

The Nexus of Feminine Empowerment and Mythic Revisionism: Contesting Gendered Ontologies within the Contours of Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice and Rise of Kali*

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Abstract

This study critically examines Anand Neelakantan's Ajaya duology—Ajaya: Roll of the Dice and Rise of Kali—as a transformative mythopoetic retelling of the Mahabharata that foregrounds gendered agency and ethical pluralism. By shifting the narrative perspective to the Kauravas and centering female characters such as Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, and Subhadra, Neelakantan challenges traditional binary frameworks of heroism and villainy and destabilizes patriarchal readings of dharma and power. The research explores how women in Ajaya move beyond passive archetypes to become strategic, morally reflective, and psychologically complex agents who shape the epic's social, political, and ethical dynamics. Through nuanced characterization, multi-focal narrative strategies, and a critique of caste and patriarchal hierarchies, the duology offers new interpretive possibilities for the Mahabharata, demonstrating that female perspectives are indispensable to the understanding of justice, morality, and agency within epic literature. Ultimately, the study argues that Neelakantan's work not only restores marginalized voices but also provides a compelling template for critically reimagining classical texts in ways that promote ethical sophistication and narrative inclusivity.

Keywords: Patriarchal critique; Social hierarchy; Ethical negotiation; Female empowerment; Political foresight; Structural constraints.

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The *Mahabharata* is one of the most intricate and enduring narratives in world literature, functioning not only as a literary epic but also as a cultural, philosophical, and moral touchstone across centuries. Its narrative intricacy encompasses multiple layers of plot, characterization, and ethical dilemmas, reflecting the complex moral and social universe of ancient India. Traditionally, the epic has been transmitted through oral recitation, Sanskrit manuscripts, regional vernaculars, and later modern interpretations including literature, television, and cinema. Across these mediums, certain interpretive patterns have prevailed, particularly the valorization of the Pandavas as paragons of dharma and the consistent moral condemnation of the Kauravas, especially Duryodhana, as embodiments of adharma. These conventional readings have reinforced binary notions of virtue and vice, often marginalizing female perspectives and limiting ethical interpretation to male heroism and failure. Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* (2013) and *Rise of Kali* (2015) disrupt this entrenched moral framework by retelling the epic from the Kaurava perspective, offering readers an alternative understanding of dharma, justice, and political power. Through this inversion, Neelakantan foregrounds previously marginalized voices, most notably those of female characters such as Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, and Subhadra, whose agency, intellect, and ethical reasoning are explored in nuanced and multifaceted ways. In doing so, the duology interrogates not only the patriarchal and caste hierarchies inherent in the epic but also the broader ethical and political assumptions embedded in traditional interpretations. The novels reveal women as strategic thinkers, moral arbiters, and socially adept actors whose choices significantly influence the trajectory of events.

By highlighting these perspectives, Neelakantan positions gendered agency at the center of his retelling, challenging readers to reassess conventional assumptions about heroism, morality, and narrative authority. Moreover, the duology's focus on the vanquished Kaurava viewpoint invites a reassessment of history, ethics, and power dynamics, encouraging reflection on the societal and structural constraints that shape both male and female agency. In emphasizing these dimensions, Neelakantan's work exemplifies the potential of contemporary mythopoesis to critically engage with classical texts, offering fresh interpretive possibilities while maintaining fidelity to the epic's thematic complexity. The *Ajaya* series, therefore, serves not merely as a retelling but as a reflective and ethically charged interrogation of canonical narratives, foregrounding the ways in which gender, social hierarchy, and moral reasoning intersect in shaping human experience and narrative history. In this way, society, culture and power become the inseparable trio. As Terry Eagleton states in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*:

The way in which what we say and believe connects with the power structure and power relations of the society we live in . . . not simply the deeply entrenched often unconscious beliefs held, but rather . . . more particularly those modes of feeling, valuing, perceiving, believing which have some kind of relation to the maintenance and reproduction of social power. (10)

Myths constitute an essential dimension of society, sustained through ritual practices and collective cultural cohesion. They thereby become embedded within the very fabric of the human psyche. Human conduct is often shaped and guided by the philosophical and ideological frameworks articulated in mythic narratives. These myths dwell within the subconscious strata of the mind, continually resurfacing and manifesting themselves through human behaviour and social action. Paul Ricoeur, a French hermeneutic phenomenologist, in *The Symbolism of Evil*, defines myth as:

A traditional narration which relates to events that happened at the beginning of time and which has the purpose of providing grounds for the ritual actions of man of today and, in a general manner, establishing all the forms of actions and thought by which man understands himself in the world. (5)

Joseph Dorairaj in *Myth and Literature* states:

Myths are uncanny phenomena. They are at once regional and yet universal; static and yet dynamic; stable and yet protean; archaic and yet contemporary; profligate and yet hallowed; fantastic and yet highly structured; divine and yet human in that they are as much about gods and goddesses as about human beings. Though they belong to a pre-literate prehistorical era, they keep recurring in all ages and are part of our contemporary society. Though they belong to the realm of primitive religion and come under the purview of anthropologist, folklorists, and phenomenologist of religion, they are an integral part of literature and other arts. (09)

However, M. H. Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* provides a comprehensive definition of myth that is quite popular even today:

... one story in a mythology – a system of hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, and to establish the rationale for social customs and observances and the sanctions for the rules by which men conduct their lives. (106)

