Achilles and Patroklos is the pivot of the story in the Iliad. The grief and anger at the death of his friend make Achilles enter the battle with vengeance. The typical trait of ‘warrior’s friendship’ is brought out when the death of Patroklos brings back the sulking Achilles to the war. In Chanson de Geste, the heroic pair Roland and Oliver, ‘are paladins of the most perfect mould, but each is ingenuously given a mark and character of his own: ‘Roland’s a hero; And Oliver is wise’. Bedwyr is the warrior partner of Cei in the Welsh Celtic Culhwch and Olwen. Cei and Bedwyr are seen accomplishing impossible tasks fully complementary to one another. In The Epic of Gilgamesh both Gilgamesh and Enkidu are seen as doubles partaking together in great adventures.

‘The heroic helper or companion being a god is a common epic convention. Divine intervention is necessary to assist the central hero, although he himself semi divine’ (Kartz, 1990, p83). Arjuna depends on Krishna not only in war but also in love. Arjuna is smitten by the beautiful sister of Krishna and is advised by Krishna to abduct her. When the news of abduction reaches the Yadava clan, Krishna pacifies them by pointing out that what Arjuna has done is lawful and that this marriage will be beneficial to the Yadavas and that in any way none would have been able to defeat Arjuna even if they waged war upon him to rescue Subhadra.
Arjuna and Krishna are seen enjoying together the leisurely sports. While Arjuna reaches the sacred place called Prabhas during his self-imposed Vanavasa, Krishna comes to know of it and immediately goes to Prabhas to meet Arjuna. There the two of them enjoy the company of each other sporting and taking pleasure in the performance of dances and dramas. Just before the burning of the Kandava too, we find both Arjuna and Krishna involved in similar pleasurable activity, which brings out the companionship of Arjuna and Krishna. No other character in Mahabharata enjoys such close friendship ties. Though the friendship of Duryodhana and Karna is also emphasised in the epic we do not see friendship on equal terms between them. Duryodhana makes Karna the king of the Anga region thereby giving him a royal status, but he never establishes any relationship with him through marriage.

The burning of the Kandava forest serves to bring out two aspects of Arjuna's heroic character. It places Arjuna in the idealised heroic image. It also establishes the heroic friendship between the hero and his companion and marks the beginning of their adventures and accomplishments together. Katz draws a parallel to the incident of the burning of the Kandava forest from other traditional epics like the Iliad and the Gilgamesh. In the Iliad the parallel is seen in the battle of Achilles with the river Skamandros; and the battle of Gilgamesh and Enkidu together against the spirit dwelling in the cedar forest, in The Epic of Gilgamesh. All three epics, 'present a battle between the structurally opposed cosmic forces of fire and water, with an anthropomorphic hero figure as intermediary' (Kartz, 1990, p74).

Skamandros, the river, is angered because Achilles is filling the river with the corpses. Achilles is almost drowned and looses the battle with Skamandros; but the intervention of the gods brings the fire, which makes the river give up the battle. In the Kandava episode both Arjuna and Krishna feed the fire with their vigorous activity of killing all the inhabitants of the forest. Although this action is 'seen as unlawful according to the epic rules of 'chivalry', it is accepted by the epic as being supportive of their higher dharma: the burning of the Kandava forest is simply a very violent sacrifice' (Kartz, 1990, p75). Indra covers the sky with cloud and sends down the rains to prevent the forest from
burning, but Arjuna stops the rains from reaching the forest with his arrows. Thus begins the battle between the father and the son. Finally, Indra accepts his defeat and withdraws from the fight.

Unlike in the Iliad, in the Kandava episode, the gods are defeated and Arjuna and Krishna are established in their heroic effort. At the end of the episode, the gods themselves are filled with wonder and Indra is gratified with the prowess of his son. In The Epic of Gilgamesh, both Gilgamesh and Enkidu fight the forest spirit, whom the storm god protects. Here too, as in the Kandava episode, is the first major military adventure the heroes take up together. Arjuna and Krishna like Gilgamesh and Enkidu exploit their martial strength in the burning of the forest. During the burning of the Kandava forest the pair is identified as Nara - Narayana the ancient rishis.

The burning of the Kandava forest brings out another aspect in Arjuna's biography. In this episode Arjuna is challenged by his divine father. This is the first of the many encounters that Arjuna will have with his divine father. It is here that Arjuna proves himself a man to his father by defeating him. It also brings out another epic convention of the son defeating the father and confirming his identity as a hero. Another important feature that has to be noticed in this event is that when offered a boon from Indra, Krishna asks for eternal friendship with Arjuna. This once again emphasises the friendship of Arjuna and Krishna.

The Kurukshetra battlefield focuses on the heroic pair once again. In contrast to the Kandava episode, where both fought side by side, in the Kurukshetra, Krishna takes on the helper role throughout the battle. He had given the choice to Arjuna before the battle either to choose him unarmed or to choose his powerful army. Arjuna chooses the unarmed Krishna as his charioteer while Duryodhana happily takes Krishna's army. In the battlefield Krishna is Arjuna's charioteer and teacher advising and encouraging, guiding and helping Arjuna to win the battle. Arjuna depends on this helper for victory. Krishna serves specifically as Arjuna's instructor and guru, in this occasion. Both as Arjuna's charioteer and as his teacher, Krishna is acting as a helper for the humanized
Arjuna, who cannot succeed alone. That Krishna has made an agreement not to fight but only advice, thrusts him into the helper role, in contrast with his apparent role of friend and equal in the Kandava episode.

Krishna directly saves Arjuna from death on three occasions. Arjuna vows that he would kill Jayadratha who has been the cause of Abhimanyu’s death. If he does not fulfil this oath, Arjuna will be compelled to enter the fire and end his life. The following day there is a mad rush to reach Jayadratha - a race against time as Arjuna had vowed he would kill his enemy before sundown the next day. Krishna employs an illusion of sunset and makes it possible for Arjuna to kill Jayadratha; thereby he saves Arjuna’s life. When Bagadatta releases the Vaishnavastra, Krishna stands up from his seat of the charioteer, receives that weapon on him, and spares Arjuna’s life. In the ultimate battle with Karna, when the serpent weapon soars towards Arjuna, Krishna depresses the wheels of the chariot just in time for the dreadful weapon to miss its target.

There are more than one occasion in Mahabharata where Arjuna and Krishna are seen as one and the same. They are referred to by the same name - of the ten names of Arjuna, one is Krishna. Arjuna says, ‘My father gave me Krishna for my last name, out of love for that little boy of the dazzling black complexion’ (Mahabharata, 4.44.22). When Arjuna and Krishna are mentioned together, they get the appellation ‘the two Krishnas’. Krishna says more than once ‘Know that I am Arjuna and Arjuna is me’.

Not only does Arjuna depend on Krishna but Krishna too depends on Arjuna. When the Yadavas destroy themselves and Krishna realises that the time has come for his departure from this world it is Arjuna he sends for (change?). He depends on Arjuna to take care of the aged, women and children and to perform the last rites of the Yadavas including himself. Arjuna is inconsolable at the death of his dear friend. Arjuna is no longer the heroic warrior that he had been. His powers seem to have drained away from him now that Krishna is not there with him. Arjuna is unable either to lift his Gandiva or to fight the robbers who attack the Yadava women whom Arjuna was taking along with him. Arjuna goes to Vyasa with a heavy heart and says,
I fail to derive peace of mind. The death of the wielder of Saranga is as incredible as the drying up of the ocean, the displacement of a mountain, the falling down of the vault of heaven, of the cooling property of fire. Deprived of the company of the Vrishni hero, I desire not to live in this world (Mahabharata, 16.8.12-14).

The anguish of Arjuna becomes more poignant as he mourns,

(That) person of immeasurable soul, of four arms, wielding the conch, the discus, and the mace, clad in yellow robes, dark in complexion, and possessing eyes resembling lotus-petals, is no longer seen by me. Alas, reft of Govinda, what have I to live for dragging my life in sorrow? He who used to stalk in advance of my car, that divine form endued with great splendour and unfading puissance, consuming as he preceded all hostile warriors, can no longer be seen by me. No longer beholding him who by his energy first burnt all hostile troops whom, I afterwards despatched with shafts sped from Gandiva, I am filled with grief and my head swims, O best of men. Penetrated with cheerlessness and despair, I fail to obtain peace of mind. I dare not live reft of the heroic Janarddana. As soon as I heard that Vishnu had left the earth, my eyes became dim and all things disappeared from my vision I, best of men, it behoveth thee to tell me what is good for me now for I am now a wanderer with an empty heart, despoiled of my kinsmen and of my possessions (Mahabharata, 16.8.19-24).

This mourning of Arjuna can be compared with the mourning of Gilgamesh at the death of Enkidu. Gilgamesh too recalls how they had together shared many adventures.

My friend, my younger brother, who with me in the foothills
Hunted the wild ass, and panther in the plains;
Who with me accomplished all things, who climbed the mountains
Seized and brought down the Bull of Heaven,
Who over Humbaba, dwelling in the forest of cedar,

Since he is gone, I can find no comfort,
But roam like a hunter in the plains.

(Translated by Frankfort et al, 1968)
5.3.5 Adventure and Other World Experience

“No other character in Mahabharata or Ramayana has such a strange and eventful career as Arjuna’ (Bose, 1986, p58). Arjuna travels in all four directions during his two exiles and the two digvijayas. Bose refers to Arjuna as ‘land-bound Odysseus’, travelling and conquering almost the whole of Bharata - the area from modern Afghanistan to Assam, Tibet and central Asia, Kasmir and Sindu and the Cedi Kingdom of central India. He goes beyond the geographical limits and enters the under world of the Nagas where he marries the Naga princes Ulipi; he enters the abode of Indra where he is instructed by his father in the art of weaponry and by the Gandharvas in the art of music and dancing; he goes into the land of Nivatakavachas and kills the demons, who because of the boon they had won, could not be killed by the gods. (Arjuna, being a semi divine being, is able to achieve what the gods could not.)

Arjuna goes on a self-imposed exile when he enters the room where Yudhishthira and Draupadi are together. In order to protect the cows of the brahmana which have been stolen Arjuna needs his weapons. The weapons happen to be in the same room where Yudhishtira and Draupadi are together. According to the agreement that the Pandavas have earlier established, Arjuna goes on a twelve-year exile.

“In some sense, one may view Arjuna’s exilic journey as a preliminary ‘conquest of the world’ since he travels in all directions during it and has an adventure with some female usually a conquest, at each cardinal point.’ (Kartz, 1990, p63). In the waters of the Ganga, Arjuna is dragged into the bottom of the waters to a beautiful mansion of the Naga king Kauravya. Ulipi, the daughter of the Naga king, falls in love with Arjuna. When Arjuna refuses to marry her because of his brahmacharya mode of life she declares that she would die if Arjuna does not fulfil her wishes. Ulipi pleads with him,
O thou of mighty arms, earn great merit by saving my life. I seek thy shelter, O best of men thou protectest always, O son of Kunti, the afflicted and the masterless. I seek thy protection (Mahabharata, 1.214.30-31).

