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"Mahabharata Unravelled" by Ami Ganatra: A Perspective on Preserving Epic Authenticity and Challenging Modern Creative Liberties

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ABSTRACT

"Mahabharata Unravelled" by Ami Ganatra is a detailed exploration of the original Mahabharata epic, focusing on the personalities and complexities of its characters. The book addresses inconsistencies in various retellings, clarifying misunderstandings about key figures and encourages readers to seek the original text. By revisiting the true essence of the Mahabharata, "Mahabharata Unravelled" provides a valuable resource for understanding the timeless saga in its authentic form and serves as a corrective for those familiar only with distorted versions of the epic, encouraging a deeper exploration of the original itihasa.

This review highlights the author's focus on character personalities, including those of lesser-known figures, and contrasts the authentic history with modern fictional adaptations. By doing so, it aids in myth-busting and provides a clearer picture of the epic's true events. It criticizes the contemporary adaptations of the Mahabharata, which often take creative liberties that distort the original story's essence and raises important questions about the extent to which artistic freedom should be allowed when interpreting Indian epics like the Mahabharata. It argues that while creativity is essential, it must not come at the cost of misrepresenting culturally and historically significant narratives. The review emphasizes the need for a balance between artistic expression and cultural preservation, suggesting that filmmakers and writers should approach these sacred texts with respect and accuracy.

***Keywords**: Mahabharata, Characters, myth-busting, Cultural preservation.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The book, "Mahabharata Unravelled", is not retellings or imaginations, but an endeavor to revisit the original itihasa[2] and tell the story of our ancestors and learnings in its true essence. Ami Ganatra, in her book, focused on more on personalities of the characters in the Mahabharata, rather than going event-wise. She included the explanation of the Bharata

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[2] The history- Rishi Ugrashava recounted the story of the narration of the Mahabharata (1,00,000 shlokas) by Vaishampaayana (student of Vyaasa) to Janamejaya (great grandson of Arjuna), as composed by Krishna Dwaipaayana Vyaasa himself.

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Vamsha[3] family tree, the geographical coverage of the Mahabharata war[4], the Vyuhas[5] and the post-war Hastinapur days. The chapter "The marriage that tied" beautifully explains the bond of the five Pandavas and their wife, Draupadi. The author also captured the friendship of Krishna and Arjuna, comparing it with that of Duryodhana and Karna.

II. THE GENERAL EVENTS, VIEWS AND PERSONALITIES

The book makes it easier for readers to understand what people would know if they follow the Mahabharata in its original form or fictional adaptations. The poisoning of young Bheem's food, conspiracy of the lac palace, the trick game of dice, humiliating Pandavas and Draupadi and refusal to give their kingdom back even after thirteen years of exile- all paved the way towards the Mahabharata war. The author adeptly highlights the unethical tactics employed by both sides in the war, including the unjust killing of Abhimanyu and the deaths of key figures like Bhishma, Drona, Karna, and Duryodhana. Krishna justifies these actions as necessary consequences of the war, attributing it to the misdeeds of those involved.

Dharma, the principle of sustaining, is vividly portrayed throughout the Mahabharata. Krishna's willingness to break his own pledge to protect Arjuna, his guidance on the "context-sensitive nature of truth" when Arjuna almost killed Yudhishthira due to an oath, and his emphasis on the importance of a lie that saves lives over a truth that leads to destruction, urging Yudhishthira to confirm Ashwatthama's death to Drona, exemplify this principle. The author skillfully captures these instances, making the essence of Dharma more accessible for comprehension.

Often, we are too hasty in our judgments or criticisms without fully comprehending the complexities of the situations. So, given the vastness of the Mahabharata's narrative and the multitude of events it encompasses[6], efforts have been made by the author to meticulously capture the intricacies of each character's personality-

1. Yudhishthira had virtue, sense of justice, wisdom, compassion, maturity, a sense of responsibility, humility and patience. It was his wisdom which saved his brothers from "Yaksha Prashna" and Duryodhana and others from Gandharvas[7]. He was not impulsive. He showed restraint multiple times during their Agyatvasa[8], even when being verbally and physically assaulted, as to not endanger their disguise. But after all the

[3] Lineage of King Bharata.
[4] the war of Kurukshetra, involving over 47 lakh people from across Bharata.
[5] Army formations in the Mahabharata
[6] The Mahabharata consists of eighteen *parvas.*
[7] Both the events, the Yaksha Prashna and the battle of Gandharvas, occurred during the thirteen years of the Pandavas' exile.
[8] The thirteenth year of the Pandavas' exile, when they were incognito in the Matsya Kingdom ruled by King Virata.

