Indira Gandhi
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MEG-15
Comparative Literature: Theory and Practice

Block

6

LITERATURE AND CULTURE: EXCHANGES AND NEGOTIATIONS-I

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

Literature and Culture: Exchanges and Negotiations I

Where 'literariness' – the basic quality of all literature - concerns one region and its language, it is transformed into 'interliterariness' when it moves across the borders or barriers of region and language and establishes its presence, albeit with variations which stem from the cultural site in which that work has been re-located, re-used or re-created. This Block will discuss tellings and retellings including translations as relevant markers detailing relationships in inter-literariness, at the core of comparative studies. It will take up the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* for discussion in this context.

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UNIT 1 TELLING AND RETELLING

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit and the next we shall study the relationship between tellings and retellings and their relevance for comparative literature as a discipline. The study will lead us to ask several questions and by the end of this unit you will have clear ideas regarding the following:

- What kind of narratives are retold?
- What genres (forms) do retellings take?
- Why are narratives retold?
- Can translations be considered retellings?
- What happens in retellings?
- Can retellings (in relation to "tellings" and among themselves) be considered legitimate subjects for study within the discipline of comparative literature?

The present Unit will discuss these general questions briefly, especially in relation to retellings of the Indian epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The next Unit will take up retellings of *Mahabharata* and discuss one such retelling in some detail.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Telling and retelling are, you will readily agree, an essential, indeed an indispensable, part of all communication. In our everyday lives, we are always "telling" others something or the other. (The "telling" may consist of actual speaking or telephonic talk or sending SMSes or e-mail messages or written messages.) We are also, most of the time, "retelling", reporting to others what we have heard. The retelling starts

very early in life - when the child, after the first day at the nursery, comes back home and tells the mother, in her own quaint way, all that was said to her. Later at the secondary school, in our grammar classes we are taught to transform direct speech to indirect, active voice into passive voice, which are again modes of retelling. (Haven't you noticed the change in focus or authenticity in such "transformations"?) We take phone calls for someone else and report the message. We are constantly retelling jokes we have heard, quite often adding juicier bits to them to amuse our listeners. The habit or the necessity continues all our lives: my grandfather used to read the newspaper first thing in the morning and retell the news (in his own way of course, never failing to add his moralizing comments) to me for the rest of the day! Historians retell narratives of historical importance and no two such "histories" may be identical in factual content or interpretation and evaluation. Most of these "retellings" are required of us as part of our familial, official or social obligations, some we perform just because we wish to "retell".

We are however concerned, in this Unit and the next, not with everyday tellings and retellings but with literary narratives and their retellings. Imaginative narratives - which is what literary narratives are - are as old as human civilization and after the first "telling", (if we can determine when the first telling took place!) such narratives have constantly been "retold" either wholly or in part. It is easy to guess how these retellings originated. In the times before the advent of printing, and even earlier before the evolution of writing, all narratives were transmitted **orally**. The tellers obviously could not have addressed everyone in their society and so the narrative - or whatever they composed - had to be retold, quite often not in the same words or forms or even with the same content in full. Retelling thus was a necessity if the tales orally told were to be preserved. But after the advent of printing, a narrative told (or written) by a person could be printed and simultaneously read by thousands of people, not only at the time of the publication but later and forever. However, we find that retellings have continued even though they were not strictly necessary. The explanation to this is that these retellings were made possible **not by necessity but rather by choice -** the choice of the reteller, his or her wish to retell an earlier narrative.

1.2 AN INTRODUCTORY EXAMPLE

Before we proceed further, let us get a basic idea of what we mean by retellings by looking at a set of examples. Most of you may be familiar with the fairy tale, "Little Red Riding Hood". Now read three "tellings" (or "versions") of that story as given in Appendix A.

Before we look at the changes in the versions, perhaps we should note that all three are basically "fairy" tales, i.e. they are not realistic stories, but contain "unbelievable" features, such as a wolf talking (and in different voices too!) and putting on clothes, people remaining alive after being eaten up by the wolf and so on. As for the changes, you must have noticed that in the first version both the grandmother and the girl get killed by the wolf, in the second they are both rescued and it is the wolf that gets killed. In the third, we don't quite know what happened to the grandmother, but it is the wolf that gets killed and the girl is the killer.

Why were these changes made? After all, the basic structure is that of a fairy tale so why does it matter if it ends one way or the other? You would have noticed that the three tales were "told" in different times and places, the first in the 17th century in Europe, the second in the 19th in Europe and the third in the 20th century in America. You would also have seen that each of these versions ends with a "moral":

in the first and the third it is stated explicitly, in the second it is understood to be what the girl thinks to herself. Are the endings in accord with contemporary notions of gender roles, what is "proper behaviour" for girls? In the first version, it is almost as if the girl is shown to meet with the end that she "deserves". In the second, even though the girl is considered to have acted with foolish independence - and she herself admits it - she is saved at the end, as also the grandmother, perhaps in line with 19th century ideas of poetic justice: evil should be punished, good should be at least saved, if not rewarded. It is in the third version that the girl, in spite of talking to the wolf, still acts courageously, shows some "agency", and kills the wolf in the most fearless way, with an automatic. The moral too here is not so much addressed **to** little girls but to those who try to harm them (or act funny, to put it informally). There is no suggestion that the girl made a mistake in talking to the wolf or telling him where she was going. On the contrary, the message is that the girl had a right to do what she did since she is intelligent and courageous enough to face the dangers of the world.

Activity 1

Haven't you come across different versions of folk/fairy tales? Even if you haven't, you must surely have felt the urge to retell some of them, changing the ending? Why did you feel so? For instance, why should the fox always get the better of the crow or the tortoise always win? Suppose the hare had access to a cellphone with an alarm device?! Try your hand at retelling and see whether you can cap it off each time with a new "moral"?!

1.3 WHAT KIND OF NARRATIVES ARE RETOLD?

Let us get back to some of the general questions that we raised earlier. As we said at the beginning, any utterance or communication can be retold including conversations, anecdotes, jokes. But our concern is with retellings of literary works and we find that there have been retellings of all forms of oral literature such as ballads (which narrate stories in verse form), folk tales and fairy tales. Most myths and legends, which must have originated in oral form, continue to be retold even after being recorded. Written literary forms such as works of fiction and drama, narrative poems (including epics) are rewritten either in full or in parts.

1.4 WHAT FORMS DO RETELLINGS TAKE?

While retellings can be - and have been - carried out in all literary forms or genres, i.e. plays, novels, short stories, comics (for children, as in the famous *Amar Chitra Katha* series) it is interesting to see that the relation between forms of "telling" and forms of "retelling" is not a one-way traffic. We know that a lot of written texts are retellings of narratives that originally existed only in the oral form. However, written narratives can also flow back into oral forms. While our unlettered grandmothers might have told us stories that they had only heard, present day parents "tell" children stories that they have read, often with changes to suit the particular child's interests and environment.

Perhaps the most interesting and complex example of written literature retold in the oral mode is the *harikatha*, practised primarily in South India. These *harikathas* are oral discourses on *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* or the *puranas* (which are stories of various gods and goddesses). They are not lectures **on** those narratives but re-enactments or re-tellings of them often containing fresh interpretations. They may re-tell an entire epic in serial episodes (daily over a month or so) or may be single

discourses on particular episodes (such as Sita's marriage). A combination of speech, music (and often dance), these discourses draw from - and re-inerpret - various other retellings and forms of culture. For example, a *harikatha* on the slaying of Vali in the Tamil *Ramayana* of Kampan, basically delivered in Tamil, always with recitations from the Tamil bhakti poets, will turn multilingual, with excerpts from Valmiki (Sanskrit), Tulsidas (Hindi), the songs of Saint Tyagaraja (Telugu), Purandarasa (Kannada), Mira or Surdas (Hindi) or Namdev (Marathi) or quotations from Mahatma Gandhi or Jawaharlal Nehru (English)!

Activity 2

Examine the Ramlila performances as retellings of *Ramayana*. Comment on the varieties of Ramlila as well as the variety within each performance. Look for example, at the forms or modes that it combines.

Numerous literary classics have been retold in various genres. To take the example of Shakespeare's plays alone, perhaps the earliest example was Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* (published in 1807). Some other examples of individual plays retold in other genres are: *Hamlet* (*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, a play by Tom Stoppard, 1966, later as a film with the same title, 1990; *Gertrude and Claudius*, a novel by John Updike, 2000), *The Tempest* (a play with the same title, by Aime Cesaire, 1969), *King Lear* (*Lear*, a play by Edward Bond, 1971).

Many of the theatrical productions of plays (by Shakespeare and others) can be called retellings in view of the new interpretations they provide and of the changes they make in plot or characterization.

Thanks to the phenomenal growth of the media, you would be only too familiar with audio-visual retellings on the large and small screens. The very settings, costumes and appearance of the characters either may recapture the "original" impact of the works or, more often, lead to newer interpretations, e.g. films of Shakespeare's plays or Jane Austen's novels. Many of these retellings lend to comparisons and contrasts among themselves. For example, the later version of the *Mahabharata* telecast is compared with B.R. Chopra's serial which was telecast earlier. We are however not discussing such retellings here owing to limitations of space.

1.5 RETELLINGS OF THE INDIAN EPICS

The primary concern of this Unit and the next is with retellings (or revisits) of the ancient Indian epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Needless to say, these two works are never regarded in this country as mere literary creations or artefacts but rather as monuments of social, cultural, religious, moral and even political significance. Their ancient lineage is easily attested by the fact that while we generally look upon Valmiki and Vyasa as their respective authors there is a clear sense in which Valmiki's *Ramayana* and Vyasa's *Mahabharata* are themselves only retellings. A great deal of research has been carried out—by scholars in India and abroad— in the past century to trace their origins.

1.5.1 *Valmiki Ramayana*: Telling or Retelling?

We shall take up *Mahabharata* in the next unit. Here let us look at the origins of *Ramayana*. We all know that Valmiki is regarded as the *Adikavi* ("the original or first poet") and *Valmiki Ramayana* as the *Adikavya* ("the original or first epic"). While this may be true with regard to the history of Sanskrit literature, it has been

shown that Valmiki did not create the Rama story. There is a view among scholars that the *Jataka Tales* (which were in circulation between the 5th and 1st centuries B.C.) might have been the source for *Valmiki Ramayana* (composed during the 4th or 3rd century B.C.). As against this, it is also held that there had been numerous Rama tales much earlier and these tales were used by the various authors of the *Jataka Tales* as well as by Valmiki. Apart from this, there appears to have been an *Adiramayana* (which consisted of five *Kandas*, i.e. without the *Bala* and *Uttara Kandas*) before Valmiki and it might have been the source for him. (Manavalan 12-18).

These views, though not accepted on all counts, are the findings of researchers over a period; the point to note is that *Valmiki Ramayana* (which we generally look upon as the original tale) was itself, most probably, a retelling.

Apart from this, scholars have also generally concluded that *Valmiki Ramayana*, though believed to have been composed before the Christian era, settled into something like its present "authentic" form around the 2nd or 3rd c. A.D. but that interpolations, additions, sub-stories, descriptions and philosophical and moralizing passages continued to be added to it till about the 10th c. A.D. (Manavalan 18). Moreover, even the Sanskrit text exists in two major **recensions** (revised editions or texts), the Northern and the Southern, based on differences in content and style.

1.5.2 Retellings of *Ramayana*

It has often been said that no Indian reads (or hears) *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata* for the first time! They (the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* stories) are always, already there in our memory or consciousness. If this is true of individual readers, when we hear of *Ramayana* in this or that particular language, we also immediately remember that it exists in various other languages and communities, not always with an identical content or in the same literary form. In his well-known essay, "Three Hundred Ramayanas", A.K. Ramanujan points out that the Rama story is found in at least twenty two different languages (Indian and South East Asian) with some of these languages hosting more than one telling (Sanskrit alone accounting for more than twenty five). "If we add plays, dance-dramas, and other performances, in both the classical and folk traditions" and forms of spatial arts like paintings and sculpture, the total number may easily be three hundred! (Ramanujan 133-34)

In a compendious research work done in Tamil entitled *Rama Kathaiyum Ramayanankalum* ("The Story of Rama and the *Ramayanas*") A.A. Manavalan has listed forty eight major *Ramayana* books brought out in twenty two different languages (including Tibetan, old Javanese, Japanese, Malay, Burmese, Filipino, Thai and Laotian). (See Appendix B for a list.)

If we add translations and retellings (of the whole or parts) in English to the lists provided by Ramanujan and Manavalan the number will grow much larger. A Kannada poet called Kumaravyasa chose to write a *Mahabharata* because "he heard the cosmic serpent which upholds the earth groaning under the burden of *Ramayana* poets"!

Activity 3

How many retellings of *Ramayana* have you read or heard about? Are there any in your first language? When were they written? What form/genre do they belong to?

1.5.3 Translations as Retellings

How do these retellings relate to one another? Is there a common core of content and message among them? If they all tell the same tale with the same intent, why should there be so many of them? If most of these are simply "translations", was the aim just to "make available and accessible" to each linguistic community a work which did not earlier exist in their language? In that case, why are there so many changes, additions, omissions in the so-called translations? Was the source for these translations the same (say *Valmiki Ramayana*)? If yes, why are not all these translations in the same literary genre (verse in a particular metre) but in various genres, such as prose or drama?

"Translation" itself may not be the right term to describe all these *bhasha Ramayanas* (i.e. *Ramayanas* in the various Indian regional languages). Scholars have pointed out that while there is a long tradition of retellings in India, "translation" may not be an accurate or satisfactory term to describe them. If we look at the nearest Hindi terms, *anuvad* strictly means "speaking after" or "following" and *rupantar* literally denotes "change in form". The three terms used in Tamil, *mozhipeyarppu* (literally "moving or displacing into another language"), *mozhimatram* ("change of language") and *mozhiyakkam* ("creating in another language" or "transcreation") are all "translated" into "translation"!

We can perhaps draw a distinction between two kinds of translation. First, many present-day translations into English (especially those done in European and American universities) provide extremely faithful translations, making no departures, changing nothing, but adding linguistic or cultural notes wherever necessary for ease of understanding or in cases of difficulty of interpretation. Example: Robert P. Goldman's translation, entitled *The Ramayana of Valmiki*. Vol. 1 *Balakanda*.(Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984).

The second type is the one represented by most of the retellings in the various Indian languages, e.g. *Kamparamayanam* in Tamil (10th c. A.D.) or *Ramcharitmanas* in Hindi (16th c. A.D.) Sujit Mukherjee calls these **acquisitions** in these languages and says that they "can only loosely be described as translation because, while the basic story remained, some of it was left out and a lot of new writing done to fill it out again" (Mukherjee 2004 33-34). The generic term that Mukherjee uses to describe these is "translation as new writing".

1.6 WHY TRANSLATE?

Why do people translate (and mostly, in the process, retell) at all? There may be individual as well as collective reasons that motivate or impel writers to do so. Let us look at the most important of these.

At a very simple level, people translate out of love. You read a work in a language (often not your first language), enjoy it and wish to communicate that enjoyment in your own first language to people who may not know the other language or may not know it well enough to be able to appreciate the work in the original.