In the South, he encounters five Apsaras who live in the five sacred waters as crocodiles because of the curse of a brahmana. They are changed to their own shapes when Arjuna drags them out of the waters. No marriage takes place here. In the East, he marries Chitrangada and has a son by her. At the end of his twelve-year exile, he goes to Dwaraka in the West where he marries Krishna’s sister - the Yadava princess Subhadra. Katz in discussing the marriages of Arjuna, comments ‘(Arjuna) has a woman in every direction . . . If one takes his earlier marriage to Draupadi into account, one may note that in the end he has four wives, obviously comprising one for each direction’ (Kartz, 1990, p61). Further the four marriages belong to four different types. Draupadi is married by winning her hand in the swayamvara. The marriage to Ulipi is what is traditionally referred to as a gandharva marriage. The marriage with Chitrangada ‘is offered as an example of the legal fiction of putrika (daughter) inheritance’. Chitrangada’s father requests that Arjuna’s son should become the successor to his line. Therefore, he (Arjuna’s son) along with his mother stays back in Manalura in the east. At Krishna’s suggestion Arjuna abducts Subhadra, this marriage by capture, is seen as a rakshasa mode of marriage.

Arjuna is exiled for a second time along with the other Pandavas. Once again he travels alone as an ascetic at the insistence of Yudhisthira to acquire the celestial weapons form Siva. Here Arjuna is twice removed and isolated from the ordinary world. The Pandavas have been exiled into the forest and Arjuna leaves them and travels alone into the Himalayan region, a region which he would be entering for the third time. He was born in that region and spent his early childhood there; again he had travelled this area during his ‘world conquest’. This adventure of Arjuna is taken up alone unlike his Kandava adventure where Krishna is by his side.

Armed with the esoteric knowledge taught by Yudhishthira, Arjuna goes to the holy mountains in the northern direction. Indra in the guise of an ascetic tells him that his bow
and arrows are of no use in this region. Soon Arjuna becomes a typical inhabitant of the north defining the characteristic lifestyle of that region. ‘Dressed in grass and bark and carrying stick and deer skin’ (Mahabharata, 3.38.23) Arjuna does severe austerities for four months living on air, standing on the tips of toes with his arms upraised. Threatened by the power of the penance of Arjuna, the rishis of that region go to Siva for protection. Considering that Arjuna was engaged in these austerities not for any selfish motives Mahadeva, in the guise of Kirata (a hunter), encounters Arjuna. The fierce combat between them ends in the near death of Arjuna, his limbs crushed and mangled he is reduced to a ball of flesh and he falls down without any power to move. He soon recovers and, filled with grief, makes a clay image of Siva and worships the Deity. Pleased with the devotion of Arjuna, Siva appears to him in his true form and grants him the irresistible Pasupata weapon and instructs him in the use of that weapon.

This episode is soon followed by Arjuna’s sojourn in Indra’s heaven. Here Arjuna transcends the geographical limitations and enters into the celestial regions. He spends five years there being tutored by his divine father in the art of using all the weapons he has acquired. During the Kandava episode Indra had promised Arjuna the celestial weapons. He fulfils this after Arjuna has proved himself for the second time to be worthy of receiving these celestial weaponry. Arjuna’s worthiness has been approved by Siva as well as the Lokapalas – the guardians of the universe –, Varuna, Yama, and Kuvera. In Indra’s heaven Arjuna is recognised as the son of Indra. He is seated on the throne of the king of gods ‘like another Indra’.

In Indra’s dwellings not only does Arjuna learn the nuances of martial arts he also becomes accomplished in the knowledge of finer arts of dances and music. He learns from Chitrasena the chief Gandharva ‘the instrumental music that is current among the celestials and which existeth not in the world of men’ (Mahabharata, 3.44.7). Arjuna lives with Chitrasena and learns to sing, play the celestial musical instruments and dancing. Indra also sees to it that Arjuna be instructed ‘in the arts of acquitting himself in female company’ by Urvasi (Mahabharata, 3.45.3). Here Arjuna’s personality seems to expand beyond the warrior and ascetic to that of a connoisseur. The incident concerned
with Urvasi adds another dimension to the character of Arjuna. While most of the great rishis have fallen a prey to the enticing Apsaras, Arjuna remains firm and self-controlled and rejects the overtures of Urvasi, thereby he is cursed by her - a curse which would be changed into a blessing during the thirteenth year of Pandava’s exile. Arjuna will be changed into a eunuch for a year and will regain his virility at the end of that year.

As his teacher’s fee, Indra asks Arjuna to conquer the Nivatakavachas. This again takes Arjuna into another other-world experience. It also heightens his heroic stature where he is able to achieve something that Indra himself has not been able to achieve. The Nivatakavachas have received a boon from Bhrama that they will not be defeated even by the gods. So Arjuna, the semi divine hero, accomplishes this fete. Matali, the charioteer of Indra who accompanies Arjuna on Indra’s chariot, finds that the battle Arjuna fights is far more terrifying than that of Indra, the lord of the thunderbolt.

While returning from the land of the Nivatakavachas, Arjuna spots an unearthly city which Matali identifies as Hiranyapura. This exotic aerial city is described in great detail by Arjuna to his brothers on his return:

(A) mighty unearthly city, moving at will and having the effulgence of fire or the sun. And that city contained various trees composed of gems and sweet-voiced feathered ones. And furnished with four gates and gateways and towers the impregnable (city) was inhabited by the Paulamas and Kalakanjas. And it was made of all sorts of jewels and was unearthly and of wonderful appearance. And it was covered with trees of all kinds of gems, bearing fruits and flowers. And it contained exceedingly beautiful unearthly birds (Mahabharata, 3.173.1-4).

This city and its inhabitants who were invincible by the gods themselves were destroyed by Arjuna. Arjuna wins the praise of all the celestials and is duly rewarded. Soon Arjuna returns to his brothers and Draupadi in the forest with the weapons he had acquired from the gods.

Arjuna travels again into many regions when accompanying the aswamedha horse. But this expedition does not bring any glories to Arjuna. True he protects the horse and
brings it back for Yudhishthira to complete the sacrifice. But he has faced failure more than once in battle in this journey. He is defeated by his own son and is revived by one of his four wives. This voyage does not give Arjuna any of the grandeur and splendour of his previous adventures. In fact, it is less constructive and rigorous than his previous expeditions.

5.3.6 Weapons

The weapons of the hero are his most important tools and the external identification of the hero. The hero is always an expert in the art of weaponry. This emphasises the skill, strength and discernment of the hero himself. The special weapon of the hero stands as the symbol of his expertise. Miller says, 'Indeed in the weaponry of the typical hero we can detect a dreadful and wonderful congruence between human imagination and human skill; between symbol and solid fact, fancied notion and finished craft' (Miller, 2002, p206).

Almost all the epics go into great detailed description and the naming of the weapons of the hero. Among the European and Eurasian epics, the sword is the principal weapon. In the Germanic epics, the Old Norse sagas, the Old Irish Ulster Cycle, and in the Old French epics the sword becomes the most important weapon. The shield, spear and the knife are also weapons which are significant. In the Celtic tradition, the slingshot is considered as a main weapon. Both Cu Chulainn and Tuatha De Danaan use the slingshot, as young David did, as a deadly missile. In the West, the bow and arrow 'was regarded as a gentleman's arm' (Miller, 2002, p207). Odysseus possesses a mighty bow that he uses with dexterity. In the Iliad, the bow is used by Alexandros-Paris and Teukros (Ford, 1977).

In the Indian tradition the bow becomes the most important weapon of the hero. The Pinaka of Siva, the Kodhanada of Rama, the Gandiva of Arjuna, and the Saranga of Krishna, are the most celebrated bows in the Indian epics. The Sutharsana - the discus of Krishna – is another powerful weapon that becomes instrumental in destroying evil and
establishing righteousness. There are many other powerful astras that are released from the bows of the heroes, which are named in the epics. Some of them are the Agneya that creates fire, the Varuna weapon that creates water, Paruanya that creates cloud, the Vayavya that creates air, the Bhauma weapon that creates land, the Parvatya that creates mountains, and the Antardhana which is capable of making all the other weapons disappear. There were other weapons such as the Brahmasira, a weapon capable of causing universal destruction and the Vasavi dart that is capable of destroying only one powerful foe; another powerful weapon mentioned in the Mahabharata is the Vaishnavasstra, which Krishna bore on his breast and frustrated to save Arjuna’s life,

'It has been suggested with considerable grounding, that only after the development of the so called damascened or faggot forged sword blade, probably in the sixth or seventh century, did this weapon achieve its exceptional yet conventional place as a nearly ubiquitous partner to the warrior hero and like the hero, its name' (Salin, 1957, Cited in Miller, 2002, p448)

Donald Meek in his article ‘The Banners of the Finn in Gaelic Tradition’ gives the details of the named swords in Celtic literature. In the Old Irish tradition king Fergus mac Leide’s sword, ‘the best blade that was then in Ireland’, is called Caladcolg or Calâdâbolg (Meek, 1986). Arthur’s sword is named Excalibur, the knife of Arthur, is Bronllafn, the magic knife of Osla, the Great-Knife (Ford, 1977). In the French, German and Scandinavian epics too, we find the image of the named swords of the heroes. The weapon of the warrior hero becomes so much an important icon that it takes on an almost human representation. It has its own characteristics and its beauty and strength celebrated as much as the hero himself. Hatto, in his translation of Nibelungenlied, has included the name of the sword Balmung in his glossary of names for he feels that ‘in heroic poetry swords are Persons’ (Hatto, 1981). The sword of the Serb hero Marko Kraljevic knows its master and would not let itself be drawn from the scabbard until it came to the hands of the prince (Miller, 2002, p208). In the Celtic tradition the swords would turn against their own masters if those warriors should lie (Cross & Slover, 1985).
The weapon of the hero, which is part of the hero’s personality, must ‘die’ with the hero. The Serb hero Prince Marko breaks his razor sword into four pieces so that his enemies will not have it. The weapons that were placed in the grave of the warriors of the Bronze Age and Iron Age were either bent or broken which indicated the ‘death’ of the weapons along with that of the owner.

Among the Pandavas it is Arjuna who goes about collecting weapons. Arjuna acquires a number of weapons on various occasions. In his youth he is gifted with the Brahmasira weapon by Drona for saving his life. It is significant that Drona gifted this weapon to Arjuna while he withheld it from his own son. Most probably, Drona understood the temperament of his son and that is why he withheld it from Aswatthaman. For, the Brahmasira is a weapon that should it be used against any human foe or a foe of inferior energy it had the power to burn the whole universe. Later on Aswatthaman does use it in a fit of anger at the Pandava forces soon after the KuruKshetra war is over and does cause an immense destruction. While Arjuna withdraws it and stops the universal destruction that could have been caused, we find that Aswatthaman is unable to withdraw the Brahmasira he has released and thereby causes the destruction of the entire Pandava lineage.

Arjuna wins his most important weapon the Gandiva jointly from Varuna and Agni prior to the Kandava episode. This Gandiva becomes one of the most celebrated weapons in the Indian tradition. The Mahabharata goes into great detailed description of the exquisiteness of the Gandiva of Arjuna.