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possible attempts at peace Yudhishthira was not willing to cede anymore as he knew that peace cannot come at the price of tolerating outright injustice forever. He involved all his ministers in the process and his style was one of the reasons why the Pandavas warriors did not have any mutual ego clashes that were common on the Kauravas side.

The only blot on his conduct was the indiscriminate staking during the game of dice, which as per the norms of the day he could not refuse. The author raised questions here as well, showing her unbiases.

2. Bheem had the collective strength of ten thousand elephants. He spoke his mind. He expressed his displeasure at Yudhishthira for staking Draupadi in the court. He was passionate and aggressive. A gentle giant! Kind and committed to his mother, brothers and Draupadi. He was the one who killed Keechak during their Agyatvasa. Relationships were not his concern once the war began, like Arjuna.

For Bheem, whatever be his view, he would eventually trust his brother's judgement and act accordingly, which set him apart from Duryodhana, who was a law unto himself. The author enshrined on this difference between the two.

3. Arjuna had dedication, focus, bravery and humility and compassion. He earned his guru Dronacharya's grace through his devotion and perseverance. He single-handedly defeated the Kauravas in the battle of Virata. But when it came to his teacher and grandfather, his will to win fell short. Just before the Kurukshetra war, for someone hailed as the greatest warrior in Bharat Varsha, admitting confusion and seeking help was quite a humble gesture, as pointed out rightly by the author.

He was the only warrior in Kurukshetra who did not lose a single face-off.

4. Abhimanyu was the unafraid and passionate son of Arjuna and Subhadra. According to the epic, he had "the splendor of Yudhishthira, character of Krishna, the daredevilry of Bheem, beauty, heroism and wisdom of Arjuna and the humility of Nakula and Sahadeva". During the Kurukshetra war, Karna admitted that his arrows were overpowering, and Drona admired his skill. On the thirteenth day, he was killed by a simultaneous attack of six warriors, being weaponless and on the ground. Abhimanyu didn't budge even when all of them at once showered a volley of arrows on him. He took out his sword, then picked up a wheel, and then picked up his mace and kept on fighting. Ultimately, Duhshasana's son struck a fatal blow to Abhimanyu's head with a mace.

His killing was one of the most horrific and condemnable events of Kurukshetra, marked by the

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complete disregard for ruled and ethics.

5. Kunti was indeed a warrior mother, as the author titled, who endured the hardships of the forest many times- with her husband and then with her sons. The book states that "Draupadi had been one of the factors that united the five brothers, but the foundation of the bond was laid by Kunti's upbringing".
6. To protest her sons' and daughter-in-law's mistreatment, she stayed at Vidur's home during the Pandavas' thirteen-year exile, not in the palace. Before the war, she reminded Yudhishthira of his duties as a warrior and a king. And after almost fifteen years of the war, when at last there was some peace and comfort in her life, she gave that up and served the blind couple in the forest.
7. Devavrata was a student of Parashurama, who himself could not defeat him. He came to be known as Bhishma due to the severity of the pledge he lived by his entire life, and received the boon of 'swacchanda maranam'[9]. Not even the kingdom of Hastinapur or the kingdom of Gods was above his pledge for him. He was loyal to the throne, so much so that he tolerated blatant injustice happening in the game of dice being a mute spectator. So much so that he fought from the side of Duryodhana.

The author outlines that he could have broken free of his "fetter of unquestionable loyalty to the throne" during these exceptional situations.

8. Vidura always gave the most appropriate and unbiased advice, devoid of any self-interest. The author drew parallels between Krishna's role with the Pandavas and Vidura's role with Dhritarashtra. He objected to the dragging and humiliation of Draupadi, advised Dhritarashtra on multiple occasions to arrest Duryodhana, disregard Shakuni and give Pandavas their kingdom. He never gave his consent to the war, neither did he leave Dhritarashtra, for they shared a unique bond.
9. Vidura's loyalty to Hastinapur rivaled that of Bhishma, but his allegiance to Dharma surpassed all. The author highlights this contrast between the two figures.