But there may be another dimension to such a labour of love. A.K. Ramanujan said, "one translates not just out of love, but also out of envy of the past masters". This happens especially if you are a creative writer yourself, as Ramanujan or Tulsidas or Kampan were, and feel the impulsion, born out of creative envy, to emulate the masters in your own or another language. It is a challenge you take up,

but it is also a way of placing and finding yourself and your individual talent in a tradition. (We shall say more about this when we relate translations and retellings to the study of comparative literature).

The envy and emulation may be not just individual but collective. If we look at Indian literary history, we find that translation (which almost invariably entailed retelling) was a significant part of the growth of all regional literatures. In the words of Sujit Mukherjee,

> The later pre-colonial times [roughly from the 13th to the 17th centuries] witnessed further growth of translation of the kind we had known and practised for several centuries. Whereas earlier the exchange was confined to Sanskrit and Tamil, Pali and the Prakrits, once each of the so-called Modern Indian languages reached a state of literary development, it declared its independence by producing its version of *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Bhagavat Purana*, until every developed language of the country had its own *Mahabharat* and *Ramayan* and *Bhagavat* and other well-respected texts from other languages. Again, these are re-tellings rather than renderings, and in most cases the author felt free to add material of his own composition.
>
> (Mukherjee 2004 22)

Translation and retelling thus become an act of linguistic and literary patriotism at the regional level, each language vying with the others and also with a widely dominant language such as Sanskrit.

That leads us to translation as **a postcolonial project**, as patriotism at the larger national level, the translation of works in Indian languages, starting with the epics and other major literary works **into English.** It is true that the initiative for such translations came from the colonizers themselves, the first being William Jones' translation of *Shakuntala* in 1789. (Such translations from Western scholars have of course continued unbroken even after the end of colonization.) But by the late 19th c. Indians also began to contribute to such translations with Romesh Chandra Dutt translating *Lays of Ancient India* (1894), *Maha-Bharata* (1899) and *Ramayana* (1902). All these were part of a national renaissance, a patriotic assertion (in the face of the Macaulay-led colonizer) that this nation possesses as vast and as impressive a literary canon as the European nations - old or modern.

Interestingly, such assertions - rather reminders - had to be made to the native Indians themselves. There was a felt need to counter the colonizer's attribution of an inferior status to India's culture and civilization and translation was one of the ways of effecting such repudiation. The translations thus became part of a postcolonial project to infuse a spirit of self-esteem, pride and courage in a people who, on account of political and cultural subjugation, had lost faith in themselves. The revitalizing could be done - or at least one way of doing it was - by means of retelling ancient tales of heroism, nobility and sacrifice. The attempt is to create **an awareness of the relevance and significance of the past for the present.**

Moreover, translations of literary texts (from Sanskrit to a regional language or from one regional language to another) "became part of the new nationalism which sought to become familiar with other regions of the country through writing originating there". (Mukherjee 2004 24-25) Nowadays of course there are institutional agencies like the Sahitya Akademi which sponsor and promote such translations but the efforts taken before Independence were entirely spontaneous. The point to note is that, in the process, there also came to be built a shared literary tradition.

In addition to all such considerations - or rather along with them all the time - the sacred and religious associations of the epics and *puranas* were also motivating factors that led to these translations and retellings. If it is a sacred duty enjoined on Hindus to know their epics, and the gods and godlike figures in them, what better way than to know them - read or listen to them - in their own language? Interestingly, however, there were also translations/retellings that focused on the human aspects of such figures.

Activity 4

In most cases, the authors have stated their objectives in carrying out their translations/retellings. Here are some of those statements (loosely rendered into English!) made by the authors of *Ramayana* in various languages:

My objective is to render in Tamil the history of Rama sung by Valmiki and to spread the fame of Valmiki and Rama among the Tamil people.

(Kampan, author of *Kamparamayanam*, 10th c. A.D.)

I have composed this *Ramayana* epic in order that not only learned scholars but ordinary folk can also become aware of *dharma*, acquire wisdom and attain salvation.

(Yogiswara, author of *Ramayana Kakavin* (Indonesian *Ramayana*), in old Javanese, 10th-11th c. A.D.)

The common people cannot grasp either the content or the flavour of the epic in the Northern language [Sanskrit]. Reading the Sanskrit epic is like playing music to deaf ears or like the deaf conversing with the dumb. Therefore I have created this *Ramayana* in simple Telugu words and style so that ordinary Telugu people can read and derive pleasure from it.

(Adhuguri Molla, author of *Molla Ramayanam*,15th c. A.D.)

I have rendered here the best verses of *Valmiki Ramayana* into Assamese in compliance with the request of King Maha Manikya of the Varahi dynasty. Even as we churn milk and take only the ghee from it, I have taken the best portions of Valmiki's epic and left out the others. In accordance with the wishes of Maha Manikya, I have also added a few portions to enhance the poetic beauty of the epic.

(Madhava Kandali, author of *Assamese Ramayana*, 14th c. A.D.)

Following the path laid down by the *Vedas*, *Puranas* and *Agamas*, and the language of Adikavi Valmiki and my predecessor poets, I sing this story for my own self-fulfilment.

(Tulsidas, *Ramcharitmanas*, Hindi, 16th c. A.D.)

(Manavalan 83-85 Translated here)

Study and comment on the statements quoted above in the light of the discussion in the preceding sub-section.

1.7 THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

We notice that several changes - of plot, episodes, characters, characterization, focus and perspective - take place in retellings and translations as retellings. But before we discuss them, we should perhaps ask why these changes are effected. In

a way, we are returning to the earlier question "why translate/retell?" It is best to remind ourselves that all communication - and literature is a form of communication, though of the most complex kind - takes place in a **context**. We have used the words "telling" and "retelling". The verb "tell", as you know, generally requires two objects: you tell someone something. You can add to these the time and the situation in which the telling and retelling take place. All these factors - what the teller knows and feels, what the teller thinks the listener or reader knows and needs in a particular time or historical situation - make up the context of the telling, which then determines the nature, form, content and style of the (re)telling.

Take for example one of the most popular set of retellings: the *Amar Chitra Katha* series of comic books. The series was conceived, designed, produced and launched in 1967 by a journalist called Anant Pai to create, among Indian children, an awareness of their own traditions of folk tales, history and mythology. It is said that the idea of starting the series came to him as he watched a quiz programme for children on Doordarshan in which the children easily answered questions on Greek mythology but could not answer a simple question like, "In *Ramayana*, who was Rama's mother?" If this was indeed the situation among middle class children, it can at least partly be explained by the socio-cultural context of the late 1960s: thirty years after Independence, the craze for "English" education, the rise of English medium schools, increasing Westernization, the gradual break-up of the joint family which resulted in children being separated from one major source of transmission of these stories, viz. the grandparents. Feeling an urgent need to educate the children on history, folklore and mythology, Anant Pai turned writer and publisher and launched the now-famous comic series and later engaged other writers too. He must also have felt that the best way to catch the attention of children was not through prose narration but through pictures. The popularity of Western comics like the Disney series was also certainly an influencing factor. So far nearly five hundred books have been published in the *Amar Chitra Katha* series. Interestingly, the first ten books were in the Kannada language after which, with the need to reach a wider audience across the country, the English books started appearing.

The aim of the retelling (this as well of many others) is thus to **revive myths, legends and historical events** which may be in danger of being forgotten. The aim, the socio-cultural context, and the writer's perception of it and of the needs and level of the audience determine **what** is to be retold (myths, folk tales, historical accounts of heroes), **how much** of it is to be retold (in abridged form, with only the most important incidents and deeds), and **how,** in what form (the genre of comic books). Basically, these retellings flow from the awareness that the past has much that is culturally valuable to offer to the present.

Let us examine a little further the importance of context for retelling efforts. We said just now that the endeavour of a retelling may be to revive past works (myths, legends, literary works, historical accounts). Such efforts may be based on the view that such works still have a relevance for the present. But there may also be a perception (on the part of the translator/reteller) that these past tales, **as they have been transmitted and interpreted so far**, are not relevant for the present or, in many cases, may even have an unhealthy or harmful impact on the present. In such cases, the retelling may constitute **a deliberate and often radical re-interpretation of the past.** Such radical re-interpretations have been both the cause and effect of recent work in the areas of cultural studies, especially those relating to hitherto suppressed or marginalized sections of society such as women, the "lower" races, castes, tribal communities, the disabled and the like. Such work has often sought to demonstrate that many of the earlier tellings and retellings had been made from

the standpoint of what is regarded as "mainstream" culture and had tended to assert the attitudes and values of that culture, often to the neglect, detriment and oppression of non-mainstream sections. You might at this point recall one of the earlier units in the present course which discusses in detail the issue of the "centre" and the "peripheries". The *Amar Chitra Katha* series itself has recently come in for such interrogation. We shall notice some of these "de-centring" tellings when we take up *Mahabharata* in the next Unit.

1.8 WHAT HAPPENS IN RETELLINGS?

Let us now return to the question, what happens in retellings? First of all, as we mentioned earlier, there may be **changes in the genre** from the "original" or from earlier (re)tellings. There are however two points worth emphasizing in this regard. First, the genre of the retelling is generally determined by literary traditions and contemporary literary fashions. *Valmiki Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* were themselves composed in verse and it is not surprising therefore, for example, that most early translations/retellings of those epics were in verse form as verse was the major vehicle for literary creations. A few, especially the "foreign" versions like the Japanese, Tibetan and Burmese, were in prose. Interestingly, *Champu Ramayanam* in Sanskrit, believed to have been composed in the 11th c. A.D. and *Bhaskara Ramayanam* in Telugu, created in the 13th c., both employed a combination of prose and verse. One of the Tamil *Ramayanas*, composed in the 16th-17th centuries, is named *Takkai Ramayanam* because it was created in order to be sung to the accompaniment of a musical instrument called "takkai"! (Manavalan 68).

As the need (and the wish) arose to make the myths and epics accessible to a wider public, we find retellings came to be written in the genres of drama, the novel and the short story. Sanskrit drama of course had existed from about the advent of the Christian era and the plays of Bhasa, "discovered" only in early 20th c., might have been written as early as the 1st c. B.C. (Many of his plays retell sub-stories and episodes from *Mahabharata*. We shall take a look at them in the next Unit.) The point to note is that the drama form helps to interpret the myths and tales in terms of conflicts of characters and situations rather than as narratives. Similarly, the novel, intimately bound up as it is with societal issues, proved the most useful form in the 20th c. for retellings in terms of conflicts between the individual and society. It is thus again quite natural that many of the **perspective** retellings, i.e. retellings from the point of view of particular characters from the epics, such as Draupadi or Bhima, have been in the novel form. (We shall discuss some of these in the next Unit.) The short story form again helps to focus on particular episodes and often provides reinterpretations of them.

There may be **changes in the content** (changes from the "original" or, as is almost invariably the case with retellings of the epics, changes from earlier tellings). While most tellers have made such departures without any explanation or apology, some have indeed sought to justify them. The introductory remarks of Madhava Kandali, author of the *Assamese Ramayana*, in this regard are quite thought-provoking. He is addressing his readers:

Poets compose their verse following the literary and cultural conventions of their times. Therefore, some of their statements may be true and some may have been imaginatively invented. . . This (the story of Rama) was not a tale told by God; it was a tale in popular vogue (*daiva vani nahi, lauka kahe katha*). Therefore you shouldn't fault me in my poetic endeavour in which I leave out some [episodes, incidents] and add some.

(Quoted in Tamil by Manavalan 51, translated here)

The best-known example of such departures is the omission of the entire *Uttara Kandam* in many tellings of *Ramayana* (including *Kampa, Adhyatma, Molla and Bhaskara Ramayanas*). As you know, the *Yuddha Kandam* ends with the coronation of Rama after his reunion with Sita and return to Ayodhya) and the *Uttara Kandam* tells the story of Sita's banishment and her final absorption into the earth. It is necessary to ask why such a major departure was considered necessary by these poets.

One explanation is that according to **literary convention**, no work was to have a tragic ending; there are no tragedies in Sanskrit drama. (Thus, the change in plot is necessitated by the choice of genre.) In fact, in Bhavabhuti's play *Uttararamacharita*, which is a retelling of Valmiki's *Uttara Kandam*, Rama is (again) re-united with Sita (after the banishment and after the birth of Lava and Kusa) and the reunion is shown to be brought about by the sage Valmiki himself! Though the other *Ramayanas* that we mentioned are not plays, they too seem to have followed the convention about not having an unhappy ending. (*Kampa Ramayanam* was also known as *Kampa Natakam*.) But why did Valmiki not follow the convention whereas the others did?

The other explanation (which may answer the question posed above) is in **the way the characters are conceived**. There is reason to believe that Valmiki visualized Rama as an ideal man, of heroic proportions of course, but still as a human being. (You will remember that the epic begins with a search, Valmiki asking Narada whether there ever existed a man who followed dharma, who was ever truthful, firm of purpose and so on.) In many of the retellings on the other hand (including Kampan) he is presented as an *avatar*. The moral and emotional dilemmas that the banishment of Sita would present to Rama would not have been consistent with his projection as an incarnation.

Returning to the question of departures again, apart from changes in plot, and changes in the conception of characters, the retellings may shift the **focus on some characters** who play a secondary or marginal role in earlier tellings. Many of the retellings done in the last few decades (especially in English) tend to focus on a single character (often not the hero) from the epic and narrate the tale and discuss issues from his or her point of view. Or, some incident or character that is only briefly or cursorily or sometimes subtly presented in one work may be developed more fully in another. As Ramanujan says, "Mimesis is never only mimesis, for it evokes the earlier image in order to play with it and make it mean other things . . . mirrors . . . become windows". (25) Interestingly, many more such retellings have been made of *Mahabharata* than of *Ramayana* and we shall discuss them in the next Unit.

There may be **additional descriptions**, **changes in the landscape**, the flora and fauna of the setting in which the action takes place.

We may also mention here in passing "retellings" in which the nucleus of a myth or an epic episode or character is taken and an entirely modern narrative is created. A well-known example from English literature is Shaw's play *Pygmalion*, which, adopting the myth of the Greek sculptor who falls in love with the statue that he sculpts, tells the story of an English professor of phonetics and his relationship with the flower-girl whom he transforms into a lady. A popular Tamil film describes the attempt of a man to possess his brother's wife: the title is *Vali*! Another film presents the tale of an abandoned child who grows up into a hero and becomes the lieutenant of a mafia chief: the hero is called Surya!

Activity 5

Comment on the following departures from *Valmiki Ramayanam* made in the retellings mentioned. Try to speculate on the motives/reasons behind the departures.

There are four places in *Mahabharata* where we find the Ramayana story or episodes from it narrated. However, there is no indication in these that Sita had a divine origin (*ayonija*); nor is there any mention of Sita's ordeal by fire.

In the Jain *Ramayanas* Rama is depicted, not as a god, but as one of the sixty three *Mahapurushas* ("great men"). Here, Rama does not even kill Ravana.

The Ahalya story is not found in the Buddhist and Jain *Ramayanas*.

The Kashmiri poet Kshemendra's work *Dasavatara Charitam* (11th c. A.D.), which tells the Rama tale in Sanskrit, does not follow a chronological order (as most Indian epics and poetical works do) but begins from Lanka where, in a flash-back narration, Ravana is told the story of Rama from *Bala Kandam* up to the Panchavati stage. Such a technique (called *in medias res*) is followed mostly in European epics (e.g. *Paradise Lost*)

In the *Krithivasa Ramayana* (Bangla, 15th c. A.D.), many of the sub-stories, events and descriptions and usages are those associated with Bengal.