He (Varuna) then gave that wonderful jewel of a bow that was endued with great energy. That bow was the enhancer of fame and achievements, and was incapable of being injured by any weapon. It was the chief of all weapons, and the grinder of them all. And it was the smiter of hostile armies and was alone equal to a hundred thousand bows. It was the multiplier of kingdoms, and was variegated with excellent colours. It was well adorned and beautiful to behold, and without a mark of weakness of injury anywhere. And it was always worshipped both by the celestials and the Gandharvas (Mahabharata, 1.225.6-9).
Arjuna also receives from Varuna two inexhaustible quivers, a car, furnished with celestial weapons the banner of which bore a large ape and steeds of silver white hue with the speed of the wind. Gratified with his son’s heroic activities Indra promises the Agneya and Vayaveya weapons that he would give when the time comes. Arjuna receives these from his father much later during his stay in the abode of Indra. During this period, Arjuna also receives fifteen more celestial weapons, along with Indra’s thunderbolt itself.

After severe austerities and a direct hand-to-hand combat with Mahadeva, Arjuna receives the Pasupatha weapon. Following which Varuna gifts Arjuna with his noose incapable of being resisted. Yama bestows upon Arjuna the weapons, mantras, and rite and the mysteries of hurling and withdrawing. Antardhana is the weapon capable of sending the foe to sleep. This is given to Arjuna by Kuvera along with celestial vision (Mahabharata, 3.41.28-49).

There is a repetition of the various gifts of weapons to Arjuna. The fleet of untiring horses yoked to the chariot of Arjuna is said to have been given along with the chariot by Varuna. The same is mentioned as a gift from Chitratha (or Chitrasena) – the chief of the Gandharvas - when Arjuna releases him after conquering him in battle on the banks of the river Ganga. He also gives Arjuna the power of creating illusions which only the Gandharvas have (Mahabharata, 1.170.41). The conch Devadatta is given by the gods just before Arjuna leaves for the battle with Nivatakavachas (Mahabharata, 3.168.85). Katz mentions ‘Devadatta, however had supposedly been given to him much earlier by the asura Maya’ (Kartz, 1990, p101).

5.3.7 Pride

Pride is an essential attribute of the warrior hero. Arjuna acquires this characteristic very early in his life. When Karna enters the arena of the tournament and performs the very deeds Arjuna had performed, Arjuna is bewildered and considers this as a personal insult to him. He expresses the same attitude in the Ekalavya episode. Arjuna is pained
to see that another can excel him in archery. He would not have anyone else placed on par with him where his martial skills are concerned.

This pride, Yudhishthira says, causes his final fall. Both Nakula and Sahadeva are said to have fallen because of their pride in their beauty and knowledge respectively. When Arjuna falls Yudhishthira tells Bhima,

> Arjuna said that he would consume all our foes in a single day. Proud of his heroism he did not, however, accomplish what he had said. Hence has he fallen down. This Phalguna disregarded all wielders of bows. And desirous of prosperity should never indulge in such sentiments' (Mahabharata, 17.2.21-22).

Hence it is Arjuna’s pride on his heroism which, Yudhishthira points out, was the cause of his final fall. Katz (1990, p205) observes ‘the fall of Arjuna causes Yudhishthira to utter a statement on heroism, which, more clearly perhaps than any other in the epic, gives expression to the human weakness of the hero’.

The pride of Arjuna is evident early in his youth. The rivalry with Kama starts early during the tutelage of Drona. In the tournament, Karna is able to perform all the feats of Arjuna. This performance of Karna is taken as a ‘personal insult or challenge’ by Arjuna. Katz comments on this temperament of Arjuna as follows: ‘It is note-worthy that Arjuna takes Karna’s performance as a personal insult or challenge: he cannot stand to be matched for he has already developed that pride which is essential to heroes’ (Kartz, 1990, p45).

This pride of Arjuna is seen throughout the epic. Arjuna is quick to challenge any opponent seen or unseen. While the Pandavas are on their way to the swayamvara of Draupadi they reach the banks of the Ganga by nightfall. Torch in hand, Arjuna walks in front of others. As they are about to cross the river Chaitaratha, the king of the Gandharvas, stops them saying that the night time is appointed as the time for the Yakashas, Gandharavas and Rakshasas. But Arjuna challenges the Gandharava king saying,
"O Gandharava seek not to terrify those that are skilled in weapons, for weapons hurled at them vanish like froth. I think, O Gandharava that ye are superior (in prowess) to men; therefore shall I fight with thee, using celestial weapons and not with any crooked means. This fiery weapon (that I shall hurl at thee), Vrihaspati the revered preceptor of Indra, gave unto Bharadwaja, from whom it was obtained by Agnivesya, and from Agniesya by my preceptor, that foremost of Brahmanas, Drona, who gave it to me."

Saying these words the Pandava wrathfully hurled at the Gandharava that blazing weapon made of fire which burnt the Gandharava’s chariot in a trice of time (Mahabharata, 1.170.27-31).

Arjuna challenges Kirata in the same way, ‘Why, again, didst thou shoot the boar that was first aimed at by me. Thou shalt not therefore, escape from me with life’ (Mahabharata, 3.39.19-20).

When the voice from the skies forbids Arjuna at the lakeside where his two younger brothers lie dead, Arjuna responds,

Do thou forbid me by appearing before me! And when thou shalt be sorely pierced with my arrows, thou wilt not then again speak in this way! Having said this, Paratha covered all sides with arrows inspired by mantras. And he also displayed his skill in shooting at an invisible mark by sound alone’ (Mahabharata, 3.313.28).

The pride Arjuna had is brought out by Krishna in an almost light-hearted manner in Udyoga Parva, He asks,

‘For what reason is it that you have selected me who will not fight at all?’ Thereupon Arjuna answered, ‘I question not that you are able to slay them, O best of men. But you are an illustrious person in the world; and this renown will accompany you. I also am a suitor for fame; therefore, you have been selected by me. It hath been always my desire to have you for driving my car. I, therefore, ask you to fulfil my desire cherished for a long time’ (Mahabharata, 5.7.34-37),

Does Krishna put this question to make Arjuna articulate the pride that he has of his warrior skills?
5.3.8 Waning of Heroic Powers

'Heroic longevity not only obtrudes into the typical biographic drama of the hero, but can bring its own woes; it is a double-edged gift, and not necessarily a welcome one. … We may even see a situation where the very essence of a markedly stoic heroism will not rest on and resonate in the bright blaze of early fears and glorious sword death, but on a resigned acceptance of old age.' (Miller, 2002, p122)

Buddhadeva Bose points out that the waning of Arjuna’s powers begins long before his old age. He discusses how soon after Salya Parva ‘Arjuna’s role is shrinking… (and) a certain darkness is settling around Arjuna’ (Bose, 1986, p176). Soon after the death of Duryodhana, the chariot of Arjuna catches fire. This chariot, which was the vehicle of Arjuna during his various combats, is reduced to ashes at the end of the Kurukshetra battle as if to symbolise that the waning of the powers of Arjuna has already begun.

Two incidents, which take place in Arjuna’s journey along with the sacrificial horse, further mark the decline of the powers of Arjuna. A battle takes place between (with?) the sons and grandsons of Trigartas, who were slain by the Pandavas in Kurukshetra. Young Dhritavarman, whose martial skill Arjuna greatly admires, wounds the hands of Arjuna and causes him to lose the grip of his mighty Gandiva. Vaisampayana describes this to the king Janamejaya as,

Dhritavarman shot a blazing arrow at him. Deeply pierced in the hand by that arrow, Vijaya became stupefied and his bow, O king, when it fell from the grasp of Arjuna resembled, O Bharata, that of the bow of Indra (that is seen in the welkin after a shower) (Mahabharata, 14.75.21,22).

Katz (1990) refers to the next episode as ‘one of the most humanizing events of Arjuna’s career’. Arjuna challenges his son Vabhruvahana, who is not at all inclined to fight with his father. Encouraged by Ulipi, Vabhruvahana vanquishes and kills his father. Fight between a father and son is a common motif in the epic tradition. In Mahabharata itself, Arjuna fights with his father in the Kandava episode. In the Shahnama Rustam
fights with Sohrab. *Tain Bo Cuailnge* (The Cattle Raid of Cooley) tells of the fight between Cu Chulainn and his son Connla. But in *Shahnama* and *Tain Bo Cuailnge* it is the father who comes out as the winner and is established as the greater of the two. But in the Indian tradition it is the father who is defeated by the son. Just as Arjuna defeated his father now Arjuna is defeated by his son. *Mahabharata* describes this incident as,

> The mighty Vabhruvahana, thinking that his father was no longer able to face him, again afflicted him with many shafts resembling snakes of virulent poison. From a spirit of boyishness, he then vigorously pierced his father in the breast with a whetted shaft equipped with excellent wings. That shaft, O king, penetrated the body of Pandu's son and reaching his very vitals caused him great pain. The delighter of the Kurus, Dhananjaya, deeply pierced therewith by his son, then fell down in a swoon on the earth. When that hero, that bearer of the burdens of the Kurus, fell down, the son of Chitrangada also became deprived of his senses. The latter's swoon was due to his exertions in battle as also to his grief at seeing his sire slain (*Mahabharata*, 14.79.34-36).

Now the younger generation of warriors seem to be able to defeat the great Pandava hero. Heroism seems to have been taken over by the younger generation...

'The meaning of the Mausala Parva for Arjuna's life is that it marks the waning of his heroic power' (Kartz, 1990, p202). With the death of Krishna, Arjuna feels his strength and valour draining away from him. He is no longer the hero who fought tirelessly. When Arjuna escorts the women and children from Dwaraka, a band of robbers attacks them. Arjuna tries to fight the robbers, and finds that he is unable to do so. In the words of Vaisampayana,

> Then Arjuna endeavoured to string his large, indestructible celestial bow with some effort. He succeeded with great difficulty in stringing it, when the battle had become furious. He then began to think of his celestial weapons but they would not come to his mind. Beholding that furious battle, the loss of the might of his arm, and the non-appearance of his celestial weapons, Arjuna became greatly ashamed. The Vrishni warriors including the foot-soldiers, the elephant-warriors and the car-men failed to rescue those Vrishni women that were being snatched away by the robbers. The concourse was very large. The robbers attacked it at different points. Arjuna tried his best to protect it, but could not succeed. In the very sight of all the warriors, many foremost of ladies were dragged
away, while others went away with the robbers of their own accord. The puissant Arjuna, supported by the servants of the Vrishnis, struck the robbers with shafts sped from Gandiva. Soon, however, O king, his shafts were exhausted. In former days, his shafts had been inexhaustible. Now, however, they proved otherwise. Finding his shafts exhausted, he had become deeply afflicted with grief. The son of Indra then began to strike the robbers with the horns of his bow. Those Milecchas, however, O Janamejaya, in the very sight of Partha, retreated, taking away with them many foremost ladies of the Vrishnis and Andhakas. The puissant Dhananjaya regarded it all as the work of destiny. Filled with sorrow he breathed heavy sighs, at the thought of the non-appearance of his (celestial) weapons, the loss of the might of his arms, the refusal of his bow to obey him, and the exhaustion of his shafts. Regarding it all as the work of destiny, he became exceedingly cheerless. He then ceased, O king, further efforts, saying, he had not the power which he had before (Mahabharata, 16.7.54-66).