The theoretical framework of mythopoesis is central to understanding Anand Neelakantan's narrative strategy in the Ajaya duology. Mythopoesis, the creative act of crafting or reinterpreting myth, allows authors to reimagine canonical narratives to reflect contemporary social, political, and ethical concerns. Scholars such as Northrop Frye, Joseph Campbell, and Wendy Doniger have emphasized that myths are not static relics but dynamic, evolving narratives that societies continually reshape to negotiate identity, morality, and cultural memory. Retelling functions as an artistic endeavour that breathes new vitality into ancient texts. It reanimates canonical narratives by fusing history with myth to yield modern perspectives on the classical tradition. Contemporary mythic fiction authors dismantle and re-envision established characters and events, thereby transforming revisionist myth-making

into a powerful medium for unsettling the rigidity of binary structures. Through such re-inscriptions, traditional stories are re-examined and interrogated, often infused with a renewed sense of suspense. Retellings also possess the potential to illuminate pressing contemporary social dilemmas and offer imaginative strategies for negotiating their complexities. When a work of art is interwoven with myth, it ought not to be perceived as a mere replication of the source text. Authors reshape and reinterpret the narrative, infusing it with fresh layers of significance that resonate with the ethos of their age and the prevailing philosophical outlook. In this process, myths transcend temporal and cultural boundaries, shedding their fixed structural features to assume renewed and adapted literary configurations. As Herman Northrop Frye, a Canadian literary critic and theorist, notes in *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology*, “Myth is a structural element in literature, because literature as whole is a displaced mythology” (1). The transposition dissolves the dialectical relationship between myth and mythic fiction.

Indian mythology, in particular, has been subjected to multiple reinterpretations through such revisionary practices. Numerous writers engage with these myths from countervailing perspectives, which may be either androcentric or gynocentric, yet rarely efface the original episodes enshrined in the classical corpus. These alternative renditions vary in form and scope, often shaped by typological differences and the demographic contexts of their production. Claude Lévi-Strauss, a French anthropologist and proponent of structuralism, remarks on the operational value of myth in his book, *The Structural Study of Myth* as,

What gives the myth an operational value is that the specific pattern described is timeless; it explains the present and the past as well as the future. This can be made clear through a comparison between myth and what appears to have largely replaced it in modern societies, namely, politics. (30)

In the context of Ajaya, Neelakantan engages in mythopoesis not merely as a literary exercise but as an ethical and political intervention. By retelling the Mahabharata from the Kaurava perspective, the author destabilizes familiar moral hierarchies that traditionally valorize the Pandavas and demonize the Kauravas. Suyodhana emerges as a reformer who critiques caste hierarchies, questions the rigidities of Brahminical orthodoxy, and advocates for social justice, contrasting with the Pandavas’ complicity in preserving systemic inequalities. This inversion does not simply reassign heroism and villainy; it illuminates the structural and moral complexities of human behavior, allowing readers to engage with questions of justice, morality, and ethical responsibility in a more nuanced and multidimensional manner.

Neelakantan’s narrative strategies enhance the ethical and psychological depth of the text. He employs techniques such as free indirect discourse, multiple focalizations, and interior monologues to provide intimate access to the characters’ thoughts, motivations, and emotional responses. This approach allows readers to

comprehend characters' decisions not as simplistic reflections of virtue or vice but as morally and socially situated actions shaped by context, upbringing, and systemic pressures. The Kauravas' ambitions, insecurities, and strategic calculations are portrayed with empathy, emphasizing that moral evaluation cannot be reduced to binary judgments. Similarly, the experiences of women, including Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, and Subhadra, are rendered with careful attention to psychological realism, social positioning, and ethical reasoning. These characters navigate complex patriarchal structures, negotiate social constraints, and exercise agency in subtle and overt ways. Their perspectives illuminate the interplay between personal desire, ethical judgment, and structural constraints, reinforcing the narrative's broader interrogation of morality, justice, and power. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir has talked about the condition of a 'woman' and how a woman is defined in society. She says:

Woman? Very simple, say those who like simple answers: she is a womb, an ovary; she is a female: this word is sufficient to define her. From a man's mouth, the epithet 'female' sounds like an insult; but he not ashamed of his animality, is proud to hear: 'He is male!' The term 'female' is pejorative not because its roots woman in nature, but because it confines her in her sex. (Beauvoir 21)

Moreover, Neelakantan's mythopoetic approach extends beyond character psychology to the ethical architecture of the epic itself. Traditional readings often valorize dharma as adherence to social and familial duty, emphasizing male heroism and moral triumph. In *Ajaya*, dharma is reframed as a dynamic and contextually contingent concept, one that encompasses considerations of social justice, systemic inequality, and ethical reasoning beyond gendered and caste-based hierarchies. The ethical agency of women in the narrative—through moral deliberation, strategic intervention, and political acumen—illustrates how dharma is enacted in diverse and socially situated ways. For instance, Draupadi's resistance in the dice hall is simultaneously a moral protest, a political intervention, and an assertion of gendered authority. Kunti's strategic concealment of Karna's identity reflects both maternal concern and ethical ambiguity, negotiating the competing demands of familial loyalty and societal norms. Gandhari's reflective moral judgments, enacted through selective silence and constrained action, exemplify ethical engagement within restrictive social frameworks. Through these portrayals, Neelakantan interrogates the conventional moral binaries of the *Mahabharata* and foregrounds the importance of ethical pluralism in evaluating human behavior.

The narrative's structural choices further reinforce the mythopoetic vision. By adopting the Kaurava perspective, Neelakantan shifts narrative authority to the traditionally silenced, challenging the reader's assumptions about historical and literary truth. This repositioning allows for a reconsideration of ethical and political legitimacy, illustrating that moral evaluation is inseparable from perspective, context, and social positioning. The text thereby operates on multiple levels: as a retelling of an epic, as a feminist and socio-political critique, and as a philosophical

engagement with ethical complexity. By combining psychological realism, narrative pluralism, and ethical interrogation, Neelakantan's *Ajaya* exemplifies how mythopoesis can function as both a literary and cultural strategy, offering new ways of understanding canonical texts while addressing contemporary social concerns, particularly regarding gendered agency and structural inequities. The duology thus situates the Mahabharata not as a static moral tale but as a flexible narrative space where power, ethics, and gender intersect to produce a richer, more inclusive moral imagination.

