



Beyond Heroes And Villains: A Psychological Study Of Mahabharata's Anti-Heroes

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Abstract

The present research offers a detailed psychological study of the anti-heroic characters of the Mahabharata, one of the great epics of the ancient Indian tradition. As traditional scholarship has always been interested in the heroic heroes, this study turns the limelight around to study the psychological depth of great anti-heroes such as Duryodhana, Karna, Shakuni, Drona, Dhritarashtra, Dussasana, and Ashwatthama. With a qualitative research methodology using descriptive and comparative analysis, the study interweaves current psychological theories to understand the motivation, inner conflict, and moral nuances of these characters. The study describes how traits such as ambition, jealousy, loyalty, manipulation, revenge, and ethical crises not only propel individual destinies but also illuminate the epic's greater thematic concerns of dharma, justice, and human frailty. Placing these old characters within a larger literary and psychological context, the book highlights the universality of their conflicts and the ongoing relevance of the Mahabharata to human nature. The cross-disciplinary enterprise links classical Sanskrit literature and modern psychological theory to newly derived understanding in order to enrich both literary study and psychological inquiry. The findings encourage continued exploration of anti-heroism within ancient literature, highlighting the value of psychological analyses in unscrambling complex characterizations and ethical dilemmas in world literature.

Keywords: Mahabharata, anti-hero, psychological analysis, Sanskrit literature, ambition, jealousy, revenge,

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

The Mahabharata is an epic poem outlining a Great War and forms part of Indian mythology. Traditionally attributed to the wise Vyasa, who is reported to have dictated the epic to the god Ganesha, the Mahabharata is at once a literary masterpiece and a cultural and philosophical foundation of Indian civilization. The genesis of the Mahabharata is found in between the 8th and 9th centuries BCE, and the epic has evolved through the efforts of poets of many generations. The epic describes the lives and achievements of a few generations of the Kuru (or Guru) dynasty, with an emphasis on the internal conflicts within the royal family. The Kuru kingdom was split into two houses: Dhritarashtra, who was born blind, ruled from Hastinapur and his sons were called the Kauravas, while Yudhishtira and his brothers, the Pandavas, ruled from Indraprastha. The Mahabharata is a story of the contest for succession to the throne of Kuru with an emphasis on the bitter rivalry and conflict between the Kauravas, whose leader is Duryodhana, and the Pandavas, whose leader is Yudhishtira. Beyond its war narrative, the epic also deals with such themes as family relationships, caste, and the roles of women in society, friendship and hostility, and

reciprocity of rights and obligations. The ending of the epic marks the close of the Kshatriya period and the start of the Kali Yuga, an era that is characterized by the decline of ethical standards (ROY and SARKAR)

1.2 Relevance of Mahabharata in Modern Times

The Mahabharata is still a peak in world literature, as it tackles all aspects of the human experience and mind, providing deep perspectives on life's many questions. Its lessons and themes are eternal, and so it is a perennial font of knowledge and insight. In today's society, where values and integrity are diminishing, the Mahabharata's focus on assisting the poor, valuing relationships, and upholding dharma (righteousness) is particularly resonating (Hiltebeitel). The epic presentation of right vs. wrong, and its detailed examination of leadership, accountability, and the fallouts of unchecked ambition, is beneficial advice to readers of today (Kalra et al.). The Mahabharata emphasizes the value of humility and selflessness, learning from one's failures, and treating failures as a means for personal development. Its tales of the ruinous impact of greed and the ultimate victory of virtuous over evil remain pertinent as cautionary tales. The long-term bond between Krishna and Arjuna, for instance, is a good representation of loyalty and leadership value, while the war as portrayed in the epic reminds us of the risks involved in war and the call for peaceful means (Fitzgerald).

In addition, the Mahabharata's dharma and karma teachings encourage ethical action, responsibility, and reflection in decision-making. The epic supports social justice, equity, and compassion, which are applied to the intricacies of family and interpersonal relationships (L. Kaipa). In the fast-changing world of today, the Mahabharata's messages on duty, leadership, knowledge, and meaning-seeking are particularly relevant. Its wisdom transcends antiquity and modernity, continuing to stimulate intellectual curiosity and moral thought (Lambate and D'souza; Widgery).