Later when Arjuna goes to the hermitage of Vyasa, he tells Vyasa how his weapons have failed him.

Taking up my bow I found myself unequal to even string it. The might that had existed in my arms seemed to have disappeared on that occasion. O great ascetic, my weapons of diverse kinds failed to make their appearance. Soon my shafts became exhausted (Mahabharata, 16.8.17).

Vyasa tells Arjuna that the time has come for him not only to withdraw from this world but also to give up his weapons. But Arjuna does not take heed of this statement (advice?) of Vyasa. He continues to cling on to his Gandiva and the quivers even though they are of no use to him now. Neither does he realise that the incident in the forest has been a sign that he is no longer fit to bear the great Gandiva. On his final journey after installing Parikshit as the king, ‘Dhananjaya had not cast off his celestial bow Gandiva nor his couple of inexhaustible quivers, actuated, Pandavas king, by the cupidity that attaches one to things of great value’ (Mahabharata, 17.1.34).

Soon Agni confronts Arjuna and requests him to return the weapons to Varuna who had procured them a long time before during the Kandava episode. We recall that Vyasa had told Arjuna that he had to part with his weapons and that they would have to go to the place from where they came (Mausala Parava VIII). Arjuna has no other choice but to
throw the bow into the waters of the seas. We find Arjuna at the final stage of his life shorn of all his weapons. Moreover, it will not be too long before Arjuna himself will depart from this world.

5.3.9 Death

A good death for a hero is a sword death. But no such death awaits Arjuna or, for that matter, any of the Pandavas. Buddhadeva Bose commenting on the death of Pandavas says,

In contrast to the way the enemy warriors were hailed in their death, these brothers come to an insignificant end... the dharma-abiding Yajnaseni and the pious-souled Pandavas die meanly – not struck down by weapons, but like the feeble, swooning – like the sick suddenly falling by the wayside. Nature does not register any mark (Bose, 1986, p190).

He contrasts their death with that of Duryodhana, Karna, Bhishma, Drona, and Jayadratha and many others.

However, Arjuna fulfils the heroic motif in his death/near death and resurrection episodes. There are altogether three episodes where Arjuna faces death/near death and is resurrected from death. In all these incidents, Arjuna faces a 'good death', challenging his opponent. The first occurrence is the encounter with Siva disguised as a mountain man, Kirata. Here Arjuna takes on a Bhima-like disposition.

The mighty son of Pritha then, his mouth smoking with wrath, struck the invincible god in the form of a Kirata, with his clenched fists, blows that descended like thunderbolts. The god in the Kirata form returned Phalgunas's blows with fierce blows, resembling the thunderbolts of Indra. And in consequence of that conflict of blows between the son of Pandu and the Kirata, there arose in that place loud and frightful sounds. That terrible conflict of blows, resembling the conflict of yore between Vritra and Vasava, lasted but for a moment. The mighty Jishnu clasping the Kirata began to press him with his breast, but the Kirata, possessed of great strength pressed the insensible son of Pandu with force. And in consequence of the pressure of their arms and of their breasts, their bodies
began to emit smoke like charcoal in fire. The great god then, smiting the already smitten son of Pandu, and attacking him in anger with his full might deprived him of his senses. Then... Phalguna, thus pressed by the god of the gods, with limbs, bruised and mangled, became incapable of motion and was almost reduced to a ball of flesh (Mahabharata, 3.39.55-62).

Arjuna falls dead only to regain his strength and the weapons he had lost to Kirata along with the Pasupata weapon from Siva.

The second occasion too occurs in Vana Prava. When all the Pandavas except Yudhishtira are killed by the Yaksha at the lakeside. While all the other three brothers decide to drink the water first then deal with the situation afterwards, Arjuna alone challenges the unknown being.

Partha (Arjuna) covered all sides with arrows inspired by mantras. And he also displayed his skill in shooting at an invisible mark by sound alone. And... sorely afflicted with thirst, he discharged barbed darts and javelins and iron arrows and showered on the sky innumerable shafts incapable of being baffled (3.312.29).

He is restored to life by the god of justice soon afterwards.

The third episode occurs much later in Arjuna’s life. In Aswamedha Parva, Arjuna faces death at the hands of his son. Commenting on the ‘tension and antagonism, possible fatal antagonism, between father or genitor and heroic son’, Miller says,

A hero is allowed to have a son; this son reveals his own heroic aptitudes far from the paternal home or zone of action; the son eventually returns or otherwise encounters the father, and although the son carries some token to identify him, the sign is revealed too late and the son is slain (Miller, 2002, p88).

In the case of Arjuna and his son the situation is seen in the reverse. It is the father who is killed by the son. Arjuna encounters his son in Manipura where his son is the king and is killed by his son. This time no divine power revives Arjuna but the gem
which is placed on his breast; a gem which Ulupi says revives dead snakes. ‘Note that it is only with the aid of a non human helper that Arjuna can continue to live on this occasion’ (Kartz, 1990, p198). (Check)

5.4 Vyasa and Krishna

5.4.1 Complemental Characters

The two Krishnas, Krishna Dwaipayana Vyasa, the rishi, and Vasudeva Krishna, prince of the Yadava clan, are two characters who traverse the fabric of Mahabharata in undeclared collaboration. Not only do they share the same name and complexion of dark hue they also act in accordance complementing each other in the epic. Surprisingly, both of them are explicitly involved in their joint function.

Vyasa is traditionally identified as the arranger of the four Vedas, composer of the Mahabharata and the many puranas. Some scholars would rather see Vyasa as a symbol of the collective authorship of the Mahabharata. Others tend to see him as a mythical figure whose ‘existence is impossible to prove except in myths and legends such as are preserved in the epic’ (Sullivan, 1999, p1). Hiltebeitel (2001, p46) comments, ‘no one has adequately theorized the relation between Vyasa’s interventions in the main story... ...and the passages where he moves around the epic’s inner and outer frames’. Mehta (1990) cites thirty occasions where Vyasa enters the events of the epic and Hiltebeitel mentions forty-one occurrences in the epic connected with Vyasa.

Vyasa is an important and active participant in the story of Mahabharata. This unusual situation of the author appearing as a character in his own composition points to the nature of Vyasa’s authorship of the epic. Here it has to be pointed out that though Vyasa is the author of Mahabharata nowhere does he intrude into the narration of Vaisampayana. First person narration never occurs in the unravelling of the story; it is Vyasa’s disciple who retells the story as he had heard it from his guru. The final stage of the narration is to the rishis of the Naimisha forest by Sauti who had been present at the
snake sacrifice of Janamejaya where Vaisampayana, one of Vyasa’s five disciples, had narrated the Mahabharata in the presence of Vyasa.

Vyasa is the composer as well as the creator of the Bharata family on which the epic is centred. Vyasa makes possible the continuance of the Bharata race by fathering Dhrtarashtra and Pandu. In the next generation when Gandhari gives birth to a mass of flesh, Vyasa divides it into a hundred portions and preserves them until they mature into the hundred Kauravas.

It is Vyasa who advises the Pandavas to get married to Draupadi. He tells the story of Draupadi’s previous birth and convinces Drupada to let his daughter marry the five Pandavas. According to Sullivan,

(Vyasa) plays the important role in supervising the Pandavas’ transition from one stage of life to another... ...effectively guiding the Pandavas from the student to the householder stage. Vyasa later advised the Pandavas to retire from administrating the realm to make the final journey thus guiding them from being householders to ascetics (Sullivan, 1999, p48).

While the character of Vyasa is present from the very beginning of the epic and a detailed account of his birth is given to us, neither of these facts can be observed where Krishna is concerned. Krishna enters the epic narration for the first time, in the amphitheatre of Draupadi’s swayamvara; he is among those who have come to view the event. Nothing of the birth or childhood of Krishna is evoked here; he is simply referred to as leader of the Vrishni, Andhaka and Yadava tribes. The popular image of Krishna as an impish little boy among the cowherds or the playful youth who steals away the hearts of the gopis cannot be found in the epic Mahabharata. These images of Krishna belong to another tradition, the Bhagavata tradition, altogether - the Krishna of Mahabharata is of a different calibre.

Mahabharata has repeated references to Krishna as the eternal God, as the reincarnation of Vishnu and Narayana. Krishna manifests his cosmic form to others more
than once in the Mahabharata. Nevertheless, the exclusion of the divinity of Krishna from the character does not diminish the magnitude of his role in the epic in any way. As soon as he recognises the Pandavas in the swayamvara of Draupadi he establishes himself as the ally of the Pandavas and continues to function in this capacity throughout the epic. He goes to the extent of risking his own life and fame for the good of the Pandavas; hence, Krishna becomes the chief supporter of the Pandavas.

The role of the two Krishnas in Mahabharata interlock even though they belong to entirely different stations in life - Vyasa as an ascetic living in an unknown hermitage and Vausdeva Krishna, as a prince and leader of the Yadava people. While the former is involved in the passive brahmanic role the latter is engages himself in the active kshatriya role. Although they function from two different angles, their actions converge towards the same end.

5.4.2 Draupadi’s Marriage

The event of the marriage of Draupadi brings together the combined efforts of Krishna and Vyasa. While the Pandavas live in the village of Ekachra (spelling) disguised as brahamanas Vyasa visits them once and tells the Pandavas the story of a rishi’s daughter who does penance to obtain a husband. When Siva appears to her and gives her a boon, in her eagerness, she requests for ‘a husband endued with every accomplishment’ five times. And Siva tells her, ‘Thou hast, O girl said full five times, ‘Give me (a) husband’. Thou shalt, therefore in another life have five husbands!’ Vyasa tells the Pandavas

Ye princes of Bharata’s line that damsel of celestial beauty hath been born in the line of Drupada. The faultless Krishna of Prishata’s (spelling) line hath been appointed to be the wife of you all. Ye mighty ones, go therefore, to the capital of the Panchalas and dwell ye there. There is no doubt that having said so unto the Pandavas, the illustrious and blessed grandsire then bade them farewell. The great ascetic then left them and went to the place whence he come (Mahabharata, 1.169.9-16).
With Vyasa’s encouragement, the Pandavas, still disguised as brahmanas, go to the Panchala land. There, Vyasa once again visits them as if to ensure that they have safely reached their destination. For, unlike in the previous instance, no detail of the conversation between Vyasa and the Pandavas is mentioned here. Vyasa had already told them the necessary information about Draupadi and ‘the great heroes’ hearts were struck by the dart of the god of love’, says Vaisampayana. ‘And on their way those heroes beheld the illustrious Dwaipayana, that muni of pure soul, and perfectly sinless. And duly saluting the rishi and saluted by him, after their conversation was over, commanded by him they proceeded to Drupada’s abode’ (Mahabharata, 1.185.2-3). Vyasa enters at this point as if to see to it that they are on the proper path to the land of the Panchalas (repeated?). Vyasa recedes ‘to the place whence he had come’, until the swayamvara is over.