In the *Jagmohan Ramayanam* (Odiya, 16th c. A.D.) Rama, Lakshmana and Sita are shown to have stayed in places like Chandrabagh, Konark, Bhubaneshwar and Puri.

In the Thai and Laotian *Ramayanas*, primacy is accorded to the monkeys, especially Hanuman.

1.9 RETELLINGS AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

We have so far in this Unit discussed various kinds of retellings including translations. Since the discussion is a part of a course on comparative literature, it is fair to ask: are retellings a legitimate subject of study under the discipline of comparative literature? To answer this question, we can perhaps recall some of the key points and statements made in the first and introductory Unit in Block I of the present course.

On the face of it, the literatures in the various languages of India may seem to constitute an appropriate subject for comparative literature. But then there is the view, often held by nationalists and by those who wish to preserve the political and emotional unity of the country, that there is only one entity called "Indian Literature". The official Indian literary academy, the Sahitya Akademi, has the motto, "Indian literature is one but written in many languages". Its official journal has the title *Indian Literature*. But there are many others, especially writers and critics, who would question such an assumption. Ramanujan for instance, wonders "if something would remain the same if it is written in several languages" (7). G.N. Devy has emphasized the **multifacetedness** of Indian literatures developing in various *bhashas* since early medieval times, each having its own continuous history; he therefore proposed the model of a comparative *bhasha* literature. (27, 42).Swapan Majumdar's observation about the diversity of India as "most congenial for the praxis of comparison" (quoted in the first Unit) is most apt here. Our discussion of the

retellings, as well as the Activities, has also brought out the **rootedness** of each of these in its own culture.

The point is that even as these literatures have had an independent existence, they have exercised sufficient **influence** on each other to make comparison possible and viable. In a society like India with a long **multilingual tradition**, influence of the most powerful kind has been exercised owing to a **direct access** to other literatures, which again has been made possible because of **linguistic skills** and **polyglot competence**. Moreover, the long Indian tradition of translation - which Weisstein places under the study of influence and **reception -**has played a significant intermediary part in these literary encounters.

The Indian phenomenon of translations/retellings is best explained by the idea of **interliterariness** which comparatists have postulated. (See the discussion on Majumdar, Dev and Gallik in Block I, Unit 1). To quote from Unit 1, "literariness", which concerns one region or language, becomes "interliterariness" when it "crosses zonal, regional and linguistic barriers and registers a pervasive presence but with striking variations, depending on the cultural location in which a feature is absorbed, reused and recreated". Amiya Dev sees "interliterariness" as the way out of the "unity x diversity" debate and other such abstractions. That the concept is eminently appropriate in the Indian context will be obvious from the fact that interliterariness is most conspicuous "where contacts between literatures are a *condition sine qua non* [essential condition] of their development". (Galik 37)

1.10 LET US SUM UP

We have in this Unit attempted first to study retellings as a distinct literary and cultural phenomenon. After an introductory example, we looked at the kinds of narratives that are retold and at the forms that retellings take. Proceeding then to translations of the Indian epics, we examined the question whether they were translations in a strict sense or retellings originating in attempts at translation. Making an analysis of the motives behind such retellings, we looked at the importance of context. We then discussed the various changes that take place in retellings. We concluded by placing retellings in the discipline of comparative literature.

1.11 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) What guesses can we make about the origins of the practice of retelling?

2) Describe the range of narrative forms that have been retold.

3) Discuss the view that there is no such event as an "original" telling and that all narratives are retellings.

4) Examine the motives that might have led people to translate and retell narratives in general and epics and *puranas* in particular.

5) The Indian epics have had profound sacred religious associations. Why has that not prevented retellings of them?

6) State the role of retellings in mediating between the past and present in a given culture and society.

7) How do contexts determine retellings—their form and content?

8) What are the ways in which a narrative can be transformed in a retelling? Illustrate with some examples (other than those provided in the Unit).

9) What are the arguments in favour of regarding retellings as a legitimate subject of comparative literature?

10) Elucidate the concept of "interliterariness" with regard to the literatures of India and the relevance of the concept for comparative literature.

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APPENDIX A

[Here is a fairy tale in three versions, that is, a story with three different endings. The first was written in the 17th century, the second in the 19th and the third in the 20th.]

1) **LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD by Charles Perrault**

Once upon a time there lived in a certain village a little country girl, the prettiest creature who was ever seen. Her mother was excessively fond of her; and her grandmother doted on her still more. This good woman had a little red riding hood made for her. It suited the girl so extremely well that everybody called her Little Red Riding Hood.

One day her mother, having made some cakes, said to her, "Go, my dear, and see how your grandmother is doing, for I hear she has been very ill. Take her a cake, and this little pot of butter."

Little Red Riding Hood set out immediately to go to her grandmother, who lived in another village.

As she was going through the wood, she met with a wolf, who had a very great mind to eat her up, but he dared not, because of some woodcutters working nearby in the forest. He asked her where she was going. The poor child, who did not know that it was dangerous to stay and talk to a wolf, said to him, "I am going to see my grandmother and carry her a cake and a little pot of butter from my mother."

"Does she live far off?" said the wolf

"Oh I say," answered Little Red Riding Hood; "it is beyond that mill you see there, and it is the first house in the village."

"Well," said the wolf, "and I'll go and see her too. I'll go this way and go you that, and we shall see who will be there first."

The wolf ran as fast as he could, taking the shortest path, and the little girl took a roundabout way, entertaining herself by gathering nuts, running after butterflies, and gathering bouquets of little flowers. It was not long before the wolf arrived at the old woman's house. He knocked at the door: tap, tap.

"Who's there?"

"Your grandchild, Little Red Riding Hood," replied the wolf, counterfeiting her voice; "who has brought you a cake and a little pot of butter sent you by mother."

The good grandmother, who was in bed, because she was somewhat ill, cried out, "Push the door open and come in"

The wolf pushed the door open, went in and then he immediately fell upon the good woman and ate her up in a moment, for it had been more than three days since he had eaten. He then put on the old woman's nightclothes, shut the door and got into the grandmother's bed, expecting Little Red Riding Hood, who came some time afterwards and knocked at the door: tap, tap.

"Who's there?"

Little Red Riding Hood, hearing the big voice of the wolf, was at first afraid; but believing her grandmother had a cold and was hoarse, answered, "It is your grandchild Little Red Riding Hood, who has brought you a cake and a little pot of butter mother sends you."

The wolf cried out to her, softening his voice as much as he could, "Push the door open, and come in."

Little Red Riding Hood pushed the door open and entered.

The wolf, seeing her come in, said to her, hiding himself under the bedclothes, "Put the cake and the little pot of butter upon the stool, and come and get into bed with me because I am so cold."

Little Red Riding Hood got into bed. She was greatly amazed to see how her grandmother looked in her nightclothes, and said to her, "Grandmother, what big arms you have!"

"All the better to hug you with, my dear."

"Grandmother, what big legs you have!"

"All the better to run with, my child."

"Grandmother, what big ears you have!"

"All the better to hear with, my child."

"Grandmother, what big eyes you have!"

"All the better to see with, my child."

"Grandmother, what big teeth you have got!"

"All the better to eat you up with."

And, saying these words, this wicked wolf fell upon Little Red Riding Hood, and ate her all up.

Moral: Children should never talk to strangers, for if they should do so, they may well provide dinner for a wolf.

2) **LITTLE RED CAP by Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm**

"All the better to eat you up with!" And with that he jumped out of bed, jumped on top of poor Little Red Cap, and ate her up. As soon as the wolf had finished this tasty bite, he climbed back into bed, fell asleep, and began to snore very loudly.

A huntsman was just passing by. He knew that the old woman was living in the house. He thought it strange that the old woman was snoring so loudly, so he decided to take a look. He stepped inside, and in the bed there lay the wolf that he had been hunting for such a long time. "He has eaten the grandmother, but perhaps she still can be saved. I won't shoot him," thought the huntsman. So he took a pair of scissors and cut open his belly.

He had cut only a few strokes when he saw the red cap shining through. He cut a little more, and the girl jumped out and cried, "Oh, I was so frightened! It was so dark inside the wolf's body!"

And then the grandmother came out alive as well. Then Little Red Cap fetched some large heavy stones. They filled the wolf's body with them, and when he woke up and tried to run away, the stones were so heavy that he fell down dead.

The three of them were happy. The huntsman took the wolf's pelt. The grandmother ate the cake and butter that Little Red Cap had brought. And Little Red Cap thought to herself, "As long as I live, I will never leave the path and run off into the woods by myself if mother tells me not to."

3) **THE LITTLE GIRL AND THE WOLF by James Thurber**

One afternoon a big wolf waited in a dark forest for a little girl to come along carrying a basket of food to her grandmother. Finally a little girl did come along and she was carrying a basket of food. “Are you carrying that basket to your grandmother?” asked the wolf. The little girl said yes, she was. So the wolf asked her where her grandmother lived and the little girl told him and he disappeared into the wood.

When the little girl opened the door of her grandmother’s house she saw that there was somebody in bed with a nightcap and nightgown on. She had approached no nearer than twenty-five feet from the bed when she saw that it was not her grandmother but the wolf, for even in a nightcap a wolf does not look any more like your grandmother than the Metro-Goldwyn lion looks like Calvin Coolidge. So the little girl took an automatic out of her basket and shot the wolf dead.

Moral: It is not so easy to fool little girls nowadays as it used to be.

[**Notes:** The Hollywood film studio Metro-Goldwyn Mayer (MGM) has a lion in its production logo. Calvin Coolidge was the President of the United States of America from 1923 to 1929.]

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APPENDIX B

Ramayana Stories

S.No.	Title	Author	Date/period	Language	Religion
1	DasarathaJatakam	Not known	5th c. B.C.	Pali	Buddhist
2	AnamakamJatakam	Not known	3rd c. B.C.	Pali	Buddhist
3	ValmikiRamayanam	Valmiki	4th-3rd c. B.C.	Sanskrit	Hindu
4	Bharatam	Vyasa	4th-3rd c. B.C.	Sanskrit	Hindu
5	DasarathaKathanam	Not known	1st c. B.C.	Pali	Buddhist
6	Raghuvamsam	Kalidasa	4th-5th c. A.D.	Sanskrit	Hindu
7	Pauma Cariyu (Cariyam)	VimalaSuri	4th-5th c. A.D.	Prakrit	Jain
8	Vasudevahindi	Sankadasa	5th c. A.D.	Prakrit	Jain
9	NarasimhaPuranam	Not known	5th c. A.D.	Sanskrit	Hindu
10	Ravanavaha (or) SetuBandha	Pravarasena	6th c. A.D.	Prakrit	Hindu
11	BhagavataPuranam	Not known	6th-7th c. A.D.	Sanskrit	Hindu
12	BhattiKavyam (or) RavanaVadham	Bhatti	7th c. A.D.	Sanskrit	Hindu
13	Janakiharan	Kumaradasa	8th-9th c. A.D.	Sanskrit	Hindu
14	UttaraPuranam	Gunapatra	9th c. A.D.	Prakrit	Jain
15	Tun Huang	Not known	9th c. A.D.	Tibetan	——-
16	KambaRamayanam	Kamban	10th c. A.D.	Tamil	Hindu
17	Ramacharitam	Abhinanda	10th c. A.D.	Sanskrit	Hindu
18	Ramayana Kakawin (Indonesian Ramayanam)	Yogiswara	10th-11th c. A.D.	Old Javanese	Hindu
19	Shampo E Kotoba (Japanese Ramayanam)	MinamoTono Tame Nori	10th c. A.D.	Japanese	———
20	ChampuRamayanam	Bhoja Raja	11th c. A.D.	Sanskrit	Hindu
21	RamayanamManjari	Kshemendra	11th c. A.D.	Sanskrit	Hindu
22	PugandiRamayanam	Not known	12th c. A.D.	Sanskrit	Hindu
23	Padma Puranam	Ravisena	12th-15th c. A.D.	Sanskrit	Hindu
24	UdaraRaghavam	Sakalya Mallar	12th-14th c. A.D.	Sanskrit	Hindu
25	Hobutkakshu (Japanese Ramayanam)	Tairano Yasuyori	12th c. A.D.	Japanese	———
26	Tibetan Prose Ramayanam	Tamarstan KasRigyal	13th c. A.D.	Tibetan	———
27	Ranganatha Ramayanam	Kona Putta Reddy	13th c. A.D.	Telugu	Hindu

28	BhaskaraRamayanam	Bhaskara and three others	13th c. A.D.	Telugu	Hindu
29	Assamese Ramayanam	Madhava Kandali	14th c. A.D.	Assamese	Hindu
30	KannasaRamayanam	Rama Panikkar	14th c. A.D.	Malayalam	Hindu
31	AdhyatmaRamayanam	Not known	14th-16th c. A.D.	Sanskrit	Hindu
32	KrithvasaRamayanam	Krithivasa	15th c. A.D.	Bengali	Hindu
33	MollaRamayanam	Adhuguri Molla	15th c. A.D.	Telugu	Hindu
34	AnandaRamayanam	Not known	15th c. A.D.	Sanskrit	Hindu
35	ToraveRamayanam	Kumara Valmiki (alias) Narahari	16th c. A.D.	Kannada	Hindu
36	Ezhuthacchan AdhyatmaRamayanam	Tunjattu Ezhuthacchan	16th c. A.D.	Malayalam	Hindu
37	BhawarthaRamayanam	Eknath	16th c. A.D.	Marathi	Hindu
38	RamcharitManas	Tulsidas	16th c. A.D.	Hindi	Hindu
39	JagmohanRamayanam	Balaramadasa	16th c. A.D.	Odiya	Hindu
40	Persian Ramayanam	Abdul Khader	16th c. A.D.	Persian	———
41	TakkaiRamayanam	Emperuman	17h c. A.D.	Tamil	Hindu
42	Hikayat Seri Ram	Not known	13th-17th c. A.D.	Malay	Hindu
43	Tama Zatdaw (Burmese Ramayanam)	Not known	17th c. A.D.	Burmese	———
44	MaharadiaLavana (Philippine Ramayanam)	Not known	17th-19th c. A.D.	Filipino	———
45	Ramakien(Ramakeerthi) (Thai Ramayanam)	King Rama I	18th c. A.D.	Thai	———-
46	GvayDvorabhi	Not known	18th c. A.D.	Laotian	———-
47	PhraLakPhra Ram	Not known	19th c. A.D.	Laotian	———-
48	PrakashRamayanam	Prakash Ram	19th c. A.D.	Kashmiri	Hindu

– Translated from A.A. Manavalan, *Rama Kataiyum Ramayanankalum* (Tamil) (“The Story of Rama and Ramayanas”) 4-7

UNIT 2 RETELLINGS OF *MAHABHARATA*

Structure

2.0 Objectives

2.1 Introduction

2.2 Origins and Transmission of the Epic

2.3 Size and Encyclopaedic Features

2.4 Kinds of Retelling

2.5 Recapitulation

- 2.5.1 Why Translate/Retell?
- 2.5.2 The Importance of Context
- 2.5.3 What Happens in Retellings?

