CHAPTER - 2

AN EXPOSITION OF THE HEROIC

I

This chapter details the characterization of both Vyasa and Homer as expounded in the epics. Several protagonists of the epics are discussed in detail, by focussing on various aspects of their heroism in an effort to understand their quality of being heroic. The characters are seen against their background and setting in the epic narrative. It is hoped that this will give us a clue to an understanding of their specific predicament and circumstances. Characters in the Greek epics are examined in the light of their culture-specific qualities, and the protagonists of the Indian epic are discussed within the context of religious and social ideas of Hinduism.

According to Aristotle, characters of an epic should be noble, with lofty sentiments and following a heroic code of conduct. Epic poetry is primarily about men who are at once individuals and types. They are one of us and yet superior to us. Oral epics are generally composed during the transition of the primitive to civilization, and an important stage during this transition is that of the 'heroic'. The men in epics exist more as a congregated whole and their individuality has to be seen in the context of the group. It is when a character realizes his own individuality, separated from the clan or tribe, that the epic hero becomes problematic.

A heroic age gives birth to highly strong and individualistic personalities, for whom personal freedom and assertion take precedence over everything else. Such deeds of liberation and assertion are sung by bards and minstrels as important memories of a hero and each action or deed gets magnified with the passage of time. In oral epics, each bard adds his own bit to the exaggeration. This removes every reader/listener of successive ages from the original epic men to such an extent, that they become great heroes whose feats were wonderful and can only be marvelled at, not emulated. The only aspect which draws men to epic poetry, despite the elevated style and great men, is the general and permanent truths about the human race and its destiny, concealed in the narrative. The destiny of each character has a particular tale to tell which encompasses an eternal truth about all men.

Epics depict the purpose of human life, highlighted by introducing a contrast between gods and men. Gods are what men cannot be, that is immortal, and at the same time, gods cannot be what men are, that is heroic. Generally speaking, heroic characters in the Greek epics seem to value sensuous life and their heroism is confined within the limits of mortal life. Death is considered ignoble, for the honour that was theirs in life can be continued after their death only in the form of songs. They wish to perform wonderful feats and deeds, for that is the singular way of being remembered even after death. This gives them a desire to control their life even in the face of their destiny. An epic hero, it can be said, may not be able to control his destiny but can, atleast, achieve lasting fame by his heroic deeds.

WAR-TIME CHART OF TROJAN WAR

First Day: A duel is proposed between Menelaus and Paris, who is whisked away to safety by Aphrodite in the midst of the duel.
The truce is broken by Pandarus who shoots an arrow at Menelaus.
Odysseus kills Demcoon (a bastard son of Priam).
Diomedes creates havoc on the Trojan armies, killing Pandarus.
Aeneas is badly wounded by Diomedes, but is saved in time by his mother Aphrodite.
Paris is roused from his romantic mood and he fights again.
Aias and Hector fight.

Second Day: The Achaeans lose some of their best men.
Most of the warriors on the Achaean side withdraw from the battle for the day.
The Trojans reach the wall built by the Achaeans as a protection near their camp.
An embassy is sent to Achilles to persuade him to rejoin the war.
Diomedes and Odysseus go near the Trojan camp area at night and meet Dolon, a Trojan.
They kill Dolon after procuring information from him.
Odysseus and Diomedes slaughter the Thracians and take Rhesus' horses after killing him.

Third Day: Agamemnon fights bravely and kills many Trojans, one of them is Iphidamas, Antenor's son.
Hector storms the trench and wall of the Achaeans.
Aias wounds Hector during fight.
Patroclus rejoins the war and kills Sarpedon.
Patroclus fights with Hector and is killed by him.

Fourth Day: Achilles rejoins the war and kills many Trojans.
He kills Lycaon, one of Priam's sons.
The river Scamander rushes on to Achilles in a spate, being annoyed at the heaps of dead bodies in its bed.
Hephaestus sends forth a terrific conflagration to consume the dead bodies.
Achilles routs the Trojan army and pushes it inside the gates of Troy.
Achilles kills Hector after a fight.

Fifth Day : Achilles maltreats the body of Hector for eleven days.
to
Fifteenth Day

Sixteenth Day: Priam goes to Achilles to retreive Hector's body.
A truce is called for twelve days for Hector's funeral.

The heroic deeds performed by an epic character require immense courage, skill and strength. For him, trying to better the best of men, is a constant desire. Courage can be shown only on the battlefield during wars, and fighting is the chief occupation of the warriors. An excess of *menos* leads to personal slights and insults which result in a war where all neighbouring clans take an active part. Each warrior has a chance to show his mettle and some emerge as better than the others. War has disastrous consequences for not only those who fight, but even for the society or civilization at large. Yet the reasons for warring are hardly of any national importance. Wars are fought to right a personal wrong, with other reasons relegated to a peripheral position. Such stress on an individual is a prominent characteristic of epic poetry. Many join for various reasons but the primary motive is of personal glory. Personal indulgence is prized above all else and a gratification of personal pride is valued the most.

II

An examination of these elements in the Homeric epics will lead to a better understanding of the heroes. While most of the characters portrayed in the epics are heroic, some of them reveal a deep understanding of their code of honour. Yet others go to the other extreme, and endanger the very code of conduct lauded as heroic. Wars are fought to satisfy their whims and yet they show no understanding of the consequences that follow. Such an attitude makes them unheroic or anti-heroic. Some like Hector and Achilles grow as characters and portray

a deeper understanding of the life chosen by them. The courage shown by the characters is both mental and physical, and while most heroes display great physical prowess, there are some who shine because of the intellectual warfare they indulge in. In any case, courage of conviction wins out in the end.

The narrative of the epics provides a background for the enactment of the hero's private and individual development and progress. Direct divine intervention is limited in an epic, and the plot is acted by human beings. The growth of the hero of the *Iliad* - for it is a poem about the wrath of Achilles, with the Trojan war as its background - from a person of excessive pride, even at the cost of his comrades, to a person who understands the common humanity he shares with his enemy, makes Achilles an example of all men's lives. In a sense. Achilles becomes guilty of *hubris* or excessive pride, which causes the downfall of his friends and himself.

A primary quality of epic heroes is that of being born to supernatural or divine parents. Achilles is the son of the sea-goddess Thetis and a king, Peleus. This attribute of being half-divine makes him the leader in the war, as seen in the *Iliad*. Agamemnon has no claims to godhead and his slight at the hands of Achilles is relegated to the background, when, even as the commander-in-chief of the Achaean army he has to give in to Achilles' wishes. Though, again it is the gods' wish that Achilles' honour be vindicated by allowing the Trojans to win temporarily in Achilles' absence on the battlefield. However, the indulgence of his wishes by the gods still gives rise to the question of regarding *menos* as

bigger than the lives of others. As he frets and fumes in his camp, he asks why he should try to save the woman of one man when his own woman has been taken away by another. He questions the very heroic life he is forced to lead at the expense of others. Jasper Griffin writes about Achilles,

> — the really important person is Achilles, and what he sees possesses a depth and truth which transforms a mere narrative of killing into an insight into death itself.
>
> (1983: 56)

But no sooner than his friend, Patroclus, is killed, Achilles regains his heroic temper and creates havoc on the battlefield. Again his wrath is calmed only by divine intervention, and the end of the poem shows a change in Achilles, as his rage is transformed into a sublime understanding of the common quality of humanity he shares not only with his friends, but also his foes.

The heroic code demanded that the hero's wounded honour be restored. When Achilles refuses to fight because his honour is wounded, he has the right to demand vindication of his honour. He is offered reasonable compensation by Agamemnon, but the redress offered to him does not satisfy his sense of honour. Aias, son of Telamon, who had come as one of the leaders to persuade Achilles, comments on Achilles' behaviour,

> I cannot help reflecting on the combination of rancour and

> arrogance that Achilles has displayed. Ruthlessness too. Not a thought for the affection of his comrades, who made him the idol of our camp! The inhumanity of it!
>
> (*Il*.9.177-178)

In a sense, only the redress of seeing his comrades die against the Trojans is acceptable to him. This extremity becomes his fault. Patroclus too is warned by him, to restrain from capturing Troy, for that honour has to be reserved for Achilles. He reminds Patroclus again and again,

> Even if Zeus the Thunderer offers you the chance of winning glory for yourself, you must not seize it. You must not fight without *me* against these warlike Trojans - you would only make me cheaper.
>
> (*Il*.16.294)

Thus, Even his friend's life does not hold any importance for Achilles at this stage. The only thought in his mind at that point is of his own imminent death. He is extremely conscious of the choice he had made. He had chosen a short life of glory, and hence he cannot afford to miss his chance of winning glory. These thoughts prompt his decision of refraining from fighting in the name of honour. When Agamemnon takes away Briseis from Achilles, it is a step towards ignominy for the latter. If such slights are perpetrated on one who is born for glory then how would he succeed in achieving it ? He complains to his mother Thetis,

> —— Mother, since you, a goddess, gave me life, if only for a little while, surely Olympian Zeus the Thunderer owes me some measure of regard.
>
> (*Il*. 1.32)

The humanity which Achilles shows to Priam at the end of the poem is an insight he develops later. Initially only his wrath is of prime importance both to the hero and the poet.

A heroic epic is an epic of explicit action. Action dominates the whole poem. The actions performed by the heroes are to be seen against the broader action of Divine will and Destiny. Every action of the hero leads him towards the fulfillment of his own destiny. Thus, neither the hero nor the audience can come out of the influence of destiny over man. Destiny of a hero involves death; for what else could be the result of heroic life; which becomes important for the heroes who seek it as a means of achieving glory. On the whole death is abhorred by them. Death means the conclusion of the vibrant life they cherish. It is the end of fulfilling desires and even life as a menial is better than death as a hero, as Achilles' ghost tells Odysseus in *Odyssey*. Achilles' shade tells Odysseus,

> —— spare me your praise of Death. Put me on earth again, and I would rather be a serf in the house of some landless man, with little enough for himself to live on, than king of all these dead men that have done with life.
>
> (*Od*. 11.189)

The only reward for embracing death is eternal glory and that is what prods these heroes on.

The temporary withdrawal of Achilles from the raging war provides him time for introspection. It gives him a deeper insight into heroic life and heroic death. When he returns to avenge Patroclus' death he looks at those he kills with a different perspective. He knows his death too is imminent, and the killing rampage he goes on is almost an outcome of the frustration he feels. He refuses to grant life to Priam's son, Lycaon and tells him,

> Yes, my friend, you too must die. Why make such a song about it ? Even Patroclus died, who was a better man than you by far. And look at me. Am I not big and beautiful, the son of a great man, with a goddess for my Mother ? Yet Death and sovran Destiny are waiting for me too.
>
> (*Il*.21.383)

His `heroic temper' or *menos* distinguishes him from the rest of the heroes. And later, again, it is his insight into the lives and deaths of the heroes that marks him as the best among men.

Achilles' foreknowledge of his own death makes him tragic, in the sense that he knows the divine help he has received would not be of much use at his own moment of death. Zeus too grants the indulgence of his wishes, almost as if in compensation for what is to follow. His half-divinity grants Achilles the right to glory which had been snatched away

from him. The human passion he nurses in isolation is carried out to its fulfillment because of divine will, but in the end the divine aid deserts him. The supernatural aid is to enhance transient glory which is withdrawn when he is absorbed into the wheels of Destiny.

The impending doom renders Achilles tragic and as a man desperate to postpone his own destiny, his actions gain a profound significance. It is the tragic aspect of his character which sublimates the personal, selfish motives and gives them an epic and heroic dimension. Achilles came to fight at Troy in search of the promised glory. It was his chance to show his prowess as a hero and a warrior. He is disillusioned with the state of things and realizes that it is futile to fight for an alien cause with one's all might, since,

> — it appears that a man gets no thanks for struggling with the enemy day in, day out. His share is the same, whether he sits at home or fights his best. Cowards and brave men are equally respected; and death comes alike to one who has done nothing and one who has toiled hard. All I have suffered by constantly risking my life in battle has left me no better off than the rest.
>
> (*Il*.9. 169)

Recovering Helen is not of priority to him, and may not be so to almost all the other heroes too. These heroes are of a highly individualistic state of life, having realized their own individuality as men. This realization of themselves as individual entities makes them selfish, intent on

living only for themselves. The degree of individuality is higher in Achilles and he comes out as a very private person, reluctant to maintain friendly or loving relations with anyone. His friendship with Patroclus is also intimate only to a certain extent, because Patroclus is his inferior in status. His relationship with Briseis is more of that between the captor and the captive. He hardly thinks of her as an individual and his demand of her return is more to indicate his insult than out of love for her. Again, his wishes are more important than the affection he might feel for her.

Achilles' relationship with his mother is the only one which gives him consolation. But here too he is the child who can demand and knows that the parent would fulfill it. Thetis' consoling has no effect on him until she promises to get him divine help to redress his honour. Achilles' lamentations over Patroclus' death are genuine enough but once more it arises out of his sense of guilt. He knows Patroclus has paid the price of his own stubborn clinging to anger. And his vengeance takes the form of the killing spree on the battlefield. But now, Achilles reaches a state of deeper understanding. He forms a kinship with all those he kills and when he calls them 'my friend' he has become conscious once again of his own death. This relation reaches its finale when he kills Hector. Though it is done as an act of vengeance, he becomes aware of the fact that his own death would soon follow Hector's. His anger at Hector for escaping him through death results in the mutilation of the corpse. Patroclus' death is avenged but Achilles' fury is not abated. The gods have to intervene, and he cannot ignore their orders.