1.3 Concept of the Anti-Hero

The anti-hero concept has been greatly changed throughout literary history, passing from mythic paragons of virtue and strength to more flesh-and-blood creatures characterized by subjectivity, pain, and moral complexity (Kadiroğlu). As opposed to the conventional hero, the anti-hero is usually defined by qualities like cleverness, self-interest, and a tendency to subvert or invert social norms. The anti-hero is a "loser winner," using weakness as strength and adversity as opportunity, frequently disrupting the status quo and challenging dominant values. These characters appeal to readers exactly because they are flawed and can mirror the complexity of human experience in the real world (Mahmood-ul-Hassan et al.). Within the context of the Mahabharata, such a system can facilitate the more intense probing of characters whose motivations and actions prove impossible to categorize, hence rich subject matter for psychological examination

1.4 Significance of the study

The Mahabharata is a colossus of world literature, providing a deep probing of human psychology, ethical issues, and social realities. Although significant scholarly effort has gone into its hero figures and idealized virtues, the epic's anti-heroes, figures characterized by moral complexity, personal fault lines, and multifaceted motivations have not been fully explored from a psychological angle. It is important because it changes the focus from such anti-heroic characters to examine their inner struggles and motivations in terms of present-day psychological theories. In the process, not only does it enhance the depth of understanding of the Mahabharata's narrative richness but also presents the timelessness of its characters in mirroring universal human tendencies like jealousy, revenge, power, and loyalty. Also, the research contributes to the field of Sanskrit literary scholarship through the integration of modern psychological knowledge, thus making for a fresh and inter-disciplinary critique of the epic.

1.5 Research Objective:

- To examine the applicability of contemporary psychological theories in understanding the antiheroic vision and nature of key characters in the Mahabharata.
- To explore the psychological drivers like jealousy, revenge, and allegiance responsible for antiheroic actions in the epic.
- To discuss the general notion of anti-heroism in the Mahabharata through the comparative application of insights from ancient literature and contemporary psychology.

- To highlight how this interdisciplinary approach fills existing gaps in the psychological study of antiheroes in Sanskrit and world literature.

1.6 Scope of the study

The current study is limited to a psychological analysis of chosen anti-heroic figures in the Mahabharata, namely Duryodhana, Karna, Shakuni, Drona, Dhritarashtra, Dussasana, and Ashwatthama. It examines how recent psychological theory might shed light on the motivations, emotional conflicts, and ethical complexities that characterize these characters. The discussion is informed by primary Sanskrit sources, classical commentary, and pertinent contemporary scholarship and benefits from comparative insights from world literature. The research doesn't try an exhaustive examination of all the characters or topics within the Mahabharata but aims at those whose behavior and nature most boldly depict the subject of anti-heroism. By demarcating this limitation, the study will be attempting to make a significant contribution towards Sanskrit literary criticism and also encourage further research on the psychological aspects of epics.

2..LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of the anti-hero, a hero who rejects conventional heroic standards has gained greater visibility in Indian literature today. Anti-heroic protagonists subvert societal expectations of heroism and masculinity and represent the irony and contradictions of contemporary Indian society. (Sarma) outlines how Indian mythology and literary texts, such as those found in the Mahabharata, contain anti-heroic masculine heroes who diverge from the prototypical hero. Characters like Karna, who faces social rejection and identity struggles despite his noble birth, exemplify this complexity. There have also been two recent scholarly reinterpretations and creative reimaginations of Indian epics with the anti-heroic vision brought to the forefront. One such example is Anand Neelakantan's Ajaya series, which is a retelling of the Mahabharata from the perspective of Duryodhana, presenting the Kauravas as complex characters and not just villains (Katdare). This storytelling forces the reader to rethink the dichotomy of hero and villain and underscores the ethical complexity of characters like Duryodhana, Karna, and Shakuni. Neelakantan's book, and others such as Asura: Tale of the Vanquished, show the literary merit of examining the so-called "vanquished" and their motives and providing a counter-history to the victor's account.

