



## Dr Shinde Sweety's *Arjun Without a Doubt*: The Reception of the non- pareil hero from the *Mahabharata*

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### Abstract

The *Mahabharata* is the vast mine of human endeavors that continues to inspire writers even today, more than five thousand years after its first appearance. Indian English literature marks the emergence of a new genre in the reinterpretation of ancient texts through mythic fiction. Today, Indian writers have adapted the age-old narrative of the *Mahabharata* to the present-day context by reimagining the multicast structure through narrations of prominent characters, such as Bhima, Draupadi, Duryodhana, and Arjun. Dr Shinde Sweety is one such author who has reconstructed the *Mahabharata* from Arjun's point of view in her retelling, *Arjun: Without a Doubt*. This novel is an example of the *Mahabharata's* reception for modern audiences, as it throws light on Arjun's inner turmoil, which is mostly unvoiced or silenced in the Ur-Text. This paper is an interpretation of understanding Arjun's side as he is the hero showing prowess, learning and incomparable attempts through this retelling.

**Keywords:** Arjun, The *Mahabharata*, retellings of the *Mahabharata*, mythic fiction, Indian English literature.

### Introduction

The present-day mythic fictions based on the *Mahabharata* mainly focus on the humiliation of Draupadi, Bhima's painful life shadowed by the fame of his brothers, Karna's jeopardized life because of his low birth, and Duryodhana's retellings proclaiming his just sides. But, amongst all these characters, there is one significant hero from the *Mahabharata* who learned the art of archery at best, fought with the

celestials, and earned weapons from them as well, it is because of him that Ekalavya had not been able to learn from Drona, the one who singlehandedly hit the target at Draupadi's swayamwara but later on, shared her with his brothers without questioning, who suffered the pain of impotence, who got Krishna as a friend and guide, who got to see his cosmic form and listened to the teachings of Bhagavad Gita, the one who was so devastated at Krishna's death

that he could not fight with the rustics with the same bow and arrow with which he had fought several tremendous battles all his life, the one who for the whole of his life tried to better his skills and trained himself unwearyingly is none other than Arjun.

After having a son with a mighty body, Pandu wanted a superior son who could achieve worldwide fame. For that, after consulting the sages, both Pandu and Kunti practiced austerities, and later, pleased by it, Indra, the king of the celestials, blessed Kunti with Arjun. As soon as Arjun was born, the incorporeal voice prophesied several things:

“This child of thine, O Kunti, will be equal to Kartavirya in energy and Siva in prowess. Invincible like Sakra himself, he will spread thy fame far and wide. As Vishnu had enhanced Aditi’s joy, so shall this child enhance thy joy...he will maintain the prosperity of the Kurus...he will also acquire all kinds of celestial weapons, and this bull among men will also retrieve the fortunes of his race.”<sup>1</sup>

Arjun is the one upon whose skills everyone relied in times of turmoil. But he is also someone who strived for the best and at the same time lost his confidence in the middle of the battle, just like an ordinary human being. Arjun embodies humans striving for perfection and growth. Dr Shinde Sweety’s retelling entitled *Arjun – Without A Doubt* (2015) showcases Arjun’s side of the whole epic journey as he always performed as commanded by his mother, tutor and brother. The modern mythic fiction tries to voice the pain and psychological trauma of the characters of the *Mahabharata*, where Arjun deserves an incomparable space with his desire for incessant learning and achievement, his prowess, his love, his bravery, his promises and strength of character, along with the instances of

arrogance and pride. He is the ‘man’, the ‘human’, embodying the desires and fears. All these qualities make him a non – pareil hero. This novel is a retelling focused on Arjun as the truest and most powerful hero.

