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**Cursing Kṛṣṇa:
Gender, Theodicy, and Time in the *Mahābhārata***

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**Cursing Kṛṣṇa:
Gender, Theodicy, and Time in the *Mahābhārata***

by

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Abstract

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In this paper, I will discuss the doctrines of theodicy and time in the *Mahābhārata*, with particular attention to the concept of gender in the epic milieu. I argue that the parallel narratives of Draupadī and Gāndhārī play a central role in establishing what Emily T. Hudson refers to as “the aesthetics of suffering.” Draupadī and Gāndhārī’s respective arguments against Kṛṣṇa, especially, raise a number of crucial theodicean questions that ultimately contribute to the overall argument of the text in regards to the necessity of detachment (*vairāgya*) and the ravages of Time (*kāla*). As such, this paper endeavors to provide a reading of the text that contextualizes Draupadī and Gāndhārī’s theodicean arguments in terms of Kṛṣṇa’s identification with the epic’s concept of Time, the interplay of gender and ethics that inform these arguments, and finally, a possible answer to these arguments that incorporates the above insights. In the end, I hope to provide a fitting testament to both the moral and theological depth of the epic as a whole.

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Introduction: The Case Against Time

In her book *Disorienting Dharma: Ethics and the Aesthetics of Suffering in the Mahābhārata*, Emily T. Hudson identifies *kālavāda*, or “the doctrine of time”¹ as the central theme of the epic. Where other scholars have variously described the *Mahābhārata*² as “an argument with God,”³ a “harsh, bare, stark, and demanding philosophy of life,”⁴ and a testament to “the problem of existence itself,”⁵ Hudson’s own interpretation resonates more with David Shulman’s vision of the *Mahābhārata* “as an extended essay...on time and its terrors.”⁶ For Hudson, Time⁷ (*kāla*) in the *Mahābhārata* is not only an abstract concept, but also a personified “character”⁸ that serves as the unsung antagonist of the epic, opposing both hero and villain alike.

As a concept, Time, which is used interchangeably with Fate (*daiva*),⁹ can be described as “an oppressive, overpowering force that leads all living beings toward their

¹ Emily T. Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma: Ethics and the Aesthetics of Suffering in the Mahābhārata*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 156.

² Hereafter abbreviated in the footnotes as *Mbh*. For the purposes of this paper, I shall rely primarily the translations of van Buitenen (books 1-6), Johnson (book 10), Fitzgerald (book 11), and Ganguli (books 7-9, 12-18). All translations featured in this paper are theirs unless otherwise noted. However, this reliance will be coupled with frequent references to the diction of the original Sanskrit—particularly in the case of Ganguli’s rather dated translation.

³ Alf Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 214.

⁴ Irawati Karve, quoted in Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma*, 215.

⁵ V. S. Sukthankar, quoted in Arti Dhand, *Woman as Fire, Woman as Sage: Sexual Ideology in the Mahābhārata*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 12.

⁶ David Shulman, quoted in Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma*, 146.

⁷ For the purposes of this paper, I have capitalized “Time” in the style of van Buitenen as a means of highlighting this specific concept of epic Time (*kāla*), as opposed to a more generic, universalized conception of “time.” I have done the same with other terms such as Law (*dharma*) and Fate (*daiva*) for similar reasons.

⁸ *Ibid*, 146-147.

⁹ *Ibid*, 186.

doom.”¹⁰ In its abstract form as *kālavāda*, this concept of time serves as the impetus by which the *dharma* declines from one age (*yuga*) to the next, before the final age, known as the Kali Yuga, culminates in the destruction of the universe. This destruction also entails rebirth of the universe and a return to the idyllic Kṛta Yuga, in which the *dharma* naturally begins to decline again with the progression of Time, *ad infinitum*. As a cyclical phenomenon, epic Time is imagined as an ever-turning wheel, continually “revolving”¹¹ (*paryaya*) through the four ages (*yugas*) and crushing every living being in its path with the strength of a juggernaut.

As an entity, Time appears in the text as a multifarious “specter”¹² that can appear allegorically as “a rat gnawing on a rope”¹³ or “a snake coiled at the bottom of a pit,”¹⁴ but also in more humanoid forms, such as the goddess Kālarātrī¹⁵ in the Sauptika Parvan, the bald vagrant in the Mausala Parvan,¹⁶ and the hunter Jarā.¹⁷ The most provocative¹⁸ of these personified forms is Kṛṣṇa, who refers to himself in the Bhagavad Gītā as the “Placer” (*dhātrī*) or cosmic agent of Fate.¹⁹ This title occurs in the midst of Kṛṣṇa’s lengthy self-revelation to Arjuna, in which Arjuna experiences a vision of Kṛṣṇa’s

¹⁰ Luis Gonzalez-Reimann quoted in *Ibid*, 156.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 156.

¹² *Ibid*, 146-147.

¹³ *Ibid*. See *Mbh* 1.13 and 1.41.

¹⁴ *Ibid*. See *Mbh* 11.2-8.

¹⁵ “The Night of Time.” *Ibid*. See *Mbh* 10.64-65.

¹⁶ *Ibid*. See *Mbh* 16.3.

¹⁷ Not mentioned by Hudson. His name means “old age.” *Mbh* 16.5.

¹⁸ Though inexplicably ignored by Hudson, who only addresses Kṛṣṇa in his capacity as an *avatāra*. See Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma*, 198-205.

¹⁹ *Mbh* 6.32.33-34.

“universal form” (*viśvarūpa*)²⁰ with its myriad, monstrous mouths devouring both friend and foe like the fires of doomsday.²¹ He then famously²² proclaims to Arjuna:

*kālo 'smi lokakṣayakṛt pravṛddho; lokān samāhartum iha pravṛttaḥ |
rte 'pi tvā na bhaviṣyanti sarve; ye 'vasthitāḥ pratyanīkeṣu yodhāḥ ||
[...]mayaiwaite nihatāḥ pūrvam eva; nimittamātraṃ bhava Savyasācin ||*

I am Time grown old to destroy the world,
Embarked on the course of world annihilation:
Except for yourself none of these will survive
Of these warriors arrayed in opposite armies.
...I myself have doomed them ages ago:
Be merely my hand in this, Left-handed Archer!²³

It is at this point in the epic that the perennial threat of Time manifests itself in its full, apocalyptic glory as not only the destroyer of all life, but also the destroyer of all *meaning* insofar as it relates to human agency. When Kṛṣṇa reveals his true nature to Arjuna, he also reveals the true extent to which humans remain totally powerless and utterly dominated by the whims of Time and Fate.

²⁰ *Mbh* 6.33.16.

²¹ *Mbh* 6.33.25-30.

²² To be sure, the iconic nature of Kṛṣṇa’s self-revelation as Time in this passage is difficult to overstate, but it is not by any means the only cosmological description of Time in the text. Nevertheless, it is in the spirit of A. K. Ramanujan—who declared that in the mind of a “native speaker,” the *Mahābhārata* represents a single “well-formed whole”—that I have opted to take the epic seriously as a unified text, rather than as an “unstructured monster” riddled with “hundreds of interpolations” (A. K. Ramanujan, “Repetition in the *Mahābhārata*,” in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma, [Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991], 421). Such a reading naturally places a great deal of weight on Kṛṣṇa’s claims in the Bhagavad Gītā. For more information on the diverse threads of epic eschatology, theories of Time, and theodicy (respectively) that run through the *Mahābhārata*, see Lynn Thomas, “The Identity of the Destroyer in the *Mahābhārata*,” *Numen* 41, no. 3 (1994): 255-272; Alf Hiltebeitel and Randy Kloetzli, “Kāla,” in *The Hindu World*, ed. Sushil Mittal and Gene R. Thursby, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 553-586; and Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), *passim*.

²³ *Mbh* 6.33.30-35.

Indeed, the characters of the epic are constantly said to be “caught in ‘time’s noose’ ... ‘bewildered’ and ‘impelled by the law of time.’”²⁴ The trope of Time as the destroyer colors all major events of the epic accordingly, especially those involving death and grief. When Aśvatthāman prepares for the massacre at night, for example, he senses a “reversal of Time,”²⁵ and when Gāndhārī publically laments for her sons and their compatriots killed in the battle of Kurukṣetra, she cries out, “See how Time turns!”²⁶

It is unsurprising then that as the single, pivotal “moment to which all other subsequent moments in the epic are a response,” the *Mahābhārata*’s account of the disrobing of Draupadī also includes a number of perspectives on Time. This begins when Duryodhana sends an usher to fetch Draupadī from the women’s quarters and the princess responds with equanimity by reciting the following verse:

*evaṃ nūnaṃ vyadadhāt Saṃvidhātā; sparśāv ubhau sprśato vīra bālau /
dharmaṃ tv ekaṃ paramaṃ prāha loke; sa naḥ śamaṃ dhāsyati
gopyamānaḥ //*

That is how he disposes, the All-Disposer,
Both touches touch the sage and the fool:
He said, “In this world only Law is supreme”:
He shall bring us peace when the Law is obeyed!²⁷

At this point, Draupadī, having secluded herself in the midst of her period, has absolutely no intention of entering the assembly hall and polluting it with her ritually impure

²⁴ Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma*, 156.

²⁵ *Mbh* 10.1.64, quoted in Alf Hiltebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahābhārata*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), 317.

²⁶ *Mbh* 11.25.25-35.

²⁷ *Mbh* 2.60.13.

presence. Governed as she is by “the Law of women,”²⁸ Draupadī has no intention whatsoever of complying with the usher’s—that is to say Duryodhana’s—inappropriate demands. Moreover, this verse leads us to believe that Draupadī, whose behavior falls firmly on the side of “Law” (that is to say *dharma*)²⁹, will prevail in this dispute because those who follow the Law are understood to be favored by the workings of Fate, here personified as “the All-Disposer” (*saṃvidhātr*).

Unfortunately, this does not prove to be the case, as Draupadī is eventually dragged to the hall by the hair and molested in full view of her husbands and the elders of the Kuru dynasty. In the midst of her humiliation, she publically laments,

*mṛṣyante Kuravaś ceme manye kālasya paryayam /
snuṣāṃ duhitaraṃ caiva kliṣyamānām anarhatīm //
kiṃ tv ataḥ kṛpaṇaṃ bhūyo yad ahaṃ strī satī śubhā /
sabhāmadhyaṃ vigāhe 'dya kva nu dharmo mahīkṣitām //*

The Kurus allow—and methinks Time is out of joint—their innocent daughter and daughter-in-law to be molested! What greater humiliation than that I, a woman of virtue and beauty, now must invade the men’s hall? What is left of the Law of the kings?³⁰

While one would perhaps expect any other woman in the same position to do the same thing, Draupadī’s speech also carries with it a broader, cosmic concern. By juxtaposing the seeming impotence of “the Law of kings” with the treachery of Time, Draupadī casts doubt on her previous assertion that the All-Disposer rewards those who follow the Law.