Comparative studies also show that the anti-hero is not exclusive to Indian writing. Anti-heroic characters are employed by postcolonial and Dalit authors, as observed by (Jaisankar) and (Banerjee), to subvert hegemonic narratives of power and privilege, usually representing subaltern or marginalized experiences. In contemporary Indian cinema and literature, the anti-hero is a tool to represent societal conflicts, moral complexity, and the harsh realities of underprivileged groups (Yash Deep Singh).

Despite this increasing literature, there is still a significant shortfall in systematic scholarly consideration of anti-heroes per se in the Mahabharata. The studies tend to concentrate on specific characters like Karna or Duryodhana or general literary movements, but not on an exhaustive psychological investigation into anti-heroism as a theme across the epic. In addition, while imaginative reinterpretations such as Neelakantan's Ajaya have introduced anti-heroic views to wider audiences, scholarly efforts remain to fully incorporate modern psychological theory with traditional Sanskrit works for a more nuanced understanding of these multifaceted characters. The research seeks to bridge this gap by utilizing contemporary psychological theories to the examination of the prime Mahabharata anti-heroes Duryodhana, Karna, Shakuni, Drona, Dhritarashtra, Dussasana, and Ashwatthama thus making a contribution to both Sanskrit literary scholarship and comparative literature at large.

3.METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative design (Kandel) with comparative and descriptive analysis to investigate the psychological richness of anti-heroic characters of the Mahabharata. The primary goal is close textual analysis, interpreting underlying motifs, motivations, and character traits within their cultural and historical context. Comparative aspects locate these figures within a wider literary and psychological context.

Primary sources consist of the seminal Sanskrit edition of the Mahabharata, buttressed by authoritative English translations and classic commentaries. Secondary sources consist of scholarly books, peer-reviewed articles, and critical essays on the epic, anti-heroism, and related psychological theories.

Data is collected through structured analysis of chosen passages, with emphasis on psychological and moral subtleties of key anti-heroes like Duryodhana, Karna, Shakuni, Drona, Dhritarashtra, Dussasana, and Ashwatthama. Salient narrative blocks and conversations are targeted to unearth motivations and conflicts, and chosen literature on anti-heroes is examined to provide context.

Content analysis categorizes recurring patterns and psychological characteristics (Vears and Gillam), whereas comparative analysis compares (Greckhamer et al.) these characters with anti-heroes in other literary traditions to identify universal and culture-specific elements. Critical interpretation uses psychoanalytic, cognitive, and motivational theories to enhance comprehension of their inner contradictions and complexities, offering a holistic view of the Mahabharata's anti-heroes.

4.THEMATIC FOCUS

4.1 Psychological Complexity of Anti –Heroes

The Mahabharata is unique in the literature of the world for its multi-dimensional, psychologically rich characters, particularly its anti-heroes. Unlike flat, one-dimensional villains, anti-heroes in the epic like Duryodhana, Karna, and Shakuni are given a depth that mirrors the complexity of human nature. These are not simple antagonists; they are people formed by individual trauma, social ostracism, and inner contradiction, so their motivations and actions are layered. Karna's life-long struggle with acceptability and belongingness, say, as well as his unwavering commitment to Duryodhana despite his understanding of the ethical challenges, point towards a personality marked by egoistic tendencies and cognitive dissonance. Similarly, Shakuni's cunning is a response to family problems, while Duryodhana's aspirations and perception of injustice are the result of his realization of being wronged. This robust characterization, where each of the characters possesses virtues and flaws, allows for the Mahabharata to be a probing investigation into human psychology as well as the complexity of morals (Agarwal).

4.2 Main Human Traits Explored

The Mahabharata anti-heroes are a selection of human traits that are understandable and yet inherently flawed. The most notable among them are jealousy, ambition, revenge, loyalty, and a constant feeling of injustice. Jealousy drive much of the competition and conflict, as with Duryodhana's enmity towards the Pandavas, and ambition and the drive to succeed compel individuals like Karna to do things that are immoral. Karna is obligated to Duryodhana and Dussasana to his brother by fidelity, often misinterpreted, and retaliation is a recurring motivation, especially in Shakuni's deeds against the Kuru clan. Internal struggles and external actions of these characters are shaped by their weakness, uncertainty about yourself, and need for acceptance. The interaction of these characteristics not only makes the anti-heroes human but also emphasizes the moral and psychological challenges encountered by those traveling through complicated social and family environments (Agarwal and Sharma).