When Achilles agrees to hand over Hector's corpse to Priam, it is out of sullen agreement to divine wishes. But when Priam comes to him, he suddenly forms a kinship with him as he remembers his own old father, Peleus, who would also be waiting for the news of his son's death. Achilles describes the sufferings of war, not only for those who take part in it, but also for those who have to wait for the news of the death of loved ones. His father, Peleus, was also suffering alone, for, "—- I am sitting here in your own country, far from my own, making life miserable for you and your children." (*Il*.24. 451). It is his imagination of his father's grief which makes Achilles empathize with Priam. When they eat together they do as co-sufferers, not as adversaries. Such understanding, which is the outcome of seeing beyond oneself makes Achilles the hero he is. The self-centred hero at the beginning of the poem, who had no thought of including others in his own world, becomes compassionate not only to friends, but to foes too. The vicissitude in Achilles' character makes him a hero of universal vision. He becomes the embodiment of the ideals of the heroic age. Homer has portrayed Achilles as a hero belonging to an earlier, heroic age when men were stronger and braver. Achilles is the poet's conception of an ideal hero for his poem. W. F. Jackson Knight considers Achilles to be the central character of the epic,

> Achilles is central, and what matters most is how, as a Christian would put it, 'his soul is saved', and what hope there is for him and his friends, in spite of all.
>
> (1968: 101)

The *Iliad* ends on a solemn note. The hero who endangers the lives of his allies by his decision of not fighting, realizes the sublime importance of enveloping even enemies into the common humanity he shares with them. As an epic hero, Achilles is bound by his own destiny. His *hubris* here is also part of the fulfillment of his destiny, which brings on the tragedy. The tragedy of an epic hero is that his actions are monitored by divine will and destiny, and even the epic action is controlled by these two principles. Such a tragic vision lends solemn grandeur and sublimity to epics. The hero's life-fulfillment is doing what heroic life demands; act according to his destiny and seek glory through a noble warrior's death.

Achilles' half-divine parentage enables him to know his future which has to bear fruition through his actions. The semi-divine status of Achilles is one of the components of his heroic nature. It is this which makes him the principal hero of *Iliad*, though Agamemnon is the commander-in-chief of the expedition. His actions and passions dominate the whole poem which form its central theme. The privilege granted to him by Homer is borne by him with epic grandeur. No one equals him better in his understanding of heroic life and death. Perhaps Hector too understands part of what Achilles comprehends, but being a mortal hinders his full comprehension of the future. He is the only other hero in the *Iliad* who meets Achilles on his own ground. And if Achilles is heroic because of his semi-divine nature, Hector is heroic because of his humanity. C. M. Bowra remarks,

> The strength of the contrast is between the natural, sympathetic humanity of Hector and the remote, terrifying magnificence of Achilles.
>
> (1972: 115)

III

Hector's death is associated with the fall of Troy, and every action after his death leads to the eventual colossal destruction, though it is outside the text of the *Iliad*. Even though the deed of abducting Helen is performed by Paris, it is Hector who is the ultimate protector of the city. The mantle of leading the Trojans to victory falls on him and the king's and his parents' aspirations of victory lies with him. Hector becomes the Trojan hero, a worthy opponent of Achilles, as the latter admits once,

> Why could Hector not have killed me ? He is finest man they have bred in Troy, and the killer would have been as noble as the killed.
>
> (*Il*.21. 387)

Hector has no claims to divinity like Achilles. Born of human parents, the Trojan King Priam and Queen Hecabe, he is a much loved son, who is to fulfill their ambitions by protecting the city. He is the mainstay of his family and his protection of Troy is more a protection of his family, of the women and children. As per the rules of the war, the conquered would become slaves of the victors. The women would become the slaves, and

the male children would be killed to make the line of the conquered extinct. Such a fate awaits Hector's wife and son. During his meeting with Andromache, Hector tells her why it is important for him to fight,

> Deep in my heart I know the day is coming when holy Ilium will be destroyed, with Priam and the people of Priam of the good ashen spear. Yet I am not so much distressed ---, as by the thought of you, dragged off in tears by some Achaean man-at-arms to slavery.
>
> (*Il*.6. 129)

This spurs him on to guard Troy as long as possible.

Hector is not the greatest warrior on the battlefield and yet comes second only to Achilles, whose heroism is due to his physical prowess in battle. The honour Achilles fights for is personal. while that of Hector is the honour of the noblest kind, that of protecting the city and his family. In Achilles' absence on the field, Hector rises to his full heroism when he kills fierce warriors like Patroclus and Sarpedon. He fights with a divine splendour, guided by Zeus and Apollo. But with Achilles' entry on the battlefield, his divine helpers abandon Hector. He cannot compete with the help that Achilles, being half-divine, receives from the gods. The powerful presence of Achilles on the battlefield with his resonating voice overshadows Hector's gentle presence. His gentleness is all the more striking against the ruthlessness of Achilles. This probably is one of the reasons why he is not a hero on par with Achilles. The age in which the

narrative is premised was one of fierce and cruel heroism. Humanity and tenderness were alien to the heroes on the war-front.

Hector's triumph in killing Patroclus is short-lived. While he puts on the armour of Achilles, he cannot claim the pair of divine horses. This transgression is allowed by Zeus for he knows Hector is to die soon. H. V. Routh describes this,

> The Father of gods and men had used Hektor as the poor instrument of his sovereign will, and could even find it in his heart to pity the mortal who forgot his own subordination.
>
> (1927: 88)

But the horses rightfully belong only to Achilles. Hector commits his only mistake when he refuses to heed to Polydamas' advice of retreating inside the walls of Troy to ensure the safety of his army. Hector is thoughtful as he contemplates his own approaching end,

> As it is, having sacrificed the army to my own perversity, I could not face my countrymen and the Trojan ladies in their trailing gowns —- it would have been a far better thing for me to stand up to Achilles. and either kill him and come home alive or myself die gloriously in front of Troy.
>
> (*Il*.22. 399-400)

Drunk on his victory of Patroclus' death, Hector's inability to protect

himself from Achilles ensures his death. When struck fatally by Achilles, Hector realizes his folly but by then it is too late. His famous fleeing from the battlefield is unheroic, but Homer never lets his heroes get away without a feeling of fear. Even the greatest of warriors feel this emotion. Homer describes Hector's change of heart thus, "Hector looked up, saw him (Achilles), and began to tremble. He no longer had the heart to stand his ground; he left the gate, and ran away in terror." (*Il* .22. 400). The divine help extended to him by Apollo is withdrawn and Athena helps in delivering the final fatal blow. Hector realizes his isolation but yet goes on, without divine aid, "Alas ! so the gods did beckon me to my death ! —- Death is no longer far away; he is staring me in the face and there is no escaping him." (*Il* .22. 405).

The only consolation offered to Hector by Zeus is that of dying a hero's death at the hands of a worthy opponent like Achilles. Such a demarcation between divinity and humanity highlights the difference between Achilles' foreknowledge about his own death and Hector's ignorance of his own. Achilles is driven to fight more heroically inspite of his knowledge, while Hector is driven because of his ignorance and personal responsibilities. Even the entreaties of his parents are not able to make him retreat to Troy. His fleeing from the battlefield is a lesson in making him realize his human vulnerability. Yet, even divine desertion is unable to take away his rising heroism at the hour of death. The mutilation of his corpse by Achilles does not disfigure his body as Apollo and Aphrodite prevent it. This is the cause of frustration in Achilles. Thus Hector achieves a victory even in death.

The two heroes are complementary aspects of heroism. Achilles represents the heroic culture of an earlier age, while Hector's heroism belongs to Homer's own age. Achilles' terrifying daemonism is all the more striking because of Hector's sympathetic tenderness. W. F. Jackson Knight regards him as a leader, "Hector is nearly perfect; he is noted as a leader, and not as a selfish fighter, like Achilles." (1968: 157). In the Greek world of heroic age, Hector's ties with his family makes him a little too human. C. M. Bowra considers Hector to be less heroic than Achilles,

> In the scarcity of his human ties Achilles stands out more emphatically as a hero, while Hector is a little too human to be a hero of the highest class.
>
> (1972: 159)

Achilles' death lacks the irony associated with Hector's death. The future of Troy's survival rests with Hector's life. It would be more of a loss to everyone rather than only to himself. Hector's dialogue with his wife before his death is poignant. Andromache is worried about her own future and also of their son, in case Hector is killed. But Hector's words ring with a warrior's passion for heroic death and glory. He seems to have an inkling of the ultimate defeat of Troy. He does not grasp at the opportunity of living, safely ensconced in his home. His death is a regret, because the future of a city rests with him. Zeus uses him to fulfill his own plan and in doing so, gives Hector a chance to die a hero's death. Having no foreknowledge of his own death, Hector misinterprets the omens sent by Zeus. His overzealousness eventually leads him to his death.

Hector's encounters with the three women in his life, before going for battle, brings out his resistance to playing safe. His wife entreats him to keep their son's and her own future in mind. His mother Hecabe also tries to dissuade him, as does Helen too. But he does not back out of his resolve. The tender scene with his wife and son is the highlight of the poem. It also brings to light the transient nature of heroic life. When on the battlefield, the hero knows what his purpose is, but outside it, the manner of his life makes him think about his own family. Warriors are reconciled to their death and fate, but are still uncertain about the future of their families after their own deaths. Such uncertainty and lack of surety about his city and family makes Hector regret his eventual death. In the interlocking of the destinies of the two heroes, Achilles' divine origin grants him some more time on earth. Thus, once again destiny and fate render a human being helpless. Used mercilessly by the gods, the only compensation for Hector is to die a hero's death.

IV

Achilles and Hector are characterized as heroes of the `Heroic age'. They are heroes who follow the heroic code and their courage lies in their physical prowess. On the other hand, there is Odysseus whose Autolycan quality is more emphasized in the epics. Like his grandfather Autolycus, he is more renowned for his strategies and cunning. He is a shadowy figure in the *Iliad* and we know of him only through what others say about him. But in two episodes his difference from the other heroes is marked. Once

in the chapter, "Night Interlude" when he enters the Trojan camp area with Diomedes, he deceives the man captured by them by telling him that he would be freed if he gives them the right information. But on procuring the information, they kill the Trojan. Also, he is a master of strategies and planning, and he shows unmistakable power as a wise person to whom others would turn to in times of crises. The council which goes to Achilles with compensation furthers Odysseus as their spokesman. Odysseus' skill as an excellent orator comes through in his speech to Achilles. His folk-tale origin as a character can be seen in the tricks he employs which do not accord with the accepted code of heroism.

Odysseus' appearance is surprisingly unheroic, with his short and stout stature. Yet he was a favourite with women. In the stressful atmosphere of the heroic age, when barbarism and violence were highlighted by the other epic heroes, Odysseus' quiet resilience, self-control and gentleness were welcomed by the others, especially women. He tried to avoid violence if he could win in another manner, and this got him the image of being a stragegist. Such behaviour was considered unheroic, and his vice of being a glutton marks his deviant behaviour as a hero. Even the weapons he uses for fighting reflect his folk-tale origins. He used arrows, being a skilled archer, instead of the mandatory spear and sword. The ambiguity in his character classifies him as a lesser warrior on the battlefield. It is his adaptability to circumstances and his quality of endurance that makes Odysseus the hero of the *Odyssey*. It is through these qualities that Odysseus manages to overcome obstacles, while returning to Ithaca. His dispassionate nature comes out strongly in the *Odyssey*. He is a master of his emotions, and comes out as a man of moderation.

The *Odyssey* is often considered as the work of an older and mature poet who has realized the folly of relying only on physical courage. Qualities like self-restraint and moderation were more appreciated by the time of *Odyssey*. The world of *Iliad* was on the decline, and with it, the qualities approved by the heroic code. *Iliad* represents the qualities of heroism, courage and youth of a civilization on the rise. *Odyssey* is representative of a defeated, quiet and mature world. W. F. Jackson Knight accepts Odysseus as the heroic character of the *Odyssey* who "—- comes to his heart's desire through harmony within himself and with the heaven that is in and with man." (1968: 101). The heroes who fought at Troy were men with violent passions and their end was equally violent, since very few returned home safely. A life of heroism on the battlefield was no longer considered as the best and a settled life was longed for, as can be seen in the case of Odysseus. His yearning for his home and the normal things of life evinces the changed temperament of the people. Intelligence and cunning were more appreciated and Odysseus becomes the embodiment of these qualities. Due to these qualities he manages to overcome the obstacles raised on his return home. Gods play a more active role, and their approval of Odysseus' actions makes him successful.

The poem is not simply an adventure story. It is also an intellectual journey towards knowledge. The element of intellectual curiosity is not overtly emphasized, but Odysseus does seem to embody the questioning attitude of the poet's age. His insistence on listening to the Sirens' song and investigating the Cyclops' cave, reveals his thirst for knowledge. His love of adventure seems to be ceaseless and even before he is able to

settle down to a long talk with his wife after twenty years, Odysseus is already thinking about Tiresias' prediction. "There lies before me still a great and hazardous adventure, which I must see through to the very end, however far that end may be." (*Od.*23.358).