²⁸ *Mbh* 2.72.10-20

²⁹ For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to the abstract concept as either Law or *dharma*, as opposed to Dharma as the god who represents this concept. Granted, the distinction between the concept and the god does not exist in the text, but such a level of fluidity is difficult to render into English in a readable fashion.

³⁰ *Mbh* 2.62.7-8.

Like Kṛṣṇa’s self-revelation to Arjuna, the ethico-cosmic implications of the disrobing scene create what Hudson describes as a “rupture”: a “gap in meaning”³¹ so vast that it threatens to devour the integrity of the text and, by extension, the moral universe itself. In this way, Draupadī’s faith in the workings of Fate is fast eclipsed by terror and dread in the face of Time.

Draupadī’s doubts are later echoed by Dhṛtarāṣṭra who, in a rare moment of lucidity, bemoans his own circumstance as a victim of omnipotent, omnimalevolent Fate. As Draupadī and the Pāṇḍavas leave the assembly hall, he tells Saṃjaya,

*yasmai devāḥ prayacchanti puruṣāya parābhavam /
buddhiṃ tasyāpakarṣanti so 'pācīnāni paśyati //
buddhau kaluṣa bhūtāyāṃ vināśe pratyupasthite /
anayo nayasamkāśo hṛdayān nāpasarpati //
anarthās cārtharūpeṇa arthās cānartha rūpiṇaḥ /
uttiṣṭhanti vināśānte naraṃ tac cāsya rocate //
na kālo daṇḍam udyamya śiro kṛntati kasya cit /
kālasya balam etāvad viparītārtha darśanam //*

When the Gods deal defeat to a person, they first take his mind away, so that he sees matters wrongly. When destruction is imminent and his mind is beclouded, the wrong course appears as the right one and cannot be dislodged from his heart. When his destruction is near, evil takes on the appearance of good, the good appears as evil, and thus they rise up before a man and he is content. Time does not raise a stick and clobber a man’s head; the power of Time is just this upended view of things.³²

Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s speech raises what is arguably the central question of *Mahābhārata*, namely: the question of why good people, good kingdoms, and good lives go bad and what kinds of forces are responsible for this process. Where Draupadī merely suspects

³¹ Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma*, 102.

³² *Mbh* 2.72.8-11.

that Time is “out of joint” (*paryaya*),³³ Dhṛtarāṣṭra finds his answer in personifying Time as an omnipresent, subtle but nonetheless vicious mortal enemy of humankind. However, the true horror implied by the epic concept of Time is not its propensity for physical destruction, or even “the Gods” complicity in this destruction, but rather Time’s active role in the decay of human morality. As the hidden agent behind the misdeeds and delusions of humankind, Time’s ubiquitous presence in the text represents a rupture at the very heart of the epic’s worldview, because it implies that the actions of its characters are not truly their own.

His discussion of Time notwithstanding, the most intriguing moment of Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s melodramatic monologue occurs when, in the midst of a poetic description of Draupadī, he says “Earth herself would burn under her [i.e. Draupadī’s] wretched eyes.”³⁴ Despite its seeming offhandedness, Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s comment is suffused with deeper meaning, because it recalls at once the story of “the burden of the Earth”³⁵ mentioned in the Ādi Parvan as well as the later scene in which Gāndhārī scorches Yudhiṣṭhira’s fingernails with the ascetic power channeled through her eyes.³⁶

The connection between Draupadī and Gāndhārī is then reinforced in the following verse, which focuses on the lament of Gāndhārī and the other Bhārata women, who mourn the departure of Draupadī and what that means for the future of the kingdom.

³³ The exact same phrase—*manye kālasya paryayam*—that van Buitenen translates as “methinks Time is out of joint” (*Mbh* 2.62.7). A more accurate rendering of this phrase occurs in *The Ritual of Battle*, where Hildebeitel translates it as “I regard this as a reversal of Time” (*Mbh* 10.1.64, quoted in Hildebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle*, 317). *Paryaya* is the same word that Hudson renders as “revolving” when she describes Time as a wheel. See Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma*, 156.

³⁴ *Mbh* 2.72.18.

³⁵ *Mbh* 1.58.40-50.

³⁶ *Mbh* 11.15.

Like the twin instances of clothing-related supernatural activity—that is to say, Draupadī’s never-ending sari³⁷ and the aforementioned heat from the edge of Gāndhārī’s blindfold—Gāndhārī’s commiseration with Draupadī in the Sabhā Parvan finds its parallel nine books later, when Gāndhārī and Draupadī together mourn the loss of their sons,³⁸ but these are just a few of the many similarities shared by these two characters. Both are wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, and queens incarnated from the realm of gods.³⁹ They are both closely-associated with *dharma* and so devoted to their husbands that they voluntarily handicap themselves so as not to be above them.⁴⁰ Draupadī and Gāndhārī both receive boons that increase the size of their family,⁴¹ they have strong opinions about the nature of kingship⁴² (which naturally go unheeded), and both of them lose their sons as an indirect result of their brothers’ scheming.⁴³ Likewise, they both experience life-changing encounters with fire.⁴⁴

Perhaps the most interesting connection between the two women is that both of them at various points blame both Time/Fate and Kṛṣṇa for the carnage of the Bhārata war.⁴⁵ Likewise, when Dhṛtarāṣṭra tacitly links the two women to the Earth with the

³⁷ *Mbh* 2.61.40-45.

³⁸ *Mbh* 11.15.16b-20.

³⁹ *Mbh* 1.61.95-100.

⁴⁰ As in the case of Draupadī’s voluntary exile and Gāndhārī’s blindfold.

⁴¹ Gāndhārī’s boon of a hundred sons and Draupadī’s five husbands, respectively.

⁴² See Draupadī and Gāndhārī’s parallel discussions to Yudhiṣṭhira and Duryodhana on the nature of kingship in the Vana and Udyoga Parvans (respectively).

⁴³ Specifically, Śakuni and Dhṛṣṭadyumna, who are both indirectly responsible for the deaths of their nephews.

⁴⁴ As in the case of Draupadī’s birth and Gāndhārī’s death.

⁴⁵ As discussed in the following section. See *Mbh* 3.13, 3.31, and 11.25.

phrase, “Earth herself would burn under her wretched eyes,”⁴⁶ it must be noted that all three female agents share an intimate connection with Kṛṣṇa, as the Earth occasions the incarnation of Kṛṣṇa, Draupadī sets in motion his purpose on Earth, and Gāndhārī puts an end to it with her curse. This apparent coincidence merits further investigation.

To be sure, Hudson herself considers the unique character of Kṛṣṇa to be a dead end or “non-answer”⁴⁷ when it comes to the question of theodicy, but Hudson’s analysis also, inexplicably, refuses to acknowledge Kṛṣṇa as Time—thereby ignoring a crucial component in the “narrative strategy” she terms “the aesthetics of suffering.”⁴⁸ For example, when Hudson describes how these aesthetics present Time as “a ‘solution’ to the problem of suffering”⁴⁹ as well as its cause, this supposed solution entails “an enlightened acceptance and acknowledgement of time’s power,”⁵⁰ “equanimity,”⁵¹ and “a calm, disinterested mind”⁵² that then allows one to “psychologically move beyond time...and hence beyond suffering.”⁵³ While this is certainly an accurate portrayal of the epic’s thought, Hudson fails to note that it corresponds perfectly to the teachings of the Bhagavad Gītā, as delivered by Kṛṣṇa,⁵⁴ who reveals himself as Time shortly thereafter.⁵⁵

⁴⁶ *Mbh* 2.72.18.

⁴⁷ Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma*, 205-206.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁵⁴ See *Mbh* 6.24, for example.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 177.

In a similar fashion, Hudson describes how the epic discourages “emotional responses (such as grief and anger) to the injustices”⁵⁶ of Time in favor of *vairāgya*, a value she defines as “the full development of the happiness that comes from the dying off of desire.”⁵⁷ However, in doing so, she effectively ignores Draupadī and Gāndhārī’s responses and focuses instead on Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Yudhishtira who, despite their incessant philosophizing, never presume to take Kṛṣṇa to task in his capacity as Time.

Thus, in light of the evidence produced by Draupadī and Gāndhārī’s parallel arguments against Kṛṣṇa as Time, this paper will attempt to provide a *reading* of the *Mahābhārata*—that is to say, a single interpretation, coherent in itself, but also one of many possibilities—that reexamines the place of these two queens within the theodicean milieu of the text and its aesthetics of suffering. I argue that these parallel arguments play a central role in establishing the aesthetics of suffering, posing crucial questions of theodicy, and finally, pointing towards a suitable conclusion of the text as an argument against grief. As such, the remainder of the paper will consist of three main parts as I describe 1) the three arguments against Kṛṣṇa presented by Draupadī, Gāndhārī, and the sage Uttanka, along with their various rebuttals; 2) the connection between gender, ethics, and Time in the *Mahābhārata*, with special attention to the decline of *dharma* and the symbolic roles occupied by Draupadī and Gāndhārī as both women and queens; and finally, 3) the manner in which Kṛṣṇa’s own example within the text implies the value of *vairāgya* as the ‘answer’ to these arguments.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 56.

⁵⁷ Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma*, 56.

Three Arguments with God: The Prosecution of a Devious Divinity

The doctrine of *kālavāda* and the theodicean problems it implies dominate Draupadī's and Gāndhārī's arguments against Kṛṣṇa. While there is certainly no dearth of arguments against Kṛṣṇa himself in the text,⁵⁸ only Draupadī, Gāndhārī, and Uttanka seem to take Kṛṣṇa's divine nature into account. To be sure, Uttanka's appearance in the Aśvamedhika Parvan seems more or less like an afterthought, but Kṛṣṇa's response to his argument provides a valuable insight into his two previous discussions with Draupadī and Gāndhārī. It is only in the final argument with Uttanka that Kṛṣṇa openly refers to his own divinity, but taken together as a whole, the three arguments build up to this moment, as the suggestions of Kṛṣṇa's affinity with Time become more and more prominent.

DRAUPADĪ'S ARGUMENT

As Kṛṣṇa's first major interlocutor, Draupadī's criticism of Kṛṣṇa and Time is split between two parallel dialogues, one regarding Kṛṣṇa himself and the other, regarding him in the abstract as the Placer (*dhātrī*). Both of these dialogues take place early on in the epic and as such, the connection is mentioned offhand, but not emphasized. All the evidence is there, but for some reason, Draupadī does not seem to put two and two together.

The first dialogue occurs in chapter thirteen of the Vana Parvan, in which the Pāṇḍavas, fresh from their banishment at the hands of the villainous Kauravas, are visited by their friend Kṛṣṇa. Before Draupadī's conversation with Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna greets him in

⁵⁸ Such as that of Duryodhana. See *Mbh* 9.60.

pious terms, referring to him variously as Nārāyaṇa, Hari, Rudra, Brahma, Yama, the Law, the Placer, and, most notably, “Time.”⁵⁹ He then praises Kṛṣṇa, saying:

*yugānte sarvabhūtāni saṁkṣipya Madhusūdana /
ātmany evātma sātkrtvā jagad āsse paramtapa //*

At the end of the Eon you dissolve all creatures, Madhusūdana, and having made the world your own within your very self, you remain thereafter, enemy-burner.⁶⁰

Here, in anticipation of Mārkaṇḍeya’s lecture, Arjuna summarizes the theology of Kṛṣṇa’s cosmic supremacy and his association with both Time and Fate.