4.3 Importance of these Traits in Narrative and Character Development

Their presence in anti-heroes is especially significant in terms of narrative progression and character development in the Mahabharata. Such complexities generate internal and external conflict that drive the plot forward, creating a dynamic tension between free will and fate. The internal conflict of characters like Karna and Duryodhana adds depth to their trajectories, rendering their final downfall tragic but unavoidable. Furthermore, the anti-heroes' internal battles of loyalty, morality, and identity engage readers with a mirror of their own moral conflicts, which allows them to empathize as well as think critically (Jena). Through injecting these multidimensional traits into its characters, the Mahabharata transcends reductionist good-and-evil frameworks and presents instead a realistic (Agarwal and Sharma)

5.CHARACTER ANALYSIS

The Mahabharata is equally renowned for its intricate portrayal of characters whose desires and deeds cannot be reduced to good and evil. This section presents a close reading of the epic's main anti-heroes and examines their psychological traits, individual motivations, and the cultural contexts in which they exist. By analysing figures such as Duryodhana, Karna, Shakuni, Drona, Dhritarashtra, Dussasana, and Ashwatthama, the study aims to explore the complex dynamics of ambition, jealousy, loyalty, manipulation, and vengeance which are dominant in their characters in the epic. The individual psychology behind the enduring thematic and moral richness of the epic is analyzed in each character separately to demonstrate.

5.1 Duryodhana

Duryodhana, eldest son of Dhritarashtra, heir to the Kuru throne (Varyani and Pandey).

Ambition

Duryodhana, although born to Dhritarashtra and Gandhari, was chiefly brought up by Shakuni, who inculcated in him a vengeful worldview passed on from his own family's entitlement. Shakuni's influence taught Duryodhana to hate rather than love, to fight his brothers rather than maintain family unity, and to act selfishly rather than selflessly (Ciccarelli and Meyer). This brought up Duryodhana's ambition to seize the throne and rule the kingdom, pushing him to the edge of becoming so cruel that he plotted to kill the Pandavas and set fire to their palace (Varyani and Pandey).

Ego

Freud's psychoanalytic theory provides insight into Duryodhana's personality formation. Freud explains that personality is developed in the first five years of life, and the superego (moral part) is shaped by socialization (Ciccarelli and Meyer). Since Shakuni taught Duryodhana in a prejudiced manner, his superego was weak and his "id" the impulsive, emotional, and self-centred aspect of the mind was in charge (Ciccarelli and Meyer). His ego, being a middleman between his id and superego, also grew distortedly, thereby not allowing him to equilibrate his needs with the reality in spite of his skill and knowledge (Ciccarelli and Meyer). This disequilibrium accounts for his impulsive, egocentric manner and his exaggeration of personal complaints (Ellis).

5.2 Karna

Karna was the close friend of the Kauravas and was regarded as one of the greatest archer's of the world. He was regarded to the greatest archer and he is capable of defeating Arjuna. Surprisingly enough, he also studied under Parshuram. Karna was born to the mother of the Pandava's Kunti prior to her marriage but deserted in a river and brought up by charioteers (Karpaha et al.).

Jealousy

Karna's jealousy, particularly toward Arjuna, is rooted in his lifelong struggle for social acceptance and recognition. Despite his divine birth, Karna was raised as a charioteer's son and constantly faced humiliation and rejection from society and the royal court (Rajagopalachari). His exclusion from the archery contest and Draupadi's Swayamvara, as well as repeated public insults, fuelled his animosity and rivalry with Arjuna. This jealousy was not created out of personal hatred but out of a deep-seated need to demonstrate his worth and earn the respect withheld from him because of his low birth as perceived by him (Kumar and Ranjan).