Odysseus is helped in his adventures by the goddess Athena, who acts as his guide and is also the representative of the Divine will. Yet his exploits reveal his prudence, of performing actions with human limitations. Divine planning, by Poseidon, estranges him from his family for many years and it is divine intervention again which enables him to return home. The heroic temperament of the *Iliad* has no place here. The heroes who died at Troy lament their own deaths and their choice of life when Odysseus meets their shades in the underworld. The unmistakable ravages of war have given them this wisdom. A life of constant strife was no longer held in high regard in the life after Troy. However, the *Odyssey* is still about a hero whose qualities have been transformed, as has the epitome of heroism in the changed circumstances. His thoughtfulness and intelligence help him through the adventures, and even he is aware of his own reputation. While introducing himself to the Phaeacian king, he says, "I am Odysseus, Laertes' son. The whole world talks of my stratagems, and my fame has reached the heavens." (*Od*.9. 141). He is still the man of action, but the action is on a different plane. Brute power has been replaced by mental superiority. His intelligence takes on varied hues depending on whether he chooses to use it for selfish gains or to gain knowledge about the mysteries of life.

The more active mind cannot be satisfied by mere expression of physical prowess. It needs satisfaction through an exploration of the unknown realms of life. Yet the ultimate goal of such a mind is also domestic happiness. Odysseus longs to be home even when he is amongst the magical worlds of Circe and Calypso. Even the offer of immortality cannot entice him to stay back with Calypso. Penelope's humanity is more appealing to him, and the lure of a normal life attracts him. He tells Calypso, "—— I long to reach my home and see the happy day of my return. It is my never-failing wish." (*Od*.5.93). It was a life he had been forced to leave when he joined the expedition to Troy.

His relationship with his wife is based more on solid grounds of the normality of a home rather than out of passionate love. But at the same time, he is unsure of his relationship with his son. Telemachus had been an infant when his father left for Troy. The gap of twenty years since then has created a formal relationship between them. Odysseus is fond of his son as his heir, but the closeness in their relation is missing. His prudence wins over his affections every time, yet he is not portrayed as an unfeeling brute. His personal ties are not able to tie him anywhere and his actions are directed towards general good. His comrades at Troy were at once wary of his Autolycan qualities and appreciative of his strategies. Though not strictly within the context of the poems, the master strategy of the Wooden Horse by Odysseus eventually wins the war for the Achaeans. Thus, cunning could only decide the fate for them after ten years of senseless and useless warfare. Again, by the end of ten years all the heroes have realized the futility of such violence. They win fame through their

warfare and fighting, but Odysseus's renown rests with his qualities of mental alertness, resilience and flexibility. His lack of strong passions makes him the emergent figure of new heroism, in whom the quality of heroism has undergone a transformation.

V

Odysseus' enduring qualities are aptly matched by Penelope's faithfulness over the years. The Heroic Age was essentially monogamous, but 'keeping' women in absence of wives was the accepted norm. Such concubines were temporary mates and the eventual return to the wife was tacitly understood. Penelope's long-lasting faithfulness against Odysseus' infidelities involving Circe and Calypso, reflects an age of male domination. Yet she was an important member in Odysseus' concept of a 'home'. M. I. Finley stresses the point, "She was part of what he meant by 'home', the mother of his dear son and the mistress of his *oikos*."(1956: 141). Penelope exhibits the traditional qualities of a woman; and her legendary reputation as a wise woman finds expression though Agamemnon's ghost, who tells Odysseus, "Not that *your* wife Odysseus, will ever murder you. Icarius' daughter is far too sound in heart and brain for that. The wise Penelope! " (*Od* . 11. 187-188). She is an excellent housewife, and manages her estate in the absence of her husband till the horde of suitors start harassing her. But her clever and enterprising nature comes through in her stratagem of weaving and unweaving the web of the shroud for three long years. She also copes with a grown-up son with her prudence and

strictness, but also understands his reaction of trying to be the master of the house.

Penelope's faithfulness is legendary, yet what binds her to her husband is not deep love, but the comfortable belief of having a home with a husband and children. However, she is not above the suspicion of others, as being a common woman who would not hesitate to choose a suitor in the long absence of a husband. Homer's characters are real men and women, and he portrays them as a balance of good and bad. The twenty years have taken its toll on Penelope and she is at the end of her patience coping with successive problems. She foresees the collapse of her household if Odysseus does not make an appearance soon, "I see approaching me the night when I must accept a union I shall loathe; heaven has destroyed my happiness and left me forlorn." (*Od*. 18. 291).

Suitors harass her, servants turn disloyal and the son has his own problems. Hence, when Odysseus returns at last she is overcautious in accepting him wholeheartedly, and puts him through various tests. Her cleverness and intelligence do not sway under the typical male exasperation. Her offhand remark about their bed clinches the matter for her, and her reaction is of complete surrender. In the male dominated narrative of the poem, Penelope has to prove herself as a capable partner for Odysseus. And instead of boasting over her triumph she surrenders completely. Her planning and wit matches that of Odysseus, and it is a tribute to women by Homer. She is constantly set against her sister Clytaemnestra, who killed her husband Agamemnon with the help of her lover. Penelope's endurance and faithfulness have remained unmatched in literature and legend.

VI

In contrast to Penelope is the portrayal of Helen. Offspring of Zeus through Leda, she is given incomparable beauty by Aphrodite. It is her divine origin which makes her the recipient of respect even in Troy. The Trojans, when they see Helen on the tower, say, "Who on earth, —- could blame the Trojan and Achaean men-at-arms for suffering so long for such a woman's sake ? Indeed, she is the very image of an immortal goddess" (*Il* .3. 68). No Trojan man or woman castigates her but hold her as an emblem, even to the extent of fighting a highly destructive war. Waking up from her folly, Helen regrets her action of running away with Paris and suffers for the distress she causes. She reveals her disillusionment with Paris to Hector,

> -— I wish I had found a better husband, one with some feeling for the reproaches and contempt of his fellow-men. But as it is, this husband I have got is an inconstant creature; and he will never change, though one day he will suffer for it, if I am not mistaken. (*Il* .6. 126)

Her compassionate nature makes her a figure of affection for all. She is a shadowy figure, looming in the background as the cause of the war, and she becomes a tragic figure who cannot escape the guilt of causing grief and distress to everyone. Helen even goes to the extent of attempting to defy Aphrodite when the goddess asks her to give company to Paris. "I refuse to go and share his bed again - I should never hear the end of it.

There is not a woman in Troy who would not curse me if I did. I have enough to bear already." (*Il*.3. 74). Her guilt has produced suffering for her family, and the pathos in her speech when she searches for her two brothers amongst the Achaeans reveals her trauma as a guilty person.

Helen becomes legendary for her act and is remembered not for her womanly virtues, but for her share in a devastating war for her guilt and suffering, writes Jasper Griffin.(1983: 97-98). Yet she comes out unscathed, without any reproach or punishment. Her willing participation in the act of elopement makes her an adulteress, and at the end of the war she comfortably goes back to Sparta with Menelaus. She talks of her past with considerable regret, in the *Odyssey*,

> I had suffered a change of heart, repenting the infatuation with which Aphrodite blinded me when she lured me to Troy from my own dear country and made me forsake my daughter, my bridal chamber, and a husband who had all one could wish for in the way of brains and good looks.
>
> (*Od*. 4. 69)

She is aware of her role in creating history at Troy, but the guilt and suffering she demonstrates are hardly any compensation for the destruction of almost an entire civilization. M. I. Finley strongly censures Helen for her crime,

> Helen was no innocent victim in all this, no unwilling captive of

Paris- Alexander, but an adulteress in the most complete sense.

(1956: 144)

One striking note in the character of Helen is her blatant use as a pawn in the game of war. She is never asked by the men, Menelaus and Paris, about her choice. She is also a victim of Divine will. She was made to run away with Paris because of Aphrodite's influence, and she goes back to Menelaus as a prize won by him in the war. In the age where the war is situated, such treatment is not surprising. Even in the case of Penelope, none of the suitors wait for her decision. They simply insist that she just has to choose one amongst them. Jasper Griffin praises the lasting qualities displayed by the Homeric characters, "The loyalty of Penelope, the endurance and resolution of Odysseus, the self-sacrifice of Patroclus, even the tragic dignity of the guilty Helen : all show us that amid suffering and disaster human nature can remain noble and almost god-like." (1983: 177).

Helen's overzealous partner in the sin is Paris, who is the archetypal Trojan. He is least concerned with the effect of his act, and even during the war hardly behaves like a warrior. His cowardly actions on the battlefield are aided by Aphrodite, and all he can think about in the midst of war is the satisfaction of his sensual pleasures. His beauty is emphasized in the poem, rather than his prowess. The act is reprehensible but he is unrepentant. His brothers have to fight for an act of selfishness performed by him. Hector bitterly reveals,

> Indeed I wish the earth would open and swallow him up. The gods brought him to manhood only to be a thorn in the flesh for the Trojans and my royal father and his sons. If I could see him bound for Hades' Halls, I should say good riddance to bad rubbish.
>
> (*Il*.4.124)

Paris' contrast with Hector is striking. When Hector reprimands Paris to return to war, the manner of his dressing reveals his sensual and selfish nature. While Paris brings destruction to Troy, Hector is the protector of the city. It had been prophesied that Paris would be the cause of the fall of the family and Troy. His parents had abandoned him, but fate cannot be thwarted. Aphrodite chooses him as her protege and promises to get him the most beautiful woman on earth. His parents welcome him back and eventually their destinies are fulfilled. The prophecy about Paris at his birth comes true.

The Achaeans and the Trojans embody the principles followed by them. Trojans, as a people, are gregarious and pleasure-loving. The example of Paris bears testimony to this. Though the war is being fought to support his regretful act, he is least concerned with the devastating effects of his action. Hector fights in the war because of his social responsibility. He understands Paris' action as selfish, but family-pride and honour make him defend Paris. On the other hand, the Achaean troops gathered at Troy have ulterior motives, especially Achilles. He is there to win a name for himself and so, consequently insistent on preserving his personal honour. The person responsible for the war. Helen, realizes her

mistake but is helpless in the face of the divine will of Aphrodite, who threatens to strip her of her beauty if she refuses to humour Paris.

VII

Homer does not reveal the feelings of his characters freely. Rather, he uses their actions to characterize them. In the larger sphere of action there is the Divine will lurking behind almost all individual actions. W. H. D. Rouse remarks about Homer,

> He makes no comments, he makes the men speak, and act; in their words and acts you may divine the characters behind them, and you may see how the men grow with experience to fulfil their destiny.
>
> (1939: 121)

This emphasizes the problem of viewing men as pawns of Fate and God, with little freedom to choose. The only choice left to them is that of acting according to the Divine will, which renders their choice as no independent choice at all.

The epic form offers a wide variety of characters who are at once typical and individual. They are typical to the extent that they typify or embody some governing principles of their age. Sri Aurobindo remarks in connection with the *Mahabharata*,

> Vyasa's knowledge of character is not so intimate, emotional and sympathetic —- it has more of heroic inspiration, less of a divine

> sympathy. He has reached it —— deliberately through intellect and experience, a deep criticism and reading of men.
>
> (1991: 58)

The individuality comes through when the characters assert their will and the freedom to choose. Destiny is still all-powerful, but they manage to work out their limited destiny in the larger scheme of things ordained by Destiny. Whereas in the Homeric epics, the characters act on either a purely individualistic basis or according to divine dictates, the personalities of Vyasa's *Mahabharata* choose their own paths of living. That is not to say that they disregard divine intervention, but rather, even the divine intervenes in the form of a human being, acting in the limited sphere of humanity. The primary characters are the sons/daughters of gods, but their actions on earth are strictly human. The five Pandavas are noted as the sons of Dharma, Vayu, Indra and the Ashwini twins, who are sent to earth to engage in an epochal warfare, thus decreasing the strength of evil ones on earth. The Kauravas are supposed to be the incarnations of *asuras* and hence their *adharmic* actions. The Indian epic is substantially different from the Homeric epic in its tone, temper and characterization. The characters of *Mahabharata* are autonomous to a very large extent. Their actions are limited, but they are a result of their own choices.

Almost all the characters in the Indian epic have a symbolic role to play. The annihilation of the *asuras* is vital, and hence all those who fight on the Pandavas' side seem to follow *Dharma*, and those on the side of the Kauravas are said to follow *Adharma*. Following *Dharma* or *Adharma*

casts them as good or evil. Their symbolic representation thus is important for the maintenance of world order. The *Mahabharata* purports to tell about everything in the world. It is more of an *Itihasa*, a history of the world as perceived in ancient India. It is concerned with depicting the creation and destruction of the world. The deluge mentioned in the epic with a forewarning, is seen as the end of the world. The characters then, are the forces which would lead the world to the fulfillment of its destiny. In this way, they do act as the agents of divine will, but the actions performed by them result from autonomous decisions.

VIII

The narrative core of the *Mahabharata* is concerned with warriors or *kshatriyas* and *kshatriyadharma*. The fights and wars are part of this narrative, and the epic on this level is a poem about a war between cousins. The didactic core lends a philosophical meaning to the epic, transforming it into a *Veda*. Within the narrative, the heroes are warriors, fighting to gain their rights. The heroic energy they exude is an integral part of the story. Though the definition of an epic character by Dandin came later, it is exemplified in these characters, who are chivalrous, brave, of noble lineage and act as examples of the *kshatriyadharma* of a *kshatriya*.