Meanwhile, Draupadī is present at this very same assembly, and she also prefaces her address to Kṛṣṇa in theological terms, referring to him as Prajāpati, Viṣṇu, the “Supreme Person” (*puruṣottama*), and “the truth” (*satyam*).⁶¹ Having affirmed her faith in Kṛṣṇa, Draupadī comes to the main body in her argument with an explosion of indignation:

*nanv ahaṁ Kṛṣṇā Bhīṣmasya Dhṛtarāṣṭrasya cobhayoḥ /
snuṣā bhavāmi dharmeṇa sāhaṁ dāsī kṛtā balāt //
garhaye Pāṇḍavāṁs tv eva yudhi śreṣṭhān mahābalān /
ye kliśyamānāṁ prekṣante dharmapatnīm yaśasvinīm //*

Am I not Kṛṣṇā, by Law the daughter-in-law of Bhīṣma and Dhṛtarāṣṭra? And I was forcibly reduced to a slave! I *detest* the Pāṇḍavas, those grand strongmen in war, who looked on while their glorious consort in Law was molested!⁶²

Here, Draupadī invokes the principle of *rakṣaṇa* to highlight the failure of her husbands, their relatives, and their allies to protect her. Her emphatic use of the term “consort in

⁵⁹ *Mbh* 3.13.19-20.

⁶⁰ *Mbh* 3.13.34.

⁶¹ *Mbh* 3.13.44-45.

⁶² *Mbh* 3.13.57-58.

Law” (*dharmapatnī*) emphasizes the moral dimension of her plight because, as was established in the second book, the assault in the assembly hall was not merely an assault on Draupadī but an assault on the *dharma* itself. Thus, Draupadī understands the problem to be not just a matter of realpolitik, but a matter of cosmic morality as well. Bracketing her own nature as Śrī and its marital implications, it is for this reason that Draupadī approaches Kṛṣṇa in both capacities, as both her husbands’ ally and the Supreme Being.

Upon hearing this, Kṛṣṇa replies,

*rodiṣyanti striyo hy evaṃ yeṣāṃ kruddhāsi bhāmini //
 bībhatsu śarasāṃchannāñ śonitaughapariplutān /
 nihatāñ jīvitam tyaktvā śayānān vasudhātale //
 yat samartham pāṇḍavānāṃ tat kariṣyāmi mā śucaḥ /
 satyam te pratijānāmi rājñāṃ rājñī bhaviṣyasi //
 pated dyaur himavāñ śīryet pṛthivī śakalībhavet /
 śuṣyēt toyanidhiḥ Kṛṣṇe na me mogham vaco bhavet //*

Weep shall the women of those that have angered you, angry woman! Weep over their men as they lie on the face of the earth, covered by the Terrifier’s [i.e. Arjuna’s] arrows, showered by a rain of blood, cut down to relinquish their lives! I shall do whatever the Pāṇḍavas can do; do not sorrow! I make you a promise: you shall be a queen of kings! Let Sky fall down, let Himalaya break, let Earth splinter, let Sea dry up, Kṛṣṇā—my word shall not be false!⁶³

Just as Draupadī addresses Kṛṣṇa in both personal and cosmic terms, Kṛṣṇa answers in kind by assuring her that his promise of the Pāṇḍavas’ victory is destined to occur. Indeed, Kṛṣṇa’s reply is pregnant with theological import, because the apocalyptic imagery Kṛṣṇa invokes is not merely a figure of speech, but as will later be seen in the

⁶³ *Mbh* 3.13.114b-117.

vision of Mārkaṇḍeya, it is a distant but nonetheless impending reality. In the end, Kṛṣṇa’s word proves itself true, but it is also important to note that rather than truly addressing the injustice at the heart of Draupadī’s grievances, Kṛṣṇa merely offers a deferral that maintains the brutal status quo of the epic, while simultaneously preserving dubious position as a caring friend and ally.

Eighteen chapters later, Draupadī has a similar outburst in conversation with Yudhiṣṭhira, in which she condemns Fate as in his capacity as the “Lord Placer” (*dhātṛ īśāna*). This speech provides an implicit parallel to the one in chapter thirteen, in that where she had previously complained to Kṛṣṇa about her impotent husbands, here, she complains to her eldest husband about the cosmic cruelty of Fate. Most of her discussion centers on Fate as anthropomorphized force and all the existential horror such a concept entails, as she describes how people are “like wooden puppets” (*iva dārumayī yoṣā*)⁶⁴ whose lives are predestined before they are even born.

ārya karmaṇi yuñjānaḥ pāpe vā punar īśvaraḥ |
vyāpya bhūtāni carate na cāyam iti lakṣyate ||
[...]yathā kāṣṭhena vā kāṣṭam aśmānaṃ cāśmanā punaḥ |
ayasā cāpy ayaś chindyān nirviceṣṭam acetanam ||
evaṃ sa Bhagavān devaḥ svayambhūḥ prapitāmahaḥ |
hinasti bhūtair bhūtāni chadma kṛtvā Yudhiṣṭhira ||
saṃprajoyya viyojyāyaṃ kāmākāra karaḥ prabhuḥ |
krīḍate Bhagavan bhūtair bālaḥ krīḍanakair iva ||
na māṭṛpitṛvad rājan dhātā bhūteṣu vartate |
roṣād iva pravṛtto 'yaṃ yathāyam itaro janaḥ ||
āryāñ śīlavato dṛṣṭvā hrīmato vṛtti karśitān |

⁶⁴ *Mbh* 3.31.22.

anāryān sukhinaś caiva vihvalāmīva cintayā ||
tavemām āpadaṃ dṛṣṭvā samṛddhiṃ ca Suyodhana |
dhātāraṃ garhaye Pārtha viṣamaṃ yo 'nupaśyati ||
ārya śāstrātige krūre lubdhe dharmāpacāyini |
Dhārtarāṣṭre śriyaṃ dattvā dhātā kiṃ phalam aśnute ||
karma cet kṛtam anveti kartāraṃ nānyam ṛcchati |
karmaṇā tena pāpena lipyate nūnam Īśvaraḥ ||
atha karmakṛtaṃ pāpaṃ na cet kartāraṃ ṛcchati |
kāraṇaṃ balam eveha janāñ śocāmi durbalān ||

Yoking himself to deeds noble and evil, *God roams through the creatures and is not identified*. . . .As one breaks wood with wood, stone with stone, iron with iron, the inert with the insentient, so the blessed God, the self-existent great-grandfather, hurts creatures with creatures, *hiding behind a disguise*, Yudhiṣṭhira. Joining and unjoining them, the capricious blessed Lord plays with the creatures like a child with its toys. The Placer does not act toward his creatures like a father or mother, he seems to act out of fury, like every other person! When I see noble, moral, and modest people harassed in their way of life, and the ignoble happy, I seem to stagger with wonder. Having witnessed your distress and the wealth at Suyodhana's, I condemn the Placer, Pārtha, who allows such outrages! What does the Placer gain by giving the fortune to the Dhārtarāṣṭra who offends against the noble scriptures, a cruel, avaricious diminisher of the Law? If an act that has been done pursues its doer and no one else, then surely God is tainted by the evil he has done! Or if the evil that has been done does not pursue its doer, then mere power is the cause of everything, and I bemoan powerless folk!⁶⁵

Where Draupadi had previously expressed her faith in the justice of the “All-Disposer,”⁶⁶ her depiction of Fate in this passage deludes and impels all beings to good and evil action alike, slaughtering “creatures with creatures.” In her discussion, Fate is personified as “blessed God, the self-existent great-grandfather,” who nonetheless possesses neither pity nor restraint, but only capriciousness and unrelenting cruelty as he “plays with the creatures like a child with its toys.”

⁶⁵ *Mbh* 3.31.29, 34-42, emphasis mine.

⁶⁶ *Mbh* 2.60.13.

These horrific images notwithstanding, the most horrific notion of all is that this inhuman, ethically monstrous conception of Fate roams freely among humankind, unidentified. In a more literal sense, this occurs in the Mausala Parvan where Time himself appears in the form of a mysterious vagrant,⁶⁷ but of course, the most intimate instance of this phenomenon is that of Kṛṣṇa himself, as described in chapter thirteen. Even though Kṛṣṇa himself is not mentioned in this passage, a broader reading of the epic as a whole encourages us to view this too as a challenge of his ethical authority.

At first, Yudhiṣṭhira replies in a characteristically obtuse manner, by describing her speech as “well-phrased and polished,” but still “heresy” (*nāstikya*).⁶⁸ He then elaborates on this point with an argument of his own:

*nāhaṃ dharmaphalānveṣī rājaputri carāmy uta /
dadāmi deyam ity eva yaje yaṣṭavyam ity uta //
astu vātra phalaṃ mā vā kartavyaṃ puruṣeṇa yat /
gṛhān āvasatā Kṛṣṇe yathāśakti karomi tat //
dharmaṃ carāmi suśroṇi na dharmaphalakāraṇāt /
āgamān anatikramya satāṃ vṛttam avekṣya ca /
dharma eva manaḥ Kṛṣṇe svabhāvāc caiva me dhṛtam //
[...]ativādān madāc caiva mā dharmam atiśaṅkithāḥ /
dharmātiśaṅkī puruṣas tiryaggatiparāyaṇaḥ //*

I do not act in quest of the fruits of the Law; I give because I must! I sacrifice because I must! Whether it bears fruit or not, I do, buxom Draupadī,⁶⁹ according to my ability, what a person who has a household is beholden to do. I obey the Law, full-hipped woman, not because of its reward, but in order not to transgress

⁶⁷ *Mbh* 16.3.

⁶⁸ *Mbh* 3.32.1.

⁶⁹ For whatever reason, there seems to be some minor discrepancies between my Sanskrit text and van Buitenen’s translation. The general sense is the same, but the vocatives are slightly different. Thus, the Sanskrit of these verses feature two instances of “Kṛṣṇā” that do not carry over to the translation, while the translation has one instance of “Draupadī” that does not occur in the Sanskrit.

the traditions and to look to the conduct of the strict. *By its nature my mind is beholden to the Law...Don't doubt the Law, out of argumentativeness or mere folly, for the man who doubts the Law ends up an animal.*⁷⁰

Again, Yudhiṣṭhira, like Kṛṣṇa, answers with a deferral. Instead of addressing the nature of her doubts, Yudhiṣṭhira simply rebukes her for doubting at all. He then describes the Law as a kind of categorical imperative, while simultaneously emphasizing his own sense of psychological dependency on the Law as what makes him human. In the end, Yudhiṣṭhira's argument is not really an argument at all, but rather a heartfelt plea for Draupadī to return to the circular logic of tradition and pledge herself anew to the Law that failed her.