In the amphitheatre where the swayamvara is to take place, Krishna is present. Krishna and Balarama are listed along with the celestial beings who had come to witness the marriage of Draupadi and not among the king who have come to participate in the contest. Krishna immediately recognises the Pandavas and points them out to his brother. When Arjuna, in the guise of a brahmana, wins the hand of Draupadi all the kings protest and a battle breaks out. Krishna intervenes; he settles the matter by emphasising that Draupadi has been won according to dharma.

(Krishna) gently addressed the assembled monarchs. Saying, ‘This maiden hath been justly acquired (by the brahmana)’, he induced them to abandon the fight. Accomplished in battle, those monarchs then returned to their respective kingdoms, wondering much (Mahabharata, 190.38-39).

Soon he visits the Pandavas briefly at the potter’s abode and hurriedly leaves before anyone else suspects the disguise of Pandavas.

When the Pandavas and Kunti inform Drupada that Draupadi will marry all the Pandavas the king is confused. ‘Just at that time, however, the island born (Vyasa)... ...came there in course of wanderings’ (Mahabharata, 1.195.33). 

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Then the illustrious Vyasa – the master Dwaipayana – rose and taking hold of Drupada’s hand led him to a private apartment. The Pandavas and Kunti and Dhristadyumna (spelling?) of Prishata’s race sat there waiting for the return of Vyasa and Drupada. Meanwhile Dwaipayana began his discourse with illustrious monarch for explaining how the practice of polyandry could not be regarded as sinful (Mahabharata, 1.196.21-23).

Vyasa recounts the mythical story of the five Indras and the story of Draupadi’s previous birth – of Siva granting her the boon of five husbands in another birth - and assures Drupada that it is right that Draupadi should marry the Pandavas. ‘With these revelations Vyasa swept aside all oppositions to their (the Pandavas) marrying Draupadi’ (Suillivan, 1999, p48).

Drupada, on hearing this observed, O great Rishi it was only when I had not heard this from thee that I sought to act in the way I told thee of. Now, however that I know all, I cannot be indifferent to what hath been ordained by the gods. Therefore do I resolve to accomplish what thou hast said (Mahabharata, 1.198.1).

When Vyasa had said so, the king makes arrangements for the marriage of his daughter. Soon the marriage takes place. Vyasa guides the Pandavas to the land of the Panchalas from the village of Ekachakra and sees to that they are married to Draupadi by dispelling the doubts that Drupada had about the marriage.

Krishna takes on anther function in this same sequence of events. He is the first to recognise the Pandavas in the arena of the swyamavara. When the other kings become enraged that Draupadi has been won by a brahmanana and a battle begins Krishna eases the situation by saying that Draupadi has been won according to dharma. He goes to the potter’s house to meet the Pandavas and Kunti briefly. He returns to his own kingdom and sends them many valuable gifts ‘of gold ornaments, pearls, gems, costly robes, servants by thousands, well-trained elephants, many excellent horses, cars, vessels by the hundreds set with gems and diamonds and coins of pure gold by crores upon crores in separate heaps’ (Mahabharata, 1.199.13-18).
In the court of Dhrtarastra when the discussion about the Pandavas goes on among Bhishma, Drona, Dhrtarastra and Vidura, Vidura says ‘They who have Rama (Valadeva) as their ally and Janardana (Krishna) as their counsellor…. (Mahabharata, 1.205.20)’ Already Krishna is recognised as the counsellor of the Pandavas. And it is not surprising that we find the Pandavas in the company of Krishna when Vidura visits them in the court of Drupada with Dhrtarastra’s message. When Vidura delivers the message that Dhrtarastra would like the Pandavas to come back to their ancestral land, Drupada looks upon to the opinion of Krishna. Krishna, in turn, expresses his opinion that the Pandavas should accept the invitation of Dhrtarastra and accompanies them to Hastinapura.

We find both Vyasa and Krishna acting in a complementary manner. Vyasa explains the mythic association of the Pandavas and Draupadi and Krishna’s actions are related to the kshatriya mode – he intervenes in the battle among the kings. While Vyasa sanctions the marriage by relating the mythic stories, Krishna states that since Draupadi was won according to the regulation set by Drupada, the others should accept it. And the kings, without any protest, accept this argument of Krishna as if recognising his authority.

5.4.3 Establishment of Pandavas in Indraprasta

When half the kingdom is given to Yudhishthira, Krishna along with Vyasa establishes the Pandavas in Kandavaprastha, which is described as an ‘unreclaimed desert’. With the collective effort of Krishna and Vyasa, the Pandavas change the ‘terrible forest’ into a magnificent city.

The Pandavas with Krishna at their head, arriving there, beautified the place and made it a second heaven. And those mighty car-warriors, selecting with Dwaipayana’s assistance a sacred and auspicious region, performed certain propitiatory ceremonies and measured out a piece of land for their city (Mahabharata, 1.207.26-29).

Decked with innumerable mansions, the city became like unto Amaravati and came to be called Indraprasta. ‘Having settled the Pandavas there the heroic Krishna obtaining leave came back with Rama to Dwaraka’ (Mahabharata, 1.207.52). Nothing is mentioned
about Vyasa at this point. Vyasa too, most properly, left to his hermitage. When the celestial rishi Narada comes to the court of Yudhishthira and advises them to set up a rule among the Pandavas regarding Draupadi, Vyasa’s presence is not pointed out. If Vyasa was present in the court of Yudhishthira, he would definitely been there to receive and do the proper honours to Narada. Since nothing is mentioned about his presence, we may presume that Vyasa too had left Indarprasta.

Subsequently we meet Krishna at the end of Arjuna’s self-imposed exile. Krishna tells Arjuna that the only way to marry his sister Subhadra is to abduct her. He supports this marriage when the other Yadavas who protest against Arjuna’s action. Krishna along with his kinsmen comes to Indraprasta to celebrate the marriage of Arjuna and Subdhara and stays on to perform the birth ceremonies of Abhimanyu. It is during this period that Krishna, along with Arjuna, burns the Kandava forest.

By these two events, Krishna strengthens the might of the Pandavas. The marriage to Subhadra acquires for the Pandavas a strong alliance. It is through this marriage that the Kuru line will continue. Structurally too this marriage becomes important in the epic for it is in the snake sacrifice of Janamejaya, the great grand son of Arjuna and Subhadra, that Visayampayana narrates the Mahabharata. The Kandava episode grants Arjuna his Gandiva and the two inextinguishable quivers, the chariot with a fleet of untiring horses and the promise of the celestial weapons in the future. Here Krishna supports and aids in increasing the martial powers of the Pandavas. At the end of the Kandava episode Krishna asks from Indra the boon of eternal friendship with Arjuna. He also requests Maya to build a magnificent palace for Yudhishtira,

Indeed, build thou such a palace that persons belonging to the world of men may not be able to imitate it even after examining it with care, while seated within. And, O Maya, build thou a mansion in which we may behold a combination of godly, asuric and human designs’ (Mahabharata, 2.1.12-13).

‘In fact, (this) very architecture will make a fool of Duryodhana, leading him to covet the Pandavas’ prosperity and to formulate his plan to divest them of it by inviting them to
a dice game' (Hiltebeitel, 1992, p87). Soon after this request to Maya, Krishna leaves for Dwaraka.

5.4.4 Rajasuya and Aswamedha Sacrifices

In the list of the great munis who are present at the inauguration of the palatial sabha, Vyasa is listed. Vyasa is present here with his son Suka, and his four other disciples. Yudhishtira discusses with his counsellors the prospect of holding the rajasuya sacrifice. Vyasa is among those who advise him and assure him that he has all the attributes to perform the sacrifice that will make him the king of kings.

However, Yudhishtira needs the assurance of Krishna to go ahead with the preparations. Thus, he sends a messenger to Krishna who arrives promptly at Indraprasta. Krishna informs Yudhishtira that Jarasandha has to be conquered and stopped from performing the cruel act of sacrificing one hundred kings before Yudhishtira can perform the rajasuya sacrifice. He says,

He that will vanquish Jarasandha will surely become the emperor of all the kshatriyas... ...The time has come for the destruction of Jarasandha. He is incapable of being vanquished in battle even by all the celestials and the Asuras (fighting together). We think, however, that he should be vanquished in a personal struggle with bare arms. In me is policy, in Bhima is strength and in Arjuna is triumph and therefore, as prelude to performing the Rajasuya, we will certainly achieve the destruction of the ruler of Magadha (Mahabharata, 2.20.1-3).

Krishna devises the means by which Jarasandha can be destroyed and accomplishes it with the assistance of Arjuna and Bhima.

Now Vyasa takes over the performance of the sacrifice itself. Vyasa with his son and disciples officiates at the sacrifice. 'The son of Satyavati became himself the brahmana of sacrifice' (Mahabharata, 2.33.34).
Krishna, by killing Sisupala, prevents the possible disruption of the *rajasuya* sacrifice and helps to conclude it successfully. After all the kings have left, Krishna too leaves for Dwaraka. When Vyasa comes to Yudhishtira with his disciples to take leave, Yudhishtira asks Vyasa if the bad omens predicted by Narada have been fulfilled by the death of Sisupala. Vyasa tells Yudhishtira that the full annihilation of the *kshatriya* lies ahead and he, Yudhishtira, will be the sole cause of it. He tells Yudhishtira of the dream he will have of Siva facing the south towards the land of the dead, just before the destruction begins (though no such dream of Yudhishtira is mentioned at the end of the thirteen years of exile of the Pandavas). Vyasa too takes leave of the Pandavas saying that he shall ‘now proceed towards Kailasa mountain’ accompanied by his disciples. With their efforts in establishing Yudhishtira as the king of kings completed both Krishna and Vyasa go their own ways.

Just as they had combined their efforts during Yudhishtira’s *rajasuya* sacrifice both Vyasa and Krishna come together in prompting Yudhishtira to perform the *aswamedha* sacrifice. At the end of the war, Yudhishtira’s mind is filled with anguish with regard to the colossal loss of human life. He holds himself responsible for the death of so many of his kinsmen and the innumerable others who died in the great war. Even the battlefield oration of Bhishma is not able to bring peace to the mind of Yudhishtira. The death of Bhishma plunges Yudhishtira into even deeper grief. He once more begins to meditate on renouncing his kingdom and go as an ascetic into the woods. Krishna and Vyasa take turns to advise Yudhishtira once again and suggest to him that he should perform the *aswamedha* sacrifice in order to drive away the anguish in his mind. Krishna tells Yudhishtira, ‘If a person indulges excessively in sorrow for his departed forefathers, he grieves them. (Therefore banishing grief), do thou now celebrate many a sacrifice with suitable presents to the priests….’ (*Mahabharata*, 14.2.2-3).

Vyasa instructs Yudhishtira where to find the wealth that he needs for the horse sacrifice; Vyasa is also present with the Pandavas when they find the spot where the treasure was buried. When the Pandavas return with the wealth to Hastinapura, Krishna
is there to welcome them. Yudhishthira now expresses his desire to perform the horse
sacrifice to Vyasa,

This treasure, O holy one, which has been brought through thy grace, I
wish to devote to that great sacrifice known by the name of the horse-
sacrifice. O best of ascetics, I desire to have thy permission. We are all,
O rishi, at thy disposal, and at that of the high-souled Krishna
(Mahabharata, 14.71.13-14).