2.6 *Mahabharata* as Retold by C. Rajagopalachari

- 2.6.1 C. Rajagopalachari
- 2.6.2 The Objectives of the Retelling
- 2.6.3 Moral Observations
- 2.6.4 Parallels Between Past and Present
- 2.6.5 Narrative Devices: Compression
- 2.6.6 Sub-Stories
- 2.6.7 Convergences and Divergences: Rajaji's *Mahabharata* in Relation to Other Retellings

2.7 Contemporary Stories Using *Mahabharata* Framework

2.8 Conclusion

2.9 Let Us Sum Up

2.10 Unit End Questions

2.11 References and Suggested Readings

Appendix A

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we discuss retellings of *Mahabharata*. By the end of this unit, you will have an idea of the origins of the epic, the lines of its transmission down the centuries and the various kinds of retelling that the epic has gone through. The detailed discussion of C. Rajagopalachari's *Mahabharata* in relation to Vyasa's epic as well as other retellings, ancient and modern will also let you appreciate the perennial appeal of the epic in all its incarnations.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Retellings, in some form or other, are an indispensable part of all communication. We are concerned, in the previous and the present Units, with retellings of literary narratives. We saw that while the practice of retelling might have originated, in all civilizations, before the advent of writing and printing, it has continued all through history. While any literary narrative can be retold, those which have acquired the status of classics and are closely associated with a nation's honoured cultural past have been revisited more often and more memorably than other works.

2.2 ORIGINS AND TRANSMISSION OF THE EPIC

In the last Unit we noted the difficulty of determining the "original telling" of ancient texts, especially *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. We discussed the various Rama stories that had existed before Valmiki composed his epic and also the numerous transformations that Valmiki's work itself has undergone over the centuries. With regard to *Mahabharata* there is even greater uncertainty about the original telling, if indeed there was one. One extreme example of such scepticism is to question whether there was in fact a person called Vyasa or to say that there was not just one Vyasa but many. Though such a view has not found acceptance, others have pointed to the meaning of the name "Vyasa", which means "one who compiles or puts writings/accounts together". It is generally believed that it was Vyasa who classified and put together the Vedas and also the *Puranas*. (His original name was Krishna Dvaipayana, meaning, literally, the dark one born on an island.) In the same manner he also put together a number of stories which had been in circulation before his time, to create *Mahabharata*.

Scholarly research has led to general acceptance of the following account. *Mahabharata*, in Sanskrit,is called an *itihasa* which means "historical event", literally "so indeed it was". The Kurukshetra war was a historical event believed to have taken place around 1000 B.C. and there were numerous narratives of it sung at various times and places by wandering minstrels called *sutas* (men born to *Kshatriyas* out of wedlock). Around 400 B.C. Vyasa put these together to create a work in about 24000 couplets which he called *Jaya*. (There are some who maintain that *Jaya* was the name given to the earlier versions and that Vyasa called his work *Bhaarata*, meaning the story of the descendants of King Bharata, son of Dushyanta). After composing the work, Vyasa passed it on to one of his chief disciples named Vaisampayana. The latter recited it at the sacrificial ceremony performed by King Janamejaya, the great-grandson of Arjuna. The story was heard (or overheard) by a *suta* called Romaharshana. Romaharshana transmitted it to his son Ugrashrava, who narrated it to the sages assembled at the hermitage of Rishi Sounakha in the Naimisha forest (Naimisharanya as it is called now, a sacred spot near Lucknow). This last rendering most probably took place around 400 A.D. It is in this form (as heard and preserved by the sages at Sounakha's hermitage) that the epic has been handed down to generations down the centuries and millennia. And the length of the epic at this point was 100,000 verses.

There was another possible line of transmission. This was through Sage Jaimini, another of the disciples of Vyasa. It is believed that the version transmitted by Jaimini has passed into many regional renderings and folk tales.

There are a few important points to note here, and these points lead us to a conclusion. The facts are (a) There was a span of about 800 years between the first composition (or putting together) and the "final" work (b) There were at least three "tellers" or narrators (or three "official" or acknowledged ones) (c) The epic has grown to four times its "original" length (from 25000 to 100000 verses). (d) There has been a two-way mode of transmission, from the oral to the written and again to the oral and so on. Vyasa was probably the first to write down the narrative(s) that had been orally transmitted till his time. Rather, as we are told at the beginning of all versions of the epic, Vyasa dictated it to Lord Ganapati who acted as his scribe. What was written down was then passed on presumably in the spoken mode through Vaisampayana, Romaharshana and Ugrashrava. The conclusion: many of the parts/episodes/passages which we now regard as central to *Mahabharata* were most

probably additions made after the time of Vyasa. That at any rate is the view of many Western scholars: that there have been scores, maybe hundreds of interpolations, i.e.texts and portions added to the "original" in the process of transmission. As against such a view, however, as A.K. Ramanujan observes, to most Indian minds *Mahabharata* is not a loose bundle of disparate pieces but a structure of unity. Many of its portions, especially the didactic ones, *Bhagavad Gita* for example, which the critical scholar is inclined to consider interpolations, are integral to the work, in the thinking of most Indians. "*Mahabharata* is not so much a text as a tradition."

Like *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* too, even after 400 A.D., had several regional versions, **recensions**, as they are called. The Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Pune, collated the numerous versions and brought out a **critical edition** of *Mahabharata* in nineteen volumes, prepared by V.S. Sukhtankar and others. Over the last many decades, this critical edition (in Sanskrit) has mostly served as the text for translations into other languages and as the basis for various retellings, adaptations and abridgements.

Again, like *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, too, has been translated, adapted, abridged, retold in numerous genres and modes: as poetry, drama (written), theatre (enacted), novels, short stories, street plays, folk tales, *harikathas*, films, serials on T.V. The claim made in the epic itself, in the *AdiParva*, is that for the poets of the world

> *[Mahabharata]* will be the source of their creativity
> As monsoon brings rain and is a life giver
> In the same way the epic *Bharata* is
> A shady tree to all creativity.

2.3 SIZE AND ENCYCLOPAEDIC FEATURES

As we said earlier, the *Mahabharata* epic, as we now have it, divided into eighteen parts or *parvas*, consists of one lakh verses in the form of couplets or two lakh lines of verse. It is about eight times the size of the Greek epics the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* put together. It takes all knowledge for its province and its encyclopaedic qualities entitle it to the claim "What is here may be elsewhere. But what is not here is nowhere else". As the ancient Telugu poet Nannayya put it,

> The votaries of righteousness regard it as a treatise on *Dharma*, the philosophers look upon it as a systematised philosophy, law-givers consider it as a standard work of ethics, the poets view it as a poem, historians value it as history, the scholars of grammar, prosody and poetics look to it as a repository of examples of vindication. The learned well-versed in the ancient lore consider it a comprehensive compendium of past wisdom
>
> (Krishnamacharya 431)

A very recent reteller expresses the same idea in a different way:

> In the Hindu tradition, purushartha or the validation of human existence has four aspects, dharma, artha, kama and moksha, that is, social conduct, economic activities, pleasurable pursuits and spiritual activities. Through the tales of the *Mahabharata*, Vyasa draws equal attention to all four aspects of human existence, making it a complete epic. (Pattanaik xx)

2.4 KINDS OF RETELLING

Given its universal and perennial appeal, it is no wonder *Mahabharata* has been translated from Sanskrit and retold in various forms and sizes in almost all Indian languages and a number of foreign languages as well. Oral renderings, of course, there have been in plenty: to cite just one example, a musical rendering of the epic called *Pandun ka kada* has been performed by the Meo Muslims in the Mewat region in Rajasthan and Haryana for more than two centuries now (Mathur). However, confining ourselves to written literature, we can distinguish five kinds of such retellings: (1) translations of the complete epic (2) abridgements of the major story of the epic (3) "perspective" retellings, i.e. retellings from the point of view of some character or other (4) narratives of particular episodes or sub-stories from the epic that may or may not be directly related to the story of the Pandavas and Kauravas. (5) an ostensibly modern narrative (with a modern setting) or an imaginative reconstruction of a historical narrative using the framework and adapting characters and motifs from the epic.

Perhaps the earliest full-length translation is what is known as *Andhra Mahabharatamu* in Telugu, begun by Nannaya in the 11th c., continued by Tikkana (13th c.) and completed by Errapragada (14th c.)! *Pampa Bharata* in Kannada (10th c.) was written in the "Champu" style. *Villibharatam*in Tamil (14th c.) by Villiputtarar is a retelling of the first ten *parvas* of the epic. More recent translations include the one in Hindi (in six volumes) by Pandit Ramnarayan Dutt Shastri Pandey.

The first complete English translation was done in prose in eleven volumes by Kisari Mohan Ganguly and published between 1883 and 1896. Another mammoth translation project, still in progress, was initiated by the Chicago University Press with J.A.B. van Buitenen, who translated the first five *parvas*. After his death the project is being continued by J.L. Fitzgerald and Wendy Doniger for the same publishers. Another such project, undertaken by the New York University Press, as part of the Clay Sanskrit Library, is also in progress, with fifteen volumes completed out of the thirty two planned. The poet-critic-publisher P. Lal has produced a verse translation (which he calls "transcreation") of the epic.

Retellings of the entire epic in English include Kamala Subramaniam's book (published by Bhavan's University) and, more recently, by Devdutt Pattanaik. Pattanaik's retelling is entitled *Jaya* and it offers fresh interpretations drawing from the Jaimini version and innumerable folk tales and regional narratives as well as from the Vaisampayana tradition.

Coming now to abridged translations of *Mahabharata*, it is well nigh impossible to list all those done in all the Indian languages, so let us just mention a few major books in English. These have been done by Ramesh Menon, William Buck, R.K. Narayan, C. Rajagopalachari, K.M. Munshi, Romesh C. Dutt, John D. Smith and a few others. Of these we shall be presently taking up the book by C. Rajagopalachari.

In the third category, we have the "perspective" retellings: i.e. those narrated from the point of view of one of the characters in the epic. Thus, in these retellings, a character relatively secondary or even marginalized in the epic may become the central character and vice versa. Most of these, especially in the last few decades, are in the novel form. For example, M.T. Vasudevan Nair's Malayalam novel *Randamoozham* (translated into English as *Second Turn*) tells the epic story from Bhima's point of view. In Shivaji Sawant's *Mrutyunjay* (Marathi) Karna is the central character. It is the perspective of Draupadi that is foregrounded in The *Palace of*

Illusions (English) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and *Yajnaseni* by Pratibha Ray (Odiya, translated into English by Pradip Bhattacharya). Both these books have been discused in Block 7.

You might have thought, from the information given above, that "perspective" retellings are only a recent phenomenon. You will be surprised to hear that they had been attempted almost around the same time that *Mahabharata* itself was being created or put together. Among the Sanskrit one-act plays of Bhasa (who is believed to have lived in the 4th c. B.C. but whose works were lost for a long time and were rediscovered early in the 20th c.) there are seven which offer such perspective retellings of *Mahabharata*. For the purpose of such revisits, quite often incidents and situations not mentioned at all in the epic are invented by Bhasa. For example, *Madhyama-vyaayoga* ("The Middle One") focuses on Bhima (the middle one among the three sons of Kunti) meeting his son Ghatotkacha in an extraordinary situation. Another play featuring Ghatotkakcha, called *Duta-Ghatotkacha* (translated as "Potshead as an Envoy") presents Ghatotkacha as a messenger to the Kauravas after the unfair killing of Abhimanyu.

Narratives of particular episodes or sub-stories from the epic have again been attempted from very early times. While Bhasa's works can also be considered under this category, there are many other Sanskrit works such Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Sakuntalam* (1st c. B.C.), Bharavi's *Kiratarjuniyam* (6thc.A.D.),Bhattanarayana's *Venisamharam* (7th c. A.D.) and Magha's *Sisupalavadam* (7th c.), all of which enact particular episodes from the epic.

While most of these works simply elaborate, in the prevailing literary fashion, brief episodes from the epic and do not offer any fresh interpretation, some of them attempt to project characters in a different light than the one in which they were seen in the epic. Kalidasa's play, in particular, has been subjected to critical scrutiny for the change it effects in the characterization of its heroine, Sakuntala. Sri Aurobindo's modern epic *Savitri*, significantly subtitled *A Legend and a Symbol*,takes up the Satyavan-Savitri episode from the epic to present a highly philosophical theme of spiritual regeneration.

Our last category of retellings consists of "modern" works (quasi-historical or imaginative reconstructions) that make a highly skilful use of the framework of the epic and adapt characters to produce a new narrative. Thus Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* is a retelling of *Mahabharata* as well as a witty narrative of the history of India from the late 19th c. to the 1970s. It is a reinterpretation of the epic as well as recent Indian history, a historicization of myth and a mythicization of history.

Activity 1

List all the retellings of *Mahabharata* that exist in your first language. Classify them using the four categories of retellings mentioned above.

2.5 RECAPITULATION

Before we take up some of these retellings for discussion, let us quickly recapitulate the major points we made in the earlier Unit, especially on the following: (a) why translate/retell? (b) the importance of context (c) what happens in retellings?

2.5.1 Why Translate/Retell?

- Translations are attempted to transmit in one's first language whatever is worth transmitting from another.

- They are undertaken as a kind of challenge to enhance and demonstrate the richness of one's language in comparison with other Indian languages and, as a postcolonial project, in comparison with the colonizer's language. They thus become part of a regional, linguistic-literary, cultural or national renaissance.
- They constitute an attempt to create an awareness of the relevance and significance of the past for the present.
- They are undertaken as a sacred obligation since the epics and the myths that they are based on have religious and scriptural associations.

2.5.2 The Importance of Context

- Each translation/retelling takes place in a specific historical, political, cultural, literary context.
- The context determines **what** is to be retold, **to whom, how much** of it is to be retold, and **how**, i.e. in what form or mode the retelling is to be done.
- The specific context of retelling necessitates a radical re-interpretation of the past, often resulting in a shift of focus, a de-centring process involving the foregrounding of hitherto marginalized sections and interests.

2.5.3 What Happens in Retellings?

- In most cases there is a **change of genre** which is determined by the literary fashions and conventions in vogue. The rise of the drama and later the rise of the novel and the short story have led to retellings of the epics in these forms. The drama form for example makes possible the presentation of conflicts among characters. The novel allows a larger canvas and enables the acting out of conflicts between the individual and society and a variety of social issues, especially the issue of social justice for all classes.
- There are **changes in content**, with the addition, omission or transformation of situations, incidents and characters.
- Retellings often **shift the focus on some characters,** those secondary or marginalized earlier becoming protagonists and vice versa. These again may be done in order to raise important cultural issues regarding class, caste or gender.
- Retellings may take the form of a **modern narrative** using the framework of the epic and adapting characters and situations from it.

Activity 2

I) Both *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have been retold innumerable times in all the ways that we have mentioned above. However, if we take the period immediately before Independence and the period since Independence we observe the following interesting difference. While there were more revisits of *Ramayana* before Independence and for a few decades after, *Mahabharata* has been retold more often in the last few decades, i.e. roughly from the 1970s. Try to analyse the reasons for this phenomenon. Is it that the latter work has a greater relevance now? Is it because it offers more solutions or because it raises more problems which we need to address?

II) From your reading in your first language and in English, which characters, episodes, situations in *Mahabharata* have figured more than others in recent retellings? Why?

2.6 *MAHABHARATA* AS RETOLD BY C. RAJAGOPALACHARI

We shall now take up for analysis C.Rajagopalachari's retelling of *Mahabharata*. While the focus will be on that retelling, we will also, from time to time, look at other revisits in order to get a better idea about changing perspectives of the epic and the ways it has been related to the concerns of the times.