While Kṛṣṇa promises her an improvement, Yudhiṣṭhira resorts to an *ad baculum* argument by saying that Draupadī's doubts about the Law leave her vulnerable to lose more than she already has. In both cases, Kṛṣṇa and Yudhiṣṭhira stress an ethic of *pativrata* that consists of loyalty to both one's husband and one's *dharma*, and in the process, they ignore the corresponding ethic of protection that is *rakṣaṇa dharma*.⁷¹ In this way, they exempt the Law—and by implication themselves—from providing the necessary protection that would actually make them worthy of such loyalty.

GĀNDHĀRĪ'S ARGUMENT

This same motif of the virtuous woman, betrayed by Dharma and ravaged by Time dominates the Strī Parvan, in which the blameless wives of all the warriors slain in the battle of Kurukṣetra are left with the devastating choice of either living out their lives

⁷⁰ *Mbh* 3.32.2-4, 6, emphasis mine.

⁷¹ As will be explained further in the next section. See Simon Brodbeck, "Gendered soteriology: marriage and *karmayoga*," in *Gender and Narrative in the Mahābhārata*, ed. Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black, (London: Routledge, 2007), 165-166.

as widows, or else committing suttee. As before, both Time and Kṛṣṇa are blamed, but this time, it is not Draupadī but Gāndhārī who accuses him. Having lost every last one of her hundred sons, Gāndhārī occupies a prominent place in the chorus of mourning widows in the Strī Parvan. United with Kuntī and Draupadī by virtue of their shared grief at the death of their respective sons, Gāndhārī attempts to comfort Draupadī, saying,

*maivaṃ putrīti śokārtā paśya mām api duḥkhitām ||
 manye lokavināśo 'yaṃ kālaparyāya coditaḥ |
 avaśya bhāvī saṃprāptaḥ svabhāvāl lomaharṣaṇaḥ ||
 idaṃ tat samanuprāptaṃ Vidurasya vaco mahat |
 asiddhānunaye Kṛṣṇe yad uvāca mahāmatih ||
 tasminn aparihārye 'rthe vyatīte ca viśeṣataḥ |
 mā śuco na hi śocyās te saṃgrāme nidhanaṃ gatāḥ ||
 yathaiva tvaṃ tathaivāhaṃ ko vā māśvāsaiṣyati |
 mamaiva hy aparādhena kulam agryaṃ vināśitam ||*

Do not be tormented with grief, girl. See how even I am suffering miserably. I think this horrifying devastation of the world was brought on by the turning of Time. It necessarily had to be, and it came to pass automatically. What happened here is just what Vidura predicted in the great speech he made after Kṛṣṇa failed to persuade the Kauravas. Do not grieve for something that cannot be averted, and especially not for what is past. And really, those who met their end in battle should not be mourned. It's the same for me as it is for you. Who's going to comfort me? It was my wrong that brought this eminent family to extinction.⁷²

Once again, Time is described as the cause of the war, but in this particular instance, Gāndhārī seems to depict Time as a non-sentient force of nature—even going so far as to take comfort in its sheer implacable impersonality. However, Gāndhārī fails to find comfort in her own assurances and quickly shifts the blame to herself. One possible interpretation of this shift is that Gāndhārī finds the prospect of a cold, impersonal,

⁷² *Mbh* 11.15.16b-20.

meaningless Fate so unnerving that she would much rather blame herself and deal with all the self-loathing that inevitably entails, presumably because at least, that way, her actions retain a sense of agency and meaning.

Nevertheless, her condemnation of Time reoccurs when she confronts Kṛṣṇa.

After listing the great warriors of the Kaurava army, she says,

*ye hanyuḥ śastravegena devān api nararṣabhāḥ ||
ta ime nihatāḥ saṃkhye paśya kālasya paryayam |
nātibhāro 'sti daivasya dhruvaṃ Mādhava kaś cana |
yad ime nihatāḥ śūrāḥ kṣatriyaiḥ kṣatriyarṣabhāḥ ||
tadaiva nihatāḥ Kṛṣṇa mama putrās tarasvinaḥ |
yadaivākṛta kāmas tvam upaplavyaṃ gataḥ punaḥ ||*

Those bulls of men could kill even the Gods with the power of their weapons, but they were all cut down in the war. See how Time turns! *Certainly there is no charge too heavy for fate*, Mādhava, for these heroic kṣatriya bulls were killed by kṣatriyas. My impetuous sons were dead already, Kṛṣṇa, when you returned to Upalavya without having accomplished what you wanted.⁷³

Again, she stresses the inevitability of Time, but in this instance, it provokes not comfort but indignant rage, as she declares with all the futile shock and horror previously expressed by Draupadī: “Certainly there is no charge too heavy for fate.” As before with Draupadī, the language of Time as a sentient force inevitably leads to a discussion of its divisive cruelty as “kṣatriya bulls” are killed by other “kṣatriyas” in direct parallel to Draupadī’s claim that Fate kills “creatures with creatures.”⁷⁴

Like Draupadī, Gāndhārī also holds Kṛṣṇa accountable in a double sense as both himself and Time. This becomes clear when her argument intensifies:

⁷³ *Mbh* 11.25.29c-31, emphasis mine.

⁷⁴ *Mbh* 3.31.35.

*upekṣitā vinaśyantas tvayā kasmāj janārdana ||
śaktena bahu bhṛtyena vipule tiṣṭhatā bale |
ubhayatra samarthena śrutavākyena caiva ha ||
icchatopekṣito nāśaḥ kurūṇāṃ madhusūdana |
yasmāt tvayā mahābāho phalaṃ tasmād avāpnuhi ||*

Why did you ignore them as they perished, Janārdana? You who were able to do something, who had many retainers, who stood in the midst of an extensive army, who had an equal interest in both sides, who had heard all that was said? And since you neglected the destruction of the Kurus, O Slayer of Madhu, *because you wanted it*, O man of mighty arms, now take the result of that.⁷⁵

At this point, Gāndhārī takes the association of Kṛṣṇa with Time to its logical conclusion, because if Kṛṣṇa truly is the single greatest force behind the Bhārata war, then he is not the well-meaning diplomatic failure he claims to be, but rather a traitor who is complicit in death of Gāndhārī’s sons. Gāndhārī emphasizes this claim by referring to Kṛṣṇa as Janārdana (“the aGītātor of men”), thereby highlighting his destructive qualities. She also argues that in the final analysis, Kṛṣṇa “wanted” the slaughter of her sons to occur, despite her previous, parallel statement that Kṛṣṇa “wanted” to broker a bloodless peace between the two armies.⁷⁶ It is this revelation that prompts Gāndhārī to finally gather her powers accumulated through her numerous devotional practices to her husband and use them to destroy Kṛṣṇa who, with all his power as the ruler of the universe, failed to reward her loyalty to the principles of *pativrata dharma*. Moreover, to reflect the true horror of her experiences, Gāndhārī stresses that this same curse carries over to the entirety of Kṛṣṇa’s kingdom, so that his family, like her own, will now be destroyed entirely by his actions.

⁷⁵ *Mbh* 11.25.36b-38, emphasis mine.

⁷⁶ *Mbh* 11.25.31.

In reply, Kṛṣṇa, in one of the most understated but chilling moments in the entire epic, replies “with a bit of a smile” (*abhyutsmayat*):⁷⁷

*saṁhartā Vṛṣṇicakrasya nānyo mad vidyate śubhe /
jāne 'ham etad apy evaṁ cīrṇaṁ carasi kṣatriye //
avadhyās te narair anyair api vā devadānavaiḥ /
parasparakṛtaṁ nāsam ataḥ prāpsyanti Yādavāḥ //*

Good woman, no one but I will be the destroyer of the circle of the Vṛṣṇis. I know this to be so. Kṣatriya woman, you are doing what has already been done. The Yādavas cannot be killed by other men, nor even by the Gods or Dānavas, so they will come to their destruction at each other's hands.⁷⁸

Cursed to suffer a catastrophic family tragedy on the scale of Kurukṣetra, Kṛṣṇa betrays his own inhuman nature by reacting to the news with a kind of callous smugness. In this passage, Gāndhārī wants Kṛṣṇa to suffer the same horror and loss as she has, but to her dismay, she finds that this impossible because Kṛṣṇa already knows the decree of Fate and wills it to be so. Where Gāndhārī had intended the curse to be an expression of her own agency as a wrathful mother possessed of great ascetic heat, Kṛṣṇa reveals that this too is part of his grand design. In other words, this exchange leads us to believe that Draupadī was right all along and all of the characters in the *Mahābhārata* are merely “puppets”⁷⁹ for Kṛṣṇa to play with. The text tells us that upon hearing this, “the Pāṇḍavas were shaken...extremely upset and had no desire to live.” (*Pāṇḍavās trastacetasaḥ babhūvur bhṛśasaṁvignā nirāsās cāpi jīvite*).⁸⁰ Kṛṣṇa continues his

⁷⁷ *Mbh* 11.25.43.

⁷⁸ *Mbh* 11.25.44-45.

⁷⁹ *Mbh* 3.31.22.

⁸⁰ *Mbh* 11.25.46.

argument, once again blaming Gāndhārī for failing to restrain her son and reminding her that

*mṛtaṃ vā yadi vā naṣṭaṃ yo 'tītaṃ anuśocati /
duḥkhena labhate duḥkhaṃ dvāv anarthau prapadyate //
tapo 'rthīyaṃ brāhmaṇī dhatta garbhaṃ; gaur voḍhāraṃ dhāvitāraṃ
turaṃgī /
śūdrā dāsaṃ paśupālaṃ tu vaiśyā; vadhārthīyaṃ tvadvidhā rājaputrī //*

Anyone who grieves over someone who is dead, or something that has been destroyed, or something that has passed by gains misery from their misery. He comes to two evils. A Brahmin woman brings forth a baby destined for asceticism, a cow brings forth a draft animal, a mare a racehorse, a śūdra woman a servant, a vaiśya woman a cowherd—but a kṣatriya woman like you brings forth a baby destined for slaughter.⁸¹

Once again, the issue of Kṛṣṇa's culpability is papered over by more conventional—if not terribly comforting—explanations in an effort to distract from the sheer existential horror implied by Kṛṣṇa's godhood. Like Draupadī, Gāndhārī struggles to understand the role of Kṛṣṇa and Time in the Kurukṣetra war, but where Draupadī can be successfully talked down by her husband, Gāndhārī persists and even succeeds in exacting some kind of retribution. In the end, however, Kṛṣṇa's acceptance of his death merely reinforces Gāndhārī's lack of agency. Like Draupadī, her grievances are dismissed outright and she is urged instead to simply seek detachment and remain loyal to the *dharma*, all the while maintaining the tacit awareness that none of her actions seem to matter on any ultimate level.

⁸¹ *Mbh* 11.26.4-5.