III. ADDRESSING CONTRADICTIONS: UNRAVELLING INCONSISTENCIES IN THE EPIC

The author highlights numerous inconsistencies in various retellings of the epic, providing answers to some major contradictions found in the original text[10].

[9] The power to choose the time of one's death.

[10] The author has used reliable sources as primary reference, such as Gita Press Mahabharata, the edition with Sanskrit text and Hindi translation and the BORI critical edition of the Mahabharata.

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1. King Shantanu was not upset or angry at the vow of celibacy of Bhishma. Instead, he was happy and proud of his actions.
2. Kunti was pregnant for many months each time. At the time of Karna, she, out of fear, concealed her conception and lived entirely in the apartments assigned to the maidens so that no one knew the truth except her nurse.
3. Sanjay was present on the battlefield, able to hear unspoken thoughts and evade weapons due to the boon. Blessed with stamina, he moved through the battlefield tirelessly. After Bhishma's defeat, he returned for the first time to report to Dhritarashtra.
4. Kunti's words were not solely responsible for the Pandavas marrying Draupadi. Yudhishthira foresaw Draupadi's potential to unite or divide them due to her captivating beauty. None of the brothers, Kunti, or Draupadi opposed Yudhishthira's decision.
5. Shakuni might not be the worst of all. Amidst all his planning and plotting, he gave one sane advice to Duryodhana of returning the Pandavas their kingdom when they were saved by them from the Gandharvas. Also, there is no mention of Shakuni limping.
6. Upon learning about Prince Dhritarashtra's blindness, only the King of Gandhar initially hesitated to marry his daughter Gandhari to him, who ultimately agreed considering the reputation and prosperity of Hastinapur.
7. Ashwatthama knew he was killing Draupadeyas[11] and not the Pandavas.
8. Dhritarashtra had a total of one hundred and two children. Apart from his sons and a daughter with Gandhari, he had a son named Yuyutsu with Gandhari's maid, Sugadha. Yuyutsu was the only son of Dhritarashtra to fight for the Pandavas and survive the Kurukshetra war.
9. Gandhari never turned Duryodhana's body into an indestructible element. She never removed her blindfold.
10. There is no mention of Barbarik or of Draupadi’s daughter in the original itihasa.

The author sheds light on lesser-known aspects of a key figure in the epic, Draupadi, and strives to reconcile the conflicting beliefs about Draupadi's behavior and actions-

1. Draupadi was the unifying force that bound the brothers together for life. As the beautiful, responsible, and courageous queen of Indraprastha, she embodied truthfulness and humility in her speech. She diligently cared for her husbands, mother-

[11] The five sons of Draupadi, one with each of her husbands.

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in-law, household, and the staff, personally knowing each of the over one lakh helpers by name. She maintained the accounts and treasury, holding sole responsibility for them.

2. Draupadi never refused to marry Karna, calling him “son of a soot”. Karna was unable to string the bow at her swayamvar.
3. There was no love angle between her and either Karna or Krishna.
4. Draupadi did not mock Duryodhana at Indraprastha by calling him the 'blind son of a blind man', as is sometimes cited as a reason for her subsequent humiliation or the Mahabharata war. This event never occurred.
5. The idea that Draupadi asked for Duhshasana's blood to wash her hair for revenge is simply made up. She did not want revenge, but justice.

Similarly, the author also highlighted the contrasting portrayals of Karna’s character in retellings versus reality-

1. Yes, Karna was talented but he was boastful and filled with jealousy and pride. He had imprudence in speech along with incessant bragging.
2. Caste discrimination against Karna is debunked by the author, who clarifies that 'soot' denoted mixed lineage, not an insult[12]. Additionally, Karna's father Adhiratha was close to Dhritarashtra, as charioteers were to the Kings during those times.
3. Dronacharya didn't reject Karna. Karna was indeed a student of Dronacharya, but his jealousy towards Arjuna drove him. When Dronacharya declined to teach him Brahmastra due to his malicious intentions, Karna went to Parshuram.
4. He consistently opposed any attempts to reconcile with the Pandavas or divide the kingdom, discouraging Duryodhana from compromising. Contrary to popular belief, he played a significant role in Shakuni's conspiracies.
5. He publicly humiliated Draupadi by calling her a prostitute and incited Duhshasana to disrobe her in the presence of the assembly. Karna silenced Vikarna's attempt to protest against Draupadi's unjust and shameful treatment.
6. Karna, despite claiming loyalty to Duryodhana and boasting of killing Arjuna, faced failures on multiple occasions. Firstly, he fled the Gandharva battle, leaving Duryodhana. Secondly, he was defeated by Arjuna alone in the battle of Virata. Despite

[12] The queen of Virata was also from the ‘soot’ community.