Arjuna is the perfect embodiment of a true epic hero. The outcome of the war at Kurukshetra largely depends on Arjuna's prowess as a warrior. The killing of major figures like Bhishma, Karna, and such

others, is the result of Arjuna's prowess as a warrior, whose primary motive is to gain honour as a warrior par excellence. The *Mahabharata* gives a fuller description of the lives and times of its heroes than the Homeric epics. This results into a detailed character portrayal of the main protagonists, who become flesh and blood men and women for the readers/ listeners. Although Yudhishthira is hailed as the hero of the epic, Arjuna seems to be the hero of the original narrative core. His birth is accompanied by prophecies of his future deeds and prowess, and the heavens seem to be celebrating his birth. On his birth, an incorporeal voice says,

> This child of thine, O Kunti, will be equal unto Kartavirya in energy and Siva in prowess. Invincible like Sakra himself he will spread thy fame far and wide. As Vishnu (the youngest of Aditi's sons) had enhanced Aditi's joy, so shall this child enhance thy joy. — The foremost of all men endued with prowess, he will achieve great fame.
>
> (*Adi*. 123. 258)

From then on, Arjuna's success in life seems to be divinely ordained, almost as if he was Gods' favourite child.

Like most heroes, Arjuna and his brothers are also partakers of godhead, being half-divine, with a human mother and divine father. Indra, the progenitor of Arjuna, is the king among the *devas* and his son emulates him thoroughly in this respect. Often, Arjuna is the only character who is called a *vira* or hero in the epic. He embodies all the

WAR-TIME CHART OF KURUKSHETRA WAR

First Day: Uttara, son of the Virata King, is killed by Shalya.
Sveta, son of the Virata King, is killed.
The battle is won by the Kauravas.

Second Day: Bhishma's arrows wound Krishna.
The battle is won by the Pandavas.

Third Day: Bhishma and Arjuna fight fiercely.
Arjuna kills many Kaurava forces.

Fourth Day: Bhima kills eight Kaurava brothers.
Ghatotkacha creates havoc for the Kauravas.

Fifth Day: Bhima fights Drona, Shalya and Bhishma.

Sixth Day: Bhima fights on foot with his mace.
Drona fights fiercely and the battle is in favour of the Kauravas.

Seventh Day: Shikhandi is badly wounded.

Eighth Day: Arjuna's son Iravan, by Ulupi the Naga princess, is killed by rakshasa Alambusha.

Ninth Day: Pandava forces are demoralized.
Arjuna is not able to fight with Bhishma wholeheartedly.

Tenth Day: Bhishma is fatally wounded by Arjuna.
He falls on a bed of arrows.
Drona is appointed as the Supreme Commander of the Kaurava Army.

Eleventh Day: Drona is made Supreme Commander.
Drona tries to capture Yudhishthira who is saved by Arjuna.

Twelfth Day: The chief of Trigartadesa and his brothers take the Samsaptaka vow, to kill Arjuna or commit suicide.
Bhagadatta is killed by Arjuna.

Thirteenth Day: Abhimanyu is killed by Jayadratha and other Kauravas.

Fourteenth Day: Satyaki and Bhurisravas fight.
Arjuna chops off Bhurisravas' arm.
Satyaki kills Bhurisravas.
Arjuna kills Jayadratha.
Ghatotkacha is killed by Karna.

Fifteenth Day: Drupada is killed by Drona.
Drona is killed by Drishtadyumna.

Sixteenth Day: Karna becomes the Supreme Commander.
Arjuna kills many of the Samsaptakas.

Seventeenth Day: Karna is killed by Arjuna.
Shalya becomes the Supreme Commander and is killed by Yudhishthira.
Duryodhana hides in a lake.
Ashwatthama is made the Supreme Commander.

Eighteenth Day: Duryodhana is killed by Bhima.
The Pandava-Panchala camp is wiped out by Ashwatthama.

kshatriya qualities along with the prime quality of maintaining the world order. Buddhadeb Bose remarks , "—- while Yudhisthir is only a possibility of history, Arjun is a history-maker." (1986: 56). The handsomeness of Arjuna is another requisite of a hero, and he has a powerful physique, though not quite like the elephantine strength of Bhima. Yudhishthira, being the eldest is the literal king, but as depicted in the course of the epic, he depends mainly on his two younger brothers, Bhima and Arjuna, to win or maintain his kingdom. The three older Pandavas together signify the unity of various qualities; Yudhishthira's mental and spiritual prowess, Bhima's blind, brute strength and Arjuna's faithful, balancing strength as a warrior.

Arjuna is the countering force for both his elder brothers and acts as a mediating influence between them. A favourite of the grandsire Bhishma, teacher Drona and queen Draupadi too, his mastery of archery with unbelievable powers of concentration and aim is the key to his success. It wins his bride for him and the renown in the battle. But as is common with heroes, Arjuna is vainly proud of his skills and unable to tolerate any competition. He knows about Drona's affection for him and tells him,

> Thou hadst lovingly told me, clasping me, to thy bosom, that no pupil of thine, should be equal to me. Why then is there a pupil of thine, the mighty son of the Nishada king, superior to me ?
>
> (*Adi* . 134. 281)

His teacher too keenly supports his vanity and to let him be the best, asks Ekalavya, the Nishada king's son. who had become an excellent archer only through observation, to cut off his right thumb and present it as his teacher's fees.

Such unfairness in support of Arjuna is also seen during the princes' tournament, after the Kuru princes' education is over. Karna challenges Arjuna to a duel but again Arjuna is saved by the disclosure of Karna's parentage, who is believed to be a charioteer's son. For, a noble hero would fight only with a person of a noble lineage. However, the seed of a lifelong rivalry is sown, since Arjuna regards Karna's challenge as a personal insult and,

> --- deeming himself disgraced, said unto Karna stationed amidst the brothers like unto a cliff, `That path which the unwelcome intruder and the uninvited talker cometh to, shall be thine. O Karna, for thou shalt be slain by me'.
>
> (*Adi* . 138. 288)

Krishna too tells him time and again that Karna is not just an equal, but a better warrior than Arjuna. But Fate's favourite child has glory and fame given to him on a platter. As a youth, Arjuna's marriage alliances grant the Pandavas the necessary support they would eventually need to wage a war. Again, the Pandava line's continuity is also ensured only through Arjuna, whose grandson Parikshit is the only survivor among all the other Pandava sons.

Arjuna's portrayal as a hero par excellence is highlighted in many instances; as in the *Khandavavanadaha* episode and his killings of great warriors in the war later on. But conversant with the Indian conception of the warrior as a recipient of ascetic powers too. Arjuna's journey to the heavens involves severe penances before gaining divine weapons, forming a part of his heroism. His subsequent war with the *rakshasas* in support of the gods enhances his fame as a warrior. A curse by an *apsara* which proves to be a boon during the year of incognito in exile, is borne by Arjuna with grace, as only a true hero can. His role as a eunuch only during the period of mandatory anonymity, *ajnatavasa*, enables him to disguise himself and gives him the time needed to prepare for the battle.

On the battlefield of Kurukshetra, Arjuna's fighting skills are the best amongst all warriors. He kills great Kuru stalwarts like Bhishma. Drona, Jayadratha and Karna. Such opponents are the right of only heroic warriors. His ardent rival, Karna, too acknowledges his prowess as a warrior and says.

> There is none else save myself that would on a single car fight with that Pandava who resembles the destroyer himself. I myself will gladly speak of the prowess of Phalguna in the midst of an assembly of Kshatriyas.
>
> (*Karna* . 42. 104)

A hero is a true warrior only in the face of a worthy opponent. Yet, Arjuna lays down his arms and refuses to fight at the beginning of the war. Such

unheroic behaviour of a hero, which also reveals his disgust of a war in which he has to kill his relatives, strikes as totally human. A half-divine hero, who has to aid Fate, or *Niyati*, in fulfilling the destiny of all, is rendered totally human by the poet. Arjuna has to be roused out of his apathy and disgust towards fighting by Krishna's counselling. Krishna's discourse to Arjuna, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, advocates selfless and detached action. Till the beginning of the war, Arjuna saw the Kauravas only as enemies who had usurped their throne and kingdom by deceit. But on the battlefield, he is filled with the realization of their mortality and he looks at them as brothers, uncles and friends.

Arjuna becomes conscious of his humanity, and like Achilles, becomes aware of the common humanity he shares with his enemies. Arjuna becomes aware of the enormity of the war and the truth hits him. "A race being destroyed, the eternal customs of that race are lost; and upon those customs being lost, sin overpowers the whole race". (*Bhishma*.25.53). It is acutely prophetic of the times that would succeed the war. His martial prowess seems powerless to raise him out of this recognition. From a fully martial hero to a more humanized one, Arjuna has to face his moment of illumination. Ruth Cecily Katz analyses this situation thus :

> In the broadest sense, the significance of the blood relationship between Arjuna and his enemies in this war lies in the fact that it forces him to recognize their common humanity.
>
> (1990: 132)

He has to be helped by his constant guide and friend, Krishna, to overcome this sudden abhorrence for war. The *Gita* is one of the greatest moral treatises on the position of man in the world. It teaches the importance of detached action, which may even be abhorrent, to sustain world order. Krishna's teaching to Arjuna is,

> Thy concern is with work only, but not with the fruit (of work). Let not the fruit be thy motive for work; nor let thy inclination be for inaction. Staying in devotion, apply thyself to work, casting off attachment (to it), O Dhananjaya, and being the same in success or unsuccess.
>
> (*Bhishma* . 26. 57)

Heroic action, even wrong action, performed for the sustenance of the world order, is necessary. A *kshatriya's* duty as the preserver of order is stressed by Krishna, and Arjuna is asked to take up his arms; for he would be taking up his weapons against men who were no longer his relatives, but are perpetrators of wrong doings, who are already dead spiritually, as decreed by *Niyati*.

Heroic action is desireless action, performed for the sustenance of order in the world. This conception of action is different from the conception of the action performed by the Homeric heroes who fight for personal ambitions and for getting glory and fame. But the philosophical Indian temperament, as expounded in the *Gita*, preaches detachment from worldly actions and emotions as the prime goal of every man.

The existential crisis faced by Arjuna is the key to heroism. The moment when the hero realizes the humanity in him takes him even higher as a hero than his divine origin. Other epic heroes too have to face this crisis at one time or another, but perhaps Arjuna's instance is unparalleled in the history of epic literature. It is at such moments that the audience truly identifies with the hero, who till then was a remotely terrifying figure performing wondrous feats. Arjuna also faces death and the mortality of humans when his son Abhimanyu dies young. Achilles' lamentations over Patroclus turns him into a ruthless warrior bent on total vengeance, and Arjuna too vows to kill Jayadratha, the killer of his son, within a specified period. His realization of his mistake is another lesson for him. Ruth Katz notes this and another incident, of the killing of Bhurisravas.

> — two humanizing aspects of Arjuna's heroic activity have emerged. First, Arjuna has had to face the fact that his heroic attempt could fail and he might be killed; — Second, Arjuna has had to face an impasse of *dharma* and make and justify a choice that is not necessarily the right one; his heroism has in no way helped him circumvent this very human situation.
>
> (1990: 150)

Such predicaments bring out the human nature of the hero. His rashness in taking the vow is pointed out by Krishna and eventually he has to help Arjuna carry out his vow to success. Krishna also makes Arjuna the main participant in the tricks and ruses they have to employ to kill the Kauravas.

As an active participant, Arjuna's heroism is slightly tainted but such tricks are common in epic literature. The reason being, small wrongs done to achieve common and bigger goods are admissible. Arjuna is the character who changes with time. Yudhishthira, who represents *Sanatanadharma* - the unchanging, eternal truth - is a misfit in the changing epoch. Arjuna embodies *dharma* which adapts with changing times. The *Mahabharata* depicts an age in which *kshatriyadharma* was on the decline, and the age of heroes like the Pandavas was at an end.

The war signifies the end of an epoch*, an old order was to be replaced by the new. Once again, it is Arjuna who provides the link between the two orders by being the progenitor of the new generation which would reconstruct history on new foundations. After the war, Arjuna's heroic powers are on the wane. As part of the *Ashwamedha Yajna* rituals performed by the Pandavas, Arjuna is required to fight with the person who intercepts the sacrificial horse. During such an interception, the invincible hero dies at the hands of his own son Babhruvahana (the son of Arjuna and Chitrangada, the Manipuri princess) and has to be revived by divine help. By the time the great fratricide of the Yadavas and the death of Krishna have taken place, Arjuna is totally powerless, and his Gandiva is no longer useful in protecting the Yadava women. The text of the epic states,

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*'the end of an epoch' is also the sub-title of Irawati Karve's book on the *Mahabharata*, *Yuganta, the end of an Epoch*.

> Beholding that furious battle, the loss of the might of his arm(Gandiva), and the non-appearance of his celestial weapons, Arjuna became greatly ashamed.
>
> (*Mausala* . 7.13)

His pride as a hero is shattered, and he is totally vulnerable by the time he comes to his end. He falls down to an ignominious death from the Himalayas. That Arjuna was a typical epic hero, vain and proud, is revealed in Yudhishthira's answer to Bhima about the cause of Arjuna's fall to death. He observes that Arjuna fell because he was too vain about his looks and too proud of his prowess as a warrior. Such pride would have to end thus eventually.

Arjuna's main source of strength was Krishna, his lifelong guide and companion. He returned Krishna's love with an equally religious devotion which was selfless and without pride. The (hidden) identity of Krishna is hinted at in the epic, and also that both Arjuna and he are the immortal pair of *rishis*, Nara and Narayana. Such a hint imbues their friendship with divine overtones. They were born as men to restore the balance of the world. When seen in this light, the victory by deceit assumes fateful significance. If gods perpetrated the wrong actions to fulfill the ordained destiny, then no doubt the Pandavas were to be exonerated from their dubious position. Arjuna thus is especially the fully divine and fully human hero, acting as the mediator between the divine and the human. That Arjuna was chosen as the chief medium to wrought the change of order makes him `heroic'.