UTTANKA’S ARGUMENT

Though the misfire of Gāndhārī’s curse seems to provide a fitting, if terrifying, resolution to the question of Kṛṣṇa’s theodicy, Gāndhārī’s objections are parroted later on in the epic by Uttanka, who accuses Kṛṣṇa of indifference in the face of the Kurukṣetra war and likewise threatens to curse him. This section comes across as an afterthought, because Uttanka is neither a major character, nor is he closely connected to the action of the story. Nevertheless, Kṛṣṇa’s reply to Uttanka is relevant, because in this specific case, he replies differently, even though faced with the same set of accusations.

Where Kṛṣṇa replied to Gāndhārī’s curse by blaming her for the war while simultaneously denying her agency as a slave of Fate, he merely warns Uttanka not to expend his *tapas* by conjuring a powerful curse. Kṛṣṇa even goes so far as to offer an apology (*gr̥ha anumayam*; literally “receive my courtesy”)⁸² to Uttanka for causing him to risk his hard-earned ascetic heat. This apology is followed by an elaborately theological self-introduction by Kṛṣṇa, who describes himself as the universal soul, the origin of both the “existent and non-existent,” the “eternal god of gods,” the source of all beings as well as their destroyer, the rites of sacrifice, the sacrifice and the sacrificial offering, and also Vishnu, Indra, and Brahma, etc.⁸³ In its epic list of divine names, aspects, and functions, Kṛṣṇa’s speech recalls the Bhagavad Gītā and true to form, it ends with an account of his descent as an *avatāra*:

*dharmasya setuṃ badhnāmi calite calite yuge /
tās tā yonīḥ praviśyāhaṃ prajānāṃ hitakāmyayā //*

⁸² *Mbh* 14.52.23.

⁸³ *Mbh* 14.53.

*yadā tv ahaṃ deva yonau vartāmi Bhṛgunandana /
tadāhaṃ devavat sarvam ācarāmi na saṃśayaḥ //
yadā gandharvayonau tu vartāmi Bhṛgunandana /
tadā gandharvavac ceṣṭāḥ sarvās ceṣṭāmi Bhārgava //
nāgayonau yadā caiva tadā vartāmi nāgavat /
yakṣarākṣasa yonīś ca yathāvad vicarāmy aham //*

In every Yuga I have to repair the causeway of Righteousness, entering into diverse kinds of wombs from desire of doing good to my creatures. When, O son of Bhrigu's race, I live in the order of the deities, I then verily act in every respect as a deity. When I live in the order of the Gandharvas, I then, O son of Bhrigu's race, act in every respect as a Gandharva. When I live in the order of the Nagas, I then act as a Naga, and when I live in the order of Yakshas or that of Rakshasas, I act after the manner of that order.⁸⁴

For whatever reason, it is in the presence of Uttanka that Kṛṣṇa finally deigns to answer one of his critics⁸⁵ in a relatively straightforward manner. Moreover, Kṛṣṇa's argument is notable in that it certainly does not remove all doubt about his innocence, but it does make explicit a number of claims regarding his own inhuman nature that were merely hinted at by Draupadī and Gāndhārī.

To be sure, the Kṛṣṇa avatar serves less to “repair the causeway of Righteousness” (*dharmasya setuṃ badhnāmi*) than it does to facilitate the deaths of several thousand people, Kṛṣṇa admits that he let the victims of Kurukṣetra die simply because he was pretending to be a human at this time. While some scholars have taken this explanation to mean that Kṛṣṇa is neither truly omniscient nor omnipotent,⁸⁶ there is nothing in the text to suggest that a being as powerful as Kṛṣṇa is not entirely in control every step of

⁸⁴ *Mbh* 14.53.15b-18.

⁸⁵ Compared to the two queens, Arjuna is not terribly critical of his friend Kṛṣṇa. Thus, the extensive explanation given in the Bhagavad Gītā does not qualify in this particular case.

⁸⁶ See Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma*, 201-202; as well as Bimal Krishna Matilal, “Kṛṣṇa: In Defence of a Devious Divinity.” In *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991), 410.

the way. A careful reading of this passage implies that Kṛṣṇa's incarnation does not imply disempowerment, but rather an elaborate pretense of humanity.⁸⁷

Furthermore, while Kṛṣṇa does not directly take responsibility for his actions as Time, he nonetheless sees fit to justify the influence of the Law of time (*kāladharman*)⁸⁸ by reassuring Uttanka that, because of their valor in battle, all of the fallen warriors have been granted access heaven. In this way, Kṛṣṇa affirms Doniger's claim that "the gods may allow men to be happy in heaven...but never on earth."⁸⁹ By affirming his own double nature as both a human who acts as if ignorant of Fate, as well as a metaphysical force that acts altogether without respect to the lives, morals, or struggles of humanity, Kṛṣṇa essentially proves Draupadī and Gāndhārī right in terms of his own nature as an inhuman doppelganger living among humans that yet refuses to help those in need or even to uphold *rakṣaṇa dharma* in protecting those who presumably deserve such protection. In the end, the only *dharma* that truly seems to matter is the merciless Law of Time.

Examining the Witnesses: Gendered Ethics in the *Mahābhārata*

In order to understand the full import Draupadī and Gāndhārī's arguments, it is necessary to understand their place in the wider universe of the *Mahābhārata*, in terms of Time, gender, and the complex system of incarnations, partial-incarnations, and theological affinities that frames the human element of the text. This framework is

⁸⁷ That is to say, a *līlā*. For the theological implications of this term, see William Sax, "The Ramnagar Ramlīla: Text, Performance, Pilgrimage." *History of Religions*. 30. no. 2 (1990): 130-131.

⁸⁸ In *Mbh* 14.53.21, Kṛṣṇa describes the warriors as *parītāḥ kāladharmaṇā*, which Ganguli translates as "assailed by the virtue of Time," but could be more directly rendered as "seized by the Law of Time."

⁸⁹ Doniger O'Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil*, 271.

established early on in the Ādi Parvan, where the Earth, overwhelmed by the number of former Asuras being born as human kings, entreats the gods to relieve her burden.⁹⁰ The gods agree, of course, and the mission begins when virtually all of the divine beings incarnate themselves in the hope of instigating massive war that will drastically reduce the human population. The chief orchestrator behind this effort is Nārāyaṇa/Viṣṇu, who incarnates himself as Kṛṣṇa,⁹¹ but the list of incarnations also includes every other major character in the epic, including Draupadī and Gāndhārī, who serve as the embodiments of “a part of Śrī”⁹² and “Wisdom”⁹³ (*mati*), respectively.

Like so many other aspects of the *Mahābhārata*, the godly origins of Draupadī and Gāndhārī are pregnant with deeper meaning, but also tinged with a cruel irony. It is fitting, for example, that Draupadī, as the personification of Prosperity (*śrī*) would be “a queen of kings”⁹⁴ who, as the power behind the throne, commands a massive kingdom, but this theological affinity is also subversive, because it implies that the goddess of Prosperity herself is forced to live as a penniless exile for over a decade, while simultaneously reduced to a kind of symbolic widowhood.⁹⁵ The same principle holds true for Gāndhārī as an incarnation of Wisdom who, true to form, functions as an exceedingly wise advisor of the king, but is nevertheless unable to make him heed her advice. Her solidarity with her husband causes her to live as a blind woman, and she also

⁹⁰ *Mbh* 1.58-59.

⁹¹ *Mbh* 1.61.90-95.

⁹² *Mbh* 1.61.95-100.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Mb* 3.13.110-120.

⁹⁵ Alf Hiltebeitel, *When the Goddess Was a Woman: Mahābhārata Ethnographies: Essays*, (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 30.

engages in a failed abortion that leaves her malformed, blindly passionate children alive to threaten the continuation of the dynasty and even the kingdom itself. The manner in which these incarnations both fulfil and defy expectation contributes to the aesthetics of suffering, because in the world of the *Mahābhārata*, the suffering of these women is seen as symptomatic of a greater cosmic imbalance.

As Kevin McGrath notes, “grief is the one quality or sign which marks women”⁹⁶ in the *Mahābhārata* and as the single most “exceptional”⁹⁷ example of this trend, Draupadī, with all her attendant roles and symbolic functions suggests a number of useful theological lenses through which to view her particular aesthetics of suffering. As such, the next three subsections will deal with the ethical complications implied by Draupadī’s role as the wife of “King Dharma,” the wife of Yudhiṣṭhira, and also as an embodiment of Śrī that is also, secondarily, associated with Viṣṇu’s other wife: the Earth.

PATIVRATA AND DHARMIC DECLINE

The most immediate of these frameworks arises from the intimate relationship with the Law (*dharma*) implied by Draupadī’s marriage to the “portion of Dharma” incarnated as Yudhiṣṭhira.⁹⁸ Likewise, a faint echo of this connection can be seen in the epic’s description of Gāndhārī as one who is “yoked to the Law”⁹⁹ and “who had seen the Law.”¹⁰⁰

For both Draupadī and Gāndhārī, the most salient Law is *pativratā dharma*, or the *dharma* of the devoted wife. In short, *pativratā dharma* requires its practitioners to view

⁹⁶ Kevin McGrath, quoted in Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma*, 74.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ *Mbh* 1.61.80-85.

⁹⁹ *Mbh* 2.66.25-30.

¹⁰⁰ *Mbh* 2.66.35-40.

their husband as “God.”¹⁰¹ This perspective can manifest itself in relatively mundane ways, such as Draupadī’s refusal to eat foods that her husbands dislike,¹⁰² her abstention from cosmetics in their absence,¹⁰³ and Gāndhārī’s practice of not even speaking of men other than her husband.¹⁰⁴ However, as Arti Dhand describes in *Woman as Fire, Woman as Sage: Sexual Ideology in the Mahābhārata*, the ideology of *pativratā* extends beyond matters of etiquette and into the realm of ascetic extremes:

[I]f the husband, however lacking in personal virtues himself, should command the wife to accomplish anything at all, even what is improper or unrighteous or leads to her very death, the wife should unhesitatingly accomplish it, taking recourse in the law of Distress.¹⁰⁵

Falling under the dictates of “the law of Distress” (*āpaddharma*), *pativratā dharma* is understood in the epic to be the ultimate priority of its heroines, even though it results in such calamities as voluntary exile, symbolic blindness, or suttee, which Dhand refers to as its “logical end.”¹⁰⁶

It is in the service of this same value of *pativratā dharma* that Draupadī concludes her speech in the assembly hall by asking her husbands’ family:

*tām imāṃ Dharmarājasya bhāryāṃ sadṛśavarṇajām /
brūta dāsīm adāsīm vā tat kariṣyāmi Kauravāḥ ||*

Is the wife of the King Dharma [i.e. Yudhiṣṭhira] whose birth matches his a slave or free? Speak, Kauravas. I shall abide by your answer.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰¹ *Mbh* 3.222.35, quoted in Dhand, *Woman as Fire*, 161.

¹⁰² *Mbh* 3.222.22-31, quoted in Dhand, *Woman as Fire*, 160.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ According to *Mbh* 1.103.10-20 at least. This is not necessarily the case when she confronts Kṛṣṇa in the *Strī Parvan*. See *Mbh* 11.25.