2.6.1 C. Rajagopalachari

C. Rajagopalachari (1878-1972), also known as Rajaji, fought for India's independence alongside the great leaders of the freedom movement such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Vallabhai Patel. He was the first Indian Governor-General of independent India and also for some time Chief Minister of the Madras Presidency. He led movements in Tamil Nadu for social reforms like prohibition and anti-untouchability. An apostle of non-violence like Gandhiji, he led a delegation of the Gandhi Peace Foundation in 1962 that met the American President John F. Kennedy to impress upon him the need for nuclear disarmament. He was known as much for his capacity for clear and fearless thinking as for his commitment to traditional values combined with social reform. He spent most of the later part of his life writing on political, cultural and ethical issues.

2.6.2 The Objectives of the Retelling

In the Preface to the first edition of his *Mahabharata* Rajaji recounts how his retelling of the epic began. It started with his telling the story of Sisupala in a Tamil magazine. The editor liked it so much that he requested the author to retell the entire epic in the form of short pieces. These pieces first appeared serially in that magazine in the 1940s and later were put together as a book. An English translation of the book was done, a substantial part by Rajaji himself and the rest by others. This book, published by Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan first in 1950, has since run into six editions and forty four reprints. Rajaji also retold *Ramayana* first in Tamil and then in English.

In his Prefaces to the first few editions of the English translation, Rajaji states his objectives in undertaking the retelling of the two epics. His aim is to retell the stories of these epics "in simple prose" to the Tamil children in such a manner that it will retain the "dignity and approach to truth of Vyasa or Valmiki" (viii). His retelling will be quite different from the stories which "come embroidered with the garish fancies of the Kalakshepam and the cinema" (viii). He expresses his deep faith in "the fact that it is the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* that bind our vast numbers together as one people, despite caste, space and language that seemingly divide them" (xx). "It is good to have the narrative written up for young people as told in the original epics, and these two books of mine seek to serve that object" (xix). He admits that "even the poets who wrote these epics did not create but built out of the inherited bricks of national memory prior to their own time" and hopes that reading them "even in the form I have given them, we go back to live with our ancient forbears and listen to their grand voices" (xx).

If we keep in mind the fact that these retellings were done in the first decade after Independence, we will understand that they are part of the nationalist project, part of the attempt **to shape the character of the people**, **especially children and the young people**, through exposure, in an easily comprehensible way, to the ancient works of India, not only to the values they embody but also to the issues of *dharma* or truth that they raise and discuss. Such an objective also explains the numerous

places in the retellings where Rajaji either provides his own moral observations on incidents and actions or faithfully quotes Vyasa's own evaluative comments.

2.6.3 Moral Observations

Rajaji being a staunch Gandhian, it is not surprising that foremost among his moral observations, interspersed in the narration, are comments on the evil consequences of war and violence. When, at the end of their thirteen-year exile, the Pandavas are discussing ways of reclaiming their share of the kingdom, Balarama advises them against waging war to achieve their goal. "Balarama did not relish an armed conflict among scions of the same family and rightly held that war would lead only to disaster". Rajaji adds, "The poet puts an eternal truth in Balarama's mouth" (220). Later, Rajaji observes how towards the latter part of the Kurukshetra battle, "many savage and unchivalrous deeds were done". In a war, "even great men commit wrong and their lapses thereafter furnish bad examples to others, and dharma comes to be disregarded more and more easily and frequently. Thus does violence beget and nourish adharma and plunge the world in wickedness" (277) He points to the immediate consequence of the act of adharma that Yudhishthira committed (in making the statement that misled Drona into believing that his son Aswatthama was dead).

> When the words of untruth came out of Yudhishthhira's mouth, the wheels of his chariot, which until then always stood and moved four inches above the ground and never touched it, at once came down and touched the earth. Yudhishthira, who till then had stood apart from the world so full of untruth, suddenly became of the earth, earthy. He too desired victory and slipped into the way of untruth and so his chariot came down to the common road of mankind. (382-83)

However, while Rajaji uses the epic narrative to demonstrate that even good and great men are liable to fall into error and evil, he takes care to clearly differentiate the epic's presentation of evil with that found in modern cinema:

> The modern cinema also projects on the screen much that is bad and immoral. Whatever may be the explanation offered by the protagonists of the cinema, evil is presented on the screen in an attractive fashion that grips people's minds and tempts them into the path of wickedness. Not so in the Puranas. Although they do point out how even great men now and then fell into error and committed wrong, the presentation is such as to warn the reader and not to allure him into evil ways. This is the striking difference between our epics and the modern talkies, which arises from the difference in the character of the people who produced them. (229)

There is again a clear condemnation of violence after the narration of the killing of Karna in clear violation of the codes of war. While (following Vyasa) attributing the adharma of the act to Lord Krishna himself (who incited Arjuna to commit the dishonourable deed), Rajaji concludes:

> The lesson is that it is vanity to hope, through physical violence and war, to put down wrong. The battle for right, conducted through physical force, leads to numerous wrongs and, in the net result, adharma increases. (388-89)

2.6.4 Parallels between Past and Present

At a number of places in his retelling Rajaji draws interesting parallels between the political events and acts described in the epic and those of recent times. Soon after

the Pandavas built the capital of their kingdom at Indraprastha and started ruling from there, "those who surrounded Yudhisthira urged him to perform the Rajasuya sacrifice and assume the title of 'Emperor'". (85) Rajaji comments: "It is evident that imperialism had an irresistible glamour even in those days" (85). In the same chapter there is another parallel drawn, this time about the evil of war and killing, which is a necessary consequence of imperialist designs. Yudhishthira is advised by his brothers as well as Krishna that before performing the Rajasuya sacrifice he should conquer and kill Jarasandha. They argue that it is his duty as a kshatriya to remove from his path to supreme power all those who will oppose it. Yudhishthira, though reluctant, is finally persuaded, and this is how Rajaji concludes the chapter:

Finally Yudhishthira assented to the unanimous opinion that their duty lay in slaying Jarasandha.

This conversation has a curiously modern ring about it and shows that powerful men in ancient days used very much the same specious reasoning as now. (87)

Activity 3

i) Study Chapter XV, "The Slaying of Bakasura", and comment on Vyasa's views (and Rajaji's remark on them) about the relationship between a king's rule and the family life of the people.

ii) Read the last paragraphs of Chapter XLVIII, "Taking Counsel", and discuss the parallel that Rajaji draws between ancient and modern times with regard to war and peace

2.6.5 Narrative Devices: Compression

The structure of Rajaji's retelling is determined by the mode and the audience. As we said, the work originally appeared in Tamil in serial form in several instalments, both the length of each part and the style easily accessible to his young readers. This structure was retained when the work appeared in book form in Tamil and later also translated into English. The English version now consists of a hundred and six chapters and no chapter is longer than eight pages. Though the chapters together narrate the entire story of the epic, most of the chapters also stand by themselves, often each depicting a situation and conveying some message or truth.

As we mentioned earlier, true to its name as an epic *Mahabharata* is a massive work, in terms not only of the time span—involving several generations—that it covers but also of the innumerable characters, situations and sub-stories. It is truly a challenge retelling it within a much narrower canvas — in less than five hundred pages — without taking away anything from the features that have ensured its appeal and significance over millennia. Rajaji successfully meets the challenge because, as we said, he is very clear about his objectives in undertaking the retelling. This enables him to retain the basic structure and substance of the epic as also many of the sub-stories whenever they fit into the moral design of the retelling, and to compress the narrative whenever necessary. Even *Bhagavad Gita*, which is regarded as a central portion in the epic, is just mentioned in a paragraph at the end of the chapter "Krishna teaches". However, Rajaji encapsulates the message of *Gita* and its value and significance for Indian society in just one sentence:

> Its gospel of devotion to duty, without attachment or desire of reward, has shown the way of life for all men, rich or poor, learned or ignorant, who have sought for light in the dark problems of life. (274)

2.6.6 Sub-stories

There are several sub-stories in the epic that are not directly related to the lives of the Pandavas and Kauravas and Rajaji retells many of them even within the short space available to him. Some of these inset stories are told by rishis to the Pandavas during their exile as part of their continuing education. Thus, sage Lomasa tells Yudhishthira the story of Ashtavakra ("The boy with eight crooks") (Chapter XXV) to illustrate the truths that a son need not necessarily inherit the qualities of his father and that it is wrong to assess the greatness of a man on his physical appearance or age, anticipating the modern view of physically challenged persons as those with special abilities.

Activity 4

Read the following sub-stories retold by Rajaji and say which of these you find most relevant to the present times and why you find it/them so.

a) The story of Paravasu and Arvavasu (Chapter XXXIV)

b) The "I am no crane" story (Chapter XXXVII)

c) The story of Utanga (Chapter C)

2.6.7 Convergences and Divergences: Rajaji's *Mahabharata* in Relation to other Retellings

There are a few places where Rajaji transforms or modifies the material found in the epic. It is interesting to speculate on the reasons he does so. Let us take as an example the role of Karna in Draupadi's *swayamvara*. As you are quite aware, a bow-and-arrow contest is set for the suitors. Before Arjuna, disguised as a Brahmin, wins the contest, several other princes, including Sisupala, Jarasandha, Salya and Duryodhana fail. And Karna too makes an attempt and fails:

> When Karna came forward, all the assemblage expected that he would be successful but he failed by just a hair-breath and the string slid back flashing and the mighty bow jumped out of his hands like a thing of life. (Rajaji 70)

But, according to most of the versions of the epic, Karna was not allowed to participate in the contest at all. Here is the relevant portion from Ganguly's translation, regarded as a faithful rendering of the epic:

> And beholding the plight of those monarchs, Karna, that foremost of all wielders of the bow went to where the bow was, and quickly raising it strung it and placed the arrows on the string. And beholding the son of Surya — Karna of the Suta tribe — like unto fire, or Soma, or Surya himself, resolved to shoot the mark, those foremost of bowmen — the sons of Pandu — regarded the mark as already shot and brought down upon the ground. But seeing Karna, Draupadi loudly said, "I will not select a Suta for my lord." Then Karna, laughing in vexation and casting a glance at the Sun, threw aside the bow already drawn to a circle. (Ganguly 374)

Let us also see how the same situation is presented in a recent "perspective" retelling. Here, as Karna is about to shoot the arrow, Draupadi's brother Dhristadyumna, who stands at the side of Draupadi, steps forward and says his sister "cannot have as her suitor a man of a low caste." Karna rebelliously asserts that though he was brought up by Adhiratha, he is in fact a *kshatriya*, as revealed to him by his guru,

Parasurama, and says, "I will take part in this contest. Who dares to stop me?" In response, Dhristadyumna draws his sword, but his face is pale as he knows he is no match for Karna.

> Then, out of the silence that shrouded the marriage hall, a voice rose, sweet as a koel's song, unbending as flint. Before you attempt to win my hand, king of Anga, it said, tell me your father's name. For surely a wife-to-be, who must sever herself from her family and attach herself to her husband's line, has the right to know this.
>
> It was Draupadi, and as she spoke, she stepped between her brother and Karna, and let fall her veil. Her face was as striking as the full moon after a cloudy month of nights. But her gaze was that of a swordsman who sees a chink in his opponent's armor and does not hesitate to plunge his blade there. . .
>
> In the face of that question, Karna was silenced. Defeated, head bowed in shame, he left the marriage hall. . .
>
> (Divakaruni 94-95)

This is from *The Palace of Illusions*¸ a novelistic retelling of the epic from the perspective of Draupadi. But there is a very interesting point about this excerpt. While the rest of the novel is told in the first person mode, this part is in the third, or, as Draupadi says, in the way bards would immortalize the *swayamvara*. But, immediately after the portion quoted above, Draupadi resumes her own narrative. She admits "things occurred just as they describe it", but proceeds to say why she acted as she did. She stepped forward to save her brother from being killed by Karna, as she had been warned by Vyasa that she would be the cause of her brother's death. The point to note is that in Divakaruni's version Draupadi rejects Karna not because of his caste but because she wishes to save her brother. This is significant because till this point in the novel Draupadi has presented herself as being drawn towards Karna from the first time he is mentioned to her. For example, earlier in the novel she says that as she heard his story narrated by her brother, "Each painful detail of Karna's stoy became a hook in my flesh, binding me to him, making me wish a happier life for him" (Divakaruni 87)

But why does Rajaji present this part of the narrative the way he does? He does not skirt or avoid the caste issue elsewhere, as you might have seen from the Activities you have gone through above. The reason perhaps has to do with the picture of Draupadi that he wishes to present to his young readers. More recent retellings, such as Divakaruni's or Pattanaik's, which freely draw from alternative or folk traditions of the epic, come up with a less conformist representation.

Activity 5

Perhaps the most serious change that Rajaji effects is in his account of the lineage of the Kauravas and Pandavas. Compare and comment on the family tree as presented by Rajaji and that found in an essay by A.K. Ramanujan "Repetition in the *Mahabharata*" (Appendix A at the end of this unit).

2.7 CONTEMPORARY STORIES USING *MAHABHARATA* FRAMEWORK

We had mentioned, in the last category of retellings, recent works that tell contemporary stories using the entire *Mahabharata* framework or portions, issues,

situations or characters from the epic. The most remarkable of such works is Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), which can be called a satirical historical novel. It retells the epic story as well as the political history of British and post-Independence India, fusing both to arrive at a new narrative. The very names of the characters in the novel are witty, often parodic, combinations of those from the epic and those from history. Thus Gangaji in the novel is a blend of Gangaputra (Bhishma) from the epic and Gandhiji from history. Duryodhana and (Indira) Priyadarsini (Gandhi) together become Priya Duryodhani in the novel.

Apart from providing a witty, and often hilarious, narrative, the more serious purpose of the novel is to historicize the myth of the epic (making it quite relevant to our times, showing that it is all happening even now) as well as to mythicize history (demonstrating how Gandhiji as well other events and personages of recent Indian history have already become mythical figures). Let us take just one example to show how the author contemporizes a situation from the epic. You must be quite familiar with the Ekalavya episode in the epic: the Nishada (forester) boy who regarded Drona as his guru and, when the master demands his right thumb as his *gurudakshina*, cuts it off and gives it without a moment's hesitation. (Ekalavya has been called the first student through the distance mode! Significantly the Ekalavya episode is not included in Rajaji's narrative.) In Tharoor's novel set in the twentieth century, Drona is the private tutor for the Pandava children and Arjun is his brightest pupil but then it is found that a low-born boy called Ekalavya, who is studying in a government school, is joint-holder of the first place along with Arjun. When Drona calls and questions him, Ekalavya says that he learnt all that the master taught the Pandava children by standing outside the door of the classroom and listening. Drona, determined that no one should equal his favourite pupil Arjuna, demands, as his fee, the boy's right thumb. The boy pleads with him saying that without his right thumb he cannot write nor advance in his life nor take care of his poor mother. When Drona persists, the boy says, "I'm sorry, sir, but I cannot destroy my life and my mother's to pay your fee". Drona orders him out. While Yudhishthir is disturbed about the teacher's action, Arjun is not. "Next time, Arjun stands first in the examination — alone" (Tharoor 198-99). A critic has interpreted Ekalavya's refusal as symbolic of the insistence of the deprived classes and castes on their right to education and empowerment.

