



Deconstructing the Mahabharata: A critical analysis of Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice*

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Abstract

Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* (2013) presents a revolutionary retelling of the Mahabharata from the perspective of the traditionally vilified Kauravas. This research paper examines how Neelakantan challenges conventional narratives, explores themes of justice and morality, and offers a nuanced portrayal of characters typically seen as antagonists. Through detailed character analysis and thematic exploration, this study demonstrates how the novel contributes to contemporary discourse on historical revisionism and moral relativism in Indian literature.

Keywords: Mahabharata, retelling, perspective, Kauravas, moral ambiguity, Indian mythology

Introduction

The Mahabharata, one of India's greatest epics, has been retold countless times across various media and interpretations. However, Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* stands apart by presenting the epic from the viewpoint of the Kauravas, particularly focusing on Duryodhana's perspective, Published in 2013. This novel is the first in a duology that challenges readers to reconsider their understanding of good and evil, dharma and adharma, as presented in traditional telling's of the epic. Neelakantan, known for his ability to humanize mythological characters, employs a narrative strategy that forces readers to confront their preconceived notions about

heroism and villainy. The title *Ajaya* meaning "the unconquered," refers to Duryodhana, suggesting an alternative interpretation of his character and actions. This research paper analyzes how the novel reconstructs the Mahabharata narrative, examines its major themes, and evaluates its contribution to contemporary Indian literature.

Literature Review

The tradition of retelling the *Mahabharata* is extensive, ranging from regional variations to modern adaptations. Notable contemporary retellings include R.K. Narayan's simplified version, Ramesh Menon's comprehensive retelling and more recently,

Devdutt Pattanaik's interpretations. However, most retellings maintain the traditional moral framework where the Pandavas represent righteousness and the Kauravas embody evil. "No self-respecting God would allow a good man to be happy for long. God has relevance only in the unhappiness of good people." (Anand Neelakantan).

Neelakantan's approach aligns with postmodern literary techniques that question grand narratives and explore alternative perspectives. His work can be compared to other revisionist mythological fiction such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (from Draupadi's perspective) and Amish Tripathi's *Shiva trilogy*, which reimagine mythological figures in more humanized contexts. The novel also reflects contemporary concerns about social justice, inequality, and the nature of truth. By presenting the Kauravas' side of the story, Neelakantan engages with current debates about historical narratives and the importance of multiple perspectives in understanding complex events.

Duryodhana: The Tragic Hero:

In traditional telling's, Duryodhana is portrayed as jealous, power-hungry, and morally corrupt. Neelakantan's Duryodhana, however, emerges as a complex character driven by legitimate grievances and a genuine desire to rule justly. The novel presents him as a victim of circumstances, societal prejudices and political machinations rather than inherent evil. The author portrays Duryodhana as someone who questions the established order particularly the caste system and the divine right of the Pandavas to rule. His arguments against the Pandavas' legitimacy are presented logically, forcing readers to consider the validity of his claims. This characterization transforms him from a clear antagonist into a tragic hero whose downfall stems from his inability to navigate the complex web of dharma and politics.

Neelakantan extends his revisionist approach to other traditionally negative

characters. Shakuni, typically portrayed as the evil mastermind behind the Kauravas' actions is presented as a loving uncle seeking justice for past wrongs inflicted upon his family. Karna's struggles with his identity and social position are given deeper context emphasizing the social injustices he faces due to his birth. Even characters like Ashwatthama and the other Kaurava brothers are portrayed with greater nuance showing their motivations and internal conflicts. This approach humanizes characters who are often reduced to simple archetypes in traditional tellings.

There are people who will offer you many things and demand nothing in return. Fear them the most, for they are the ones who will take the things that are most precious to you and then their demands will come at a time when it is most inconvenient to you. (Anand Neelakantan)

One of the central themes in *Ajaya* is the nature of justice and the relativity of moral judgments. Neelakantan challenges the black-and-white morality often associated with the *Mahabharata* by presenting situations where the "villains" have legitimate grievances and the "heroes" make questionable decisions. The novel explores how perspective shapes our understanding of right and wrong. "When our schools fail to teach our children what they should know, other schools take their place and teach different lessons, which we may not like." (Anand Neelakantan).