### **The Dialogic Mahabharata – Reception and Reconstruction Today**

Since classical times, the role of the reader and audience has been considered important. Around the 1970s, several critics at the University of Constance in Germany began to formulate a systematic reader – response or reception theory. The influence of Russian Formalism, Prague Structuralism, phenomenology of Roman Ingarden, Hans Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics and the sociology of literature paved the way for ‘Reception theory’ today. Hans Robert Jauss proposed this theory in his “Literary History as Challenge to Literary Theory”,<sup>2</sup> where a reader’s changing responses, interpretive and evaluative of the general reading public over the course of time is taken into consideration. According to Jauss, a text does not have any ‘objective meaning’, but it contains a variety of objectively describable features. The reader’s responses are the product of their own “horizons of expectations” and refutation, confrontation, disappointments and reformulations of these expectations when they are challenged by the features of the text itself. Following Hans Georg Gadamer, Jauss suggests that this tradition is a continuing ‘dialogue’ between a ‘text’ and the ever-altering horizons of successive readers. The literary text does not possess a fixed or final meaning; thus, according to Jauss, the study of literary work needs to be studied in terms of the impressions or impact it makes on the contemporary audience.

The *Mahabharata* has influenced mythic fictions vastly due to its own layered narratives and ability to adapt itself to the present age. The

<sup>1</sup> The *Mahabharata*, Book 1: Adi Parva: Sambhava Parva: Section CXXIII, pp. 259

<sup>2</sup> New Literary History, Vol. 2, 1970 – 71

present age marks the plethora of mythic fictions based on the *Mahabharata*, which proves the dialogic tradition set between readers and the age-old epic. This paper is an attempt to understand Dr Shinde Sweety's *Arjun – Without A Doubt* (2015) as the reception and reconstruction of the *Mahabharata* from Arjun's point of view.

### Arjun: The Non-Pareil Hero's Mahabharata

The author here is not focusing on the recollection of the events that happened, but its psychological impact and dilemmas that Arjun faced while going through it. The book is divided into 29 chapters. The author also tries to assess the relevance of myths and its reconstructing in the present era, listing the similarities and differences between Arjun, Achilles and Alexander. The author is a firm believer of Ayan Rand's statement that "The person at the centre of the storm is often taken for granted, his viewpoint deemed to be the least. It needs a middle man to convey his voice."<sup>3</sup> (*Arjun-Without a Doubt* Preface-vii) This storm is the Kurukshetra war, and the person at the centre is Arjun. The middleman needed to convey his thoughts is the author, trying to voice the thoughts of Arjun, who has been silenced through the epic as well as the history of retellings.

The narrative begins with the swayamwara where Arjun along with his brothers is about to attend it and meanwhile Arjun is also curious about this fire born princess after escaping Varnavat: "a princess fragrant as the blue lotus and born from fire, indeed! Considering that we had just escaped the murderous fire at Varanavat. well, we had enough of fire for a lifetime." (*Arjun-Without a Doubt* 1). Arjun is more excited to meet Krishna, as the Swayamwara is for the Kshatriyas; they have to conceal their identities. The narrative suddenly shifts to Draupadi, where she is also

curious about Arjun as the most suitable warrior husband for her. She is also bored of the tales about Arjun's prowess and it not ready to marry him being a "a puppet to my father's wishes" and Krishan's "whims" (*Arjun-Without a Doubt* 5) but Krishna insists that "he is a nice person...when everything else is gone, it is the only quality that remains." (*Arjun-Without a Doubt* 4). Thus, the beginning sets the tone of the love story of Arjun and Draupadi, who are reimagined as star-crossed lovers who detest each other initially but end up falling in love with each other. This retelling resonates with modern rom-com fictions, which excite and interest the present-day audience.

During the swayamwara, the narrative is again divided between Draupadi and Arjun, where Arjun narrates about Karna, and Draupadi narrates about Arjun's win. She is relieved that instead of Arjun, a Brahmin is competing, and that way she won't have to be a pawn in the hands of her father and Krishna. There is no comment on the famous episodes of Draupadi refusing Karna's participation. It is discarded as a rumour in the later chapters, whereas this has remained a favourite trope of the retellings of the *Mahabharata*. After Karna's death, when Kunti brings up this incident and blames Draupadi for rejecting him, it is Arjun who retaliates against her and states, "You were not present in the Panchal court. You could have clarified with us instead of believing malicious rumours." (*Arjun Without a Doubt* 255). Dr Shinde Sweety is focusing on hailing Draupadi's choice of a Brahmin instead of a royal prince rather than blaming her for rejecting Karna for his low caste. Draupadi is unaware of the identity of the Brahmin when they escape into the jungle after winning, and there is a long conversation between the two where she tries to make the Brahmin disclose his identity. Arjun tells her that he is "Parth. Pritha's son." (*Arjun-Without a Doubt* 15). This statement gives

<sup>3</sup> Sweety, Dr. Shinde. *Arjun: Without A Doubt*. Mumbai: Frog Books, 2015. Print. All the

subsequent references are from this edition only.