Draupadi, one of the most pivotal figures in the Mahabharata, is reimagined in *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* as a politically astute, morally conscious, and psychologically complex agent whose influence extends far beyond her conventional role as the object of male honor or a narrative catalyst for war. Traditional interpretations often emphasize Draupadi's suffering—particularly during the dice game—as the central aspect of her narrative, reducing her to a symbol of humiliation or a trigger for male-driven events. Neelakantan, however, reconstructs her character as one who engages actively with the moral, social, and political structures around her. Badrinath Chaturvedi remarks in his book *The Women of Mahabharata: The Question of Truth*:

That she was born from the flames of a yagna fire, a most unusual form of human birth, is to be understood metaphorically, for her later life, at any rate, the greatest part of it, would be lived in the flames of one kind of human fire or another, mostly in the flames of hatred and revenge that she let burn in her heart for thirteen years. (171)

Her resistance in the dice hall is portrayed not as impulsive outrage but as a deliberate, ethically grounded act of protest against patriarchal norms that commodify women and legitimize male dominance. Through her dialogues and internal reflections, Draupadi demonstrates an acute awareness of the moral hypocrisies of both the Kauravas and the Pandavas, recognizing that neither side fully embodies justice or virtue. She evaluates the actions of those around her not only through personal emotion but through ethical and political lenses, positioning herself as an active participant in the broader social dynamics of the court and the impending conflict. Renu Verma points out:

As and when Draupadi has been interpreted differently from her classical trajectory of a mythic queen, she has represented new meanings for the social and political lives of people. Many renderings on her life story especially some particular episodes in it are created, recreated, interpreted and constituted in the larger narrative universe. (57)

Neelakantan further highlights Draupadi's agency by depicting her strategic intelligence and capacity for negotiation. Beyond her confrontations in public spaces, she maneuvers within the intricate web of familial loyalties, social obligations, and political alliances. For instance, her interactions with Suyodhana, Karna, and her husbands reveal her ability to influence decisions, negotiate

outcomes, and assert moral authority without overstepping the constraints imposed by patriarchal society. Draupadi's insight into the motivations, strengths, and weaknesses of those around her allows her to act in ways that subtly guide political and ethical developments. She is portrayed as understanding the consequences of inaction as much as the consequences of defiance, demonstrating a sophisticated grasp of political strategy. Her ethical reasoning is inseparable from her strategic awareness; she is constantly evaluating the potential impact of her words and actions, not merely for herself but for the broader moral and social order. Spivak valorizes Draupadi as "odd, unpaired and uncoupled" and points out that this unique trait of Draupadi is also exhibited by Mahasweta Devi in her *Dopdi* "by placing the tribal woman *Dopdi* first in a comradely activist, monogamous marriage and then in a situation of multiple rapes" (387).

The psychological depth of Draupadi in Neelakantan's narrative further enhances her portrayal as a multifaceted agent. She is not a one-dimensional figure defined by suffering or vengeance; instead, she experiences fear, anger, hope, and moral doubt, all of which inform her actions and decisions. These emotions are not weaknesses but sources of insight and resilience, enabling her to navigate the oppressive structures of her world with pragmatism and intelligence. The narrative emphasizes that Draupadi's moral clarity is hard-won and contextually grounded, shaped by lived experience within a system that simultaneously venerates and marginalizes her. In this way, Neelakantan portrays her as a fully realized character whose internal deliberations and outward actions exemplify the complex interplay between personal agency, social constraint, and ethical judgment. Draupadi stands out as a fierce and independent protagonist in the *Mahabharata*, known for her courage, determination, and high self-esteem. Unlike her demi-god husbands, she displays remarkable strength of character and fortitude in the face of adversity. Though she harbors a deep, secret love for Karna, she consciously buries these feelings within herself. Draupadi's indignation surfaces strongly when Kunti refers to her impersonally as 'it,' reflecting her resistance to being objectified and overlooked. Throughout the epic, Draupadi embodies resilience and a powerful voice advocating for justice, maintaining her dignity despite numerous trials and humiliations. Draupadi's fierce resistance against being treated is vividly captured when she says, "a thing without heart and feelings; to be bartered, shared, fought over, and pawned when its use was over" (*Roll of the Dice* 330). Her explosive indignation is clear when she confronts Kunti, asking, "Am I a prostitute to share the bed of all your sons?" (*Roll of the Dice* 331), boldly questioning the morality and righteousness upheld by the elders. Draupadi ridicules Kunti's notion of dharma: "Mother, I hope these are all the sons you have... So I do not wake one day to find myself wife to half a dozen men..." (*Roll of the Dice* 332). Upon learning she was pawned by Yudhishtira, she challenges, "Am I your chattel to pawn when you wish, share when you want, and sell when you fancy?" (*Rise of Kali* 27). She sees her husbands as "puppets controlled by priests and obscure texts," powerless to defend her honor (*Rise of Kali* 29). These moments underscore Draupadi's unwavering strength and refusal to be a mere

object in male power struggles. In a moment of utter grief she lashes out at Kunti: “You poisoned your sons’ minds and created this war. You made me marry your five sons and ruined me” (*Rise of Kali* 468).