¹⁰⁵ Dhand, *Woman as Fire*, 173.

¹⁰⁶ Dhand, *Woman as Fire*, 167.

¹⁰⁷ *Mbh* 2.62.5-15.

As in other instances of extreme *pativratā dharma*, the operative question here is not what is equitable or beneficial, but simply what the husbands want. That being said, Draupadī’s reference to her oldest husband Yudhiṣṭhira as “King Dharma” (*dharmarāja*) here is not entirely devoid of irony either, because Yudhiṣṭhira’s failure protect his wife also implies a failure to uphold his own *dharma*.

As Simon Brodbeck notes in his treatment of Draupadī and Yudhiṣṭhira’s relationship, *pativratā dharma* is only one half of a “mutually supportive”¹⁰⁸ gendered pair. The other half is the masculine ethic of protection known as *rakṣaṇa dharma*, which, as shown above, is sometimes more of an ideal than a reality in the epic. While some of the blame could perhaps be placed on Yudhiṣṭhira himself, the young king’s apparent moral impotence is also reflected in the various *Mahābhārata* stories in which Yudhiṣṭhira’s father Dharma is likewise subject to powers beyond his control. By portraying the personification of Law as disempowered or compromised in some way, these stories effectively dramatize the universal decline of human morality that occurs in the universe of the text.

The most dramatic of these incidents occurs in the Ādi Parvan, when the sage Māṇḍavya is forcibly impaled on a stake as karmic retribution for acts committed as child. He then curses Dharma:

alpe 'parādhe vipulo mama daṇḍas tvayā kṛtaḥ /
śūdrayonāv ato dharmamānuṣaḥ saṃbhaviṣyasi //
maryādāṃ sthāpayāmy adya loke dharmaphalodayām /

¹⁰⁸ Brodbeck, “Gendered soteriology,” 165-166.

*ācaturdaśamād varṣān na bhaviṣyati pātakam /
pareṇa kurvatām evaṃ doṣa eva bhaviṣyati //*

The sin was small and the penalty you dealt me vast. Law, for that you shall be born a man from the womb of a serf! Now I lay down the limit on the fruition of the Law: nothing shall be a sin up to the age of fourteen years; but if they do it beyond that age it shall be counted an offense.¹⁰⁹

Within the greater epic, this curse does little more than provide an occasion for Dharma to be reborn as the “serf” (*śūdra*) Vidura, but the fact that someone like Māṇḍavya is even able to do this is staggering, because it shows that even Dharma is not so powerful that he cannot be brought low by the powers of an imperfect human. More importantly, the curse is rich with irony because Māṇḍavya is retaliating specifically against the perceived *injustices* meted out by Dharma, who is supposed to represent justice itself.

Both the relative impotence and the moral decay of Dharma are explained later on in the Vana Parvan, where the theory of the *yugas* is explained in detail by the legendary monkey Hanumān and the great sage Mārkaṇḍeya. Once again the culprit is Time, as Hanumān explains when he prefaces his discussion of the *yugas*, “Time is inescapable.”¹¹⁰ For Dharma, the inescapability of Time manifests itself in the constant decline of universal morality throughout the four *yugas*, which begin with Dharma possessing four “quarters” or “feet” (*pādas*)¹¹¹ and end with a crippled, depleted Dharma, who possesses only a single *pāda*.¹¹² It should also be noted that in this context, Time is not treated as an abstract entity either, because according to Hanumān, it is expressly a

¹⁰⁹ *Mbh* 1.101.25-26.

¹¹⁰ *Mbh* 3.148.5-20

¹¹¹ *Mbh* 3.148.21.

¹¹² *Mbh* 3.148.30-35.

function of the progression of Time into the Kali Yuga that the god Viṣṇu becomes “black” (*kṛṣṇa*). Mārkaṇḍeya later corroborates this view in his own discussion of the *yugas*, in which Kṛṣṇa is described as both the beginning and end of all things.¹¹³

The decline of the Law is relevant to Draupadī’s situation because, as Dhand notes, the concept of the *yugas* are also closely intertwined with the discourse on women, who are seen as “repositories of class and family identity”¹¹⁴ that inevitably reflect the moral fabric of society. Thus, in Mārkaṇḍeya’s description of the Kali Yuga, the breakdown of traditional gender roles is described in two ways. In one respect, the Kali Yuga entails the utter extinction of *pativrata dharma* as women “cast off all morals”¹¹⁵ and engage in various sorts of non-normative behavior, but the Kali Yuga also marks the death of *rakṣaṇa dharma*, in which the violence of men engulfs the Earth and rape replaces marriage as the dominant sexual institution.¹¹⁶ This latter situation is prefigured in the disrobing scene, where Draupadī’s devotion to her husbands and to *dharma* goes unreciprocated and she is instead left to the mercy of Duryodhana, who represents the Kali Yuga incarnate.¹¹⁷ Thus to a certain extent, the disrobing represents not only the failure of the Pāṇḍavas, but the failure of Dharma himself to act in any substantial way.¹¹⁸

PRAVṚTTI DHARMA AND YUDHIṢṬHIRA’S DILEMMA

When it comes to Yudhiṣṭhira’s failure to uphold *rakṣaṇa dharma*, the problem is not so much one of impotence or even a failure of nerve, so much as it is Yudhiṣṭhira

¹¹³ *Mbh* 3.186-187.

¹¹⁴ Dhand, *Woman as Fire*, 148.

¹¹⁵ *Mbh* 3.186.30-40.

¹¹⁶ *Mbh* 3.186.25-40.

¹¹⁷ *Mbh* 1.61.80-85.

¹¹⁸ Possibly excepting the miracle of the infinite sari. In the actual scene, this phenomenon remains entirely unexplained. See *Mbh* 2.61.40-45.

mistakenly choosing one form of *dharma* over another. In Dhand’s terms, the choice is between worldly, *pravṛtti dharma*, in which people “continue to perform their social functions and duties”¹¹⁹ while simultaneously acknowledging that these tasks do not reflect “the ultimate path,”¹²⁰ and renunciant, *nivṛtti dharma*, in which the “ultimate path” of liberation is pursued to the expense of all else.¹²¹ However, a careful analysis reveals that the value of *vairāgya* can contribute to either of these *dharmas*. According to Hudson,

The underlying emotion of *śāntarasa* [i.e. the dominant *rasa* of the *Mahābhārata*], according to [Ānandavardhana], is *vairāgya*, which generally means ‘disgust,’ ‘aversion,’ or ‘indifference to worldly objects and life.’ Lest we be tempted to rush to label Ānanda’s reading of the *Mahābhārata* as ‘pessimistic’ or ‘world-negating,’ however, we should be very clear about what the disillusionment denoted by the term *vairāgya* is targeting. *Śāntarasa* and its related underlying emotion (*sthāyibhāva*) of *vairāgya* are deeply connected with the issue of time and transitoriness in the *Mahābhārata* according to Ānanda. As Gerow and Aklujkar argue, Ānanda used the term *śāntarasa* to refer to ‘an intense experience of detachment that comes from reading or witnessing a work of art depicting ruin, impermanence, the transitory character of worldly existence and the futility of ambition.’ ... This suggests that what the sensitive reader/spectator is being encouraged to feel aversion toward, according to Ānanda, is not the empirical/natural world per se, but a particular psychological state or attitude with regard to the empirical world—namely egoism—that renders human beings emotionally vulnerable to feelings of suffering and grief over the losses that are brought about by the inevitable ravages of time.¹²²

In other words, as a value that advocates detachment from the ego, *vairāgya* is not merely a synonym for *nivṛtti dharma* (which simply demands a withdrawal from the world), but rather a broader principle that accommodates both *nivṛtti* and *pravṛtti dharmas*.

¹¹⁹ Dhand, *Woman as Fire*, 43.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ In another—perhaps not entirely different—context, the words *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* also refer to the creation and destruction of the universe, respectively. Doniger O’Flaherty, *Origins of Evil*, 228.

¹²² Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma*, 57.

Thus, when Yudhiṣṭhira justifies his passivity in the dice game by saying “But this world obeys the Placer’s design—I do not refuse now to play with those gamblers,”¹²³ he is engaging in *nivṛtti dharma*, whereas Hudson’s reading¹²⁴ and the teachings of the Gītā¹²⁵ recommend engaging in *pravṛtti dharma*, albeit with a detached, *vairāgya* perspective. Simply put, he rejects a *dharma* of detached action in favor of a *dharma* of inaction, and the kingdom suffers for it.

Like the previously discussed pair of *pativrata* and *rakṣaṇa dharma*, *nivṛtti* and *pravṛtti dharma* can also be seen as gendered concepts. According to Simon Brodbeck, the *Mahābhārata* is just one of many stories of the Indian epic tradition in which the tension between *nivṛtti* and *pravṛtti dharma* is played out via “the possibility of the man abandoning the wife.”¹²⁶ This gendered analogy is made possible by the “hierarchically gendered terms”¹²⁷ of the Sāṃkhya philosophical tradition, in which the higher, changeless, spiritual principle of *puruṣa* is coded as masculine, while its lower, ever-changing, material counterpart *prakṛti* is seen as feminine. In this way, the idea of a male subject flirting with the possibility of engaging in *nivṛtti dharma* is dramatized in stories about men attempting to leave their wives, because the gendered terminology of Sāṃkhya implies that as the metaphorical “daughters of *prakṛti*,”¹²⁸ women are often viewed as “sexual objects,”¹²⁹ that are more physical, “more sense-oriented than men,”¹³⁰

¹²³ *Mbh* 2.52.14.

¹²⁴ Following Ānandavardhana’s lead.

¹²⁵ See *Mbh* 6.24, for example.

¹²⁶ Brodbeck, “Gendered soteriology,” 150.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ Dhand, *Woman as Fire*, 136.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

and as such, seen living embodiments of the temptations that imply “bondage to the world.”¹³¹

However, Brodbeck is quick to add that within these stories, the possibility of spousal abandonment never comes to fruition. Instead, the male protagonist remains engaged in both the marriage and the world, pursuing the *pravṛtti dharma* of detached, but deliberate action. Yudhiṣṭhira himself eventually falls into this pattern as well, but in the specific context of the disrobing scene, he remains befuddled by both the decline of *dharma* and the turning of Time, and, as a result, fails to follow the course of detached *pravṛtti dharma* that would allow him to practice detachment, while simultaneously honoring the ethical demands of *rakṣaṇa dharma*.

SOTERIOLOGY AND QUEENSHIP

Yet another dimension of analysis opens up when one considers that despite its gendered language, Dhand argues that the true philosophical core of Sāṃkhya “has nothing to do with gender.”¹³² Once the concepts of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* are divorced from gender and instead addressed as the component parts of the human being, it becomes clear that women can also act as “soteriological subjects,”¹³³ who are faced with a similar choice between *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti dharma*. Seen in this light, *pativrātās* such as Draupadī, who are detached from the world, but nevertheless engaged in serving their husbands, become exemplars of *pravṛtti dharma*.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 137.