Draupadi the feeling of joy as the man she married is not Arjun but Parth. The suspense breaks when one of the accomplices speaks Arjun's name. This episode is important because the Vyasa *Mahabharata* is silent about the inner thoughts of Draupadi and Arjun on their way to the hut after the swayamwara. The novelist here adds layers to the existing narratives to plant the seeds of love and respect for each other, which is going to be the prominent theme of this retelling.

After swayamwara, the next important event in their life is the question of polygamy. In the Vyasa *Mahabharata*, Kunti is grief-stricken when she realises that her sons have brought Draupadi and not alms and thus the solution to the question of dividing this 'alms' becomes predominant. When Yudhishthira is asked about the solution to it he mentions several examples of polyandry in past:

"It is said that obedience to superior is ever meritorious. Amongst all superiors, it is well - known that the mother is the foremost. Even she hath commanded us to enjoy Draupadi as we do anything obtained as alms. It is for this, o best of Brahmanas, that I regard the act as virtuous." (*The Mahabharata* Book 1: Adi Parva: Vaivahika Parva: Section CLXLVIII, 389)

The Vyasa *Mahabharata* does not mention Draupadi or Arjun's inner turmoil over polygamy. At once, Arjun declares that seniority should be followed and Yudhishthira and Bheema deserve to be married before him, but none of them mentions Hidimba. Vyasa himself has excluded her from this conversation. During this conversation, there are Yudhishthira, King Drupad, Kunti, Dhritarashtra, Vyasa and partly Arjun present. Draupadi is nowhere included to discuss her thoughts on her own marriage. There's no retaliation or rejection from her or from Arjun. This creates a gap in the narrative, which is also called "*Vyasa Maunam*". The authors today try to remodify and retell such

gaps by adding layers to the narrative. Dr Shinde Sweetly reconstructs this episode and includes the argument of Arjun and Draupadi rejecting polygamy. It is but natural for a couple to do so, and in this way, the author portrays Kunti as the controlling mother - in - law, Yudhishthira as an incapable eldest and Bheema as the claimant for Draupadi. Both Arjun and Draupadi are holding each other's hands like lovers who do not want to part. Listening to the arguments of Kunti, Bheema and Yudhishthira, the narrative then shifts to Arjun's mind, where he questions his beliefs about Kunti and Yudhishthira as they were "the epitome of justice to me. Their wish, their word was law" (*Arjun-Without a Doubt* 22), but now he was accusing them of injustice. At the same time, Draupadi's mind is also in turmoil as the "choice was not either Arjun or all five, it was either all five or Yudhishthira." (*Arjun-Without a Doubt* 22). Soon, the sages come and try to solve this by stating that Draupadi in her past life desired a husband who would be righteous, mighty, valorous, handsome and patient; thus, Shiva has granted five husbands with each quality. But Draupadi has her own thoughts about these qualities, as she thinks that these qualities are

"An apt summary of Arjun. He had completed the contest that nobody else could; he had righteously not attacked any opponent until they initiated the attack on us. As for patience! Well, the very fact that he did not kill his brothers on the spot for making so hideous a suggestion, spoke for itself." (*Arjun-Without a Doubt* 23)

She patiently waits for Arjun to fight back his brothers and mother at the grave suggestion the way he did at the swayamwara. It was this bravery of Arjun that made her feel safe with him, and that's why she was holding hands with him and supporting him throughout the argument. But looking at the moral dilemma and Arjun's inability to fight back, she accepts the suggestion of the sages and withdraws her hand from him. This turn of events makes Arjun

awestruck. The readers are able to understand the turn of the events, but both these characters carry unanswered questions in their minds as they grapple with them. The inner turmoil is reconstructed through the lens of the love story of Draupadi-Arjun, which is never directly indicated by Vyasa in his version.