Moreover, Draupadi’s narrative challenges traditional epic morality by highlighting the ethical responsibilities and limitations of male heroes. Her critical perspective exposes the contradictions and moral failings of both the Pandavas and the Kauravas, revealing that gendered oppression is not incidental but structurally embedded within the epic’s moral universe. Adrien Rich, in her essay, ‘When We Dead Awaken: Writing as re-Vision’, states- “Revision- the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction is for women more than a chapter in cultural history. It is an act of survival”(18). By foregrounding her reflections and interventions, Neelakantan not only centers female agency but also encourages readers to reevaluate the nature of dharma, justice, and ethical leadership. Draupadi’s capacity to shape outcomes through strategic, ethical, and political insight underscores the centrality of women in determining the course of events, demonstrating that moral and political agency is not exclusive to male characters. Through this multidimensional portrayal, Draupadi emerges as a figure whose intellectual, ethical, and political contributions are essential to understanding the Mahabharata’s narrative and ethical landscape, reaffirming the transformative potential of mythopoetic reinterpretation in contemporary literature.

Kunti, traditionally idealized as the virtuous mother of the Pandavas, is reimagined in *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* as a politically savvy, morally complex, and ethically reflective figure whose agency operates both within and against the constraints of a patriarchal society. In conventional narratives, Kunti is often celebrated primarily for her maternal devotion, her obedience to societal norms, and her role in facilitating the Pandavas’ rise to power. Neelakantan, however, presents a more nuanced portrayal, emphasizing her strategic intellect, ethical deliberation, and the intricate ways she negotiates power within restrictive social and familial frameworks. Her concealment of Karna’s identity, the orchestration of Draupadi’s marriage to all five Pandavas, and her selective interventions in political and familial affairs reveal a mind attuned to both moral and practical imperatives. These actions are not morally simplistic; rather, they reflect a sophisticated balancing act between personal loyalty, familial duty, societal expectations, and long-term strategic considerations. By foregrounding Kunti’s calculated and morally reflective decisions, Neelakantan challenges the notion that maternal or female virtue in the epic is inherently passive or constrained solely to obedience.

Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas, is portrayed as a woman of strong character and intelligence who is fiercely determined to secure the throne of Hastinapura for her eldest son, Yudhishtira. She tactfully aligns herself with the brahmins in the court and holds even more fundamentalist views than the priests. Unafraid to speak her mind before the elders of the family, she demands justice for her sons, asserting their legitimate claim to the throne. Kunti sharply criticizes

Bhishma's interventions in favor of Suyodhana when the court is in session, showing her unwavering dedication to protecting her sons' rights and status within the royal family. Her political acumen and strategic alliances make her a formidable and fearless matriarch in the complex power dynamics of Hastinapura. She says, "Your heart has become as hard as a rock, Lord Bhishma. You do not know what a mother feels. You have never married nor do you know what children mean to their parents" (*Roll of the Dice* 154).

Kunti's agency is particularly significant because it operates within a patriarchal context that limits women's formal authority, compelling her to exercise influence through persuasion, secrecy, and ethical negotiation. Unlike male characters who wield power overtly through physical action or political authority, Kunti's interventions are subtle, requiring foresight, moral reasoning, and a keen understanding of human psychology. For instance, her concealment of Karna's lineage is a complex act that balances ethical concerns with practical necessity: she protects her son from the social and political consequences of illegitimacy while navigating the ethical obligations toward her other sons. This reveals her capacity for ethical judgment under conditions of moral ambiguity, demonstrating that true agency often involves navigating constraints rather than ignoring them. Similarly, her decisions regarding Draupadi's polyandrous marriage reflect both a strategic understanding of dynastic politics and a recognition of the ethical imperatives of fairness, social harmony, and long-term familial security.

Neelakantan also emphasizes Kunti's psychological depth, portraying her as a reflective and morally introspective figure who constantly negotiates the tension between personal desires, ethical principles, and societal expectations. Her internal monologues reveal her awareness of the consequences of her actions, the potential for moral compromise, and the risks inherent in asserting agency within a male-dominated system. Kunti's moral reasoning is thus inseparable from her strategic thinking: she evaluates both the immediate and long-term implications of her choices, seeking to maximize justice, minimize harm, and preserve familial integrity. Her ability to operate ethically and strategically within constrained circumstances exemplifies the interplay between personal morality and structural limitations, illustrating how women exercise nuanced forms of power even when overt authority is denied to them.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak critiques the rigid, hierarchical division between the public and private spheres, observing that sexism perpetuates the notion of the public domain as superior, rational, and inherently masculine. She argues that this binary enforces patriarchal dominance by repressing the importance of emotions, sexuality, and the private sphere, which are deemed lesser and irrational. Spivak advocates for a feminist reversal and displacement of this fixed hierarchy: rather than simply opposing the public with the private, her deconstructive approach seeks to make visible how patriarchal structures maintain control by undervaluing private experiences and subjectivities, particularly those of women. She insists that feminist activity should foreground the significance of emotion and sexuality as central to

human life, challenging and destabilizing the masculine privileging of rationality and public agency, and opening space for more inclusive, sex-transcendent societies. She observes, “The most ‘material’ sedimentation of this repressive politics is the institutionalized sex discrimination that seems the hardest stone to push” (89).