At the end of the aswamedha sacrifice Yudhishthira says that he shall give whole
earth to Vyasa. Vyasa replies,

The Earth has been given by thee to me. I, however, give her back to thee.
Do thou give unto the these brahmanas gold. Let the earth be thine.’
Then Vasudeva, addressing king Yudhishthira the just, said, ‘It behoveth
thee to do as thou art bid by the illustrious Vyasa (Mahabharata, 14.89.16-
18).

Thus Krishna persuades Yudhishthira to accept and govern the earth which Vyasa had
‘given’ to him. In the aswamedha sacrifice, too as in the rajasuya sacrifice, we see
Vyasa and Krishna are involved jointly. They once again restore the sovereignty of
Yudhishthira through their combined efforts.

5.4.5 During Vanavasa

Soon after the rajasuya sacrifice is over both Vyasa and Krishna take leave of the
Pandavas and absent themselves from the events that follows. Though the suggestion is
there that the power of Krishna protected Draupadi from being disrobed, his presence is
neither acknowledged nor declared by anyone ‘Hearing the words of Draupadi, Krishna
was deeply moved. And leaving his seat, the benevolent one, from compassion, arrived
there on foot’ (Mahabharata, 2.68.45).

The absence of Krishna during the game of dice and the following events is explained
later. Krishna himself says that he was away engaged in a war with the son of Sisupala.
But there is no explanation given for the absence of Vyasa. Vyasa who had gone away
soon after the *rajasuya* sacrifice returns in time to caution the Kauravas about their actions against the Pandavas when Duryodhana and his allies decide to go after the Pandavas with the intention of waging war against them.

It is interesting to note that their roles are slightly altered in the visits to the Pandavas in exile. The Kauravas hatch a fresh plan to attack the Pandavas in the forest. 'Knowing by his spiritual vision that they had gone out, the master Krishna Dwaipayana of pure soul came upon them, and commanded them to desist' (*Mahabharata*, 3.7.23-24). Vyasa stops an unwanted war that might have broken out. Soon after this incident, Yudhishtira Bhima and Draupadi are involved in a discussion about the future and their fears about winning the war against Duryodhana in which they will have to fight against Bhishma Drona and Kripa and most of all Karna.

And while the sons of Pandu were thus conversing with each other, there came to that spot the great ascetic Vyasa, the son of Satyavati... (and) ...addressing Yudhishtira, said, O Yudhishtira, thou of mighty arms, knowing by spiritual insight what is passing in thy heart, I have come to thee, O bull among men! The fear that is in thy heart arising from Bhishma, Drona, and Kripa and Karna and Drona’s son and prince Duryodhana and Dussasana, I will dispel, O slayer of all foes, by means of an act enjoyed by the ordinance. Hearing it from me, accomplish it thou with patience, and having accomplished it, O king, quell this fever of thine soon (*Mahabharata*, 3.36.25-27).

Vyasa teaches the *pravidya* which he says will enable Yudhishtira to win the war against Duryodhana. Through this knowledge which he instructs Yudhishtira to pass on to Arjuna, who in turn will gratify Siva and the Lokapalas and obtain the many celestial weapons which will be the doom of the Kauravas. In both these occasions, Vyasa is of assistance in the warrior mode of his grandsons.

During his first visit to the Pandavas in the forest, Krishna pacifies Draupadi by saying 'Weep not, for I will exert to the utmost of my powers for the sons of Pandu!' While Dhrishtadyumna pledges 'I will slay Duryodhana, Sikhandin will slay the grandfather' and so on, Krishna says,
O lord of earth, if I had been at Dwaraka, then O king, this would not have befallen thee! And, O irrepresible one, coming unto the gambling match, even if uninvited by the son of Amvika (Dhrtarastra), or Duryodhana, or by the other Kauravas, I would have prevented the game from taking place (Mahabharata, 3.13.1-2).

Krishna here is not talking of the kshatriya prowess but about the evils of gambling. Had he been present, he would have stopped the gambling match by pointing out its evils to everyone. ‘Had he been present the dice game could not have taken pace, or, perhaps better could not have taken place with the same results’ (Hiltebeitel, 1992, p93).

The next time Krishna is seen with the Pandavas is when Draupadi is in a dilemma about how to feed the sage Durvasa and his disciples. Duryodhana sends the sage and his disciples with the evil intention of bringing harm to the Pandavas. The guests reach the forest abode of the Pandavas at a time when Draupadi has already taken her meal and the vessel given by the sun god emptied and cleaned. Krishna who arrives in answer to Draupadi’s fervent prayer dispels the anxiety of the Pandavas. By swallowing a particle of the rice and vegetable sticking at the rim of the vessel, he satisfies the hunger of the sage and his disciples. ‘And it was thus the machinations of the wicked sons of Dhrtarastra about the Pandavas in the forest, were frustrated’ (Mahabharata, 3.263.49). Krishna leaves as abruptly as he had come.

Here again the assistance that Krishna gives to the Pandavas has nothing to do with the kshatriya prowess unlike the assistance given by Vyasa. Vyasa is instrumental in Pandavas acquiring the celestial weapons that would help them win the war with the Kauravas. Throughout the vanavasa of the Pandavas, Vyasa and Krishna visit them and give confidence to them in their despondent circumstances.

5.4.6 Non-Combatants

Both Krishna and Vyasa act as non-combatants in the war. Vyasa tells Dhrtarastra time after time that the only way for the Kauravas to survive is to make peace with the
Pandavas. Krishna goes as an envoy of Yudhishthira to the Kuru court and tries to stop the impending war. However, neither of them succeeds. Dhrtarastra is too weak to control his son. He is also blinded by the love he has for his son to see that Duryodhana is doing wrong to the Pandavas. Krishna tells Duryodhana that what he is doing is wrong and that he should give the Pandavas their share of the kingdom but Duryodhana refuses to listen to the counsel of anyone.

Arjuna and Duryodhana go to Krishna requesting Krishna’s assistance in the impending war. Krishna offers his assistance to both; he gives the choice between the large army called the Narayanas and Krishna alone as a non-combatant. Arjuna chooses Krishna while Duryodhana chooses the great army of Krishna. As a non-combatant Krishna is the charioteer of Arjuna in the battle. He is also the chief advisor to the Pandavas. In every stage of the battle, the Pandavas depend on Krishna’s directions. When Arjuna falters at the sight of his grandfather and guru and other relatives and friends with whom he must fight Krishna instructs him on his duty and convince Arjuna that it is his duty to fight. The dejected Arjuna regains his morale and is resolved to fight.

Hiltebeitel (1992) in his The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahabharata discusses how Krishna is instrumental in the death of all the four main marshals of the Kaurava side. Seeing that the Pandava troops are unable to withstand Bhishma’s attack Krishna says that if Arjuna is unwilling to fight with Bhishma he would do so. Yudhishthira would not hear of Krishna breaking his vow for his sake; therefore, he says that he would go to Bhishma and get his counsel as he had promised before the war. The Pandavas, along with Krishna, go to Bhishma for his advice; Bhishma says ‘Beholding any inauspicious omen I would never fight’. Bhishma tells them that Arjuna should fight him keeping Sikhandin before him. Even while ‘Bhishma maps out his own death’ Arjuna is filled with grief. Seeing Arjuna so dejected and not inclined to fight the battle, Krishna reminds him of his duties. He also reminds Arjuna that once he had vowed to slay Bhishma and that he has to fulfil his promise.
Having vowed the slaughter of Bhishma before, O Jishnu, how canst thou abstain from slaying him, agreeably to the duties of a Kshatriya? ...(This) is the eternal duty sanctioned for the Kshatriya, viz. that they should fight, protect subjects and perform sacrifices, all without malice (Mahabharata, 6.108.96,102).

Instructed by Krishna Arjuna agrees to fight the battle against Bhishma and overthrows him thereby procuring victory to the Pandavas troops.

Drona too is defeated through the ‘device adopted for victory’ by Krishna. Drona had earlier said, ‘I shall abandon my weapons in battle having heard something very disagreeable’. Krishna’s plans the ‘disagreeable’ news for Drona. Yudhishthira complies with Krishna’s plans. Drona gives up fighting when Yudhishthira falsely confirms the death of Aswatthaman, which makes way for Dhrishtadyumna to kill Drona.

In the battle between Karna and Arjuna there are repeated references to Indra and Virta and Namuci. Hiltebeitel (1 observes that just as Indra had depended on Vishnu for his victory over his opponents, here Arjuna depends on Krishna for his victory over Karna. Arjuna is in need of constant encouragement from Krishna during his battle with Karna. When Karna calls upon the war ethics and tells Arjuna that it is not right for him to attack him while he is standing on the ground trying to release the wheels of his chariot that has been stuck in the mud, Krishna takes this opportunity to remind Arjuna of the two incidents where Karna did not have any thought of virtue. Reminding the involvement of Karna in the humiliation of Draupadi in the court of Dhrtarashtra and then in the killing of Abhimanyu, Krishna stirs Arjuna’s fury which will initiate Arjuna in slaying Karna. ‘Indeed remembering the incidents alluded to by Krishna, Dhhananjaya blazed up with fury’ (Mahabharata, 8.91.17,18). Krishna points out to Arjuna the ideal moment to kill Karna.

After the death of Karna, the Kaurava troops are led by Salya, the king of Madras. Krishna tells Yudhishthira
I do not behold a match for him in battle save thee, O tiger among men, thou art possessed of power equal to that of a tiger. Save thee there is no other person in either heaven or the whole of this world, who, O son of Kuru race, would be able to slay the ruler of the Madras while excited with wrath in battle (Mahabharata, 9.7.33-34).

Krishna makes Yudhishthira see the killing of Salya as his responsibility. During the battle with Salya, Yudhishthira is reminded of the words of Krishna. ‘Beholding the ruler of the Madras before him, he rushed towards that foe with great impetuosity. Recollecting the words of Govinda, he quickly set his heart on the destruction of Salya (Mahabharata, 9.17.36-37).

While the mace battle between Bhima and Duryodhana is going on Arjuna asks Krishna who will win the battle. By way of answering Arjuna’s question Krishna reminds the vow that Bhima took in the court of Dhrtrastra on the day of the game of dice. This reminder enables Bhima to hit Duryodhana on his thigh and defeat him. ‘Having heard those words of the high-souled Kesava, Dhananjaya struck his own left thigh before the eyes of Bhimasena. Understanding that sign, Bhima began to career with uplifted mace’ (Mahabharata, 9.58.21-22).

Not only in defeating the four main generals of the Kaurava troops but also in all the war tactics, the Pandavas depended on Krishna. With the help of Krishna, Arjuna is able to slay Jayadratha and fulfil the vow that he has made. Krishna also makes Karna use the Naikartana, (that dart which Karna had received from Indra to use on Arjuna) on Ghatotkacha, thereby he weakens the power of Karna against Arjuna. At the end of the battle, Yudhishthira tells Krishna,

It was through thy grace that Partha had never to turn back from even the fiercest of encounters! Similarly, it was through thy grace, O mighty armed one, that I myself, with my posterity, have, by accomplishing diverse acts one after another, obtained that auspicious end of prowess and energy! (Mahabharata, 9.62.29,30).
But Krishna has still many other things to do; the Pandavas need Krishna even after their victory. On the night of the last day of the war, Krishna leads the Pandavas out of their camp and saves them from the wrath of Aswatthaman. When Aswatthaman kills in the womb all the unborn children of the Pandava race, Krishna revives the son of Abhimanyu, thereby making it possible for the line of the Pandavas to continue.