Draupadi's character acts out of her own individuality every time. When she is given the stricter code of conduct to be followed regarding her marriage, she agrees to it that her physical virginity will be restored after her loyal completion of the year with each husband but her inner thought is something different: "I wanted to tell Arjun that virginity not physical. It is a state of mind, a response. Unless I willed it and responded voluntarily, I was virgin forever." (*Arjun-Without a Doubt* 34) She performs the roles of a wife, mother, friend and queen and is not hesitant to critique Yudhisthira and others during crucial times. The author reconstructs Yudhisthira's character as an undeserving and patriarchal king who cannot tolerate his wife's critique of him; whereas Draupadi, while accepting him, wanted to talk to him on judicial, religious and philosophical topics. His knowledge was vast and fairly accurate, but too theoretical." (*Arjun-Without a Doubt* 37).

Draupadi, throughout the narrative, tries to be near Arjun. The famous episode where Arjun departs to forest for twelve years because of intruding privacy is reconstructed by adding a layer to the existing narrative by the author. According to it, Arjun required his famous bow Gandeeva to help the Brahmin in need, and it is in the chamber of Yudhisthira. The Vyasa *Mahabharata* does not mention why Gandeeva was in his chamber, and the author here fills this gap. Out of curiosity, Draupadi takes Gandeeva to her inner quarters so that she can spend some time observing it, as she humorously mentions it as her twin sister. This way, Gandeeva is inside the chamber with Draupadi, and Arjun cannot go there due to the strict code of conduct. He had to go to

Yudhisthira's chambers to take it, which shocks Yudhisthira. The Vyasa *Mahabharata* narrates Yudhisthira's stance differently, but here, in the novel, it is additionally layered to make it more intriguing. The pair of lovers, Draupadi and Arjun, are separated as Arjun is exiled, and the time together is prolonged.

This exile shows another aspect of Arjun, where he seeks knowledge and constantly tries to upgrade his skills. His long tenure in the forest teaches him,

"How to anticipate an animal attack, how to read the various calls, whistles and sounds of myriad animals, how to decode the language of nature, how to protect against unexpected rains, against quicksand, against honeybee attacks, how to utilize a fruit to its fullest, how to make use of its pulp, rind and tree bark for multiple purposes." (*Arjun-Without a Doubt* 40)

On the way, he also marries Chitrangada and Uloopi. The Vyasa *Mahabharata* mentions that Arjun was practising brahmcharya, but looking at Chitrangada's beauty and Uloopi's pleas, he falls for them and lives happily as a married man. When he reaches Dwarka, he is again struck by Subhadra's beauty:

"She is Vasudeva's daughter and Vasudev's (Krishna) sister; endowed with so much beauty, who can she not fascinate? If thy sister, this maid of the Vrishni race, becometh my wife, truly may I win prosperity in everything. Tell me, o Janardana, by what means I may obtain her. To get her I will achieve anything that is achievable by man." (*The Mahabharata*, Book 1: Adi Parva: Subhadra-haran Parva: Section CCXXI, 426)

With Krishna's advice, he elopes with her and marries her. This episode provides a gap where Arjun openly shows how much he loves Subhadra and wants to keep her as his own wife,

unlike his behaviour with Draupadi. Dr Shinde Sweetly identifies this gap and tries to show Arjun's fidelity towards Draupadi as his one and only lover. He explains that those women desired him because he was Draupadi's husband, and this fame follows him because of the contest he won. Although he married other women on the journey, he could never forget her as he talks about his inner feelings to Krishna,

"She has not vanished, nor blurred in my memory. She accepted me as husband when I had no wealth, when she did not know my name, when I did not have the aura of being a Pandava or the allure of Indraprastha as a beacon. I won her by archery. I cannot forget her unless I forget archery. They are like conjoined twins." (*Arjun-Without a Doubt* 48)