Kunti’s ethical and political agency challenges conventional notions of dharma and moral hierarchy in the Mahabharata. By acting strategically and ethically, she often subverts male-dominated interpretations of righteousness, revealing the moral limitations and hypocrisies of patriarchal power structures. Her actions underscore the idea that ethical and political insight is not exclusive to male characters; rather, women’s reflective, strategic, and morally grounded decisions are central to the trajectory of events in the epic. Through this reimagined portrayal, Kunti emerges not merely as a mother figure but as a shrewd, ethically principled, and politically astute agent whose influence is crucial to understanding the social, political, and moral dynamics of the narrative. By foregrounding Kunti’s intelligence, foresight, and ethical discernment, Neelakantan elevates her from a traditionally peripheral or idealized figure to a central actor whose decisions and reflections shape both personal and societal outcomes, reinforcing the duology’s broader emphasis on gendered agency and moral complexity.

Gandhari, traditionally depicted as the idealized and self-effacing queen of Hastinapura, is reimagined in *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* as a morally complex and psychologically nuanced figure whose agency, though constrained, operates through reflection, judgment, and selective intervention. In classical interpretations, her act of blindfolding herself in solidarity with her blind husband Dhritarashtra is often read as emblematic of obedience, self-sacrifice, and passive devotion. Neelakantan, however, presents Gandhari’s blindness not simply as self-effacement but as a site of ethical and political consciousness, demonstrating that constrained agency can be both morally significant and socially impactful. By choosing to blindfold herself, Gandhari negotiates the ethical and emotional landscape of her household, signaling loyalty to her husband while simultaneously highlighting the limitations and contradictions inherent in her role as a woman in a patriarchal society. Her silence, far from being mere passivity, is depicted as a deliberate strategy of moral observation and reflection, allowing her to perceive and evaluate the ethical failures and ambitions of those around her.

Neelakantan emphasizes Gandhari’s psychological depth by portraying her internal deliberations, grief, and moral judgment as central to her character. Gandhari is a woman of honour and who would not tolerate any atrocities. When she learns about Draupadi’s disrobing in the court, she rushes in and slaps Suyodhana hard on his face. “I am ashamed. Where were the Acharyas and Gurus when a woman was being humiliated in our own Sabha?” (*Rise of Kali* 33). She is acutely aware of the ambitions, limitations, and ethical compromises of her sons, as well as the political machinations of the court. Her reflections reveal both frustration and sorrow, as she recognizes the structural constraints that shape the behavior of those around her and the inevitable consequences of their actions. Gandhari’s moral

authority derives not from overt power but from her capacity to interpret, critique, and anticipate ethical outcomes, positioning her as a subtle yet indispensable agent within the epic's moral universe. She understands that direct intervention is often impossible without transgressing societal norms, yet she exercises influence through counsel, selective communication, and moral judgment, demonstrating the complex ways in which women navigate patriarchal hierarchies to assert agency.

Her ethical engagement is particularly evident in moments where she must reconcile her maternal affection with broader moral imperatives. She advises Suyodhana: "A good politician knows when to act noble and when to be ruthless. Politics is the art of using others to achieve your goals" (*Roll of the Dice* 189). Gandhari's grief for her sons is intertwined with her recognition of their ethical failings, forcing her to consider the balance between familial loyalty and moral accountability. This dual awareness adds layers of complexity to her character, illustrating that constrained agency can involve difficult ethical negotiation rather than passivity or submission. Gandhari embodies the tension between societal expectation and personal moral insight: she operates within restrictive social frameworks while continually reflecting on the consequences of her sons' actions and the ethical obligations of her position as queen. Her deliberations reveal that morality is situational, contextually grounded, and inseparable from gendered and structural limitations.

Furthermore, Gandhari's portrayal underscores Neelakantan's broader critique of patriarchal and hierarchical structures within the Mahabharata. By highlighting her reflective agency, the narrative challenges the assumption that moral and political authority is the exclusive domain of men. Gandhari's ethical and psychological complexity demonstrates that influence and moral reasoning can manifest in subtle, non-confrontational ways, redefining what constitutes meaningful action within constrained circumstances. Through her selective interventions, strategic silence, and reflective judgment, Gandhari emerges as a central ethical voice in the narrative, offering insight into the limitations, contradictions, and responsibilities inherent in navigating patriarchal power. Neelakantan's reimagining thus elevates Gandhari from a passive archetype to a figure of profound moral and psychological significance, illustrating the duology's commitment to exploring the multidimensionality of gendered agency, the intricacies of ethical decision-making, and the moral texture of social hierarchies within the Mahabharata.

In *Ajaya: Rise of Kali*, the escalation of the war creates a narrative space in which the agency of female characters becomes even more pronounced and ethically significant. Draupadi, whose strategic, moral, and political insight was established in *Roll of the Dice*, is further developed as a figure whose decisions have profound implications for both personal and collective outcomes. The intensifying conflict sharpens her awareness of the systemic forces that perpetuate gendered and social inequalities, compelling her to act with increasing deliberation and foresight. Draupadi's interventions are not merely reactions to events imposed upon

her but proactive engagements with the political, moral, and social dimensions of the war. Her ethical reasoning is consistently intertwined with strategic calculation: she recognizes that her choices can influence alliances, shape moral perceptions, and alter the course of the conflict, and she maneuvers accordingly. The narrative emphasizes that Draupadi's agency is simultaneously personal and structural, reflecting her ability to navigate and influence the male-dominated spheres of decision-making, even as her autonomy is constrained by societal norms and expectations.

Kunti's agency in *Rise of Kali* similarly expands as the stakes of war intensify. Her strategic and ethical decision-making continues to operate within the subtle, indirect modes that characterize her influence. Kunti's reflections reveal a sophisticated understanding of the interplay between familial loyalty, political strategy, and moral responsibility. She carefully balances the needs of her sons with the broader ethical imperatives of justice and societal stability, illustrating how women exercise nuanced forms of power when overt authority is limited. Kunti's decisions are deeply contextual, demonstrating that ethical and political insight often requires navigating a complex network of obligations, potential consequences, and competing loyalties. Neelakantan highlights that Kunti's capacity for moral and strategic judgment is not diminished by her constrained social role; rather, it is enhanced by her ability to anticipate, negotiate, and intervene in ways that are both ethically and politically effective, even when her actions remain largely indirect.