¹³¹ Ibid, 78.

¹³² Ibid, 135.

¹³³ Brodbeck, “Gendered soteriology,” 166.

Moreover, the ideal *pativrata*'s devotion to her husband as a "god"¹³⁴ bears an uncanny resemblance to the devotion involved in serving an actual god. This parallel is played out in Draupadī's associations with both Śrī and the Earth,¹³⁵ who, as the dual wives of Viṣṇu,¹³⁶ also serve to reinforce Draupadī's connection with Kṛṣṇa.¹³⁷ While it is certainly true that the disrobing of Draupadī forms a structural parallel with the burden of the Earth as an instance of female victimization that eventually provokes the battle of Kurukṣetra,¹³⁸ Śrī and the Earth form a significant pair that represent not only the wives of Viṣṇu, but also the symbolic wives of the king,¹³⁹ and the "female symbolic units"¹⁴⁰ that must be renounced by the traditional ascetic in pursuit of *nivṛtti dharma*.

All three of these paired connections are relevant to the trials experienced by Draupadī and Gāndhārī, because in addition to their identical status as queens, both of their husbands are inspired by Fate to forsake the obligations of *rakṣaṇa dharma*,¹⁴¹ and in both cases, the circumstances that arise from the failure of the husband eventually lead them to question Fate himself in the guise of Kṛṣṇa. Indeed, their arguments against Kṛṣṇa are by far the most salient, because where Yudhiṣṭhira and Dhṛtarāṣṭra are

¹³⁴ *Mbh* 13.134.54, quoted in Dhand, *Woman as Fire*, 174.

¹³⁵ For Draupadī's associations with the Earth, see Hildebeitel, *When the Goddess was a Woman*, 33-52.

¹³⁶ Hildebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle*, 67-68.

¹³⁷ For a more detailed discussion of Draupadī's (i.e. Kṛṣṇā's) connection with Kṛṣṇa, see Hildebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle*, passim.

¹³⁸ Both Draupadī and the Earth also play an active role in inciting such violence, but for the purposes of this paper, I am focusing specifically on the instances of victimization because both instances arise indirectly from a failure of *rakṣaṇa dharma*.

¹³⁹ For more on Kṛṣṇa's benedictory role in legitimating the institution of kingship, see Hildebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle*, 192-228.

¹⁴⁰ Brodbeck, "Gendered soteriology," 150.

¹⁴¹ To be fair, they do not do so for the same reason. While Yudhiṣṭhira initially maintains a misguided, naïve faith in the omnipotence of Fate, Dhṛtarāṣṭra fails to act because he is paralyzed by his own emotions, most notably resignation, but also love for his son. See Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma*, 106-145.

befuddled by Fate and morally crippled by the decline of *dharma*, Kṛṣṇa, as Time itself incarnate, has no such excuse. Moreover, as “female symbolic units” intimately tied to both the world (Earth) and its fortunes (Śrī) and as famously steadfast wives dedicated to the selfless service of *pativratā dharma*, Draupadī and Gāndhārī are uniquely qualified to make these arguments, because they remain actively involved in human affairs but nevertheless devoted to a higher purpose. Thus, when Draupadī and Gāndhārī question Kṛṣṇa, they do so not merely as the victims of male neglect, but as philosophically-minded “soteriological subjects”¹⁴² confronting a universal human problem, and by extension, as representatives of humanity itself.

In Defence of a Dark Lord: Answering the Aesthetics of Suffering

Despite the complex arguments put forth by Draupadī, Yudhiṣṭhira, Gāndhārī, Uttanka, and Kṛṣṇa, the epic never provides any kind of answer that accounts for all of these objections in a coherent fashion, at least not explicitly. Like Kṛṣṇa’s moral interlocutors, readers who hope to discover a cohesive theodicy in the *Mahābhārata* have no choice but to cobble together a diverse patchwork various implications, hints, half-stated theological doctrines, and inconclusive arguments in order to produce anything resembling a unified theory.

MATILAL’S ARGUMENT

Of these readers, one of the most gifted is Bimal Krishna Matilal, who states his case in an essay entitled, “Kṛṣṇa: In Defence of a Devious Divinity.” In true *Mahābhārata* fashion, Matilal seems unable or unwilling to come up with a single

¹⁴² Brodbeck, “Gendered soteriology,” 166.

definitive reason and instead, assails his readers with a number of miscellaneous possibilities. Matilal's primary argument is that as "the God of the Yogins,"¹⁴³ the "dark Lord"¹⁴⁴ Kṛṣṇa is omnibenevolent, but not actually omnipotent. In this scenario, Kṛṣṇa's morally dubious behavior, in both action and inaction, is necessary in order to establish "new paradigms" of human ethics that exploit the "limitations" of traditional moral practices such as "truth-telling and promise-keeping"¹⁴⁵ and in doing so, aid humankind in alleviating the greater evil that is the burden of the Earth, which he interprets morally as a "burden of sin."¹⁴⁶ However, all of the above arguments rely on Matilal's misreading of Kṛṣṇa's response to Uttanka as a denial of omnipotence. Once Kṛṣṇa's omnipotence has been restored to the equation, these proposed solutions fall flat, because a reasonably intelligent, omnibenevolent, and omnipotent Kṛṣṇa would naturally find a way to prevent great evil, not with a lesser evil, but with a greater good.

Not entirely satisfied by the above line of reasoning, Matilal also hedges his bets by describing the problem of evil as endemic to the universe itself, or rather the *kind* of universe that gives rise to the human condition. In his conclusion, Matilal describes the design of the universe in terms of three possible worlds that provide alternative models. The first world, W_1 , is an "amoral world,"¹⁴⁷ operated solely by the rational dictates of science. W_2 is a more human world, in which good and evil exist in a state of constant

¹⁴³ Matilal, "Kṛṣṇa," 413.

¹⁴⁴ Matilal's reference to Kṛṣṇa as the "dark Lord" is undoubtedly a reference back to the etymology of the word *kṛṣṇa*. Despite his essay appearing as late as 1991, Matilal seems entirely unaware of the Tolkien-esque connotations implied by this particular phrase. Ibid, 406.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 417.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 414.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 419.

struggle, but with the “persistent belief that good will win at the end.”¹⁴⁸ W₃ then is a “perfect world” in which only good exists and the concept of evil is entirely unknown, but “the meaning of happiness is perhaps lost.”¹⁴⁹ Matilal then concludes,

Now, if a divine creator is faced with the choice of creating a world like any one of this, which particular one would He select? For various reasons into which I do not wish to go into here, I suggest that he would select W₂... Whether there is a creator God or not, whether Kṛṣṇa was a devious deity or not, this is the kind of world we have got and hence if justice can be salvaged in the end the creator will fulfil His promise.¹⁵⁰

While Matilal does not elucidate the “various reasons” W₂ is preferable, he does hint that it has something to do with the notion that the presence of evil is necessary for the possibility of meaningful happiness, but this notion too assumes that Kṛṣṇa is not omnipotent to the point where he can accomplish his goals without unintended, undesirable consequences. On the other hand, if meaningful happiness in the absence of evil is within the purview of an omnipotent Kṛṣṇa, then the current state of the universe as seen in the *Mahābhārata* poses a seemingly unanswerable question.

In the end, Matilal’s conclusion is less convincing than his earlier statement that “Kṛṣṇa’s role was not to resolve the ambiguity but to heighten the mystery”¹⁵¹ of the epic. Alf Hildebeitel echoes this sentiment when he describes how in regard to Gāndhārī’s arguments in particular, “there is no doubt that they capture the surface events and produce charges that any ‘secular’ judge would honor in the courtroom. But they do not

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 404.

capture the essential.”¹⁵² In both cases, the consensus seems to be that there is an inner, hidden moral reality within the epic that can only be truly understood on faith.

ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

In his discussion of Hindu mythology, Mircea Eliade is even more concise when he says, “What is true in eternity is not necessarily true in time.”¹⁵³ Such a blunt, counterintuitive statement may be difficult to understand offhand, but it nevertheless seems to apply to the *Mahābhārata* as a work concerned with both Time and eternity.

Kṛṣṇa’s arguments with Draupadī and Gāndhārī in particular assume a unique theological dimension in light of the Gītā, where Kṛṣṇa says:

*aham evākṣayaḥ kālo dhātāhaṃ viśvatomukhaḥ ||
mr̥tyuḥ sarvahaś cāham udbhavaś ca bhaviṣyatām |
kīrtiḥ śrīr vāk ca nārīṇāṃ smṛtir medhā dhṛtiḥ kṣamā ||*

I am everlasting Time, the Placer who looks everywhere, I am all-snatching Death, and the Source of things yet to be. Of feminines I am Fame, Beauty, Speech, Recollection, Wisdom, Fortitude, and Patience.¹⁵⁴

In these verses, Kṛṣṇa’s destructive role as Time/Fate is offset by a list of positive feminine concepts (*nārīs*), including Śrī (“Beauty”) and “Wisdom” (*medhā*),¹⁵⁵ which directly parallels the account of Draupadī and Gāndhārī’s incarnations in the Ādi Parvan.¹⁵⁶ When one takes these connections seriously, Draupadī and Gāndhārī’s

¹⁵² Hildebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle*, 288.

¹⁵³ Mircea Eliade, quoted in Doniger, *Origins of Evil*, 59.

¹⁵⁴ *Mbh* 6.32.33b-34.

¹⁵⁵ In all fairness, Gāndhārī is described as an incarnation of *matī*, rather than *medhā*, but van Buitenen sees no reason distinguish the two in his translation. The parallel usage of *śrī*, on the other hand, is direct, even though van Buitenen glosses it here as “Beauty.” See *Mbh* 1.61.95-100.

¹⁵⁶ This similarity is further compounded by the plural genitive *nārīṇāṃ*, which van Buitenen translates as “Of feminines,” but it could also be taken in a more literal sense, as “Among women.”

previous arguments against Kṛṣṇa acquire an entirely different tone, because that means that on a broader, theological level, those arguments essentially reflect a debate between a god and a feminine version of himself.¹⁵⁷ In this context, Kṛṣṇa’s reaction to Gāndhārī’s curse makes more sense, because it implies that Kṛṣṇa can only be truly threatened by another part of himself. Thus, when a hunter named Jarā finally kills Kṛṣṇa in the Mausala Parvan, the hunter, whose name means “old age” (*jarā*), also recalls Kṛṣṇa’s role as Time. A similarly ambiguous situation is described by Arjuna in the Vana Parvan, who refers to Kṛṣṇa as both “the sacrifice and the one to be sacrificed to” as well as “the sacrifice” itself.¹⁵⁸ In this way, a close theological reading of the *Mahābhārata* shows that in the world of the text, there is no clear dichotomy between the victim and the victor and indeed, such a dichotomy may be fundamentally impossible. The machinations of Time and Fate notwithstanding, such a reading does not destroy the possibility of human agency, but rather *redefines* it.

