



IN THE NAME OF DHARMA: READING DURYODHANA IN *ROLL OF THE DICE* BY ANAND NEELAKANTAN

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Abstract : Indian Puranic literatures, the epic Mahabharata and socio-political system are designed on the basis of the concept of dharma. It is in dharma that the priests, kings and others are regulated to live and act. However, retellings of the Mahabharata in various literary genres critically evaluate the concept of dharma of that time to be more critical and adaptable for current readers of the epic. The novel *Roll of the Dice* by Anand Neelakantan has well portrayed it in his first book of Ajaya series. He intelligently portrays doubts and conflicts about Dharma through the inner realities of the esteemed characters, viewed through the eyes of S[Dur]yudhana, the crown prince. The story develops in and through the interventions of the protagonist Suyodhana until a point where he himself loses the compassion and dharma he had nurtured so far. This essay is an analysis of the contradictions in exercising the dharma of Duryodhana and Yudhishtra.

Key Words: Dharma, Society, Rightness, Justice

INTRODUCTION

The Mahabharata, an epic consisting of 18 books, is widely regarded as having dharma as its core theme. While the epic does not explicitly address caste or varna in terms of inequality, many of its characters come from the top two castes, and the language is Sanskrit. The bard Ugrasrava recounts to a group of rishis the story of the Mahabharata as narrated by Vyasa, who is not only the author but also one of its pivotal characters. Vyasa's intervention is critical to the progression of the story, such as when he impregnates Ambika and Ambalika to preserve the Kuru lineage. Interestingly, Vyasa himself does not belong to either upper caste. Most of the retellings of the epic Mahabharata published in the post-millennial period have been questioning the exercise of dharma through their narratives. The following is an attempt to discuss how various characters in the fiction, *Roll of Dice*, the first book in the Ajaya series written by Anand Neelakantan, interpret dharma. He also attempts to conscientize the readers about the present concepts of dharma as opposed to the concept of dharma found in the epic times. This is efficiently portrayed through the detailed conflicts between the characters as well as their inner conflicts. In order to bring out novel concepts of dharma, the author makes use of the villainous characters traditionally portrayed in the Mahabharata.

Sarade, and Charvi Seeta (2021) in their respective studies titled *What should I do: Dharma in Mahabharata* and *The Portrayal of Dharma in Mahabharata* enumerate about dharma. Dharma is a central theme in the Mahabharata, an ancient Indian epic composed by the sage Vyasa. Dharma refers to right action and is everyone's way of action, and the difference between right or wrong. Charvi Seeta illustrates that 'Dharma is one of the main reasons that the great war in the Mahabharata happened, as each side was trying to fight for what they thought was right, by following their Dharma'. The concept of dharma has no English translation. "Words such as duty, rights, goodness, law, conduct, virtues, and righteous way of living seem to be possible literal translations, but they fall short when explaining the spiritual sense of the word dharma" (Malhotra, ix). It can be seen as doing or completing one's responsibilities, upholding values and virtues, practicing goodness, and living life in the right way. The Mahabharata focuses on three dharmas: Sva-dharma (dharma of an individual), Sādhāraṇa-dharma (universal dharma), and Āpad-dharma (practical application of dharma). Malhotra's detailed study found that "the Mahabharata focuses on three dharmas—i.e. Sva-dharma (dharma of an individual), sadharana-dharma (universal dharma) and Apad-dharma (practical application of dharma). Most of us expect ready-made answers to all the fundamental questions concerning right and wrong in life, instead of having to delve deep into the problems, thinking them out completely, and understanding their whole significance" (Malhotra, p. 1).

Dharma is a multidimensional concept that goes beyond religion, morality, and ethics as seen in Mahabharata. The text presents dharma as an all-encompassing principle that governs every aspect of human life, both personal and social. It is a code of conduct that guides individuals and society towards righteousness, justice, and harmony. It is not a rigid set of rules but a flexible system of values and principles that adapts to the changing needs of society. (Fitzgerald, 2004) studies dharma in Mahabharata as 'what is "transcendentally" good or right to do or be' (...). He goes on to speak of three forms of dharma in

which the other-world orientation is expressed. These are dharma; a) as normative action or behavior, b) as an abstractive quality of rightness or justice and, c) as good character or virtuous disposition/habits of doing particular acts. (45).