The central episode in *Mahabharata* is the disrobing of Draupadi by the Kaurava brothers in the royal assembly following the dice game between Yudhishthira and Sakuni. It is perhaps the most emotionally and morally charged scene in the entire epic. But the issues that it has evoked and the symbolic and metaphorical meanings and significance it has carried have differed through the ages. In most retellings, of course, it is presented as the ultimate dishonour done to a woman. But the very fact that the outrage it evokes is directed not only against Duryodhana, his brothers, and Karna, but also against Yudhishthira and the elders in the court including the King shows there are several others concerns that arise. Draupadi herself first raises the legal issues, whether Yudhisthira had any right to wager her after he had wagered and lost himself. The feminist would raise the question whether Yudhisthira, or any husband, can at all claim to own a woman as he owns property. As a powerful presentation of the clash of *dharmas* or codes — which code is higher: the code or rules of the dice game, the code of loyalty to the State, the code of property rights, or the code of honouring women? — the choice that is made by one party and acquiesced in by the others may seem to justify all the other violations of the code of war eventually.

But, since our concern is with retellings, it is interesting to look at the symbolic interpretations that the episode has received in various retellings. In Subramanya Bharathi's long Tamil poem *Panchali Sabatam* ("Panchali's Vow") Draupadi is projected as Mother India, the Kauravas are the alien rulers of the land, the Pandavas the suffering Indians and Draupadi's vow finally leads to the liberation of the country. In Tharoor's novel, the disrobing of Draupadi is presented as a dream or nightmare but it symbolizes the declaration of Emergency and the assault on democracy in the nineteen seventies. (There is a character called Draupadi Mokrasi in the novel, and there is a play on her name which, when shortened is D.Mokrasi, which can be pronounced as "democracy"!)

Activity 6

Read Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi" and discuss the following questions:

a) Which type of retelling (among those we have listed earlier in this Unit) does it come under?

b) In what ways does it conform to or depart from the epic narrative?

c) What are the political and cultural (especially gender) issues it raises?

d) What impact does it make on you?

2.8 CONCLUSION

Besides focusing on Rajaji's *Mahabharata*, we have, in this Unit, looked at some of the retellings of the epic. The list we have provided is nowhere near being exhaustive. If *Mahabharata* is the largest book ever written, its retellings must make it innumerable times larger, not to speak at all of the books and essays written about it. But perhaps we should conclude with the question: how is it that *Mahabharata* has been the fountain-head of so much creative work down the ages, across languages and cultures?

It may be useful here to look at a vital distinction, made by the critic Roland Barthes, between **readerly** and **writerly** texts. Most texts are readerly texts in which meaning is fixed and pre-determined and the reader becomes a site merely to receive information. On the contrary, in a writerly text there is "a multiplicity of cultural and other ideological indicators or codes for the reader to uncover". In the process of uncovering these indicators or codes readers become writers. Put in very simple terms, while a readerly text is read and perhaps commented upon, a writerly text, when it is read critically and in context, which means the context of its production as well as its reception, triggers a proliferation of several other texts, each "writerly" again (Barthes 4). *Mahabharata* has been the fecund soil from which so much has grown precisely because it has been a most "writerly" text.

Even if we confine ourselves to the reading part — after all not everyone who has read *Mahabharata* has retold it in the form of a book, play or poem though we are all of us retelling it in our own ways — what kind of reading does the epic succeed in effecting? It has been said that a real book reads us, not we it! What does that mean? It means that when we read *Mahabharata* we are actually reading ourselves: we examine ourselves and ask what cultural assumptions we hold, what stances we take, with regard to family, social, religious, cultural and political systems and structures. Reading the epic we ask ourselves an endless series of questions. To cite just a few: What is *dharma*? Is *dharma* absolute or relative? If relative,

relative to what? If relative, can its relativity be the justification for all our acts? And so on. It is precisely by asking such questions that every generation makes this ancient epic relevant for itself.

2.9 LET US SUM UP

We have, in this Unit, discussed retellings of *Mahabharata*. We began with a brief account of its possible origins and the traditions of its transmission. We then listed the various kinds of retellings it has gone through. After recapitulating, from the previous Unit, the why and how of retellings in general, we studied, in some detail, C. Rajagopalachari's *Mahabharata*, in its relation both to the epic and to a few other revisits. We concluded by looking at the causes for the epic's enduring appeal and relevance in all its multifarious forms.

2.10 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) Is it possible to answer the question, "Who is the author of *Mahabharata*?" Compare: "Who is the author of *Discovery of India*?"

2) What conclusions can we draw from the transformation of the epic between 400 B.C. and 400 A.D.?

3) What genres have retellings of *Mahabharata* taken through the centuries? Why were these genres chosen for the retellings?

4) How do Rajaji's personal background and ideals influence his retelling of the epic? Give some examples.

5) Comment on Rajaji's intended audience/readership and the way it determines his choices in the retelling.

6) Rajaji draws some parallels between the past and present in his narration of the epic story. Can you draw some more parallels of your own?

7) Comment on the sub-stories that Rajaji presents and compare them with sub-stories in your first language or English that deal with the same persons/episodes from the epic.

8) Are there sub-stories that you have read or heard that are not included in Rajaji's book? Mention them and try to explain why they have not been presented in his version.

9) Do all retellers interpret the epic the same way? Discuss with reference to Rajaji's work and /or other retellings that you are familiar with.

10) We said in the concluding section (2.9) that *Mahabharata* and its various retellings raise innumerable questions. We also listed a few such questions. Can you mention some more that may arise in the present-day context?

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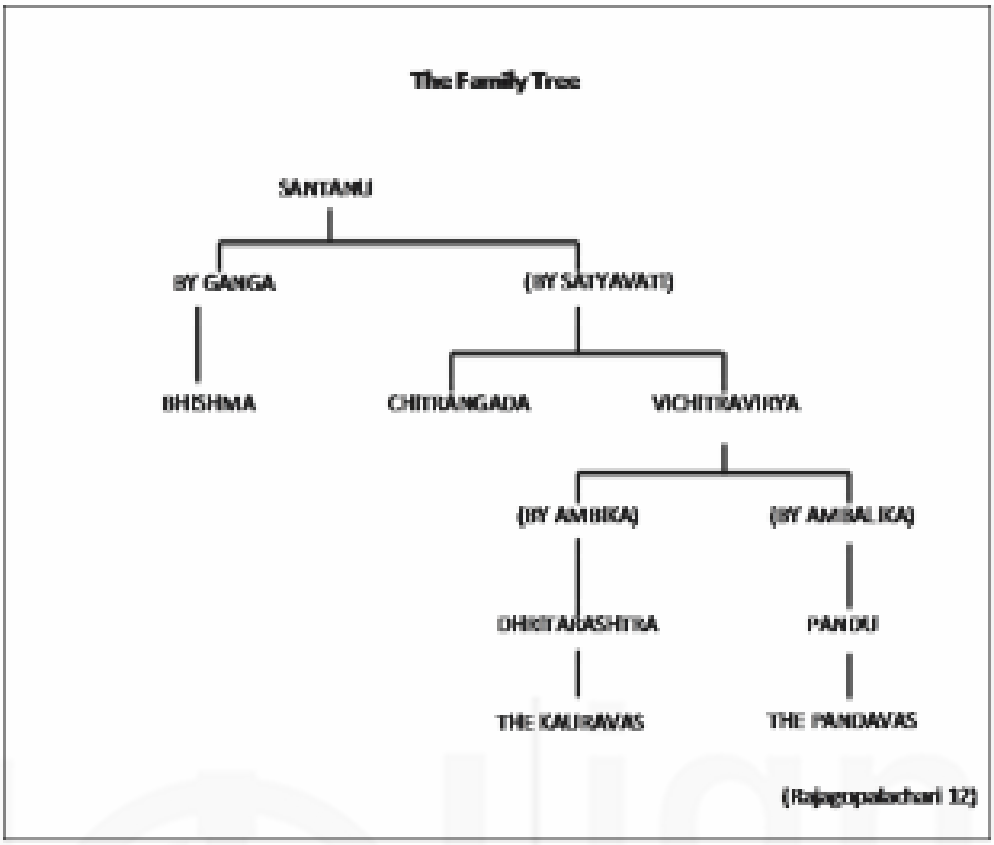
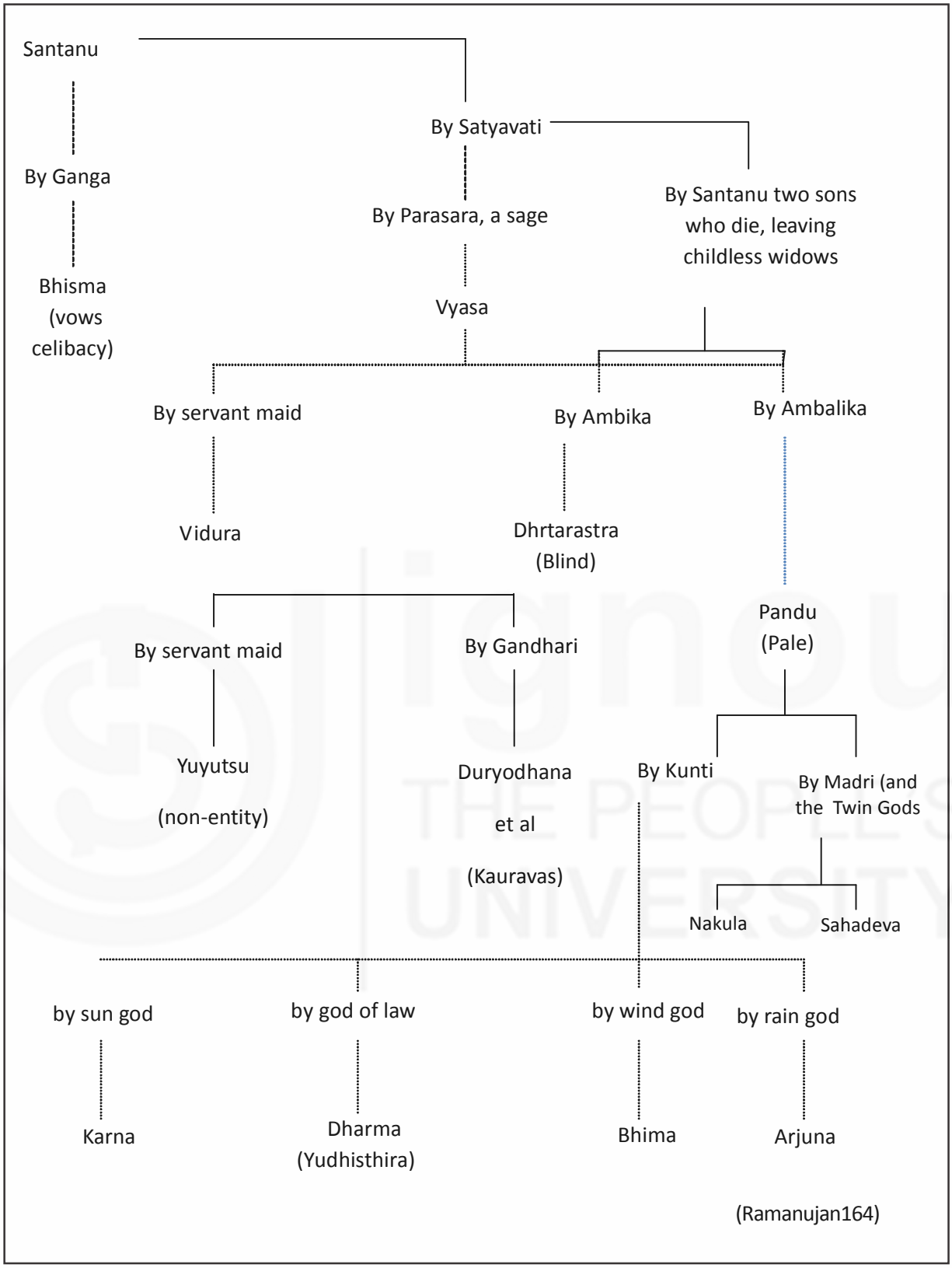
APPENDIX A


The Family Tree
SANTANU
BY GANGA
(BY SATYAVATI)
BHISHMA
CHITRANGADA
VICHITRAVIRYA
(BY AMBIKA)
(BY AMBALIKA)
DHRITARASHTRA
PANDU
THE KAURAVAS
THE PANDAVAS
(Rajagopalachari 12)


Santanu
By Ganga
Bhisma
(vows
celibacy)
By Satyavati
By Parasara, a sage
Vyasa
By Santanu two sons
who die, leaving
childless widows
By servant maid
Vidura
By Ambika
Dhrtarastra
(Blind)
By Ambalika
Pandu
(Pale)
By servant maid
Yuyutsu
(non-entity)
By Gandhari
Duryodhana
et al
(Kauravas)
By Kunti
By Madri (and
the Twin Gods
Nakula
Sahadeva
by sun god
Karna
by god of law
Dharma
(Yudhisthira)
by wind god
Bhima
by rain god
Arjuna
(Ramanujan164)

UNIT 3 DHARAMVIR BHARATI'S VERSE PLAY *ANDHA YUG*

Structure

3.0 Objectives

3.1 Introduction

3.2 Analysis of *Andha Yug*

- 3.2.1 Prologue: Darkness and Light
- 3.2.2 Act I: The Kaurava Kingdom
- 3.2.3 Act II: The Making of a Beast
- 3.2.4 Act III: The Half-truth of Ashwatthama
- 3.2.5 Interlude: Feather, Wheels and Bandages
- 3.2.6 Act IV: Gandhari's Curse
- 3.2.7 Act V: Victory and Death
- 3.2.8 Epilogue: Death of the Lord

3.3 A Note on Translation

3.4 Let Us Sum Up

3.5 Unit End Questions

3.6 References and Suggested Readings

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we will analyse the play in detail, its major themes, characters, plot construction, dramatic conventions and certain dramatic strategies the author has employed to convey a sense of chaos and gloom which pervades the entire play.

By the time you are through with this Unit, you will have a good grasp on the way the play succeeds in conveying the message that when all societal and moral values have crumbled, society descends into a state of anomic lawlessness and it becomes difficult to tell the good from the bad. You will be able to see how the incidents in the play call for a comparison with the contemporary situation. Since it is a translated text, you will also have an idea of the problems translation poses.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The Mahabharata and *The Ramayana* are two great Indian epics which we may not have read, yet we are, in all likelihood familiar with the stories they narrate. Like other epics from the western world such as *Odyssey* by Homer, *Aeneid* by Virgil, and *Paradise Lost* by John Milton, *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana* too are grand stories which are dignified and lofty in narration and content. They are ambitious narratives, in the sense that they tend to define our whole culture. In fact, no aspect of our culture – national or individual – is left out of the ambit of these narratives. They deal with issues which concern individual human destiny and that of the entire nation. These narratives are conceived on such a grand scale that gods and humans interact with each other and there are endless stories within stories. Each story can be improvised into a full length play.

Dharamvir Bharati's verse play *Andha Yug* (*The Age of Blindness*), written originally in Hindi and published in 1954 is one such literary text which is based on *The*

Mahabharata. But before we focus on what the play is all about, we need to know about the author and the times in which he lived and wrote this play.