Many retellings have focused on Arjun as a charismatic and romantic hero who loved Subhadra, but here, Arjun is expressing his emotions for Draupadi and other women in his life, marking the strong companionship between archery and Draupadi. Both Arjun and Draupadi are shown to be fighting their inner turmoil regarding marriage and companionship; it is difficult for Draupadi to accept the third marriage of the man she loved yet she has to come out stronger, she has to support her self and thus, looks at herself in the mirror and advised the woman in the mirror not to cry and to be strong: whereas Arjun also contemplates on his condition as a husband: "four wives, two sons, not a single companion. I had sampled almost all varieties of marriages – the contest swayamwara, the lust nuptial, the political alliance and the bride abduction." (*Arjun-Without a Doubt* 62).

Draupadi not only loves her children but also Abhimanyu, who gives her a chance to meet little Arjun. When they finally get to spend the year as husband and wife Draupadi has several questions to ask Arjun regarding his exile and marriage to Subhadra but Krishna

being their strong companion, advises her not to hurt Arjun by asking such things as he could have built another empire for himself but he chose to return to Indraprastha, a place "where he will never be King – to a family that prioritizes their desires over his emotions – where his skills will be used but not necessarily acknowledged." (*Arjun-Without a Doubt* 77) Arjun has strived for the best without being competitive or blaming others. His inner will to de-learn, re-learn and re-invent himself all the time makes him the best of all, a non – pareil one.

The narrative is focused on Draupadi and Arjun as lovers and thus, all the episodes are reconstructed from the point of view of the lovers. They meet as lovers secretly near the lake, even though Draupadi is not with him during the year. The narrative then shifts to the dice game, where the turmoil in Arjun's mind is focused. It also shows Draupadi's infatuation with the Indraprastha palace. Due to her inner strength, she could sustain through all of it and could release her husbands from the slavery. She gets back what Yudhisthira had lost due to the boon given to her by Dhritrashtra to compensate for the humiliation. This whole incident finally plants the seed of destruction in her heart, and she declares war: "I want Hastinapur widowed. I want all those from the court dead. Every single one." (*Arjun Without a Doubt* 127). This statement shows her prowess as a woman and a queen. When Yudhisthira again loses everything, she accompanies them to the forest silently, only to be awakened by Krishna when he tells her to use this feeling and make it into a weapon and let it boomerang back to those who uttered it. Just don't let it overpower your life." (*Arjun Without a Doubt* 135)

The author also tries to fill the gaps about Karna's narrative and the myth of his invincible armor. The idea that Karna is a superior warrior to Arjun and Bheema is also repeatedly discarded by the author through incidents in which Karna is defeated, even though he has the invincible armor. Meanwhile,

they also collect celestial weapons due to Arjun's skills, and he also had to go through the curse of impotency given by Urvashi. All the brothers, while waiting for Arjun, help Draupadi in their own capacities, which makes Draupadi happy, as she always wanted them to be like this. But unfortunately, fate made them her husbands. Meanwhile, Arjun also realizes the value of his family and his wife, and misses Draupadi, whose beauty is incomparable even to the apsaras in heaven, and this realization makes him easily reject Urvashi.

The next part of the narrative mentions the incognito years and the marriage of Uttara to Abhimanyu. Again, there's an analogy between Draupadi and Subhadra when Draupadi watches Subhadra performing the marital duties with Arjun. The woman who loved Arjun with all her heart is jealous seeing this. She creates this analogy while watching them:

"Here, at last was a normal woman – amiable, pleasant and sweet. Basically, everything that I was not. She had not been dragged before a flock of wolves. She would not lead to any Keechaks getting killed. She had no scandals attached to her name and person. She was Krishna's bonafied sister and Dwarka's sole princess. She had only one husband and only one son. She was normal, ordinary and perfect.