Gandhari's role in *Rise of Kali* similarly emphasizes the expansion of ethical and reflective agency in response to the intensification of conflict. While her power remains constrained, Gandhari's moral vigilance, critical judgment, and selective interventions have increasing significance as the war unfolds. Her reflections on her sons' actions, her grief over their choices, and her strategic silence become mechanisms for ethical engagement, allowing her to exert influence in morally and politically consequential ways. Gandhari's character embodies the paradox of constrained agency: her direct actions may be limited, but her ethical insights, judgment, and moral authority shape the interpretation and evaluation of events, guiding the moral consciousness of other characters and providing a critical counterpoint to male-driven narratives of heroism and victory.

In addition to these central figures, Neelakantan also develops the agency of secondary female characters such as Subhadra, Amba, and Ulupi, whose interventions provide insight into the broader social and political landscape. Subhadra's moral awareness, political acumen, and interpersonal intelligence enable her to navigate complex ethical dilemmas and act decisively when opportunities arise. Amba and Ulupi similarly demonstrate how women exercise agency in diverse contexts, from personal revenge to strategic alliance-building, highlighting the multifaceted ways in which female characters influence the trajectory of events. By foregrounding both primary and secondary female perspectives, *Rise of Kali* extends Neelakantan's project of re-centering gendered agency within the epic, demonstrating that women's ethical, strategic, and political contributions are

essential to understanding the dynamics of war, morality, and social hierarchy. This expanded portrayal underscores the duology's broader critique of patriarchal and hierarchical structures, revealing that true agency and moral insight are distributed across genders, shaped by structural constraints, and enacted through both overt and subtle forms of engagement.

Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya* duology intricately weaves the intersection of gender, caste, and social hierarchy into its narrative, illuminating how systemic oppression shapes both moral and strategic agency. Draupadi's experiences, for example, are deeply influenced by her liminal position within the social and ethical hierarchies of the epic: she is neither fully divine nor entirely human, neither wholly sovereign nor completely subordinate. This liminality reflects the precarious position of women in patriarchal societies, where agency is often constrained by structural forces such as caste, gender norms, and the dictates of dharma as socially interpreted. Neelakantan foregrounds Draupadi's acute awareness of these intersecting oppressions, showing that her ethical reasoning and strategic interventions are always informed by a keen understanding of social hierarchy. Her resistance in the dice hall is not merely a personal act of defiance; it is a confrontation with entrenched social structures that commodify women, reinforce male honor, and legitimize systemic inequality. By emphasizing these intersections, Neelakantan highlights how ethical and political agency is profoundly shaped by structural contexts, demonstrating that gendered oppression cannot be understood in isolation from caste, class, and societal norms.

The duology further illustrates that male characters, often portrayed as moral arbiters in traditional readings of the *Mahabharata*, are themselves enmeshed within hierarchies that perpetuate inequality. Suyodhana's critique of Brahminical orthodoxy, for instance, exposes the ethical blind spots and complicity of the Pandavas in sustaining social hierarchies. This creates a narrative framework in which women, while structurally constrained, often demonstrate more nuanced ethical and strategic insight than their male counterparts. Kunti's careful management of familial, ethical, and political obligations exemplifies this interplay: her agency is exercised through negotiation, secrecy, and foresight, reflecting her capacity to operate effectively within a system designed to limit her formal authority. Similarly, Gandhari's moral reflection and selective silence are structured responses to patriarchal constraint, illustrating the subtle ways in which women can assert ethical and political influence in contexts where direct action is constrained.

The duology also examines how caste intersects with gender to exacerbate systemic oppression. Draupadi's social position as a royal princess is complicated by the expectations placed upon her as a woman within a stratified society. Her actions are scrutinized not only for their adherence to dharma but also for their compliance with gendered and caste-based norms, highlighting how structural inequalities shape the possibilities for agency and resistance. The novel demonstrates that women's moral, political, and social decisions cannot be separated from these intersecting pressures; their agency is simultaneously constrained and defined by

the hierarchical systems they navigate. By foregrounding these intersections, Neelakantan challenges simplistic readings of virtue, vice, and heroism, illustrating that ethical and political insight is often distributed unevenly across social hierarchies, with women frequently occupying the role of moral and strategic mediators.

Secondary female characters such as Subhadra, Amba, and Ulupi further illustrate the interplay of gender and hierarchy. Subhadra navigates the ethical and political expectations of her royal household with subtlety, employing intelligence and moral reasoning to influence key events, while Amba's narrative is shaped by her experience of social injustice and her quest for personal and political justice. Ulupi, too, demonstrates agency within both personal and political spheres, revealing how women negotiate authority, desire, and ethical responsibility across the epic's social spectrum. By emphasizing these intersections, Neelakantan underscores the importance of understanding gendered agency as relational, socially mediated, and responsive to the structural realities of caste, patriarchy, and hierarchical authority. This approach not only deepens the ethical and political texture of the narrative but also reaffirms the centrality of female perspectives in interpreting the Mahabharata, illustrating that the intersections of gender, caste, and hierarchy are crucial to understanding both moral and strategic decision-making in the epic.