IX

The combination of divinity and humanity is predominant also in the character of Karna, the lifelong adversary of Arjuna. Born to Kunti before her marriage to Pandu, Karna is brought up by a charioteer and his wife, after he was abandoned by Kunti. He is an excellent portrayal of a man inextricably tied to his circumstances. Life is never kind to him, and each decision he takes is a step towards his fateful end. Even though Karna is brought up as a *suta's* son, his talent as a warrior is unmistakable. With the earrings and armour as his emblems, Karna realizes early in life that he is different from the family he has been brought up in. But his real identity eludes him, and when he finds it, he no longer has any use for it. His *kshatriya* talents, confined to low caste upbringing, cannot remain hidden for long, and he too becomes an excellent warrior and archer under the tutelage of Drona. Later he learns the use of *Brahmastra* from Parashurama under the guise of being a *brahmin*, as it can be taught only to a *kshatriya* or a *brahmin*. However, his real status becomes known to Parashurama, and he is cursed by his teacher. The effect of the curse is such that he would forget the knowledge of using the weapon when he desperately needs it. Another curse by a *brahmin*, whose cow he accidentally kills, renders him helpless by making his chariot-wheel stick in the earth at the hour of his death. Both these curses come true when on the battlefield, during his last encounter with Arjuna, he is unable to remember the manner of using his weapons and also his chariot-wheel is stuck in the earth. It is at this moment when the Sun, his father, is about to set, that Karna's life ends. Arjuna's arrow hits its mark, killing Karna.

The stuck chariot-wheel and the futility of his knowledge of weapons at the opportune time, become the metaphors of Karna's life. His *kshatriya* qualities are also stuck, like the chariot-wheel, in the earth of low social status. And like the elusive knowledge in the time of need, his *kshatriya* identity is useless for him when it is finally disclosed. It is the hunger for such an identity which prompts him to support the Kauravas. Duryodhana gives him the identity he seeks by making him the king of Anga state at the Royal Tournament. The public humiliation he has to suffer when he is unable to provide a noble lineage during the duel with Arjuna, sows the seed of a lifelong rivalry between Arjuna and Karna, and which ends only with Karna's death. The rivalry is so intense that even after coming to know that Arjuna is his younger brother, Karna cannot break his vow of killing him. The only solution he can offer to his natural mother Kunti is that he would be the fifth brother to the Pandavas in case of Arjuna's death. This keenness for an identity and the overwhelming gratitude he feels for Duryodhana leads Karna to the lowest depths. His acts are abhorrent, especially in the Kuru assembly after the dice game, but his character comes out like pure gold afterwards. His character proves itself capable of growth and we remember him for the striking qualities he exhibits.

Early in life Karna realizes his own talents and yearns to make a name for himself as a distinguished warrior. This is improbable until Duryodhana crowns him as the king of Anga. This generous act of Duryodhana, without any expectation, makes Karna the strongest supporter of the Kauravas. In his extreme loyalty to Duryodhana, Karna

agrees to all the mean and reprehensible acts of his friend. In fact, some of the tricks are suggested by him, resulting out of his irrational hatred of the Pandavas, especially Arjuna. Karna could have directed Duryodhana to better behaviour because he wielded a good influence over him. But his overeagerness to prove his loyalty to Duryodhana leads him to speak and behave in a manner unbecoming of a *kshatriya* after the dice game. He calls Draupadi a slut, who would now be able to satisfy herself with a hundred husbands, which is totally deplorable. His justification of the Kauravas' act of bringing Draupadi to the Kuru assembly is totally uncharacteristic, unless one takes it as his revenge for Draupadi's refusal to consider him for marriage at her *swayamvara*. His words are,

> This Draupadi, however, hath many husbands. Therefore, certain it is that she is an unchaste woman. To bring her, therefore, into this assembly attired though she be in one piece of cloth - even to uncover her is not at all an act that may cause surprise.
>
> (*Sabha* . 67. 131)

Yet what he says about the Kauravas, who would never stoop so low as to stake their wife, shows his anger towards the eldest Pandava's regrettable act.

But as the war approaches, the finer qualities of Karna's character shine through. His act of parting with his earrings and armour shows his extreme generosity. He is warned by his father, the Sun-god, in his dream about the subterfuge of Indra, but Karna is more indulgent. He would

rather part with his gifts than earn a bad name for himself. He is also indulging his pride as a generous donor here, and all he gets in return is the singular use of a weapon. His conversation with Krishna after the peace talks fail, brings out Karna's inner, spiritual growth. Even the temptation of having Draupadi as a wife is unable to shake him out of his resolve to side with the Kauravas. Krishna's offer of crossing over to the Pandava side is part of his Machiavellian plan, but Karna's refusal points to his realization of truth. By now he has realized that Yudhishthira would be a better king, and he says, "Let Yudhishthira of virtuous soul become king for ever." (*Udyoga* . 141. 272). But it is too late for him to desert Duryodhana who depends on him to win the war. He wants his identity to be kept a secret, for if Yudhishthira comes to know about his real position, he would hand over the kingdom to Karna, who would in turn give it to Duryodhana. Thus, Karna rejects the very cherished identity he has sought all his life. He also realizes the deeper identity of Krishna, but he refuses to sway from the path he has chosen, even if it is the wrong one. He has a vision of the future and his last brave words to Krishna are,

> If, O Krishna, we come out of this great battle that will be so destructive of heroic Kshatriyas, with life, then O thou of mighty arms may we meet here again. Otherwise, O Krishna, we shall certainly meet in heaven. O sinless one, it seemeth to me now that there only it is possible for us to meet.
>
> (*Udyoga*.143. 278)

He has made his choice and he has to stand by it. Such a perceptive vision lifts Karna above the gratuitous position he held earlier. It makes him a willing participant in the destruction of a morally degenerated order.

Karna does not question his suffering or the need to sacrifice him in the war. No questions are asked and facts are calmly accepted, revealing him as a man who has found his poise in life. In true heroic manner he knows that his deeds would be recorded for posterity and he would be the subject of many a heroic lay. It seems compensation enough. His encounter with Kunti also throws light on the understanding he has gleaned from life. Once again, he rejects the noble lineage offered to him and thereby rejects the mother who had once rejected him, by identifying himself as, "I am Karna, son of Radha and Adhiratha." (*Udyoga* . 145. 280).

Before the war, Karna is characterized as a person whom everyone rejects, including Bhishma and Drona, but during the war, he is accepted wholeheartedly, even sought by everyone. The grandsire, Bhishma, who once called him *Adharatha* - a half-warrior welcomes him as Kunti's son after his own fall. Again, Karna is unable to accept the old man's proposal of crossing over. He says he has to help Duryodhana.

> Like Vasudeva's son who is firmly resolved for the sake of the Pandavas, I also, — am prepared to cast away my possessions, my body itself, my children, and my wife, for Duryodhana's sake!
>
> (*Bhishma* . 124. 313)

And he gets ready for his own imminent death, an action he is now willing to perform without any desire or emotion. He sticks to the choice he made early in life, and pays his debt of friendship with his own death. Even when he is given a second chance to fulfill his vow of killing Arjuna by the *Naga* spirit, Karna refuses to aim again at Arjuna, "Karna, O snake, never desires to have victory in battle to-day by relying on another's might. Even if I have to slay a hundred Arjunas, I will not, O snake, still shoot the same shaft twice." (*Karna* . 90. 247).

The tragedy of Karna is a vicious planning of *Niyati* and circumstances, but he comes through as a good soldier, a fair fighter and an enlightened person, by the time he meets his death. His life as a *suta-putra*, son of the low born, had been hesitantly but devotedly accepted by him. But death is unflinchingly chosen by him as a *suta-putra* rather than as a *Kaunteya* - the son of Kunti.

X

History has never been kind to the friend of Karna, the eldest Kaurava, Duryodhana. He is portrayed by Vyasa as the epitome of villainy, guided by the lame and scheming Shakuni, befriended by the misguided Karna and encouraged by an ambitious father, Dhritrashtra. The large-hearted brilliance of this man is covered under the hotheadedness and frustration he shows time and again. Nurturing the secret ambition of becoming the king, Dhritrashtra is unable to curb his son's

violent tendencies, and he actually inflames his son's whims and fancies. Another influence on Duryodhana is Shakuni, his uncle, Gandhari's brother, who is more interested in destroying the Kaurava capital by his scheming, than ruling over his own country. Though severely at fault on three serious offenses; trying to kill the sleeping Bhima by poisoning him first, as an adolescent, attempting to murder the Pandavas at the burning of the lac house and cheating the Pandavas at the dice-game by deceit: Duryodhana remains a young, angry boy at heart. The intrigues are planned by Shakuni and implemented by Duryodhana; this points to his lack of being a real villain. His own schemes are bizarre and only reveal his immaturity. He depends on his uncle for mental intrigues and, on Karna for physical support.

Ill-omens abound at Duryodhana's birth and he is prophesied as the harbinger of the destruction of the Kuru family. Throughout his growing years he considers the Pandavas as usurpers of his own position as a king, forgetting that the throne originally belonged to Pandu and then later to Yudhishthira, as the eldest Kuru prince . His irrational demands are supported by his blind, overambitious, but weak father. His self-centred attitude refuses to accept the real situation. (To use Freudian analysis, his 'ego' never matures enough to control his desire). No one points out the reality - that through common consensus Yudhishthira has a prerogative to be the king. His narcissistic desires become so dominant that Duryodhana does not develop the conscience of a normal grown- up man. He comes out as a man without conscience and scruples. The call of duty is also not able to bring Duryodhana out of his self-absorption, and hence

he becomes extremely irrational, to the extent of being evil, especially in the case of the Pandavas. This casts him into an 'unheroic' mould in so far as ethical and moral duties are concerned. He is not accepted as a king by society since the throne rightfully belongs to Yudhishthira, even though he has other qualities which only enhance his character. Umashankar Joshi highlights the ambiguity of Duryodhana's character, "If the poet had painted Duryodhana as exclusively villainous, it would have been a rigidly mechanistic narrative." (1990: 288).

Though Duryodhana is the overgrown young boy throughout the poem, his character has finer nuances even as a boy. It is this quality of being able to recognize good talent, combined with the wish of defeating the Pandavas, which makes him crown Karna as a king, and ask only for friendship in return. He has some innate good qualities which binds other people to him with undying loyalty. Moreover, whatever hostilities he harboured for the Pandavas, they do not interfere in his position as a king. Even though he is the king in the normal course, his blind father still holds the position of the final authority, as does Bhishma with the influence he wields. His irrationality in respect of his kingly ambitions overshadows his thinking. His mother's advice during Krishna's peace mission goes unheeded, but his devotion to her comes through when he seeks her blessing every single day of the war, even though she refuses to say a word beyond the perfunctionary, "Let victory be where righteousness is".

As the war progresses, and Duryodhana loses some of his best men, he realizes the gravity of his stubbornness. The consequences of his action frightens him, and in one weak moment he even thinks of

peace. He had wanted kingdom and wealth, but not at the cost of his friends. However, he realizes the futility of talking or even thinking about peace. The Pandavas would never agree to it now, and even he had to pay the debt of taking the life of his friends and relatives by giving up his own. He resolves to fight,

> Remembering with gratitude the feats of those heroes that have died for me, I desire to pay off the debt I owe them, instead of fixing my heart upon kingdom.
>
> (*Salya* . 5. 14)

By now he realizes that he has been almost defeated, the kingdom is lost, but he refuses to give up, because now all he can save is his name as a warrior.

Duryodhana cannot cling to life, though in a brief spell of weakness he does escape to a hide-out in a lake, where he is ultimately discovered. During the peace mission of Krishna, Duryodhana had ridiculed Krishna's attempts to escape by assuming a gigantic body, but he was not unaware of Krishna's divine identity. Yet he asserts that, "If the divine son of Devaki united in friendship with Arjuna, were to slay all mankind, I cannot, even then, resign myself to Kesava." (*Udyoga* . 69. 150). He prefers to make his own choices and emphasize his own autonomous existence as man. He refuses to concede that he regrets his choice. It is a choice he had willingly made, and there is no room for regrets. He loses the war, but there is no remorse.

Despite the fact that none of the Kauravas had any divine guidance or help to win the war, the fight they put up is admirable. None of them, especially Duryodhana, resort to any unfair means on the battlefield. He is fairly sure of his prowess as a warrior and relies only on it to fight it out. He declares with pride to Ashwatthama,

> I am not ignorant of the glory of Krishna of immeasurable energy. He hath not caused me to fall off from the proper observance of Kshatriya duties. I have obtained him.
>
> (*Salya*. 65.178)

In an age when skills as a warrior were of prime importance in determining the heroism of an individual, Duryodhana is definitely a hero. But for Vyasa, not a single character is totally evil or good, there are always shades of grey. Duryodhana accuses Krishna of resorting to deceit in the war, and Krishna points out that the wrongs of the Kauravas brought on the wrongs in the battlefield. He talks about his own killing, as that death which one gives to a sleeping person, and unconsciously he reveals his guilt of trying to murder the sleeping Bhima. He is totally without any self-deception, he accepts his own responsibility in creating the catastrophe. Though this man is capable of self-growth and he tries to go beyond his selfish ends, at least for his friends, he has no regrets about his path of action even on his deathbed. He is proud of his independence from God or Krishna, and is happy that he had no divine help during the war.