Loyalty

Karna's unconditional devotion to Duryodhana is the defining characteristic of his personality. Duryodhana's decision to coronate Karna King of Anga promoted him to a higher social standing and provided him with the attention he was starved of (Rajagopalachari). As a token of appreciation, Karna swore eternal loyalty to Duryodhana despite knowing about his friend's moral flaws. This loyalty, however, became Karna's tragic flaw he supported Duryodhana in his wrongdoings against the Pandavas, including the humiliation of Draupadi (Rajagopalachari). Karna's loyalty also led him to reject Krishna's and Kunti's offers to join the Pandavas, prioritizing his debt to Duryodhana over his own dharma and family ties (Nath).

5.3 Shakuni

Shakuni was born in Gandhara to its king, Subala, and had a sister named Gandhari, who was very dear to him. Portrayed as a highly intelligent, cunning, and devious man (Sharma).

Manipulation

Shakuni, the brother of Gandhari and maternal uncle to the Kauravas, is one of the Mahabharata's most pivotal and cunning figures. His manipulative nature is evident in his strategic interventions throughout the epic, especially in his efforts to influence Dhritarashtra and the outcome of key events. Shakuni constantly schemes to help Duryodhana triumph, employing his brain and cunning to manipulate people and circumstances to his own gain. The most well-known instance of his cunning is the notorious dice

game, in which he uses cunning play to bring the Pandavas to ruin, taking advantage of the blind King Dhritarashtra's infirmities and using his own power to rig the match. As a result, the dice game becomes a metaphor for Shakuni's ubiquitous manipulation, which advances the plot and determines everyone's fate (Pushkar et al.).

Revenge

Shakuni is highly driven by revenge for what he perceives as injustices done to his sister Gandhari and her sons. His loyalty towards Duryodhana is not just familial but is also driven by a personal grudge against the Kuru dynasty for the injustices inflicted upon his family. Shakuni's strategic guidance of Duryodhana and his relentless pursuit of the Pandavas' ruin are manifestations of this underlying drive for retribution. His capacity to sow seeds of doubt and resentment in the mind of Dhritarashtra at critical moments of political instability only goes to prove how his desire for revenge is deeply integrated into the power politics of the epic (Gogoi).

5.4 Drona

Guru of both Kauravs and Pandav's. He was also a disciple of Parshuram and almost if not so strong as Bhishma (Karpaha et al.).

Ethical dilemmas

The life of Drona is characterized by intricate moral challenges. Though as the royal teacher, he instructed both Pandavas and Kauravas without bias, there was no consistency in his actions according to the very noble principles of dharma. For instance, he sought personal favours from his students as a reward for teaching them, which subsequently led to them fighting against Drupada on his behalf (Menon). Drona's partiality towards Arjuna, his treatment of the devotion of Ekalavya (commanding Ekalavya to give his thumb as guru dakshina in order to secure Arjuna's position), and his involvement in the war on the side of the Kauravas despite his love for the Pandavas, all underscore the ethical uncertainties and contradictions that characterized his personality. Even in combat, Drona was conflicted between his responsibilities as a teacher, a Brahmin, and a general, frequently apologizing for the brutality that he was forced to unleash (Pilikian).

The conflict between duty and personal gain.

The core conflict of Drona is the inner struggle between his sense of responsibility (as a teacher and servant of Hastinapura) and his personal grudges or ambitions. While he denounced the Kauravas' ill-treatment of the Pandavas, he still was tied to his position in the Kaurava court and fought against his own dear pupils in the war. His actions in the Kurukshetra war particularly his efforts to take Yudhishtira prisoner and his ultimate leadership of the Kaurava forces were driven by a sense of duty, but by personal interests as well, such as his devotion to his son Ashwatthama and his ongoing feud with Drupada. The death of Drona, caused by the psychological shock of hearing (untrue) that his son had perished, and the subsequent abandonment of weapons, highlights the tragic fate of his conflicting loyalties and the moral cost of his actions (Menon).

5.5 Dhritarashtra

Dhritarashtra, born blind, was the king of the Kuru Kingdom, ruling from Hastinapur (Karpaha et al.)