I was the only royal woman to be married to five husbands. I had been dragged menstruating into full court. I had been on exile for thirteen years. I would be held responsible for the hideous war to follow. I had not invited any of these events in my life. Yet, I would be answerable for them." (*Arjun Without a Doubt* 202)

The author gives the idea of the inner monologue, showcasing the pain of being an extraordinary woman. Irawati Karve also notes in *Yuganta* that

"Draupadi's troubles were human, brought on by people of this world, and particularly by her own husbands...in almost every episode, insult is piled upon insult, constantly adding fuel to the hatred in her heart...she was the wife of the five but bereft, the daughter of a rich house but like an orphan, she had brave allies but she was alone."<sup>4</sup> (91)

Apart from Draupadi and Arjun, Krishna is also an important character presented as their cousin and close friend who helps and guides them in times of trouble. Krishna guides Arjun to burn the forest and rebuild the city at Khandav, to enhance his reputation by marrying the princesses of other kingdoms, teaches him that marriage is a great alliance to expand the kingdom and also solves Arjun's dilemmas as and when needed. In the next part of the narrative, it is Arjun's warrior skills and Krishna's guidance that lead them forward. In the chapter entitled "An Exquisite Torture", Kunti runs to the war ground to find Karna's body and reveals that he is her first son and also expects her other sons to participate in the last rites. Arjun and Draupadi have a different stand here as they do not wish to worship him as the eldest brother because he publicly humiliated Draupadi in the court, and also participated in the unrighteous killing of Abhimanyu. Arjun's clear argument is that Karna knowingly killed the child, attacked an unarmed charioteer, and recalled the rules only when he was in trouble. His words and his actions did not match. This refusal from Arjun ignites anger in Kunti, and it is diverted towards Draupadi, revealing her as an all-controlling mother-in-law. Kunti wanted

<sup>4</sup> Karve, Irawati. *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2008. Print.

to show her that she was not different or special from the other women of the Kuru race. Arjun is dissatisfied with this justification and leaves the ground, holding Draupadi's hand the way they had begun their journey together after the swayamwara. They survived this long journey together, and they are still together.

The deaths of everyone make Draupadi realise the futility of war, and the pang of revenge is finally satiated. After the death of Krishna, they also renounce the kingdom and begin their final journey, recalling their unfulfilled desires. Draupadi, in her last moments, ponders not having a childhood. Also, she sighs not having to daughter to carry on the mantle of my beauty. They may wonder and postulate but they would never know Draupadi's beauty." (*Arjun Without a Doubt* 276). For the last time, she confesses that she loved that serene youth moving towards the bow. Until her last breath, she is still the beloved of Arjun. Arjun, in his last moments, also recalls his love for Draupadi, Gandeeva and Krishna. Looking at Yudhisthira walking towards Draupadi, he realises his incapacity to admit his love for Draupadi. Arjun closes his eyes, knowing that the soul of Draupadi was with him always. The novel ends with the lovers dying and the love surviving through turmoil and pain.

This novel is a homage to the triumphs of Arjun. He is the only character who tried to achieve excellence, lived in exile more than others, was heartbroken when he had to share his wife with others, fulfilling Kunti's ambitions, tolerating the pain of Yudhisthira's wager during the dice game, endured the impotency, and witnessed the death of his young son. Still, he has never complained. Arjun's life is full of achievements, excellence, consistent performance and discipline. The narrative reimagines Arjun because, apart from being all these, he is the lover of Draupadi. The central theme runs through these two characters trying to meet each other.

All his life, Arjun worshipped his mother, brother and tutor, and these three are people who betrayed him the most. The novelist attempts to create the *Mahabharata* story from Arjun's self-sufficiency and how he is capable, confident and deserving. He is the hero, and that's why the central theme and the heroine belong to him. Even at the end of the *Mahabharata*, it is Arjun's race that survives and carry forwards his lineage. Dr Shinde Sweety challenges the existing horizon of expectations of Arjun's character by voicing his inner thoughts, by showing Yudhisthira's incapacities and Draupadi - Arjun's love story. These three elements form the plot of the novel, and every event revolves around these three prominent themes. Arjun, in his lifetime, was never a king but worked as an army general. He deserved every quality of a righteous king, yet he was an army general; fate has its own way, and so it is his race that survives. Thus, the novel brings forth Arjun as the non - pareil hero - the one who is unparalleled in history and will always be.

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