While Krishna actively participates as a non-combatant in the battle, Vyasa is passively involved in the battle. Just before the war begins, Vyasa offers to give the divine eye to enable Dhrtastra to see the action. Dhrtastra refuses this boon saying he would rather 'hear the account of the battle minutely described' to him (Mahabharata, 6.2.7). Therefore, Vyasa gives 'the power to see the past, the present and the future and seeing all things as if present before his eyes' to Sanjaya so that he could relate to the blind king all the details of the battle.

During this visit, Vyasa once again tells Dhrtastra of the great devastation to come upon his sons. As a last attempt, Vyasa once again pleads with Dhrtastra,

Show the path of righteousness to the Kurus, to thy kinsmen, relatives, and friends. Thou art competent to restrain them. The slaughter of kinsmen hath been said to be sinful. Do not do that which is disagreeable to me...Show what righteousness is unto thy sons. O, thou that art invincible, of what value is that kingdom unto thy sons? Take care of thy good name, thy virtue and thy fame. Thou wilt then win heaven. Let the Pandavas have their kingdom and let the Kauravas have peace (Mahabharata, 6.3.53, 57-58).

Dhrtastra will not even at this last hour give heed to his words. Vyasa departs soon after this.

While Yudhishthira grieves over the death of Abhimanyu, Vyasa appears there to console him. He narrates the legend of the origin of Death and another legend of the king Srinjaya that was related by Narada. He tells these tales to explain to Yudhishthira why Abhimanyu could not be resurrected; Vyasa mentions that Abhimanyu has fulfilled all the virtues in this life unlike the son of Srinjaya who was killed when he was unarmed.
and had not performed any sacrifices and was also without child. Here Vyasa hints at the birth of Parikshit who later Krishna will revive from death as the only survivor of the Pandava clan.

On the thirteenth day of the war, Krishna sets Ghatotkacha against Karna so that Karna uses the most powerful weapon he has and intends to use against Arjuna. Yudhishthira is filled with sorrow at the death of Ghatotkacha and rushes towards Arjuna. At this point Vyasa appears to Yudhishtira in the battlefield itself, stops him, and explains to him how the death of Ghatotkacha will lead to the victory of Yudhishtira. Here Vyasa seems to elucidate to Yudhishtira how subtly Krishna had paved the way for the Pandavas to win the battle. Vyasa tells Yudhishtira that five days hence he would regain his kingship. With this prophesy ‘Vyasa made himself invisible there and then’ (Mahabharata, 7.184.66,67).

Here Vyasa makes Yudhishtira see the advantage behind the death of Ghatotkacha; the invincibility of Karna has been eliminated after he had spent the dart that he obtained from Indra to use against Arjuna. He tells Yudhishtira to ‘practise kindness (to all creatures), penances, charity, forgiveness, and truth’ (Mahabharata, 7.184.66-67). ‘Vyasa thus drops into the very thick of battle to see to it that Yudhishtira does not step out of character’ (Hiltebeitel, 2001, p59). Vyasa, by stopping Yudhishtira from fighting against Karna, makes sure that Arjuna is able to fulfil the vow he had taken that he would slay Karna in battle. ‘At this time Vasudeva of mighty arms, addressing Dhananajaya said ‘Filled with wrath, yonder proceedeth Yudhishtira with great speed from desire of slaying that Suta’s son. It is not proper that thou shouldst rely upon him in this’ (i.e. the killing of Karna, which is Arjuna’s share in the battle) (Mahabharata, 7.184.55). In this particular incident, the two non-combatants act balancing each other in words and actions.

Soon after Duryodhana’s defeat, Yudhishtira acknowledges the part Krishna had played in his victory:
Who else save thee, O grinder of foes, not excepting the thunder-wielding Purandara himself, could have withstood the Brahma weapons hurled by Drona and Karna! It was through thy grace that the Sansaptaks were vanquished! It was through thy grace, O mighty-armed one, that I myself, with my posterity, have, by accomplishing diverse acts one after another, obtained the auspicious end of prowess and energy! At Upalavya the great rishi Krishna-Dwaipayana told me that thither is Krishna where righteousness is, and thither is victory where Krishna is! (Mahabharata, 9.62.28-31).

5.4.7 After the War

Fearing the ordeal of facing Gandhari after the defeat of Duryodhana, Yudhishthira requests Krishna to go and meet Dhrtarastra and Gandhari before the Pandavas could meet them face to face. Here Krishna’s peace mission seems to come full circle. Once again, Krishna leaves for Hastinapura to meet the king, where Yudhishthira says Vyasa will be present. He consoles the king and queen pointing out how this end could have been averted by Dhrtarastra.

On the eve of the battle I myself came and in the presence of all men begged of thee only five villages. Afflicted by time and by covetousness, thou didst not grant my request. Through thy fault, O king, all the kshatriya race hath been exterminated (Mahabharata, 9.63.44-45), says Krishna. When he is in conversation with Dhrtarastra and Gandhari, Krishna senses the evil intentions of Aswatthaman and leaves the palace abruptly leaving (two times leave) Vyasa to console the blind king and his queen. Already Krishna had taken the Pandavas away from the camp to the banks of Oghavati stating ‘as an initiatory act of blessedness, remain out of the camp for this night’ (Mahabharata, 9.63.37,38). Dhrtarastra asks Sanjaya why Aswthaman couldn’t perform the great slaughter of the Pandava soldiers before the defeat of Duryodhana. Sanjaya says that the absence of the Pandavas and most of all the absence of Krishna made it possible for Aswatthaman to carry out the terrible massacre. The fact that it is the presence of Krishna that preserves the Pandavas, is emphasised here.
The actions of Krishna and Vyasa intertwine in the events connected with the release of the Brahmasira by Aswatthaman and by Arjuna. After the carnage of the Pandava troops Bhima goes in pursuit of Aswatthaman and finds him in the company of rishis with Vyasa. As soon as Aswatthaman sees Bhima he releases the Brahmasira weapon out of fear of the Pandavas.

Unable to brook the arrows (of the Pandavas) and the presence of those wielders of celestial weapons, he uttered in wrath these terrible words, viz. 'For the destruction of the Pandavas'. Having said these words... ...the valiant son of Drona let off that weapon for stupefying all the worlds... ...At the very outset the mighty-armed hero of Dasarha's race understood from signs the intention of Drona's son. Addressing Arjuna, he said, 'O Arjuna, O son of Pandu, the time is come for the use of that celestial weapon which is in thy memory and knowledge of which was imparted to thee by Drona. For protecting thyself as also thy brothers, O Bharata, shoot in this battle that weapon which is capable of neutralising all weapons (Mahabharata, 10.14.1-6).

At the insistence of Krishna, Arjuna releases the Brahmasira weapon. Arjuna releases the Brahmasira weapon in order to neutralise Aswatthaman's weapon whereas Aswatthaman had released the weapon for the destruction of the Pandavas. Vyasa and the celestial rishi Narada appear between the two powerful weapons: 'conversant with all duties and desirous of the welfare of all creatures, the two sages, possessed of great energy, stood in the midst of those two blazing weapons' (Mahabharata, 10.14.15). Here while Krishna instructs Arjuna to release his celestial weapon to neutralise Aswatthaman's weapon, Vyasa stands between the blazing weapons in order to save the world from being annihilated.

Vyasa demands that the two warriors withdraw their weapons, and save the whole world from destruction. As a sign of surrender to the Pandavas, Aswatthaman hands over his head-jewel saying,

I cannot, by any means part with it. That, however, O holy one, which thou sayst should be done by me. Here is this gem. Here is myself (Mahabharata, 10.15.31-33).
Hiltebeitel (2001, p63) comments, ‘Vyasa thus sets the terms of appeasement while introducing a new twist, which puts new ideas into his characters’ head: Draupadi had asked not for Aswatthaman’s head-jewel but his life’.

Though Arjuna is able to withdraw his weapon, Aswatthaman who had released the weapon in a fit of terror is unable to withdraw it. Unable to withdraw it he diverts it into the wombs of the Pandava women, promising to do what Vyasa commands him to do. Vyasa requests Aswatthaman not to ‘entertain any other purpose’ but stop his evil doings with this one act. Krishna at this point promises to revive the son of Abhimanyu who will rule the earth for sixty years. By doing so Krishna averts the symbolic death of the Pandavas with no hope of ‘rebirth’ (Hiltebeitel, 1992). In addition to this promise, Krishna tells Aswatthaman,

‘(As) regards thyself, all wise men know thee for a coward and a sinful wretch! Always engaged in sinful acts, thou art slayer of children. For this reason, thou must have to bear the fruit of these thy sins. For three thousand years, thou shalt wander over this earth without a companion and without being able to talk with any one. Alone and without anybody by thy side, thou shalt wander through diverse countries, O wretch, thou shalt have no place in the midst of men...’ (Mahabharata, 10.16.9-13).

Vyasa gives his approbation to this curse of Krishna by saying,

‘Since, disregarding us thou hast perpetrated this exceedingly cruel act, and since thy behaviour is such although thou art a good brahmana (by birth), therefore those excellent words that Devaki’s son has said, will without doubt, be realised in thy case, an adopter as thou hast been of kshatriya usages’ (Mahabharata, 10.16.17,18).

In Stree Prava, Vyasa and Krishna, protect the Pandavas from the wrath of Dhrtarastra and Gandhari. When Dhrtarastra meets the Pandavas in the battlefield soon after the war,

Having embraced Yudhishtira the just and spoken a few words of comfort to him... ...the wicked-souled Dhrtarastra sought for Bhima, like a blazing fire ready to burn everything that would approach it. Indeed, the fire of his wrath, fanned by the wind of his grief, seemed then

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to be ready to consume the Bhima-forest. Ascertaining the evil intentions cherished by him towards Bhima, Krishna, dragging away the real Bhima, presented an iron statue of the second son of Pandu to the king. Possessed of great intelligence, Krishna had at the very outset, understood the intentions of Dhrtarastra, and had therefore, kept such a contrivance ready for baffling them. Seizing with his two arms that iron Bhima, king Dhrtarastra, possessed of great strength, broke it into pieces, thinking it to be Bhima himself in flesh and blood (Mahabharata, 11.12.13-17).

Similarly when the Pandavas go to meet Gandhari soon after this incident, Gandhari wants to curse Yudhishthira for the death of all her sons.

The faultless Gandhari, afflicted with grief on account of the death of her hundred sons, recollecting that king Yudhishthira the just had slain all his enemies, wished to curse him. Understanding her evil intentions towards the Pandavas, the son of Satyavati addressed himself for counteracting them at the very outset. Having cleansed himself by the sacred and fresh water of the Ganga, the great rishi, capable of proceeding everywhere at will with the fleetness of the mind, came to that spot. Capable of seeing the heart of every creature with his spiritual vision and with his mind directed towards it, the sage made his appearance there. Endued with great ascetic merit and ever intent on saying what was for the benefit of creatures, the rishi, addressing his daughter-in-law at the proper moment, said, 'Do not avail thyself of this opportunity for denouncing a curse...' (Mahabharata, 11.14.2-14).