Once an abiding connection has been established between the otherworldly Kṛṣṇa and the other, more mundane characters of the *Mahābhārata*, it becomes possible to read Kṛṣṇa’s behavior within the epic as a model for human action. As Hildebeitel explains,

when Gāndhārī sees her hundred sons slain on the battlefield, she charges Krishna with “overlooking” (*upa-īkṣ-*...) the destruction while being able to prevent it...Indeed, there is some irony in the charge that Krishna “overlooks” or “is indifferent to” the heroes’ fates. One thinks of his advice to Arjuna to cultivate “indifference.”¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Once again, the analysis of Kṛṣṇa’s argument with Draupadī recalls her connection to him as Kṛṣṇā.

¹⁵⁸ *Mbh* 3.13.44-50.

¹⁵⁹ Hildebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle*, 288.

This shared terminology of “indifference” identified by Hildebeitel is not insignificant, because it implies that Gāndhārī is not only correct in her assessment of Kṛṣṇa’s role in the war (on a superficial level, at least), but also that the slaying of her sons was actually the result of Arjuna engaging in an act of *imitatio dei*, because it was Arjuna’s “indifference” in the war that indirectly led to the death of the Kauravas. For this reason, when Gāndhārī curses Kṛṣṇa to visit similar horrors upon his own people, the god merely smiles because he has already cultivated indifference to the extent that even the death of his people no longer matters to him.

Aside from Kṛṣṇa’s momentary, murderous rage at the slaying of his son,¹⁶⁰ which could be seen as yet another example of the deluding powers of Time,¹⁶¹ Kṛṣṇa maintains a state of detachment throughout the entire epic. Unlike other characters, Kṛṣṇa is not motivated primarily by the values of *artha*,¹⁶² *kāma*,¹⁶³ *dharma*,¹⁶⁴ or even *mokṣa*.¹⁶⁵ Instead, he engages in worldly action with the constant understanding that it has absolutely no bearing on the ultimate reality and he does this without any undue sense of egoism. In this way, Kṛṣṇa exemplifies the concept of *vairāgya* that Hudson identifies as the underlying emotion of the epic.

¹⁶⁰ *Mbh* 16.4.

¹⁶¹ See *Mbh* 2.72.5-15.

¹⁶² Kṛṣṇa, it should be remembered, is also a prince, but somehow this fact never seems to cause him any anxiety in the text.

¹⁶³ The Ādi Parvan mentions that a group of *apsarās* became incarnate as Kṛṣṇa’s “sixteen thousand queens,” but again, he is never seen to obsess over them. See *Mbh* 1.61.90-95.

¹⁶⁴ In his capacity as a human, Kṛṣṇa never seems over-worried about upholding the *dharma*. The question of *kāladharman* is another matter entirely, but one that is more or less divorced from Kṛṣṇa’s human attributes.

¹⁶⁵ He does meditate in preparation for his death at the hands of Jarā, but only at the proper time. See *Mbh* 16.5.

The operative question then, is what this example accomplishes within the greater theodicean scheme of the epic. Hudson maintains that in the absence of any conclusive philosophical discussion, the argument of the text is relegated to a “narrative strategy”¹⁶⁶ that manifests itself in a series of hints, implications, and suggestions, that must be then sifted out of the greater *Mahābhārata*. Thus, when the sage Ugrasravas claims that the Strī Parvan¹⁶⁷ was designed “to produce tears and terror in the minds of good people,”¹⁶⁸ this design is not merely an instance of artistic sadism, but rather a technique for instilling the audience with the kind of emotions that eventually lead to the state of *vairāgya*.

As Hudson observes, the text accomplishes this through its portrayal of Time. Despite its myriad sub-stories and their diverse chronologies, the *Mahābhārata* declares time and time again that Time itself, much like suffering, can never be truly prevented, reversed, or even endured by humans in any ultimate sense, but it can be escaped in a psychological sense, because the sensation of detached equanimity that characterizes *vairāgya* allows one to move “beyond”¹⁶⁹ all ordinary human experiences of suffering and Time.¹⁷⁰ Just as Kṛṣṇa acts as both the personification of Time and also its victim, Time serves as both the “cause and a ‘solution’ to the problem of suffering,”¹⁷¹ because even as Time exploits the impermanence and vulnerability of all things, repeated exposure to the tragic ravages of Time—as one experiences in reading the

¹⁶⁶ Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma*, 205-206.

¹⁶⁷ Coincidentally, the same book in which Gāndhārī has her argument with Kṛṣṇa.

¹⁶⁸ *Mbh* 1.2.195, quoted in Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma*, 146.

¹⁶⁹ Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma*, 176.

¹⁷⁰ Such a state may or may not resemble a reader’s experience of the *Mahābhārata*. See Hildebeitel and Kloetzli, “Kāla,” 579.

¹⁷¹ Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma*, 176.

Mahābhārata—has the ability to instill one with the same sense of constant fluctuation or “transitoriness,”¹⁷² which, once internalized, yields the state of *vairāgya*.

Thus, as an all-powerful being unwilling or unable to stop the fundamental principle of Time, Kṛṣṇa could be seen as exempt from the value of *rakṣaṇa dharma*, because from a god’s-eye view merely protecting others from certain dangers simply delays the inevitable and perhaps even positions those people to experience even greater trauma in the future. However, if Kṛṣṇa’s example does indeed communicate the value of *vairāgya*, then his words and actions within the greater epic can then be seen as the core framework of a living philosophy that promises to eliminate even the possibility of future suffering in the lives of its followers. In any case, due to the aforementioned subtlety of the *Mahābhārata*’s narrative strategies and its reliance on suggestion, such tentative, optimistic speculation seems to be the closest thing to a coherent argument the text can support with respect to theodicy.

Inconclusion: The Verdict

In this paper, I argued that the arguments against Kṛṣṇa put forth by Draupadī, Gāndhārī, and (to a lesser extent) Uttanka perform a crucial role in informing the “aesthetics of suffering” that characterize the *Mahābhārata*’s greater ethico-cosmic landscape. Moreover, the significance of these arguments can be seen especially in reference to Kṛṣṇa’s identification with Time, and the gendered ethics and soteriological schemas implied by Draupadī and Gāndhārī’s status as women, wives, and queens. In the end, I suggested a number of possible, if not entirely conclusive, ‘answers’ that could be

¹⁷² Ibid, 57.

given in response to these arguments, with special attention to the notion that on an ultimate, theological level, Kṛṣṇa as Time necessitates, exhibits, and encourages in various turns the value of *vairāgya*.

However, any argument attempting to discover a deeper meaning in the *Mahābhārata* can only ever be a single reading that traces only a handful of threads in the greater tapestry of the text, because like *dharma* and like Kṛṣṇa himself, the prospect of discovering an abiding sense of meaning despite the myriad tragedies in the *Mahābhārata* is “hard to bear on the head” and “difficult to seize by force.”¹⁷³ In the Ādi Parvan, Vaiśampāyana praises the *Mahābhārata*, proclaiming that “whatever is here, on Law, on Profit, on Pleasure, and on Salvation, that is found elsewhere. But what is not here is nowhere else,”¹⁷⁴ but despite this glowing endorsement, the epic fails to answer even the most fundamental question in regard to the Law, namely: “Is *dharma* worth upholding if it can be maintained only at the cost of great suffering?”¹⁷⁵

In *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*, Wendy Doniger cites Ursula Sharma in reference to “three levels of theodicy: cognitive (the problem of injustice), psychological (the need for comfort), and theological (the classical problem of monotheism).”¹⁷⁶ While the epic arguments of the *Mahābhārata* certainly confronts all three levels,¹⁷⁷ the results of these arguments remain far from conclusive in any universal

¹⁷³ See Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s words in *Mbh* 5.128.39, quoted in Hildebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle*, 123.

¹⁷⁴ *Mbh* 1.56.30-35.

¹⁷⁵ Greg Bailey, quoted in Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma*, 218.

¹⁷⁶ Doniger, *Origins of Evil*, 15.

¹⁷⁷ As is demonstrated in the arguments with Kṛṣṇa, Time in the *Mahābhārata* can be seen equal parts cognitive and theological. Of the three levels of theodicy, the psychological takes pride of place in the epic

sense.¹⁷⁸ Doniger herself recognizes the difficulty of her subject when she quotes Paul Ricoeur’s assertion that “tragedy is unthinkable.”¹⁷⁹ Likewise, in *Disorienting Dharma*, Hudson argues that when it comes to theodicy in the *Mahābhārata*, “fate, human exertion, *karma*, and Kṛṣṇa,”¹⁸⁰ all represent ‘non-answers’ that fail to fully address the problem of evil in a comprehensive fashion. In the end, Hudson comes to the rather bleak conclusion that “suffering is not a phenomenon that can be understood, or justified, or rationalized away; it simply exists.”¹⁸¹

Like the disrobing of Draupadī, the problem of evil in the world represents a rupture of meaning that cannot be repaired through the usual methods of cognition, theology, and psychology. This rupture carries a feeling of futility about it, as if anything short of the total surrender of *vairāgya* is—as Draupadī and Gāndhārī are fated to learn—merely a foolhardy attempt to circumvent the relentless onrush of Time. Perhaps the best advice to this effect comes from Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s chronically underappreciated minister Saṃjaya, who reminds the grieving king:

*Vidhātṛvihitaṃ mārgaṃ na kaś cid ativartate /
 kālamūlam idaṃ sarvaṃ bhāvābhāvau sukhāsukhe //
 kālaḥ pacati bhūtāni kālaḥ saṃharati prajāḥ /
 nirdahantaṃ prajāḥ kālaḥ kālaḥ śamayate punaḥ //
 kālo vikurute bhāvān sarvāṃl loke śubhāśubhān /
 kālaḥ saṃkṣipate sarvāḥ prajā visṛjate punaḥ /*

because it is, in the end, a character-driven work. However, if anything, the psychological level is satisfied even less than the other two.

¹⁷⁸ The abiding popularity of the epic, particularly the Gītā, implies that the supposedly inconclusive nature of the text’s theodicy is by no means a universal judgment common to all readers.

¹⁷⁹ Paul Ricoeur, quoted in Doniger, *Origins of Evil*, 373.

¹⁸⁰ Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma*, 205-206.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 214-215.

kālaḥ sarveṣu bhūteṣu caraty avidhṛtaḥ samaḥ ||
atītānāgatā bhāvā ye ca vartanti sāmpratam |
tān kālanirmitān buddhvā na samjñāṃ hātum arhasi ||

No one steps beyond the path the Ordainer has ordained. All this is rooted in Time, to be or not to be, to be happy or not to be happy. Time ripens the creatures. Time rots them. And Time again puts out the Time that burns down the creatures. Time unfolds all beings in the world, holy and unholy. Time shrinks them and expands them again. Time walks in all creatures, unaverted, impartial. Whatever beings there were in the past will be in the future, whatever are busy now, they are all the creatures of Time—know it, and do not lose your sense.¹⁸²

¹⁸² *Mbh* 1.1.187-190.

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