On the goal of retelling the epic Mahabharata, in the book *Exploring Agency in the Mahabharata- Ethical and Political Dimensions of Dharma* quotes Kaviraj where he mentions the Tagore's episode on the meeting between Kunthi and Karna. Kaviraj, as the author states, is of the opinion regarding the retelling of Mahabharata that;

“an ‘infra-narrative space’ – an under-narrated and under-determined moment in the story of a fictional character, which others can then pick up and fill out in another story. Tagore's tale, for instance, explores the interiority of the characters left unmined in the epic. The ontological status of such modern retellings transcends the dichotomy of either being a mere elaboration of the epic or being radically different from it. According to Kaviraj, retellings of the Mahābhārata foreground contemporary ethical struggles and affective milieus and become a strategy to incorporate and negotiate the historicity of a text with the conceit of being ‘eternal’(24).

Likewise, the *Roll of Dice* by Anand Neelakantan tries to portray the under-narrated moments in the epic Mahabharata from the perspective of Duryodhana, whom the readers mostly consider as the antagonist of the epic.

In the heat of the situation and on the verge of taking revenge, Duryodhana, seeing Shakuni's skill with dice, decided to make use of Yudhishtira's vulnerability, inviting him to play dice; “Yes, we can roll dice. We will send the Son of Dharma an invitation that he cannot refuse. We will tie him in the knots of his own *dharma*”(Neelakantan, 411). Yudhishtira, the epitome of Dharma, as mentioned by Duryodhana, thus became the victim of dharma for he believed that “it was a Kshatriya *dharma* to play dice”(415). The very acceptance of invitation breaks hell of the events unprecedented. Neelakantan, sided with the rightness or justice of an action questions the *adharmā* occurred from the Pandavas. As the new palace titled Indraprastha, has built, the architect and his company of low cast people have been displaced from their homes in the beautiful city. Duryodhana's first impression upon seeing the city, devoid of poor people, was astonishment at the righteousness of his cousin, Yudhishtira. “I wonder how Yudhishtira succeeded in solving the greatest problem that plagues our country. Do you see there are no poor people in the streets? The place looks rich and prosperous,” Suyodhana said, trying to control his pangs of jealousy” (339). But his surprise did not last long, as they learned the way Pandavas treated the poor in the city. Duryodhana witnessed the pathetic situation inflicted upon them by Pandavas, in the name of social stratification mentioned in the sacred scriptures. He questions this injustice and unrighteous behaviour of the Son of Dharma:

So, this is the palace built over the dead bodies and the palace where the King of Chedi was murdered in cold blood. Yudhishtira, you have banished half the population from your city. You should hang your head in shame at the way you have treated the people who have built Indraprastha (406).

Duryodhana believed in the philosophy of *sva-dharma*, the dharma of individual, whereas Yudhishtira relied upon the holy *Smritis* to decipher dharma in his actions. Yudhishtira has his advocate, Dhaumya the priest, to counsel him in all matters. The very response to the accusation of the Duryodhana was not from Yudhishtira but Dhaumya. He retorts by accusing the virtuous disposition of Duryodhana:

“How dare you come here and insult the epitome of *dharma*? What do you know about dharma? You are the one who should be ashamed for befriending a lowly Suta and making him a King; you are the one who should hang your head in shame for having Aswathama, who is a disgrace to all Brahmins as friend. You are trying to destroy our society” (406).