Thus, Vyasa intervenes and protects the Pandavas from the curse of Gandhari.

Both Krishna and Vyasa know the mind of the king and queen and act with promptness for the good of the Pandavas. They make Dhrtarastra and Gandhari see that it was the covetousness of Duryodhana that brought about his downfall.

Just before the war when Arjuna sees Bhishma, Drona and the other elders and relatives arrayed against him, he is faced with dejection and refuses to fight. Krishna, his charioteer, advises Arjuna on 'the absolute necessity of heroic action for the preservation of the world. The most important thing for Arjuna is not to abandon his kshatriya dharma' (Katz, 1990, p132). Initiated in the desireless action Arjuna is ready to fight with all his strength. The Gita makes Arjuna realise that it is his duty to fight against his
kinsmen as well as his teacher and elders in spite of his personal crisis. And Arjuna does it to the best of his ability with the help of Krishna to the very end of the war. Throughout Krishna, as the charioteer, encourages and urges Arjuna to follow the kshatriya dharma.

At the end of the war Yudhishthira is grief-stricken over the death of so many of his kinsmen. He wants to give up his kingdom, ‘Abandoning the whole of my kingdom, therefore, and the things of this earth, I shall go to the woods, escaping from the ties of the world, freed from grief, and without affection for anything... ...I have no need for kingdom or for pleasure’ (Mahabharata, 12.17.41-42). Arjuna, Bhima Draupadi, the twins and Kunti try to console Yudhishthira but in vain. Vyasa tells Yudhishthira that he as the king should not think of renouncing the world; instead, he advises Yudhishthira, ‘Thou art acquainted with all duties. Do thou then duly practise the duties prescribed for thee’ (Mahabharata, 12.23.3). Vyasa then goes on to tell Yudhishthira the duties of a king, they are:

- sacrifice, learning, exertion, ambition, wielding ‘the rod of punishment’,
- fierceness, protection of subjects, knowledge of the Vedas, practice of all kinds of penances, goodness of conduct, acquisition of wealth, and gifts to deserving persons, -these well performed and acquired by persons of royal order, secure for them both this world and the next (Mahabharata, 12.23.9-11).

Vyasa continues to answer the many questions Yudhishthira has on varied subjects such as how a man could be freed from sin, what gifts are praise-worthy, the deserving and undeserving gifts and many other topics.

Krishna joins Vyasa in instructing Yudhishthira with many examples from the Vedas and the ancient legends to appease his grief-tormented mind. Soon after Yudhishthira has been established on the throne of Hastinapura, Krishna along with Vyasa advises Yudhishthira to go to Bhishma to be instructed further in the duties of kingship.
While Bhishma instructs Yudhishthira, Krishna and Vyasa are present most of the time. Krishna gives the 'eye of knowledge' to Bhishma. Bhishma says,

O thou of incomparable splendour, all that is past, all that is future, all that is present, I behold as clearly as a fruit placed in my hand. All the duties declared in the Vedas, all those laid down in the vedantas, I behold clearly, O thou of unfading glory, in consequence of the boon thou hast granted me (Mahabharata, 12.54.19-24).

Bhishma instructs Yudhishthira on 'everything related to the four modes of life', the duties related to 'king-craft', duties and practices among the tribes and families of various lands and whatever is 'beneficial for the world'. In the course of his discourse, Bhishma says, all this was conveyed to him by Vyasa in the past. Even this extended conversation between Bhishma and Yudhishthira has both Vyasa's and Krishna's collective actions intertwined within it.

5.4.8 The Withdrawal

Thirty-six years after the battle of Kurukshetra the Yadava race is destroyed and Balarama and Krishna too die. Arjuna reports these events to Vyasa. Arjuna, filled with deep anguish, comes to the hermitage of Vyasa and reports to Vyasa all that had happened. Vyasa answers the unanswered question of Vasudeva (Krishna's father) as well as that of Arjuna and the audience, 'How is it that that Lord of the universe... ...how could he remain indifferent to such a calamity as the curse denounced by the rishi? Alas being puissant Vishnu himself, he witnessed, without interfering the destruction of his kinsmen!' (Mahabharata, 16.6.15). Vyasa tells the completely despondent Arjuna that Krishna had 'lightened the burden of the Earth' by letting the annihilation of the Yadavas take place (Mahabharata, 16.8.29).

It is significant that Vyasa had carried out a similar deed when he prompts that the kshatriya women whose husbands have been slain in the war may enter the waters of the Ganga and be united with their husbands. Hiltebeitel (2001, p82) commenting on this episode says, Vyasa by making the war widows join their husbands lightens the burden of
Yudhishthira’s kingdom. ‘The Kaurava widows’ grief for their husbands is a surplus that is disposed of by Vyasa. As we have seen, he hints repeatedly that the Kaurava widows are a burden to Yudhishthira …’

The actions of both Vyasa and Krishna are directed towards ‘lightening the earth of her burden’. Vyasa had mentioned this earlier to Dhrtarastra in Stree Prava (Mahabharata, 11.8.22-28). He tells Dhrtarastra that Earth had requested the gods to lift her burden and Vishnu had promised that it would be done so in the battle of Kurukshetra. The total destruction of the Yadavas too is a continuation of the Kurukshetra. For in their drunken state both Satyaki and Kritavarma begin to insult each other referring to their unheroic behaviour in Kurukshetra following which the devastation of the whole clan takes place.

We find that with the death of Krishna Arjuna’s martial powers too have diminished. Arjuna escorts the remnant of Yadva women, children and old people through the forest. There robbers attack the caravan. Arjuna fails to defeat the robbers. The great hero who once fought tirelessly with mighty warriors like Bhishma and Drona is now unable to withstand the attack of the common robbers. He fails even to string his Gandiva. Arjuna finds that his inexhaustible quivers have become empty of shafts and his celestial weapons fail to appear. Vyasa tells Arjuna that the time of departure has come for the Pandavas. ‘The time has come, O Bharata for you all to attain to the highest goal. Even this is what I regard to be highly beneficial for you all, …’ (Mahabharata, 16.8.36). We realize that this is the last advice that Vyasa will give the Pandavas. Also this the last time that Vyasa will speak. The rest of the epic moves on without a word from Vyasa. Though he is present when the Pandavas leave on their final journey there is no functional role for him any more. After he had advised Arjuna that ‘the time has come’, Vyasa recedes to the background. Once Krishna withdraws from the action it seems the Vyasa too has no more deeds to accomplish. Mausala Parava is the culminating point of the role of both Vyasa and Krishna in the epic.
5.5 Conclusion

As already discussed in Chapter 3 and applied in Chapter 4, the terms 'hero' and 'protagonist' today indicate the main character in any composition. Originally the word hero pointed to the main character of an epic where the main character is of semi divine origin, possesses particular characteristics, undergoes certain experiences and longs for a sword death, which is the 'good death' for a hero.

The protagonist in its original meaning is the main actor of a drama. In fact he was the first actor to be introduced in a dramatic exposition of the Greek theatre. Before the introduction of the protagonist, the dramatic performance depended only on the chorus, which sang and acted the events in unison. Initially the protagonist was the only actor apart from the chorus. When the number of actors was increased to three, the protagonist became the main actor and functioned as the prime mover of the plot. By delivering the prologue, the protagonist functioned also as the voice of the author.

It has also been pointed out in Chapter 3 that a composition that is complex enough can have a character who undergoes the traditional experiences of an epic hero and another character who acts as the prime mover of the plot.

The above discussions shed some light on the question of the protagonist in the epic Mahabharata. One of the important questions in this respect is the place of Krishna in the epic and the other one is whether Yudhishthira can be considered as the hero of the epic.

Sharma (1995) considers Yudhishthira as the sublime hero of Mahabharata. Buitenen (1972) sees Yudhishthira as the central figure in the structure of kingship in the epic. Though Yudhishthira enjoys the outcome of the epic plot and he is the 'king', he lacks the all important adventures as well as the martial prowess of an epic hero. Companionship and other world adventures are also missing in his character. Hence, Yudhishthira cannot be considered as the hero of Mahabharata.
Neither can Yudhishthira be considered as the protagonist of the epic. Yudhishthira has a ‘quest’ – dharma; in this quest his concern is more on the learning of the various aspect of dharma rather than coherently expressing dharma in words and actions. Thus Yudhishthira does not function as the voice of the author. He is also not the mover of the epic plot, as most of the time he is reluctant to take an active role without the express persuasion of others.

Among all the characters in Mahabharata Arjuna has the largest number of characteristics of the epic hero. He is the youngest and most favoured son (of Pandu and Kunti), has exceptional martial skill, has won several battles and undertaken various adventures including other world experiences, and has had a formidable companion; he is also the winner of the hands of many women. Although many characters in Mahabharata possess varying degrees of the characteristics of an epic hero, Arjuna qualifies as an unmatched ‘epic hero’.

Bhishma is of divine birth and possesses invincible martial skill. He also has control over his death. It can also be said that he has a quest in living up to his vow and defending the king of Hastinapura. However, there is no adventure in his life and his other world experience (as a youth in his divine mother’s care) is not described at all in the epic. Bhima has many of the epic hero’s characteristics. Starting from semi divine birth, he is a skilled warrior; he protects his family on many occasions and faces other world experiences when he was thrown into the water by Duryodhana and when he goes in search of the golden lotus Draupadi wanted. In addition, he marries a nonhuman being. Misra (1992) in his Introduction to Mahabharata-tatpaya-nirmaya sees Bhima as the chief instrument in conquering evil in Mahabharata. Therefore it may be argued that he is the hero. However, Bhima doesn’t possess the glitter of a hero where he is aided by celestials, human companions and lovers in his wanderings. Apart from some one-to-one combats, Bhima does not encounter any other adventure.

One important outcome of this study is the clear placement of Krishna’s character in the epic. Krishna of Mahabharata is not of divine birth but he is declared as divine on
various occasions by himself and others. His youthful exploits are not described in Mahabharata. His adventures are also not mentioned in Mahabharata as in Bhagavada Purana. His martial skills too are not given importance in the epic. He functions as the companion in the exploits of Arjuna. Nevertheless he plays an important role in Mahabharata as one of the prime movers of the epic plot. Section 5.4 discusses this in detail. If one assumes that proclamation of dharma is the main motive of the author of the epic, then Krishna plays an important role in meeting this end by preaching the Gita. Hence, Krishna’s role in the epic is that of the protagonist.

The other important outcome of this study is the identification of Vyasa as another protagonist of the epic. Vyasa does not possess any of the characteristics of the epic hero. He is born of mortal parents, possesses no martial skill and has no adventures or otherworld experience except some ‘magical powers’. Still he plays a vital role in the movement of the epic plot as discussed in Section 5.4. This is an outcome of the complex character involvement in Mahabharata. As the author of the epic Vyasa is responsible for the character portrayals and therefore can be credited for that role also.

References