The Heavens shower flowers and blessings upon Duryodhana , contrary to what had been predicted at his birth. Buddhadeb Bose points out, "By dying in battle he attains heaven, and by any literal interpretation of the heroic ideal we are bound to regard him as a heroic warrior"(1986: 142). Vyasa makes Duryodhana's death a lesson in heroism, a heroism which does not bow down under anyone or anything. Yet such 'aheroic' actions do not necessarily become right behaviour by making willful choices. Hinduism preaches fulfilling *dharma* by doing *karma* as god wants it. *Karma* should be accepted in all its facets - *karma* also means destiny, so one should accept one's destiny and should not swerve from the path of *dharma* as charted out by ancients. Hence, a character which actively decides to challenge and change the course of its destiny by conscious actions, is considered to have swerved from the path of its *dharma*. Passive acceptance of *karma* and *dharma* for the good of society is an important component of one school of ancient Indian philosophy. Inaction or passivity in regard to personal ambitions is applauded. Hence, Duryodhana's act of assertion of his personal desires and choices is condemned; for, individual and personal dictates have no place in the divine design. *Niyati* cannot be overcome, and those who try to do so are the perpetrators of *Adharma*. Duryodhana's life and death are a lesson in defiance of *Niyati*. While the death of such men is applauded, their life is not to be emulated.

XI

Another study of a character embroiled in Fate, Destiny and Circumstance is Bhishma, the grand old man of the Kuru dynasty, and the original heir to the throne of Hastinapur. Born to divine and human parents, the towering personality of Bhishma gains unimaginable magnitude during the scope of the epic. As is common with epic tradition, he is a celestial being trapped in human form, tied to live his human destiny. He is the eighth *Vasu*, and the eighth child of the river goddess Ganga and King Shantanu of Hastinapur. Saved by his earthly father from drowning, Devavrata, as he is earlier called, is trapped to live a human life, full of responsibility but with little authority. He is trained to be the greatest warrior of the age, and he becomes the unmatched child of his age too, when he renounces his natural right to be the king of Hastinapur and remains a celibate bachelor all his life. His terrible vow earned him the name 'Bhishma', and his thunderous words bring forth blessings from heavens when he says,

> Ye kings, I have already relinquished my right to the throne, I shall now settle the matter of my children. O fisherman, from this day I adopt the vow of Brahmacharya. If I die sonless, I shall yet attain to regions of perennial bliss in heaven !
>
> (*Adi* . 100. 217-218)

He takes up this terrible vow to enable his father to marry the fishergirl.

Satyavati. But fate does not relieve him from a moral responsibility towards the throne, and he is destined to rule by proxy for two generations.

The result of his unstinting loyalty to the throne is the catastrophic war between the cousins, and he is tied to the throne he had once willingly relinquished. His role as the protector of the throne and kingdom forces him to be on the side of the Kauravas. Time and again, his devotion to the throne is taken for granted as the duty of a person who is sustained by the royal family, and Dhritrashtra. Duryodhana and even Gandhari do not hesitate to remind him of that.

Bhishma had been offered a chance to take up his right to the throne by none other than Satyavati herself, when both her sons die heirless. She asks him to be the king and beget sons through his brother's widows. But his refusal is totally in accordance with the integrity he shows throughout his life. He reminds Satyavati.

> Thou knowest also all that transpired in connection with thy dower. O Satyavati, I repeat the pledge I once gave, *viz*., I would renounce three worlds, the empire of heaven, anything that may be greater than that, but truth I would never renounce.
>
> (*Adi*. 103. 223)

He has to shoulder the responsibility of safeguarding the kingdom till the two young princes are of age. Later even Pandu dies, and he has to help the blind Dhritrashtra in ruling the kingdom. Thus, Bhishma is

unable to come out of the circle of responsibility he has drawn round himself. However, with the return of the Pandavas to Hastinapur he is faced with a struggle within the royal family. He does not really know the extent of Duryodhana's hatred when as a boy he tried to harm Bhima, and later burn the Pandavas in the lac house. He comes to know about the intrigue much later, and when the Pandavas return with Draupadi as their wife. Bhishma divides the kingdom with a heavy heart, and the land of Khandavaprastha is given to the Pandavas.

The *Rajasuya Yajna* is the site to which the beginnings of the war can be unmistakably traced . The affluence and wealth of the Pandavas incite Duryodhana to challenge them to a game of dice. Shakuni's tricks win the game and the kingdom for Duryodhana along with Draupadi as a slave. The humiliation of Draupadi is as much because of the Kauravas as also because of Yudhishthira. His irresponsible action of staking his own wife as if she was an 'object' rather than an individual, raises many moral questions. Not even Bhishma is able to answer them, and realizing the irresponsible action of Yudhishthira, he passes on the responsibility of answering them to the eldest Pandava, by saying.

> O blessed one, morality is subtle. I therefore am unable to duly decide this point that thou hast put. —— Sakuni hath not his equal among men at dice-play. The son of Kunti still voluntarily staked with him. The illustrious Yudhishthira doth not himself regard that Sakuni hath played with him deceitfully. Therefore, I can not decide this point.
>
> (*Sabha* . 68. 129)

The dice game decides the outcome of the exile, which is war. Later the peace talks initiated by Krishna too prove futile, and during this mission, Bhishma regrets his abdication of the throne. He is grieved at Duryodhana's stubbornness and recalls his own vow, which he had stuck to, even after Satyavati's implorations. He realizes that he could give up his birthright because it was his to give away, but he cannot give up his responsibility to the throne because it was his social responsibility as a Kuru prince.

Bhishma's support is taken for granted by Duryodhana during the preparations for the war, but Bhishma volunteers to stay away from the position of the supreme commander. He knows that Duryodhana, given his tantrums and meanness, would not understand his resolve of not slaying a single Pandava during the battle. But on being made the commander he promises to rout the Pandava armies. When not a single Pandava is slain, Bhishma is insulted by both Karna and Duryodhana about favouring the enemy. Realizing that he would neither be able to kill the Pandavas nor make Duryodhana see the truth, Bhishma hopes, finally, to bring peace through his own death. He repeatedly tells the Kuru prince that he would always strive for their victory. On the tenth day of the war, he promises Duryodhana,

> O thou of great might, today I will achieve even a great feat. Today I will either sleep myself being slain, or, I will slay the Pandavas. O tiger among men, I will today free myself from the debt I owe thee, - the debt, O king, arising out of the food, thou gavest me, - by casting away my life at the head of thy army.
>
> (*Bhishma* . 109. 277)

And true to his word he lays down his life. He feels liberated from his bondage to Duryodhana after his fall.

Pleased with his son ' s devotion, Bhishma's father had granted him the wish of dying at will. Bhishma discloses the way in which he could be overcome; by putting forward a woman-like person, Shikhandi, in the front so that he would not raise arms against such a revolting human being. The Pandavas manage to overpower him in this manner, but Vyasa grants Bhishma a heroic death by not specifying whose arrows really strike the grandsire, because Arjuna is the real warrior who fights hiding behind Shikhandi.

The old man's wish is not granted, for Duryodhana refuses to stop the battle, and he makes his last attempt by asking Karna to cross over to the Pandava side . Yet he understands Karna' s refusal, because both of them are helpless due to their circumstances. Krishna Chaitanya writes about Bhishma 's entrapment in his circumstance.

> — the perspective a man chooses in his integrity may lead him to a situation which may seem intransigent, obstructive, from the perspective of another, though the ultimate ends of both may be the same.
>
> (1993: 90)

He calls Karna, the son of Kunti, and their acceptance of each other is a moving scene. His fall brings a dying epoch to its end, the epoch of knights and heroes, to which heroes like Bhishma belonged. Bhishma's tragic fate

is unrelenting, and at every step he is tried by Destiny. No one eventually remembers the great sacrifice made by him, by relinquishing his right, but expect him to pay his dues for getting his sustenance from the royal family. Till the end, the grand old man of the epic keeps on repaying the debt he owes to his dynasty, for having been born as a Kuru descendent.

XII

Bhishma's statesmanship is equaled only by one master strategist, that is Krishna. Krishna is a highly Odyssean character in the epic, and his cunning is the source of the Pandavas' victory. Similar to the Homeric character, Krishna's character too has an amalgamation of folk-lore and legend. As is the case with such depictions, the character acquires mythic proportions, with even the simplest human deed magnified to a divine level. Krishna has now become a cult figure, raised to the level of a god. The theogony of the *Mahabharata* distinguishes two divine levels; one is that of the older gods who still retain their powers, and the other is that of God incarnate. Mythologically, Krishna is the eighth *avatara* or incarnation of Vishnu, born on earth for the destruction of evil. This invests Krishna with divine and mysterious powers, not on par with God, but within the limits of his worldly existence of god incarnated as man. The *deus ex machina* in this epic, also an important epic convention, is not through a direct intervention of divine but through the medium of an incarnation. Krishna's incarnated form is identified by the sage Narada at the *Rajasuya* ceremony.

> He knew that that creator himself of every object one, that exalted of all gods-Narayana —— that slayer of all the enemies of the gods, that subjugator of all hostile towns, in order to fulfil his own promise, had been born in the Kshatriya order. —— had taken his birth in the race of Yadus.
>
> (*Sabha* . 35. 74)

More than a divinely invested person, the leadership qualities of Krishna are the highlight of the epic. He uses his excellent leadership qualities, first to maintain the order of a world on the brink of destruction and later to bring about a new order of life through a vast annihilation. The study of Krishna's character on the human plane reveals his sharp intelligence which is ready for any eventuality. His human nature is emphasized in the epic, and critics too agree on this to a large extent. Buddhadeb Bose says,

> Krishna blends in a simple sense the characteristics of the nature of humanity with those of an individual human being.
>
> (1986: 81)

The *Mahabharata* does not make any mention of Krishna's glorified childhood in Gokul and Mathura. His connection with the Pandavas is mentioned only after the *swayamvara* of Draupadi, when he goes to the hide-out of the Pandavas to pay respects to his aunt, Kunti. He definitely is not the central figure of the epic, for the epic purports to tell the story

of the Bharata dynasty. Krishna belongs to the Yadava Dynasty, and is remotely connected with the Kuru Dynasty, with a common ancestor, Yayati. The *Mahabharata* is more concerned with the character of Krishna as a fully evolved statesman. Krishna shows an amazing knowledge of the working of the human mind and his philosophy is based on this knowledge. He lives a life of integrity, fighting for the rights of man. Yet he is not above using cunning tricks to achieve his ends. Like Odysseus, he represents a blend of the older generation of heroes who lived by a certain code of conduct, and the future generation of men who have to resort to the use of mental powers to survive in a world of changing values. He is an example of a highly developed individual - mentally, spiritually and physically - and points out the heights a man can, and should, reach. Yet all his actions are without any emotional investment. He fights for rights without any interest in power, thus exemplifying his own teaching in the *Gita*. He helps others achieve position of power, but himself declines to assume power himself. Krishna's detached, objective behaviour reveals his control of ordinary human emotions.

Krishna acts as the guide and helper of the Pandavas from the time of Draupadi's *swayamvara*, when he advises the enraged *kshatriyas* to refrain from fighting, because it is within the code of *dharma* for *brahmins* to take part in the *swayamvara*. Later he helps the Pandavas transform the barren land of Khandavaprastha into the enchanting Indraprastha by enlisting the aid of Maya, an *Asura* architect. The *Rajasuya Yajna* is also performed with Krishna's guidance, when he advises the Pandavas to conquer Jarasandha's kingdom first. He actively

helps Bhima in the killing of Jarasandha by pointing out the latter's weak spots. After his killing of Shishupala at the *Rajasuya*, Krishna maintains a low profile. He is busy warding off Shalva from his own country, when the Pandavas get enticed to the game of dice. Draupadi's disrobing and Krishna's help are ambiguously described by Vyasa. but one can attribute Krishna's role in saving Draupadi to his mythical dimension. Again, during the exile of the Pandavas, Krishna plays a limited role, of consoling Draupadi and reprimanding the Pandavas. He comes into the picture again at the time of Abhimanyu's wedding, when he advises Yudhishthira to send a suitable envoy with a peace treaty to the Kauravas.