Parental love

Dhritarashtra's anti-heroic path is inextricably linked to his overwhelming fondness and "blind love" for his son, Duryodhana. Even though he was physically blind, a by-product of his mother Ambika's fear at the time of conception, Dhritarashtra was treated equally with the same privileges as his siblings, but his disability excluded him from inheriting the throne (Katupalli and Kaporwan). Being a father, his blind love for Duryodhana tended to deceive him at times and make him favour his son's aspirations despite knowing their ethical and moral faults. This emotional myopia paralleled by his physical blindness was a hallmark that developed through his failure to decide against Duryodhana's wrongdoings and paved the way for the epic's tragic confrontations (Pushkar et al.).

Moral weakness

Dhritarashtra's rule is characterized by a strong prejudice towards his own sons, especially Duryodhana, over justice and dharma (Vanita). His ethical lapse can be seen in his inability to act in times of crisis, e.g., the infamous game of dice and the disrobing of Draupadi. On being asked for justice by Draupadi, Dhritarashtra gives evasive and non-committal answers, passing the buck to others and not taking any stance. This failure of moral accountability is not so much a personal shortcoming as an expression of his inability to square his responsibilities as a king and a father. His affective and emotional obtuseness keeps him from seeing the magnitude of the injustices playing themselves out in his court, perpetuating his anti-heroic status as a ruler who is both powerful and powerless.

5.6 Dushasana

Dushasana was the second son of the blind king Dhritarashtra and Gandhari in the epic Mahabharata, and the younger brother of Duryodhana.

Blind loyalty

Dushasana's unmatched devotion towards his brother Duryodhana lead him to blind loyalty towards to the words of his brother. Dushasana's loyalty towards his brother is seen all over Mahabharata. For instance when Shakuni and Duryodhana devise a plot to kill the Pandavas by trapping them in a palace made of flammable lac, Dushasana plays an active role in executing the plan. He does not question the morality or the potential consequences of murdering his cousins, nor does he hesitate to participate in such a terrible act just because his it was his brother's words he obeyed whole heartedly. This action clearly expressed the state of blind loyalty in Dushasana (Dhillon and Chhabra).

Cruelty

The name Dushasana itself stated what kind of person he was 'Dush' came from the word 'Dushman' which means a wicked man and 'Asana' means staying so by associating this it is understandable that he is bad by name. On the thirteenth (13) day of war Dushasana, along with other Kaurava warriors, participated in attacking Abhimanyu in violation of the rules of war. They surrounded him, attacked him simultaneously, and ultimately killed him through unfair and cruelly merciless action. Dushasana was among those who struck Abhimanyu when he was weapon less and exhausted this action exposed that Dushasana was not only by his name but also his heart filled with cruelty and wickedness.

5.7 Ashwatthama

Ashwatthama was the son of Guru Dronacharya and his wife Kripa, the sister of Kripacharya (Rana)

Revenge

Ashwatthama's personality in the Mahabharata is closely entwined with the idea of revenge, which eventually characterizes his tragic fall. The death of his father, Dronacharya, in the war executed by trickery by the Pandavas gives rise in Ashwatthama to a strong urge to exact vengeance for this perceived wrong. This revengeful urge reaches its climax following the fall of his close friend Duryodhana, leading Ashwatthama to orchestrate a night massacre in the Pandava camp (Suraj Singh). His own actions, fueled by anger and sorrow, are not so much acts of war but intensely personal reactions to loss and trauma.

Violence

Violence is both weapon and bane of Ashwatthama's life. In the Mahabharata, his most notorious deed the night-time massacre of the sleeping sons of the Pandavas is an extreme transgression of the warrior code and a plunge into moral abyss. This act of violence, as a snare of revenge, is also magnified by his release of the Brahmastra, a mass-destructive weapon, which will destroy future generations. Krishna's intervention and ensuing curse condemning Ashwatthama to roam the earth in pain, suffering from an incurable wound constitute divine punishment for his wanton brutality In later works like Ghimire's play, Ashwatthama symbolizes the lasting psychological scars of violence, portrayed as a tormented soul unable to escape the consequences of his actions (Nepal)

6. PSYCHOLOGICAL INSIGHT INTO EACH CHARACTER

This section presents a brief survey of the seven major anti-heroes' main psychological traits. The following table summarizes the findings