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these setbacks, Karna falsely instilled confidence in Duryodhana of defeating Arjuna in the Kurukshetra war and incited him towards it. Even during the final war, Arjuna defeated Karna multiple times before their ultimate duel on the seventeenth day. Additionally, Abhimanyu once defeated Karna in a face-off.

7. During the Kurukshetra war, Karna's ego clash with Bhishma led him to refrain from participating until Bhishma was the commander. This again raises doubts about his proclaimed loyalty.

IV. Exploring Beyond Abhimanyu: Insights into Other Remarkable Sons

1. Ghatotkacha, eldest among the upa-Pandavas[13], was Bheema and Hidimba's son. He aided Sahadeva in conquering Lanka for Yudhishthir's Rajasuya Yajna[14]. Throughout the Pandavas' exile, he remained their steadfast companion. Tall and muscular, resembling a mountain, his mere presence terrified ordinary humans in the war. Only Karna remained undaunted, using the Indrastra against him, intended for Arjuna. Even in death, Ghatotkacha devastated Duryodhana's one akshauhini[15] armies by expanding his body.
2. Iravan, son of Arjuna and Uloopi, was a skilled horse warrior. He defeated many enemies in the war, including six haughty princes of Gandhar who attacked him simultaneously. Tragically, he died on the eighth day, ensnared by Duryodhana's rakshasa.
3. Babruvahana, Arjuna and Chitrangada's son, confronted Arjuna in a duel while Arjuna was leading the Ashvamedha yajna horse after the Kurukshetra war. It marked Arjuna's first ever defeat in a duel!
4. The five Draupadeyas—Prativindhya, Sutasoma, Shrutakirti, Shataanika, and Shrutakarma—primarily fought alongside Abhimanyu, safeguarding him and other warriors. They were the sole survivors among the sons of the Pandavas throughout the eighteen days of the Kurukshetra war. However, in the middle of the night after the war's conclusion, Ashwatthama slew them in their camp.
5. Shwet, young son of King Virat besides Uttar, slayed many young warrior princes.

[13] The five sons of Draupadi and Pandavas.
[14] A ritual performed after the Kurukshetra war ended and Yudhishthir became the King.
[15] Calculation of akshauhini says that one akshauhini had 21,870 chariots, 21,870 elephants, 1,09,350 soldiers, and 65,610 horses.

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Seeing no one capable of defeating Shwet, Bhishma intensified his attack. Both warriors fought fiercely and ultimately, Shwet succumbed to the assault of Bhishma.

V. CHALLENGING MODERN CREATIVE LIBERTIES IN THE ADAPTATION OF INDIAN EPICS

The Mahabharata, often regarded as the "fifth Veda," remains a timeless saga, continually discussed even in modern times. Various adaptations of the Mahabharata[16] offer entertainment but often deviate from the genuine narrative, prompting the question: Should filmmakers be granted artistic freedom when interpreting Indian epics?

While creative liberty is vital for artistic expression, it shouldn't distort the essence of the tale. From a legal standpoint, there's a delicate balance to be maintained between artistic interpretation and cultural preservation. Misrepresentations can misinform the masses, especially in narratives with profound cultural and religious significance. Therefore, filmmakers must approach these narratives with caution and respect, safeguarding their cultural heritage. Most of them distort the original epic to suit the current tastes of the viewing public.

For those only familiar with distorted retellings, Ami Ganatra's book serves as a corrective. It also aids those unable to delve into the original Sanskrit texts due to time constraints or other reasons, though it shouldn't be seen as a substitute. Rather, it should encourage further exploration of the Itihasa.

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[16] BR Chopra's Mahabharata TV serial, StarPlus Mahabharata, Suryaputr Karna TV series, Ekta Kapoor's Mahabharata and other TV serials, novel from Draupadi's perspective, etc.

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