Krishna's own peace mission reveals his persuasive powers as an orator, as he employs all the tactics of political *niti - sama, dama, danda* and *bheda* - to persuade the Kauravas. Being a well-wisher of the Pandavas, he would like to avoid war, but not unconditionally. He tells Yudhishthira,

> I will go to the court of the Kurus for the sake of both of you. If without sacrificing your interests I can obtain peace, O king, an act of great religious merit will be mine, productive of great fruits.
>
> (*Udyoga* . 72. 157)

There is again, a reference to Krishna's assuming the *Virataswaroop* to escape seizure at the Kaurava court. After he realizes that a war is imminent. Krishna talks to Karna about his real identity and suggests that he cross over to the Pandava side. Karna's refusal highlights his own

fated to be. Krishna's last aid to the Pandavas is by saving their future generation in Uttara's womb. Ashwatthama's use of *Narayanastra* destroys the foetus in her womb, but Krishna revives it. It is interesting to note here that instead of using some divine power at will, Krishna prays for the revival of the unborn babe by depending on his adherence to truth, his life of integrity, to bring about a revoking of the situation. His words are interesting to note,

> O Uttara, I never utter an untruth. My words will prove true. I shall revive this child in the presence of all creatures. Never before have I uttered an untruth even in jest. Never have I turned back from battle. (By the merit of those acts) let this child revive. — - As truth and righteousness are always established in me. let this dead child of Abhimanyu revive (by the merit of these)!
>
> (*Aswamedha* . 69. 121)

As an incarnation, Krishna should have had access to divine powers. but in all instances where his mythical role becomes larger than his human one, Vyasa is ambivalent in describing things, letting things take on an ambiguous tone. To the sage Uttanka's rebuke of not preventing the war. Krishna's words are significant. He says, "Born now in the order of humanity, I must act as a human being." (*Aswamedha.*54.97). Heinrich Zimmer observes prudently,

> It behooves a superhuman savior. when he has been born of an

> earthy mother, to conform to the environment he has chosen to inhabit. To all appearances, he is as much enmeshed in Maya as everybody else.
>
> (1990: 82)

Krishna's helplessness at the Yadava fratricide is indicative of humanly limited control of events ordained by Fate. He passes out of the world not on the battlefield, but at the hands of a hunter, Jara, who accidentally kills him. Krishna's exit from the narrative is as unobtrusive as his entry. Throughout the narrative, Krishna's actions do not have any personal motive. He seems to be helping his friends when they need him, without any ulterior motive or expectation. In this sense, Krishna practises what he preaches in the *Gita*. His famous dialogue with Arjuna, at the beginning of the war, is a philosophy he has evolved from his own personal experiences and comprehension of the ways of the world. Krishna's hidden identity as an *avatara* of Vishnu is constantly hinted at in the poem, but is never explicitly stated. His actions are within the boundaries of human power and fallibility. He remains an ambiguous figure till the end, and his divinity and humanity are subjects of speculation till date. His unexpectedly unheroic end though, seems to be in tune with his life of public welfare. Whereas the other characters of the epic are towering personalities with their heroic ideals and behaviour, the mastermind behind the vicissitudes during the significant epoch is as elusive as before. Krishna's character cannot be slotted in a single identity and this reveals his protean character which defies precise description.

XIII

There is one character in the *Mahabharata* who stands out for his inaction, against all the other characters who are known by their actions. Even though Yudhishthira is supposed to be the main protagonist in the epic; it is for him that all the characters act; he is, most of the time, only a figure-head. Reminiscent of Agamemnon in *Iliad*, who too is only a figure-head, Yushishthira's character pales in front of the decisive actions of his brothers. He remains the most indecisive character in the poem, and his ambivalence seems to stem from his bewilderment at the changing fortunes of his life and surroundings. Yet he is not unhappy; his stoic acceptance of the changed states of his life is a lesson in the teachings of the *Gita*; he is a *sthitaprajna* - one who feels detached from his actions. His prowess in the battlefield is limited, and we rarely see him acting like a warrior. In fact, he is an exact opposite of a *vira*, a hero.

Whereas, Bhima and Arjuna have only a few moments of weakness, arising out of the desire for peace, Yudhishthira consistently voices his strong inclination towards peace at any cost, as seen in his demand for only five villages in lieu of his large kingdom. Yudhishthira's verbosity in matters of philosophical discussions is striking against Arjuna's taciturnity. Arjuna is a man of few words and believes in action, while Yudhisthira would rather solve matters by philosophical speech than by action. Such an attitude in an heroic epic seems out of place, but he is the hero for those who consider the *Mahabharata* as a didactic discourse. He cannot be accepted as a hero in the traditional, heroic sense. He represents

the religious milieu of his time, which was undergoing change, and seems out of place in the changing environment. The only person who seems to be happy during the forest exile is Yudhishthira. Arjuna is busy gaining weapons as prepatory for the war, Bhima and Draupadi nurture their simmering anger, and the twins are as usual, glossed over. Yudhishthira spends his time in discussions with various *rishis* who visit them, to enhance his own knowledge of the intricacies of life.

Yudhishthira is the son of Dharma, more a concept than a personification. Dharma is equated, in the epic, with both 'death' and 'the right way of living'. It is no wonder that he is keen on solving the metaphysical problems of life. Even Bhishma leaves the questions of the morality of staking one's wife to Yudhishthira to answer. And once again brothers and wife suffer because of his inaction. On the one hand, we have Menelaus in the *Iliad* who wages a ten-year war to rescue his wife, and on the other, we have Yudhishthira who willingly allows himself to stake his wife without attempting to rescue her. If he, who is hailed as a 'Dharmaraja' - who knows *dharma* the best - is unable to answer the questions put forward by Draupadi, then his identity as a person who does not swerve from his *dharma* becomes uncertain.

From modern perspective, the staking of Draupadi seems an act of egoism of a person who believes that his family members and his wife are his possessions. He even admits to his greed, of acquiring the Kauravas' wealth and kingdom by playing the dice game, to Bhima and Draupadi in the forest. He accepts that,

> From my folly alone hath this calamity come against you. I sought to cast the dice desiring to snatch from Dhritrashtra's son his kingdom with the sovereignty.
>
> (*Vana* . 34. 75)

His folly brings to light the human chink in his haloed, saintly armour. His ambiguous answer to Drona about Ashwatthama's death, is also part of his desire to win the war at any cost, as is his inquiry about Bhishma's death to the grandsire himself. It is surprising that a man who was insistent on maintaining peace at any cost, is transformed into a person who wants to win the war. Thus, though he is supposed to represent *sanatanadharma* - eternal *dharma* - his behaviour on the battlefield is totally in keeping with the heroic code. He does not win many fights himself, but does participate actively to bring about the fall of many Kuru stalwarts. The third example of Yudhishthira's changed character is his intrigue with his uncle, Shalya, to demoralize Karna while Shalya is driving Karna's chariot on the battlefield.

Yudhishthira, who earlier did not even attempt to save his wife from humiliation, is willing to go to any lengths to retreive his lost kingdom. His prudence is admirable, for when Bhima is raging at him during their exile, he points out that without any preparation they cannot wage a war. Also, they have to gather their own forces to be able to face not only the Kauravas and their allies, but also those kings, whose kingdoms were annexed by them during the *Rajasuya Yajna*, and who would join the Kauravas against them. He tells Bhima,

--- whatever is begun with deliberation, with well-directed prowess, with all appliances, and much previous thought, is seen to succeed. --- Those kings and chiefs of the earth also who have been injured by us, have all adopted the side of the Kauravas, and are bound by ties of affection to them.

(*Vana* . 36. 79)

He agrees to send Arjuna to do penance and gain celestial weapons. Though he desperately desires for peace, Yudhishthira comes out as a cautious, practical man, fully prepared for the eventuality of war. And true to his *kshatriya* nature, he refuses Krishna's help of waging a war against the Kauravas on the Pandavas' behalf. His conduct during the war is that of a warrior, and his urge to regain his kingdom is his *kshatriyadharma*.

But once again, after the war, Yudhishthira goes back to his original self, and is grief-stricken at the catastrophe. He blames himself for the war and feels pity for his misguided cousins. His conscientious nature prompts him to ask Gandhari to curse him. He does not want to be exonerated. He addresses Gandhari thus,

Here is Yudhishthira, O goddess, that cruel slayer of thy sons ! I deserve thy curses, for I am the cause of this universal destruction. Oh, curse me ! I have no longer any need for life, for kingdom, for wealth! Having caused such friends to be slain, I have proved myself to be a great fool and a hater of friends.

(*Stree* . 15. 22)

In fact, he has to be persuaded to accept the kingship, and gains relative peace of mind only after Bhishma discourses him on the duties and aims of life. Buddhadeb Bose applauds Yudhishthira as the real hero of the epic because of the unique gift he leaves for posterity,

> That he should assume responsibility for the misdeeds of others and thus become one with persons like Duryodhana and Sakuni, that he should become the spokesman of all the evil characters and seek with bent head the forgiveness of Gandhari and of the world, is his gift to posterity.
>
> (1986: 132)

It is only during and immediately after the war, when Yudhishthira acts and behaves like any other ordinary person, that he becomes human. Otherwise his detached, aloof behaviour renders him incomprehensible to us. But he is idealized as the hero of the epic by Hindus, precisely because of his dispassionate nature. Yudhishthira is able to evolve into a better human being. Krishna Chaitanya writes about him,

> — in his encounter with his predicament, — the self capable of deeper reflection tried to control the self caught in the peripheral involvements, transient gratifications.
>
> (1993: 143)

He becomes the embodiment of an exemplary life. Yudhishthira's capacity

for reflection makes him different. He realizes that the kingdom is not his property, but his responsibility. This truth enables him to rule the land after the war as a duty of the *kshatriya* that he was.

The Pandavas who are hailed as the greatest warriors face insignificant deaths, unlike their enemies' heroic deaths on the battlefield. Yudhishthira's understanding of his own follies, as well as those of his wife and brothers, makes him a man in control of himself. He remains the same *dharma*-abiding person till the end, when he refuses to go with Indra unless the dog, who had accompanied him till the end of his journey, is also allowed to go with him. And his feeling for compassion and brotherhood for all gains him an entry to heaven in his earthly body. When he reaches *Swarga* he finds the Kauravas present there, but his brothers are missing. Once again he wishes to be with his brothers in *Narka* rather than remain alone in *Swarga*. And thus, he gets an insight into the knowledge of *swarga* and *narka*, he comes to have an in-depth knowledge of these two human conditions. Ruth Katz remarks that "--- the major point made by the ascent-to-heaven events is that the oppositions of human existence are illusory." (1990: 264). All persons, good or bad, go to *swarga* or *narka*, since ultimately all are the embodiments of God Himself. He is instructed by Indra about such truths, and Yudhishthira realizes the ways of God. The mysteries of life and death, of all beings and things as emanations of God, are accessible to Yudhishthira. It is no wonder that he is looked upon as the hero of the epic.

Yudhishthira's character is not in the mould of traditional heroism. His physical abilities are limited, but his mental growth is unlimited. The

vast expanse of life lived by the Pandavas generates maximum growth only in Yudhishthira. The rest remain the same, unchanging in their actions and behaviour. Arjuna is able to comprehend the deeper meanings of life to a certain extent after the *Gita*. But, Yudhishthira, with his adaptability to situations and feeling for common humankind, emerges as the ideal of Hindu life. He is described as embodying *sanatanadharma*. Ruth Katz describes him thus.

> — Yudhishthira, although he is in many ways the least traditionally heroic of the Pandavas, is also the one who manages to remain the most aloof and idealized, who succumbs the least to his human failings; this is because he embodies *sanatanadharma*.
>
> (1990: 206)

Yudhishthira is the one who grows in the philosophical understanding of Reality, and grows with the times in the epic. He learns to accept his human limitations and in this sense he does change. But, in the larger scheme of the epic narration he is also the one who remains unchanged. This paradox underlies the character of Yudhishthira, the most ambiguously 'heroic' character.

XIV

In an epic dominated by male characters, Vyasa does not forget to flesh out his female protagonists through inferences. His female protagonists are able companions to the manly, warrior heroes. Maeve Hughes

writes about these women,

> Gandhari, Kunti, Draupadi all merit the little *viranari* - warrior women. They would tolerate nothing less than valour and heroism on the part of their husbands. They were women, too, with a great sense of dignity and self-respect and when their honour was touched they were implacable in their demand for justice, nay, insatiable in their thirst for revenge. Life-bearers, life-nurturers, they can and do demand human sacrifice on the field of battle in atonement for the attempt to desecrate womanhood.
>
> (1985: 143)

The two shadowy figures of the Kuru queen mothers are excellent portrayals of the women of *Aryavrata*. Both Kunti, the Yadava princess who marries Pandu and Gandhari, the Gandhar princess married to Dhritrashtra, reveal an inner strength and beauty. Both are the progenitors of valiant sons who reflect the heroism of their mothers rather than of their fathers. Dhritrashtra, as the morally weak and blind king, does not wield any concrete influence over his sons. His self-deception till the end discloses his incapacity for inner growth. It is Gandhari's silent image which speaks volumes about her attitude to the whole situation. Her belief in righteousness does not allow her to bless even her son with a hope for his personal victory. She is the only voice of reason amongst the unruly Kauravas, bent on self-destruction. Typically, her voice is not heard when it is inconvenient to do so. Her integrity stands out in sharp contrast to

the moral ineptitude of the weak Dhritrashtra. But being the *ardhangini* of a weak king, and the mother of an unscrupulous son, Gandhari too cannot escape the whirlpool of time and circumstances.

When Bhishma chooses Gandhari to be the wife of his blind nephew Dhritrashtra, he unwittingly tramples upon a young girl's life. She blindfolds herself when she comes to know, on reaching Hastinapur, that her husband is blind. Gandhari was kept in the dark about her husband's blindness till the last minute. Though, in keeping with epic lore, her act is praised as that of a *sati* - a pure woman who is faithful to her husband - who would not like to have the benefit of vision when her husband is blind. Is it her devotion or is it her anger at Fate ? The poem is ambivalent on this point. Her voluntary blindness opens the doors of her inner vision and she can foresee the doom of her own family.

Gandhari's portrayal, however, is not free of human weaknesses. As a young bride, she too has her moments of frustration when Kunti gives birth to Yudhishthira before she herself could produce an heir. In an act of frustration Gandhari beats her stomach until the unborn foetus comes out in the form of a lump of flesh. This is later divided into a hundred pieces that become the hundred Kauravas. Her jealousy of Kunti getting the advantage of having the first born, who would be the crown prince, is hinted at in the narrative. Gandhari admits to the sage Vyasa,

> Having heard that Kunti had brought forth a son like unto *Surya* in splendour, I struck in grief at my womb. Thou hadst, O Rishi, granted me the boon that I should have a hundred sons, but here is

only a ball of flesh for those hundred sons.