Dharamvir Bharati (25th December 1926 – 4th September 1997) was a celebrated Hindi poet, novelist, and playwright and also the Chief-Editor of the popular Hindi weekly magazine *Dharmayug*. He was deeply perturbed by the Second World War and the cataclysmic events which accompanied India's Independence in 1947. He was intensely troubled in particular by the near absence of a moral-ethical centre which could hold people together and prevent their descent into unfathomable depths of bestiality which characterized human behaviour during those troubled times. The anarchy which resulted led the nation into a situation where distinctions between evil and virtue, and good and bad got clouded. This was veritable *Kal Yug*, the Age of Darkness, one of the last of the four eons in Indian philosophy, the preceding three being *Krita Yug* (known popularly as *Sat Yug*), *Treta Yug*, and *Dvapara Yug*. The entire story of *The Mahabharata* unfolds in the *Dwapara Yug* which slides into the *Kal Yug* with the death of Lord Krishna. The conduct of the Kauravas and Pandavas during and after the eighteen day internecine Kurukshetra War, which ended the reign of the Kauravas provides ample intimations of the descent of the society into *Kal Yug*.

Dharamvir Bharati's play, divided into five acts, a Prologue, an Interlude and an Epilogue is an imaginative retelling of the eighteenth day of the epochal Kurukshetra War, and the play lays bare before us the utterly catastrophic nature of violence. The playwright takes some liberties with the original *Mahabharata* whose authorship is attributed to Ved Vyasa.

Although all major incidents and characters in the play are all from the *Mahabharata*, the play immediately calls for a comparison between the mythological age of darkness (*Kal Yug*) and contemporary age of darkness which descended on India at the time of India's independence. Thus by employing elements of mythology, the author gives us an opportunity to understand our present better.

3.2 ANALYSIS OF *ANDHA YUG*

Let us now critically analyse the play. But let us first look at what motivated the author to retell the last day of the battle of Kurukshetra. Virtue, goodness and humanity stood defeated in this war.

In his brief Prefatory Note, the author talks about the compelling reasons which made him write this play. "*Andha Yug*," he says, "would never have been written if it had been in my power not to write it!" It is, as if, there was some power beyond his control forcing him to pen it. In the darkness of the violent chaos into which India had plunged at the time of our Independence, he saw a glimmer of hope that something could still be retrieved, that there were some "grains of truth" which could be found by confronting the darkness head on. The idea is that in order to discover some strand of goodness which offers hope for redemption, we have to confront the Other, the beast that resides within us, the beast which lurks just beneath the veneer of culture, civilization and sanity which, we believe, separates the human from the beast. This ray of hope in the midst of despair is what Bharati wishes to share with his audiences/readers.

About the main plot of the story the author says that it is well known and "only a few events have been invented – a few characters and a few incidents." Such interpolations are allowed by classical aesthetic theories.

Activity 1

Although we have to deal only with the written text, we should always bear in mind that *Andha Yug* is not a closet drama but has been a very successfully performed play. Hence, when you read the play, try to imagine the scenes as being actually enacted before you. We have to pay careful attention to how the action unfolds since all the moral attributes of the characters are revealed to us through their actions. Try to watch some episodes of some TV serials which dramatized the *Mahabharata*. Or, if it is possible, you could watch Peter Brook's acclaimed film *The Mahabharata*. This will help you not only in understanding *Andha Yug* better; you will also be able to make comparisons with these adaptations of the *Mahabharata*. Another book that can help you in understanding *Andha Yug* better is Irawati Karve's retelling of the *Mahabharata* in her book *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*. If you read her book you will notice the liberties which Bharati has taken with the well-documented versions of the *Mahabharata*.

3.2.1 Prologue: Darkness and Light

The Prologue begins with an Invocation which is in accordance with epic/poetic conventions. The Invocation is a salutation to God in which the author seeks the blessings of the Divine. It is worth mentioning here that Homer begins his epics *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Milton his *Paradise Lost* with invocation of the poetic Muse, thus indicating that these epic writers seek inspiration from the Divine source. The Invocation in *Andha Yug* immediately establishes parallels with these Western epics while it points toward the lofty nature of the play Daharamvir Bharati has written.

The Invocation is followed by the Proclamation interspersed with Sanskrit hymns. When the Proclamation is being made, a dancer, through his actions conveys the meaning of what is proclaimed, thus establishing the importance of action in the play. We learn from the Proclamation that the play is concerned about the age of darkness which followed the end of the great war of *Mahabharata*. In *Vishnu Purana* this age of darkness is described as a period in which all values will become topsy-turvy. There will be decline in *dharma*, the rulers will be greedy and rich and all thoughts and actions of men will be evil. Deceit and cunning will flourish. Full of fear, common people will seek refuge either in some caves or they will withdraw into the deepest caverns of their own selves. The good and evil will be so inextricably intertwined that only Lord Krishna will be able to unravel them. The Prologue ends with these lines:

> This is the story of the blind –
>
> or of enlightenment
>
> through the life of the blind.

The last lines indicate the intention of the poet. He is looking for hope in the midst of despair. The Prologue tries to establish Lord Krishna as the moral centre of the play. However, as we go through the play, we will scrutinize the veracity of this claim.

3.2.2 ACT I: The Kaurava Kingdom

In Act I the author brings us face to face with misery, death, decay, corruption and the bottomless pits of savagery into which humanity descended during the war.

It is the eighteenth day of the Battle of Kurukshetra. The Pandavas have won and the Kauravas stand defeated. However, there has been so much bloodshed on both sides, that the victor and the vanquished are indistinguishable. Fear and gloom reign supreme in society.

The Narrator who, along with the Chorus and two Guards in the play, represents the authorial consciousness tells us how the war was conducted by both the combatants:

> Both the sides in the war
> Violated
> The code of honour
> Smashed it
> Ripped it into shreds
> And scattered it –
> The Kauravas perhaps more than the Pandavas. (27)

The Narrator informs us that in this strange war both sides are doomed to fail. He makes a telling comment on the beginning of the age of darkness.

Activity 2

When reading the text of the play we must pay attention to the stage directions. Just see how the Narrator's voice is heard only from behind the curtain. His speech is like a sermon. The Narrator is actually a part of the dramatic conventions which the playwright employs. Can you identify some other dramatic conventions in this play? Note them down and analyse their importance in the play. In doing so you will be paying attention to the architectonics of the play, by which we mean how the play is constructed and how various episodes are strung together. Please also make note of the fact that the Narrator, the two Guards and the Chorus have not been given any proper names, whereby suggesting that despite being actors their role is that of commentators and that they represent the types to which they belong.

Once the Narrator has made his comments, two Guards enter the stage. They are despondent at the outcome of the war. In the "desolate corridors" of the devastated Kaurava kingdom, with nothing left for them to defend, their life has lost all meaning. They speculate on the reign of the blind Kaurava King Dhritarashtra:

> This is the kingdom
> of an old and blind ruler
> whose children
> in their blindness
> declared a bitter war. (29)

Suddenly they hear the sound of an approaching thunderstorm but soon realize that it is not a storm but thousands of vultures flapping their wings in the sky. It is death itself which stalks not only the streets but even the skies of Hastinapur now.

Dhritarashtra and Gandhari wait for Sanjaya to bring news from the battlefield. Dhritarashtra admits to Vidura that for the first time in his life his mind is full of fear. When Vidura reminds him that Bhishma, Dronacharya and Krishna had warned him earlier that if the Kauravas violated the code of honour, they would come to grief, Dhritarashtra confesses that his blindness – blindness that has to be understood in all its figurative manifestations in the overall context of the play – did not let him see the world as it is and he could not understand its social and moral codes. He confesses that his "senses were limited by my blindness" (33). However, the dreadful defeat of his sons has brought to him the realization that "there is truth/that lies

beyond the boundaries/of my selfhood" (35). Thus we have a physically blind Dhritarashtra who had turned morally blind in his love of his sons, arriving at a better understanding of his self and the knots he has tied himself into. He realizes that truth lies beyond the boundaries of his self.

This dialectic of blindness and enlightenment is played out throughout the text.

Dhritarashtra's wife Gandhari admits that unable to bear all the hypocrisy masquerading as morality, honour and selflessness, she had chosen to live "with my eyes blindfolded" (37). Her grief over the death of her sons has made her cynical and bitter. However, when Vidura reminds her that she had herself told Duryodhana that victory was on the side of dharma, she agrees that she had done so only to realize later that "There was no dharma on either side. Each was inspired by blind self-interest" (38). She holds Krishna squarely responsible for violating the code of honour and calls him "a fraud" (38).

Gandhari's perspective on Lord Krishna, though undoubtedly biased, not only raises serious doubts about Krishna being the moral centre of the play, it also throws light on how, when evil becomes operative in human life, it subverts all virtue. The Kauravas employed all kinds of evil means to dispossess the Pandavas of their rightful inheritance. But in order to defeat evil, the Pandavas too, assisted by Lord Krishna, employed evil stratagems. In order to defeat evil, they took recourse to evil and once evil was unleashed it destroyed all moral and ethical values. The descent into the age of darkness was paved with good intentions supported by evil means. In fact, *Andha Yug* is a text from which nobody emerges unscathed.

In fact, in suggesting that evil is a very potent force which destroys all that is good, also brings to our mind Shakespeare's great tragedies such as *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*. In *Macbeth*, it is General Macbeth who, with help from evil forces represented by the three Witches, destroys virtue when he murders King Duncan. Once chaotic evil forces are let loose, they become utterly uncontrollable.

Just when Vidura, Gandhari and Dhritarashtra are debating issues of honour, virtue and right conduct, a Mendicant who claims to be "an astrologer from a distant land" (40) and who had once predicted victory for the Kauravas enters the stage. He knows that his prophecies have not come true and like "broken dreams" they "lie scattered" and unfortunately only Gandhari "fondly nurtures each one of them" (41). Only the blindfolded Gandhari has been deluding herself with false dreams.

Activity 3

According to the Indian philosophy of *Karma Yoga*, karma means right action which leads to union with the Divine. The *karma* is detached action. This was Lord Krishna's message to Arjuna in the *Bhagawad Geeta*. However, despite Lord Krishna'a exhortations, the society still hurtled into the age of darkness. Keeping this message in mind, we should analyze the actions of all the major characters in the play and try to understand how their actions lead them to their irremediably punishing destiny.

Another important contemporary play employing historical figures to make a telling comment on India's socio-political situation is Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* in which he sets up parallels between the historical Tughlaq and the present-day rulers of the country. Try to read this play by Karnad. How do Bharati and Karnad employ myth and history respectively to understand the contemporary reality?

3.2.3 Act II: The Making of a Beast

A major part of Act II is devoted to the transformation of Ashwatthama into a blood-thirsty beast.

Sanjaya's major worry is how to divulge the news of Duryodhana's defeat to Dhritirashtra. He wishes that he had been killed by Satyaki in the battle because only his death would have saved him from the impossible task of narrating the bitter truth of the defeat of the Kauravas to Dhritirashtra and Gandhari.

In the meantime, Kripacharaya, looking for Ashwatthama, comes across Kritavarma and tells him that all except the two of them and Ashwatthama have perished in the war. Unable to bear the sight of Duryodhana accepting his defeat, Ashwatthama broke his bow and ran away screaming.

Ashwatthama repents breaking his bow because he wonders how without his weapons he would be able to avenge his father Guru Dronacharya's murder. He vividly recalls how his father was killed through deceit. It was Yudhishthira who lied to his father that Ashwatthama had died in the battle. Taking this lie to be true, his father, who had so much faith in Yudhishthira, threw his weapons down and was slain by Drishtadyumna. Ashwatthama claims that when he saw his father being murdered in this way, all that was good in him died and he decided to turn himself into a beast. He decided that from then onward, his only dharma would be to "Kill, kill, kill/and kill again!" (54). Mistaking Sanjaya to be a Pandava soldier he attacks him and tries to strangle him. Sanjaya is saved by Kritavarma and Kripacharya.

Ashwatthama contemplates suicide but Kritavarma informs him that Duryodhana is still alive. Sanjaya discloses that with his extraordinary powers Duryodhana was able to still the waters of the lake on whose floor he was lying quietly. They all proceed towards the enchanted lake to seek directions from Duryodhana about the future conduct of the war.

As they leave for the lake, the Mendicant who had predicted victory for the Kauravas enters the stage. He soliloquizes about the unpredictability of the future and makes a very profound statement that:

> Truth resides
>
> in the acts
>
> we perform.
>
> What man does
>
> at each moment
>
> becomes his future
>
> for ages and ages. (58)

Mad with rage and the desire to kill, Ashwatthama runs after the mendicant calling him a false prophet and strangles him.

Act II ends with the Chorus commenting on the night which was the night of intoxication for the victorious Pandavas but of shame and concealment for the Kauravas.

Activity 4

We come to know how almost everyone violated the code of honour in the battle. Nobody is really blameless. Yudhishtira, resorted to falsehood to get his Guru Drona killed. Do you think this offers ample justification for Ashwatthama's transformation into a beast? We would do well to focus on other such examples which reveal the duplicity of both the Pandavas and Kauravas because it provides us with an opportunity to understand the psychological, social and moral underpinnings of the age of blindness.

The words of the Mendicant that "what man does/ at each moment/ becomes his future" reveal to us how our future happiness or sorrow depend upon our present actions. Does this emphasis on action by the Mendicant not bring to the mind Aristotle's emphasis on action in his *Poetics*? Can we compare the two situations?

3.2.4 ACT III: The Half-truth of Ashwatthama

Gandhari and Dhritarashtra are petrified when Sanjaya tells them about Duryodhana's defeat.

There is a lot of commotion and panic in the city as people believe that along with the defeated Kaurava soldiers, a giant enemy soldier who was a sorcerer and could change his form at will, had slipped into the city and was going to ransack people's homes.

This feared enemy soldier is none other than Dhritarashtra's son Yuyutsu, who had taken the side of the Pandavas against his own brothers because of his commitment to truth. Since he is considered to be an enemy, he is the object of fear and revulsion. He is apprehensive about how his mother and father will treat him. In regard to people's loathing for Yuyutsu, Vidura makes a very perceptive comment on how simple-minded people always treat with contempt anyone who "turns away from well-worn traditions" (73).

Vidura's worst fears come true when Gandhari spurns him and pours scorn on him:

> Son
> I hope
> those strong arms of yours
> are not tired
> from slaughtering
> your relatives
> are they? (73)

This rebuff leaves him wondering if he had done the right thing in following the path of truth. He comes to this tragic realization that "In the final analysis/whether you uphold truth/or untruth/you are damned" (75).

Commenting on the prevailing situation, Vidura claims that it is not possible to know "where righteousness ends/and falsehood begins" (77) and then with a very appropriate simile he explains:

> Everyone has lost
> his bearings today.
> The axle is broken

and the wheel spins
without a centre. (77)

The image of the broken axle and the wheel spinning without a centre establishes a parallel with W. B. Yeats's poem "The Second Coming" written in 1919, in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. Yeats writes:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Activity 5

Read the poem "The Second Coming" and try to find thematic parallels between Yeats's poem and *Andha Yug*. Despite the difference in the spatio-temporal setting of the two works, both the works are a telling comment on the human condition when anarchy and anomie prevail in the absence of a moral centre.

There is chaos in the city when Sanjaya brings the news of Duryodhana's defeat. Ashwatthama alleges that Duryodhana was killed by Bhima's treachery.

The dialogue between Balarama and Lord Krishna is very significant. Unhappy with the conduct of the Pandavas in the war, Balarama chides Krishna for his partisan role. Balarama is angry with Krishna for not letting him confront Bhima who had killed Duryodhana by treachery. He says to Krishna that he has always been "an unprincipled rogue" (79) and warns him that he might do anything but he would not be able to save the Pandavas from being "destroyed by adharma" (80).