Events that seem clearly justified from the Pandavas' viewpoint become morally ambiguous when seen through Kauravas eyes. This theme resonates with contemporary discussions about historical narratives and the importance of considering multiple perspectives.

Neelakantan uses the *Mahabharata's* framework to critique social hierarchies and the caste system. Through characters like Karna and Ekalavya, the novel highlights how birth-based

discrimination affects individuals and society. Duryodhana's acceptance of people regardless of their birth is contrasted with the Pandavas' adherence to traditional social structures. This theme makes the ancient epic relevant to modern social issues, connecting mythological narratives to contemporary concerns about equality and social justice.

The novel presents a sophisticated analysis of political power and its corrupting influence rather than portraying the conflict as a simple battle between good and evil. Neelakantan shows how political ambitions, family loyalties, and personal vendettas create a complex web of motivations that drive the characters toward inevitable conflict. The portrayal of Krishna as a political manipulator rather than a divine guide adds another layer to this theme, suggesting that even divine intervention serves political purposes. Neelakantan employs a third-person omniscient narrator but focuses primarily on Duryodhana's perspective and experiences. This narrative choice allows readers to understand events through Kauravas eyes while maintaining enough distance to present other viewpoints when necessary.

The novel's structure follows the traditional sequence of events leading up to the Kurukshetra war, but the emphasis and interpretation of these events differ significantly from conventional tellings. Key incidents like the game of dice, the disrobing of Draupadi and various political negotiations are recontextualized to show the Kauravas perspective. The author uses accessible, contemporary language while maintaining the epic's grandeur. The tone is serious and contemplative, matching the novel's philosophical exploration of complex moral questions. Dialogue is crafted to reveal character motivations and internal conflicts, making ancient characters feel relevant to modern readers.

Ajaya: Roll of the Dice received significant attention from critics and readers, praised for its bold reinterpretation of familiar characters and events. The novel sparked discussions about the nature of mythological narratives and the importance of alternative perspectives in understanding complex stories. Some critics appreciated Neelakantan's courage in challenging established narratives, while others questioned whether such radical reinterpretation was appropriate for sacred texts. This divided reception reflects broader debates about tradition versus innovation in Indian literature. The novel's success led to increased interest in revisionist mythological fiction, influencing other authors to explore alternative perspectives on traditional stories. It also contributed to discussions about the fluidity of mythological narratives and their relevance to contemporary society.

The themes explored in *Ajaya* resonate strongly with contemporary concerns. The novel's critique of social inequality connects with ongoing discussions about caste discrimination and social justice in modern India. Its exploration of moral relativism speaks to current debates about historical narratives and the importance of multiple perspectives. The portrayal of political manipulation and power struggles offers insights relevant to contemporary politics, while the examination of justice and righteousness provides a framework for understanding complex moral issues in modern society.

Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* represents a significant contribution to contemporary Indian literature and mythological fiction. By presenting the *Mahabharata* from the Kauravas perspective, the novel challenges readers to reconsider their understanding of heroism, villainy, and moral judgment. The novel's strength lies in its ability to humanize traditionally negative characters while maintaining the epic's philosophical depth. Through careful character development and thematic exploration, Neelakantan creates a

compelling narrative that questions established truths and encourages critical thinking about complex moral issues.

While the novel may be controversial for its radical reinterpretation of sacred narratives, its contribution to literary discourse is undeniable. It demonstrates the power of perspective in shaping understanding and the importance of considering multiple viewpoints when examining complex historical or mythological events. *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* succeeds in making ancient stories relevant to contemporary readers while respecting the source material's essential themes and conflicts. It stands as an example of how traditional narratives can be reimagined to address modern concerns while maintaining their timeless appeal and philosophical significance. The novel's impact extends beyond entertainment, contributing to important discussions about justice, equality, and the nature of truth. As such, it represents not just a successful retelling of an ancient epic, but a meaningful engagement with enduring human concerns through the lens of Indian mythology.

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