One of the most significant narrative strategies in Anand Neelakantan's Ajaya duology is the subversion of the traditional hero-villain binary, which has profound implications for the exploration of gendered ethical engagement. In conventional readings of the Mahabharata, the Pandavas are celebrated as paragons of virtue, embodying dharma and moral rectitude, while the Kauravas, particularly Duryodhana, are cast as embodiments of adharma and vice. This binary framework not only simplifies complex ethical dilemmas but also marginalizes female perspectives, as women are often confined to roles that reinforce male-centered moral hierarchies. By presenting the epic from the Kaurava perspective, Neelakantan destabilizes these entrenched moral assumptions, revealing the ethical ambiguity of all characters and highlighting the ways in which gendered and social structures shape moral reasoning. This subversion allows for a more expansive consideration of ethical engagement, where moral judgment is informed by context, perspective, and relational dynamics rather than rigid binaries. Women, in particular, emerge as central ethical agents, whose capacity for reflection, strategic intervention, and moral negotiation is foregrounded in a narrative that interrogates conventional notions of heroism and villainy.

The narrative's destabilization of the hero-villain binary enhances the visibility of women's ethical agency. Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, and Subhadra are no longer peripheral observers of male heroism; rather, they operate as independent moral and strategic actors whose decisions influence the course of events and challenge conventional assessments of virtue and vice. Draupadi's confrontations in the dice hall, for instance, force a reevaluation of what constitutes justice, honor, and ethical

conduct. Her critique is not limited to the Kauravas; it extends to the Pandavas as well, whose passive complicity in her humiliation exposes the limitations of male-centered moral authority. Similarly, Kunti's strategic concealment of Karna's identity and her orchestration of complex familial arrangements illustrate her capacity for ethical reasoning and political foresight, challenging the assumption that moral authority resides solely with male actors. Gandhari's reflective silence and selective intervention, too, demonstrate that agency can manifest in subtle, morally significant ways, emphasizing the relational and context-dependent nature of ethical judgment.

Neelakantan's subversion also illuminates the interplay between structural constraints and ethical agency. By presenting characters traditionally labeled as villains in a sympathetic and morally nuanced light, the narrative highlights how societal norms, caste hierarchies, and patriarchal constraints shape both male and female ethical engagement. Women's decisions are often constrained by social expectations, yet they exercise moral authority through strategic foresight, reflective judgment, and selective action. For instance, Draupadi's insistence on justice, Kunti's careful planning, and Gandhari's moral observation all operate within a system that limits their overt power but does not diminish the ethical significance of their choices. This nuanced portrayal underscores the complexity of moral agency, suggesting that heroism and villainy are relational and contextually mediated rather than absolute categories.

Furthermore, the subversion of the binary challenges readers to reconsider the ethical frameworks through which narratives are traditionally interpreted. By destabilizing the simplistic dichotomy of right and wrong, Neelakantan positions women's agency as a lens through which the moral universe of the epic can be more fully understood. Female characters are shown negotiating ethical dilemmas, balancing personal, familial, and societal responsibilities, and exercising strategic judgment under constraint, thereby revealing the limitations of male-centered moral authority and the broader ethical significance of gendered perspectives. Through this narrative strategy, Neelakantan not only redefines the moral terrain of the Mahabharata but also emphasizes that meaningful ethical engagement is inseparable from considerations of gender, social structure, and relational context, affirming the centrality of women's moral and strategic contributions to the epic's ethical and political discourse.

The ethical and political significance of female agency in Anand Neelakantan's Ajaya duology is profound, as the decisions and interventions of women directly influence the trajectory of the narrative, the conduct of war, and the moral interpretation of events. Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, and Subhadra exemplify the ways in which women operate as ethical and political agents within a patriarchal and hierarchical social order, shaping outcomes through strategic action, moral persuasion, and calculated intervention. Draupadi's insistence on justice, her ability to critique both Pandava and Kaurava conduct, and her strategic engagement in court politics demonstrate that female agency is essential for understanding the

unfolding of events. Her moral and political interventions not only challenge the ethical assumptions of male characters but also actively influence the decisions that guide the war's progress. Through Draupadi, Neelakantan emphasizes that women's agency is inseparable from ethical and political frameworks, reinforcing the idea that moral authority is relational and contextually mediated.

Kunti's role similarly underscores the intersection of ethics and politics in female decision-making. Her strategic concealment of Karna's identity, mediation among her sons, and negotiation of complex familial and dynastic relationships highlight the ethical weight and political ramifications of her choices. Kunti's interventions are not performed in isolation but are deeply informed by considerations of familial loyalty, social expectation, and long-term consequences. The narrative portrays her as exercising a form of moral foresight and political acumen that rivals and, in some instances, surpasses that of male actors. Her decisions demonstrate that ethical insight and political strategy are intertwined, and that women, despite operating within structurally constrained roles, can exert influence that significantly shapes historical and narrative outcomes.

Gandhari's ethical agency further exemplifies the political significance of female influence. Her reflective silence, moral judgment, and selective interventions position her as a critical observer of power, allowing her to shape the interpretation of events and the moral evaluation of her sons' actions. Although her influence is exercised indirectly, it is no less consequential; her ethical discernment provides a moral compass within the narrative, guiding other characters and framing the ethical consequences of male ambition. Gandhari's constrained agency reveals that political and moral authority does not require overt power, but can operate effectively through reflection, ethical observation, and strategic silence, highlighting the nuanced ways in which women negotiate systemic limitations to shape outcomes.