Taking heart from Balarama's prediction that the Pandavas will be destroyed by adharma, Ashwatthama vows to kill the Pandavas. Kripacharya and Kritavarma tell him that they also want revenge but not through treachery. But when Ashwatthama reveals to them how Bhima had killed Duryodhana, they support Ashwatthama saying that perhaps the way of treachery is the only way left to them.

Ashwatthama and Kripacharya go to Duryodhana so that he could proclaim Ashwatthama as the commander of the Kaurava army. After his anointment as the army commander, Ashwatthama tells Kripacharya and Kritavarma that he would direct them the next day about what they would have to do.

What follows after the darkness of the night descends on the stage is very symbolic. Two dancers masked as owl and crow enter the stage and the owl attacks the crow. While they fight ferociously, Ashwatthama watches them. The owl kills the crow and when the lights come on, he performs the tandava dance of death. Ashwatthama laughs like a mad man. The owl attacking the unsuspecting, sleeping crow gives the vital clue to Ashwatthama as to how he should attack the sleeping Pandavas when there would be no Krishna to defend them. He orders Kritavarma and Kripacharya to come with him as he was determined to kill Drishtadyumna and Uttara who was carrying Abhimanyu's son. Horrified at what he is up to, Kripacharya refuses to go with him but Kritavarma follows him meekly. Act III comes to an end with Kripacharya following Ashwatthama and trying to stop him.

3.2.5 Interlude: Feathers, Wheels and Bandages

What follows Act III is a brief Interlude, a dramatic practice which was quite prevalent in medieval and Renaissance drama and which meant a short, comic dialogue performed during the interval between two acts of a full length play. But the Interlude in this play is not a comic dialogue; it gives us a chance to understand the psychological motives of Vidura, Sanjaya and Yuyutsu, the three characters who dither in their support to the Kauravas and who raise serious questions about the conduct of war.

The entire Interlude unfolds on a "ghostly lit" stage. The spectre of the old Mendicant who was earlier killed by Ashwatthama walks on the stage and likens life to a "dark and tormented ocean/that seethes and surges/like a pit of snakes" (89).

With his visionary powers, he raises the spectres of Yuyutsu, Sanjaya and Vidura so as to "rip them open/and understand/their inner contradictions" (90). In their brief speeches, all of them invoke the image of the axle and wheel and talk about the futility of their existence. Vidura, a righteous follower of Lord Krishna confesses that his simple faith has been shattered and he likens Lord Krishna to a "useless axle/which has lost its wheels" (92).

Suddenly the Mendicant hears the sound of Krishna's chariot, and a peacock feather, which has obviously fallen from Krishna's crown, floats across the stage. The Mendicant, who had succeeded in stopping the flow of the narrative, expresses his inability to stop Krishna's chariot. The sound of Ashwatthama's chariot too is heard. The Mendicant expresses his inability to stop Ashwatthama's chariot also. He wonders if Ashwatthama's "unappeasable hatred" which is like the "blood soaked feather/of a black crow" can be defeated by a "small peacock feather" (92). He reports that Ashwatthama's chariot has reached the Pandava camp only to be confronted and challenged by a "giant-like being/standing in the dark/like a wall of black granite" (93).

The Interlude comes to an end with a terrifying roar off stage and the mendicant covering his eyes in fear.

Activity 6

Act III and the Interlude bring us face to face with all the horrors of the war. This episode points towards the abysses into which the remaining combatants will descend in the coming times. In what way does the owl's behaviour become an exemplar for Ashwatthama to attack his victims?

3.2.6 ACT IV: Gandhari's Curse

The Chorus reveals that the "giant-like being" stopping Ashwatthama from approaching the sleeping Pandavas is none other than Lord Shankara himself who challenges Ashwatthama to defeat him before attacking the Pandavas. Ashwatthama attacks him with all his might and weapons but finally accepts his defeat and begs the Lord to bless him. "Easy to please/easy to appease" (96), Shankara blesses Ahswatthama by saying that he would be victorious.

Sanjaya reveals that Ashwatthama kills Drishtadyumna, Shatanik and Shikhandi. Kritavarma and Kripacharya waiting outside the tent, mow down children, old men and servants who run out in terror.

Whereas Vidura is nauseated by the details of atrocities, Gandhari revels in all the gory details and eggs Sanjaya on to bestow on her the power to see Ashwatthama in

his full glory. Whereas to Sanjaya, Ahswatthama is a cruel, horrible and dreadful sight, Gandhari thinks he is heroic since he had achieved what her hundred sons, Drona and Bhishma could not. She knows that Krishna would not spare Ashwatthama; therefore she wants to have one glimpse of him before Krishna kills him.

Dhritarashtra and Gandhari's tragedy immediately bring to mind the 19th century German thinker Arthur Schopenhauer's ideas on tragedy and suffering. If we look closely at why they suffer, we will realize that theirs is the tragedy of their Will. Their desire to see their son Duryodhana rule over Hastinapur takes the form of such strong willing that it turns them blind to everything else. Schopenhauer, in his book *The World as Will and Representation* says that the whole world is phenomenal, that is it is only a mental representation which is available to us through our senses only; and hence it has no noumenal reality, which means that we cannot know the world as it really is. It is our Will which transforms the reality for us. The world is often not how we will it to be. Dhritarashtra, who is physically blind from birth, just wills the world to be what it is not and cannot be. He is literally blind to the many faults of his sons but wants them to be the rulers. His will and Gandhari's are joined in the pursuit of their blind ambition. According to Schopenhauer, all suffering results from willing. The more intense the willing, the more intense the suffering. This is a position which brings him close to the Indian sensibility, to Buddhist philosophy in particular, in which desire is understood to be the root cause of all pain and suffering – *dukha*. Schopenhauer suggests that ascetic denial of the will can prevent suffering. But Dhritirashtra and Gandhari - and their sons too - do not practice any such denial of their will and hence they cannot arrive at a better understanding of either their own selves or that of the world around them. Gandhari's act of blindfolding herself may appear to us to be a supreme act of self-denial but it is not; it is more an act of submission of a wife to the will of her husband in a patriarchal society than an act of asceticism as Lord Buddha or Schopenhauer would understand.

Meanwhile the scene shifts to the lake in which Duryodhana is lying still. Kripacharya informs Duryodhana that Ashwatthama has destroyed the Pandava camp and he has gone to procure his Brahmastra and talisman. Ashwatthama arrives and expresses his regret at not having been able to kill Bhima and blast Uttara's womb. However, everybody soon realizes that Duryodhana is no more. Gandhari is beside herself with grief. Sanjaya loses his visionary powers and grieves over their loss. Vidura wants all of them to leave Hastinapur and perform the holy rites of their dead kinsmen.

The Chorus comments on the desolation of the city.

The battle rages between Arjuna and Ashwatthama and after being hit in the neck, Ashwatthama fires the Brahmastra, the ultimate weapon and this immediately invites Vyasa's ire. Arjuna also fires his Brahmastra. Calling Ashwatthama a vile monster, Vyasa asks him to recall the weapon but Ashwatthama expresses his inability to do so since his father had never taught him how to recall it.

Activity 7

Does the description of the powerful Brahmastra ring some bells in your mind? Read up on the power of nuclear weapons, the kinds of which were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the US in the Second World War.

Ashwatthama's Brahmastra blasts Uttara's womb. Sanjaya fears that Krishna will kill Ashwatthama for the sin of infanticide. However, Krishna spares Ashwatthama's

life but curses him with immortality which is worse than death; his wounds will fester forever and he will be a living abomination.

Gandhari curses Krishna that his kinsmen will attack and kill each other and many years later, he himself will be killed "like a wild animal/by an ordinary hunter" (123). Krishna accepts the curse with grace and says that in "this terrible war of eighteen days/I am the only one who died a million times" (123). Gandhari weeps over what she has done and tells Krishna that he could have deflected the curse but Krishna replies that he may be omnipotent as a god but he is Gandhari's son too.

Act IV comes to a close with the Chorus commenting that after Krishna accepted the curse, the stars began to grow dim and the "corrosive shadow" of Gandhari's curse "spread from age to age/and stained every heart/and every soul/with sorrow" (125).

3.2.7 ACT V: Victory and Death

Since the play is now moving towards its conclusion, we see accelerated action in this Act. Many years separate Act IV and Act V. During the intervening period, the scorched earth has turned green once again but the Pandavas have proved to be bad rulers. Bhima is proud and arrogant, Arjuna has grown weary, Nakula is ignorant and Sahadeva has been retarded from birth. Only Yudhishthira is aware of how, after Krishna meets his violent end as has been prophesied, "The days they had sown together in the battlefield/would yield the harvest of such bitterness/that all the wisdom of the past ages/would be covered with dust and darkness" (128).

The plight of Yuyutsu is really pitiable. Bhima insults him and children abuse him and throw stones at him. Unable to bear this insult, he commits suicide. Dhritarashtra, Kunti and Gandhari perish in the jungle fire. It is, as if, Yamaraj himself "walks through the streets...at midnight" (142).

3.2.8 Epilogue: Death of the Lord

The Epilogue deals with the death of Lord Krishna and its consequence – the onset of the age of darkness. When the old Mendicant who was murdered by Ashwatthama appears in the form of an old hunter, Jara and shoots his arrow mistaking Krishna's foot for a deer, "The stars went out/darkness covered the earth" and on the "god-forsaken earth/Kali yug took its first step" (151).

Lord Krishna'a death has been presented as a sacrifice which he made to atone for the sins of humanity. Lord Krishna himself exhorted the Mendicant to fulfil Gandhari's curse. Lord Krishna assured the hesitant Mendicant that "Death is only a transition/from one state to another" (158).

It is interesting to note that in consonance with the age of darkness in which all values turn topsy-turvy, the death of the Lord has an opposite effect on Ashwatthama, Yuyutsu and Sanjaya. Yuyutsu feels that while Krishna was alive, he had failed "to kindle faith in us" (154). Sanjaya also says that he had understood long ago that faith was false and he had thrown it away on a garbage heap. Only Ashwatthama realizes that when he was on a killing spree, it was the blindness of the Age which was flowing through his veins. Krishna's sacrifice kindles his faith because Krishna has freed him by taking the sins of the likes of Ashwatthama upon his shoulders. Ashwatthama witnesses a peaceful radiance spread over Krishna's face when he is dying. And this is what gives hope as the Mendicant claims:

Whenever you like
you can make him
a radiant presence
in your life. (159-60)

Thus despite the future appearing very bleak and the darkness growing "deeper and deeper" (161), the Chorus still sounds a note of hope in suggesting that a "small seed/ buried somewhere in the mind of man/there is courage/ and a longing for freedom/ and the imagination to create something new" (161).

3.3 A NOTE ON TRANSLATION

Andha Yug is a translated work and no translation is ever unproblematic. Translation of poetry, with its attendant rhythm and the symbolic, connotative universe poses insurmountable problems. The present translation, though extremely competent, is also beset with some problems which come to light when the original Hindi version and the translated version are studied side by side. In most cases these problems pertain to cultural dislocation and a shift in the cultural frame of reference. A few examples can be cited here in support of this contention. In Act III when Yuyutsu is spurned by his mother, he says:

अब यह माँ की कटुता
घृणा प्रजाओं की
क्या मुझको अंदर से बल देगी?
अन्तिम परिणति में
दोनों अर्जर करते हैं
पक्ष चाहे सत्य का हो
अथवा असत्य का! (46)

In the present translation, Yuyutsu's contention "अब यह माँ की कटुता/घृणा प्रजाओं की/क्या मुझको अंदर से बल देगी?" is rendered as "As if my mother's curse/and the people's hate/will save me/from damnation!" Whereas, in the original version Yuyutsu seems to suggest rather sarcastically "Will my mother's bitterness now/ and the people's hate/give me inner strength?" It is not only that the caustic edge of Yuyutsu's sarcasm is lost in translation, the use of the word "damnation" leads to cultural dislocation. The English term 'damnation' is a highly culturally loaded term with its filiations with the entire Christian concept of sin, the Fall of Man and condemnation in hell. In the original Hindi text, there is no hint of Yuyutsu's damnation in this sense; what he suggests is that his being an object of his mother and people's odium weakens him from within. His words "अन्तिम परिणति में/दोनों जर्जर करते हैं/पक्ष चाहे सत्य का हो/अथवा असत्य का" are rendered as " In the final analysis/whether you uphold truth/or untruth/you are damned" (75). What Yuytsu wants to say is that in the final analysis, whether you uphold truth or untruth, both the positions devastate you. The Hindi term "जर्जर" connotes weak, dilapidated, devastated, about to crumble, and hollowed from inside. Again the translator's use of the term 'damned' for "जर्जर" introduces Christian ideas which seem quite alien in the present context.

Activity 8

Try to read both the original Hindi text and the English version and find some more examples of cultural dislocation in the translated version. You are likely to find many such examples. By no means do these examples indicate the inadequacy of the English translation; in fact, these examples point toward the difficulties involved in translation.

3.4 LET US SUM UP

We have seen that there are certain markedly identifiable themes in the play. The main preoccupation of the play is morality. The play explores the moral choices various characters make and the impact these choices have on their lives. The idea of dharma – the right action – and the evil which results from inappropriate action is another important theme of the play. The play foregrounds the importance of right action. Our future depends upon our actions. Both the Kauravas and Pandavas deviated from the right action and paid the price for it.

Another important concern of the play is the question of evil. Evil is shown to be very potent indeed. The play makes it very clear that once we take recourse to evil to achieve our ends, then evil takes control of our lives and there is no escape. Thus the play explores how evil takes us in its grip once we allow it to enter our lives.

The author has taken most of the characters from mythology but Yuyutsu, Sanjaya and Ashwatthma grow and develop as the play advances. They have been imbued with sufficient individuality to be called round characters. However, since the play draws heavily upon the Indian *rasa* aesthetics, many characters represent *rasas*. Ashwatthama represents Vibhatsa (disgust, aversion) and Raudra (anger, fury), and Lord Krishna represents Karuna (compassion). In order to understand the rasa theory, you can consult Manmohan Ghosh's book *Natya Sastra*: *A Treatise on Hindu Dramaturgy and Histrionics.*

3.5 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) Discuss the plot of the play. Can the plot be analysed using Aristotelian yardsticks of unity of action and internal coherence?
2) Discuss major themes of the play.
3) Give a well-reasoned answer if Lord Krishna can be considered as the moral centre of the play.
4) Comment on Sanjaya's role in the play.
5) Discuss the dramatic significance of the Interlude.
6) Analyse the circumstances leading to the transformation of Ashwatthama into a beast. Do you find his transformation psychologically convincing?
7) Discuss the contemporary relevance of the play.
8) Discuss the dramatic importance of the Narrator, the two Guards and the Chorus.
9) Light and darkness, day and night are recurring symbols in the play. Discuss the symbolic universe of the play with special reference to the significance of light and darkness.
10) Comment on the Prologue and Epilogue of the play.

11) Comment on the psychological motivations of Yuyutsu and Vidura.

12) Write a detailed note on how the choices made by various protagonists in the play determine their life.

13) Is *Andha Yug* a play with characters who are black and white or shades of grey? Give a cogent answer with special reference to the characters of Lord Krishna, Yudhishthira and Dhritarashtra.

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