Table 1 Psychological Traits and Insights of Major Anti-Heroes in the Mahabharata

| Character | Key Psychological Traits | Insight/Explanation |
|----------------------|--|---|
| Duryodhana | Ambition, Ego | Raised by Shakuni, Duryodhana's value system is revolved around revenge and competition. His unbridled ambition to take over the throne and his self-centered, impulsive nature (according to Freud's psychoanalytic theory) are caused by a weak superego and strong id. This leaves him incapable of reconciling personal desires with moral or social facts, causing ongoing conflict and brutality. |
| Karna | Jealousy, Loyalty | Karna's jealousy of Arjuna is the result of life-long social rejection and humiliation. He is motivated by his need to be validated. His absolute loyalty to Duryodhana, who upgraded him socially, is his tragic flaw that leads him to condone immorality and turn his back on his own family and dharma. |
| Shakuni | Manipulation, Revenge | Shakuni is motivated by a need for vengeance against the Kuru dynasty due to perceived wrongs inflicted on his family. His cunning intelligence is seen in creating the game of dice and fomenting discord, rendering him the sparkplug for much of the conflict in the epic. |
| Drona | Ethical Dilemmas, Conflict between Duty and Gain | Drona's moral paradoxes as a teacher and a warrior are his demands for personal favors, biasness, and conflict of work obligation and personal allegiance. His fatal death due to psychological shock is a reflection of the price of his conflicting obligations. |
| Dhritarashtra | Parental Love, Moral Weakness | Dhritarashtra's emotional and moral blindness to Duryodhana and failure to act according to dharma betray his love that is blind. His failure to act according to dharma, particularly in times of crisis, continues injustice and stamps his rule with passivity and partiality. |
| Dussasana | Blind Loyalty, Cruelty | Dussasana's blind obedience towards Duryodhana makes him commit atrocities, like the humiliation of Draupadi and the murder of Abhimanyu. His inability to use his own judgment and his cruelty make him a benefactor of mass evil. |
| Ashwatthama | Revenge, Violence | Ashwatthama's mind is molded by trauma and a need for revenge following his father's death. His acts of violence, such as the night killings and deployment of the Brahmastra, result in his eternal torment and solitude, representing the psychological wounds of revenge and violence. |

The table 1 demonstrates that every anti-hero in the Mahabharata has different psychological reasons motivating him, which not only lead to individual actions but also contribute to the higher moral and thematic depth of the epic. Exploring these characters through the lens of modern psychology enables the

research to show the way ambition, jealousy, manipulation, moral dilemma, and the impact of unrestrained control of emotions shape individual fates as well as the development of historical events in the novel. Through analysis, it seeks to underscore the eternal relevance of the Mahabharata characters as symbols of universal human conflict.

7.CONTRIBUTION

The study enriches Sanskrit literature, psychology, and comparative literary analysis by presenting a psychological analysis of anti-heroes in the Mahabharata. Unlike much of the previous scholarship on heroic figures, this study examines the complex motivations of morally nuanced characters such as Duryodhana, Karna, and Ashwatthama. Through the application of modern psychological theories like psychoanalysis and trauma studies, the study reveals new insights into their inner conflicts and human vulnerabilities. Comparative approach positions these characters on the international stage, whose issues become universal. By foregrounding the psychological complexity of anti-heroes, this research bridges a research gap in Mahabharata scholarship and encourages future interdisciplinary.

8. CONCLUSION

The psychological investigation of the anti-heroes of the Mahabharata therefore reveals to us the deep richness behind characters who have traditionally been interpreted as villains. These characters embody a spectrum of human motives and emotions ambition, jealousy, loyalty, manipulation, and revenge which attests to the richness of human psychology. Their inner conflicts and moral ambiguities not only drive the dramatic tension of the epic, but also invite readers to question simplistic good-versus-evil dualisms. Based on the application of classical literary theory and contemporary psychological thought, this study demonstrates that the Mahabharata's anti-heroes are timeless representations of universal human issues. Ultimately, this work underscores the relevance of the epic to the present day, calling for further allegiance to its characters as representatives of the human experience across cultures and centuries.

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