(*Adi* . 115. 241)

There is a suggestion in the poem, that by wishing for a son to be born to her before Kunti, Gandhari had hoped to secure the right of succession denied to Dhritrashtra. She is very much aware of the advantages of wealth and position. Yet she never identifies herself with the wrongs of her husband and sons. All she is able to do is to pray for forgiveness and repeatedly warn them of the consequences. She tells Dhritrashtra. "Know that the time hath come for the destruction of race through him." (i.e. Duryodhana) (*Sabha* . 74. 144).

Gandhari knows that her own brother Shakuni is the trouble-maker. and if so, the question arises. why does she not ask him to go back to his own country ? Her silence on this subject is ambiguous. However, later we find that she has no pity for Shakuni when he dies in the battle. It is during her great lament after the war, that Gandhari comes out as a remarkable woman. Vyasa grants her a moment of vision, to see her sons for the first and the only time, dead on the battlefield. She mourns them as a mother would. but she also mourns collectively for all those who died due to their own fault or as victims of Fate. This all-enveloping lamentation makes her console Draupadi, who is also weeping for her loved ones, as well as for the humiliation she suffered in the past. Being human and a mother at that. Gandhari's anger at Krishna is justified. She tells him that he could have avoided the catastrophe, and hence she finds him guilty. Krishna reminds her of his attempts to bring about peace and also points out that the wrong

actions of her sons had brought their destruction. Yet she cannot help cursing him. Krishna accepts the curse with a smile and promises that he would ensure that it came true.

Gandhari's regret is that not a single son of hers was spared by Bhima to support her in old age. But on being reminded by Vyasa of her own belief in victory being where righteousness is, she concedes that even the Pandavas are her own sons. The Gandhar princess, who is well-known for willfully accepting the dark world of her husband as her own fate, remains a looming tragic figure. She could avoid watching the destruction of her own family by blindfolding herself, but she is rendered helpless in the face of unrelenting *Niyati*, which does not distinguish between the just or the unjust. Every human being has to die, though death comes earlier for the unjust. But by virtue of her innate goodness and integrity, Gandhari realizes that her sons sealed their own fate when they opted for war, and she exonerates Krishna by saying,

> My sons endued with great activity were slain even then, O Krishna, when thou returnedst unsuccessfully to Upalavya.
>
> (*Stree* . 25. 39)

XV

The Pandavas' memory of their own father is that of a shadowy figure in the past. Their strength and the force behind their unity is their mother, Kunti. Daughter of Kuntibhoja by adoption, Pritha, as she was earlier known, is a woman of high ideals and integrity. Following the ideal

of Aryan womanhood, Kunti had a dynastic obligation which overshadows her role as a wife and mother. Her description as a practical woman who took her duties as a *kshatriya* wife seriously reveals the difference between Madri and her. Madri becomes the cause of Pandu's death and it is left to Kunti to bring up the five sons after their death. It is significant that Madri requests Kunti to refrain from committing *sati* because she is confident that Kunti would be able to bring up her twins as her own sons, without any discrimination. Madri implores Kunti,

> O revered one, if I survive thee, it is certain I shall not be able to rear thy children as if they were mine. Will not sin touch me on that account ? But, thou, O Kunti, shalt be able to bring my sons up as if they were thine.
>
> (*Adi*. 125. 263)

Her practical nature had earlier caused her to restrain Pandu from overusing the spell of begetting sons given to her by a *rishi*. The Pandavas are actually the sons of only Kunti, but being born after her marriage to Pandu, they are considered his sons according to the prevailing custom. Karna, born to Kunti before her marriage to Pandu, could not be considered as a Pandava, and hence would have no share in the kingship even though he is the eldest son. Kunti is acutely conscious of this fact when she requests Karna to cross over to the Pandavas' side. But for the sake of her sons she takes this calculated move, unaware of the integrity of her first born who would only hand over the kingdom to Duryodhana out of loyalty. Kunti

only remembers Karna as a small infant, and the grown-up man with his own convictions and ideas is a stranger to her. S. L. Bhyrappa stresses the way Kunti admirably copes with her peculiar situations, and states that "Kunti as a character grows more powerfully than her daughter-in-law." (1990: 261).

Despite her extremely practical nature, Kunti is not incapable of love and affection, as can be seen in her relationship with Sahadeva and Draupadi. Sahadeva is her favourite, and she asks Draupadi to take special care of him during their exile. Similarly, Kunti tells her sons to take special of Draupadi when they get ready to go into exile in the forest. The affection is returned by both Sahadeva and Draupadi. Kunti's famous words to the Pandavas, to share whatever they have brought, when Arjuna wins Draupadi's hand, are considered to have been said unknowingly. But once again, one cannot overlook the possibility of Kunti's prudence, which makes her utter these words. Did she unconsciously know that Draupadi's beauty would be the cause of dissension between her sons, and hence spoke the words to continue the binding relationship they shared ? Kunti was aware that the strength of the Pandavas lay in their unity, as even Duryodhana realizes it, which was absolutely essential to fight the Kauravas. Her unending obligation to the throne her husband once possessed is always present in her actions.

Yudhishthira's ambivalent stand on war makes Kunti narrate the story of Vidula and her son to stir him out of apathy. Her description of her own state as a dependent in somebody's house is to make Yudhishthira take a concrete decision about war. Her words

reflect her true *kshatriya* nature,

> Act thou, therefore, in such a way that thy religious merit may not diminish. Fie to them that live, O Janardana, by dependence on others.
>
> (*Udyoga* . 90. 186)

So when it is time for her to enjoy what her sons have won for her, it is surprising and saddening for them to see her decide to accompany Dhritrashtra and Gandhari to the forests. Her reply is characteristic.

> It was not for my own sake that I had urged Vasudeva with the stirring words of Vidula. It was for your sake that I had called upon you to follow that advice. O my sons, I do not desire the fruits of that sovereignty which has been won by my children.
>
> (*Asramavasika* . 17.28-29)

She says she had incited her sons for war, because she had wanted them to gain their right to succession to the throne after Pandu. As for herself, she says she had enjoyed the life of a queen when Pandu was the king, and wanted nothing of the land and wealth now. Vindication of honour was more important to her. She would rather go along with the old king and queen who needed her, and to serve them was her duty. Kunti's keen sense of duty always prevails, and all her actions are motivated towards the fulfillment of her role as an Aryan woman. She becomes the embodiment of *kshtariyahood* observed by Aryan women in her times.

XVI

A woman cast in the most heroic mould is Draupadi. The regal Pandava queen is the one woman in the *Mahabharata* who is willing to be the cause of vast annihilation for the sake of vindicating her honour. There is no doubt that the humiliation she suffered at the hands of the Kauravas was by no means small. She represents that breed of women who do not tolerate the violation of their womanhood passively. She has none of the forgiving nature of the women of *Aryavrata*. Her twin, Dhrishtadyumna, and Draupadi herself, were born of the sacrificial fire. Dark in complexion, Krishna, as Draupadi is also called, is the harbinger of a colossal *kshatriya* destruction. Her destiny is charted out for her from her birth, and she remains true to her destiny. Her birth from the sacrificial fire is for a specific purpose. The prophecy at her birth bears testimony to this.

> This dark-complexioned girl will be the first of all women, and she will be the cause of the destruction of many Kshatriyas. This slender-waisted one will, in time, accomplish the purpose of the gods, and along with her many a danger will over-take the Kauravas.
>
> (*Adi*. 169. 342)

It is significant to note, that this same proud woman who had refused to accept Karna as a contender for her hand, is silent when she is divided amongst the five Pandavas. No one cares to ask her opinion on the matter, and she too voices none.

Mythologically, there is a detailed account of Draupadi's previous birth, when she had asked for five *gunas* or qualities in a single man. Shiva granted the boon, only to be fulfilled in her next birth. She does not protest at her division in such a manner. But the words said by Kunti seem ambiguous, when one takes into account the belief of Kunti that the strength of her sons lay in their unity. All the five Pandavas are described as being inflamed by desire on beholding Draupadi. And Yudhishthira wisely takes the decision of accepting her as their common wife. Vyasa describes the situation, "And the king, then, from fear of a division amongst the brothers, addressing all of them, said, `The auspicious Draupadi shall be the common wife of us all.'"(*Adi* . 193. 381). And Draupadi becomes the strength of the five brothers. Her behaviour and attitude to all five of them is that of the best *Aryanari*. This can be seen from the description she gives to Satyabhama of her devotion to her husbands. She says,

> Hear now, O illustrious lady, of the behaviour I adopt towards the high-souled sons of Pandu. Keeping aside vanity, and controlling desire and wrath, I always serve with devotion the sons of Pandu with their wives.
>
> (*Vana*.231.473)

So, when in return of her own ideal behaviour as a wife, her husbands do nothing to save her from the humiliation in public, the *sakhi* of Krishna is unable to curb her anger. Draupadi's piercing question to the Kaurava

assembly about the right of a king to stake his wife, and also her query about the king staking her after he lost himself in the stakes, renders even the most-knowledgeable persons speechless. Irawati Karve finds such behaviour as "inexcusable arrogance" (1991: 101), and she castigates Draupadi, "She had made many mistakes in her life that were forgiveable, but by putting on airs in front of the whole assembly, she had put Dharma into a dilemma and unwittingly insulted him." (101). Karve's analysis seems to support the prevalent views about the position of women during ancient times, when she questions the intelligence of a woman, and considers her valid query as an insult to her husband, who had, without doubt, overused his rights as a husband. Draupadi does not let her husbands forget their own inaction during her humiliation, and blames them categorically when Krishna comes to visit them in the forest. Her tirade is justified, hence her husbands too accept it.

> I blame the Pandavas who are mighty and foremost in battle, for they saw (without stirring) their own wedded wife known all over the world, treated with such cruelty! Oh, fie on the might of Bhimasena, fie on the *Gandiva* of Arjuna, for they, O Janardana, both suffered me to be thus disgraced by little men!.
>
> (*Vana*. 12. 31)

Draupadi nurses her wound through the thirteen years of exile, even acts as a queen's maid at the Virata king's palace, only in the hope of retribution at the end of it all. So when Krishna and the others are

discussing issues of bringing about peace with the Kauravas, she reminds them of her vow to see Duryodhana and Dushasana dead, before she can tie her hair after washing it with the latter's blood. She reproaches,

> If Bhima and Arjuna, O Krishna, have become so low as to long for peace, my aged father then with his warlike sons will avenge for me in battle. My five sons also that are endued with great energy, with Abhimanyu, O slayer of Madhu, at their head, will fight with the Kauravas. What peace can this heart of mine know unless I behold Dussasana's dark arm severed from his trunk and pulverised to atoms ?
>
> (*Udyoga* . 82. 170)

Draupadi's unrelenting thirst for vengeance includes Ashwatthama too, when he slaughters her brothers and sons. She wants to see his head severed, and only Krishna's intervention is able to appease her. During the Pandavas' exile, Jayadratha too is saved because of Yudhishthira, while Keechaka meets his end at Bhima's hands at Virata city. A noticeable fact is that Draupadi relies more on Bhima to avenge her wrongs as can be seen in his fights with Jayadratha and Keechaka. Yet she is more receptive to Arjuna's attraction than to Bhima's unquestioning devotion. Yudhishthira cites her partiality towards Arjuna as the cause of her fall from the Himalayas. But, Draupadi is primarily remembered for the end she wrought on the Kauravas, through her anger and her destiny. She does not scale the heights of greatness through her unceasing demands of

revenge, but she merits the title of a warrior-woman, or a *viranari* through her role in the staging of the Kurukshetra war.

XVII

Vyasa's portrayal of characters reveals them as at once types and individuals. If, on one hand, they embody the ideas of *kshatriyadharma*, on the other, they display highly individual characteristics. Their presentation as people with shades of grey with unfailing regularity, is Vyasa's conception of the human race. The poet comes out as a keen and compassionate observer of people and society, wherein he does not find characters only in black or white, totally just or unjust. His understanding of the complexity of human life comes through in his delineation of characters. In his story of human strife and life, the poet is keen on bringing out the complexities and ambiguousness inherent in any human's life.

Fate, or in the Indian sense *Niyati*, and Destiny are important in the larger sphere of human life, but one can attempt to fulfill one's fate through certain codes of conduct. Hindu philosophy does not grant total freedom to man, even though apparently God has given it. Man-made rules do not allow an individual to act outside the decisive sphere of action set by society. This strain of philosophy reveals an understanding of human nature and the relation between man and Nature. But it becomes restrictive by its all-binding rules about the behaviour of man. A person deviating from the accepted norms of conduct is not a *dharma*-abiding man.

The concept of *dharma* is extremely subjective and dependent upon the changing codes of society, hence it becomes difficult to know what is the right *dharma*. There is the *sanatanadharma* - the eternal Truth, embodied by Yudhishthira and there is *svadharma* - the truth of one's own class, embodied by Arjuna. The relative value of *dharma*, (as a law that affects human beings according to their birth, gender and position in society), as can be seen in the episode of the staking of Draupadi by Yudhishthira, is a matter of much speculation and discussion; but the absolute value of *Dharma*,(as the eternal and constant law, unchanging for any one), to be abided by men as a race, decides the *dharmic* or *adharmic* men. Hence the 'heroic' or 'unheroic' nature of men is wholly dependent upon the prevalent philosophy of a particular culture, time and society. Men, per se, are not heroic or unheroic, but it is their measuring against an existing ideology which makes them so.

The preceding sections discussed the major protagonists of the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and the *Mahabharata*. It could be seen that various characters display certain culture-specific qualities, but the basic tenets of heroism remain the same for both the Greek and the Indian epics.

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