The outburst of the priest in fact was a response to Duryodhana as a whole. Anand Neelakantan clearly wants to depict that a huge difference lies between the conceptions of *dharma* in the holy *smritis*. While Duryodhana moves with the pain and plight of the poor people, accept and appreciate the talented men in spite of their lowly origin, acts maturely and humanistically, the other group of people never come out of their traditionalistic view of the *dharma* in the fear of losing the comfortably they enjoy. Neelakantan never runs short of enumerating the good deeds and support that Duryodhana renders to people in the novel. In fact the author wants to brighten up Suyodhana from the shades of Duryodhana as people call him. In *Roll of the Dice*, the first book of the series, Duryodhana's character is portrayed in a different light. In this book, a more human side of Duryodhana is portrayed as he struggles to navigate the complex web of politics, family dynamics, and societal expectations that define his life. He is shown as a man torn between his duty to his family and his kingdom, capable of both cruelty and compassion, and driven by a deep sense of loyalty to his own people. He symbolizes the human struggle with duty, morality, and free will, representing the tension between individual ambition and social responsibility, and the consequences of actions taken in pursuit of power. He also serves as a reminder that every individual has the capacity for both good and evil, and that our actions and decisions have far-reaching consequences.

Duryodhana declares his dharma on the day of their graduation. He is against caste discrimination and eventually declares Karna, the Suta as the king of Anga. He is determined not to succumb to the southern confederacy that tries to destroy the religion and culture in the name of dharma. He further swears:

Today on this graduation day, I have come of age and this is my promise to you, my beloved people. Every moment of my life, I will strive to wipe out hunger, ignorance, and pain. My dreams have the sanction of our holy books. May Lord Mahadeva strengthen my arms. I will strive with my last breath to wipe out the curse of hunger, caste and inequality which is spreading from the Himalayas in the far north to where the three seas meet in the Deep South. This is my dream, my promise my dharma (263).

The very declaration of his dharma is in a way modern. In fact the dharma that he has shouldered was keeping the society at heart. This may be against the descriptions of the holy *smritis* or the traditions the common people familiar with, but it was an act of justice and *sva-dharma*. When Anand Neelakantan details about Pandava, we find subtle changes in the interpretation of dharma. For them, every evil act is an act of dharma. Be it taking the lives of the Nishada woman and her five children at the house of lac, or cutting the finger of Eklavya, playing dice, and other acts.. Kunthi would say to the Nishada woman, “You are serving a great cause. You and your five sons are serving dharma”(299). And the fact is that the Nishada woman does not even know what dharma is. Such inhuman actions recurred many times with the intention of justifying their vile acts. Kunthi justifies their crime of murdering the Nishada woman and her five children along with some guards saying, “Remember your Gurus teaching you about *Apat dharma*. Nothing is considered wrong if it is in self-preservation” (301). At the same time the

pandava activities shocked others, a sentiment vivified by the author through Bhishma's words, "Sometimes I am embarrassed by the doings of Kunti and her sons. I do not know which book they refer to on morals and dharma"(347).

Duryodhana in turn overlooks the *Varnashrama dharma* throughout the novel. *Varnashrama dharma* provides absolute norms for human conduct and a social hierarchy. By the *varnashrama dharma* each person is obliged to follow his on *kula dharma* throughout the entire life. This social order accounts for the hierarchical position in the epic. Each caste is expected to follow the duties and dharma bound to their community. A Brahmin is to follow the scriptures, a Kshatriya is to rule and protect the country, a Vaishya is to produce and sell, and a Shudra is to do menial work. However, Duryodhana does not limit himself with the duties bound to a Kshatriya. He surpasses all these norms, as we see in the novel, by declaring the Suta Karna as the King of Anga, befriending the poor Eklavya, and Aswathathma, the fallen Brahmin.

The portrayal of Duryodhana in *Roll of Dice* challenges us to rethink our preconceived notions about dharma. His character reminds us of the complexity of human nature, and the many factors that shape our actions and decisions. It also highlights the importance of exploring diverse perspectives on dharma, and the value of engaging in critical discussion about the dharma at the appropriate time. By exploring the dharma of Duryodhana, we can gain a deeper appreciation for the complexity of the Mahabharata, and the many lessons it has to offer us about duty, morality, and the human experience. By exploring diverse perspectives on dharma, we can gain a deeper appreciation for the complexity of the human experience, and the many ways in which individuals navigate the challenges of life.

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