Secondary female characters, including Subhadra, Amba, and Ulupi, further demonstrate the ethical and political significance of gendered agency. Subhadra's capacity to navigate the ethical and social expectations of her household allows her to exert influence in crucial moments, while Amba's quest for personal justice exemplifies how individual agency intersects with political and ethical concerns. Ulupi's interventions, blending personal motivation with political strategy, reveal that women's influence often extends beyond the immediate sphere of familial or martial engagement, affecting broader social and political dynamics. Through these portrayals, Neelakantan emphasizes that female agency is not ancillary but central to the ethical, strategic, and political fabric of the narrative. The duology thereby challenges traditional interpretations of the Mahabharata, which often marginalize women's contributions, and repositions women as essential actors whose decisions, judgments, and strategic engagement fundamentally shape the course of events, the moral universe of the epic, and the interpretation of dharma itself.

Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya* duology foregrounds moral complexity and ethical ambiguity in its female characters, presenting them as multidimensional agents whose choices are informed by personal, social, and structural considerations. Unlike traditional readings of the *Mahabharata*, which often present female characters as embodiments of virtue, victimhood, or moral arbiters of male actions, Neelakantan portrays women such as Draupadi, Kunti, and Gandhari as ethically sophisticated figures navigating morally fraught landscapes. Draupadi, for example, exhibits both principled defiance and strategic pragmatism, reflecting the tension between personal desire, ethical judgment, and social expectation. Her insistence on justice in the dice hall is morally assertive, yet she is equally aware of the political and familial consequences of her actions, illustrating the interplay between ethical conviction and pragmatic reasoning. This nuanced portrayal challenges simplistic categorizations of right and wrong, demonstrating that women's moral agency is both contextually grounded and ethically intricate.

Kunti's ethical complexity is similarly foregrounded in Neelakantan's narrative. Her decisions, including the concealment of Karna's identity and her navigation of familial obligations, reveal the moral ambiguities inherent in negotiating loyalty, justice, and societal expectation. Kunti is consistently portrayed as weighing competing ethical imperatives, reflecting the intricate dynamics of *dharma* as socially mediated and context-dependent. She is neither unambiguously virtuous nor morally flawless; her choices are informed by the limitations imposed by her social position, the well-being of her sons, and the potential repercussions of action or inaction. This complexity allows readers to engage with Kunti not merely as a symbol of maternal devotion but as an ethically reflective actor whose moral reasoning shapes the trajectory of events and challenges conventional patriarchal interpretations of virtue and duty.

Gandhari, too, embodies ethical ambiguity, particularly through her reflective silence and selective intervention. By choosing when and how to act, she negotiates the tension between moral judgment, maternal obligation, and social constraint. Her grief and moral awareness of her sons' failings illustrate that ethical evaluation often entails navigating conflicting loyalties and the limitations imposed by structural hierarchies. Gandhari's moral complexity highlights a central theme in Neelakantan's mythopoetic approach: that ethical agency is relational and mediated by context, and that women often exercise influence in ways that are subtle, indirect, yet profoundly consequential. Her selective action and reflective insight underscore the idea that morality is not reducible to binary categories of right and wrong but is instead informed by ethical reasoning, situational judgment, and strategic foresight.

Secondary female characters, including Subhadra, Amba, and Ulupi, further illustrate the ethical intricacies of women's agency. Subhadra navigates her roles within family, political alliances, and social expectation with calculated discernment, demonstrating how women exercise ethical and political judgment simultaneously. Amba's pursuit of personal justice and Ulupi's interventions in political and relational

spheres exemplify the ways in which female agency intersects with ethical ambiguity: their actions may be driven by personal motives, but they are situated within broader moral, social, and political frameworks, complicating simplistic evaluations of right and wrong. By emphasizing these dimensions, Neelakantan challenges readers to appreciate the ethical sophistication and strategic intelligence of women, illustrating that moral ambiguity is not a flaw but a reflection of the nuanced, contextually grounded decision-making that defines gendered agency in the duology. Through this approach, Ajaya reframes female characters as central ethical actors whose choices, reflections, and interventions illuminate the complexities of justice, duty, and morality, highlighting the multidimensionality of women's agency in a traditionally male-centered epic.

Anand Neelakantan's Ajaya duology—comprising *Roll of the Dice* and *Rise of Kali*—offers a groundbreaking reimagining of the Mahabharata through the lens of gendered agency, foregrounding the ethical, strategic, and political roles of women who have historically been marginalized or constrained in classical retellings. By centering characters such as Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, Subhadra, and others, Neelakantan not only restores their narrative and moral centrality but also provides a sophisticated exploration of the interplay between agency, social hierarchy, and structural constraint. The duology illuminates the multifaceted ways in which women exercise influence—through reflection, ethical deliberation, strategic intervention, moral critique, and relational negotiation—demonstrating that agency extends beyond overt power and physical action to encompass subtle, contextually grounded, and ethically resonant forms of engagement. These portrayals challenge conventional readings of heroism, villainy, and moral authority, destabilizing the traditional male-centered dichotomies of the epic while elevating the ethical and political significance of female perspectives.

Furthermore, Neelakantan's work engages deeply with socio-political critique, revealing how patriarchal norms, caste hierarchies, and dynastic politics shape the possibilities for action, moral judgment, and ethical reasoning. Through the narrative and psychological strategies he employs—interior monologues, reflective narration, multi-focal perspectives, and carefully constructed dialogues—the duology presents women as ethically sophisticated actors whose decisions and interventions directly influence the trajectory of events and the moral universe of the epic. The ethical and political significance of their actions demonstrates that gendered agency is not peripheral but central to understanding both the structural and interpersonal dynamics that govern the Mahabharata's world, offering a nuanced exploration of justice, duty, and relational ethics.

Neelakantan's subversion of conventional binaries—hero versus villain, virtue versus vice—further amplifies the visibility of female agency, allowing readers to appreciate the complexity, moral ambiguity, and strategic acumen of women navigating constrained circumstances. By presenting ethical reasoning as relational, contextually mediated, and socially informed, the duology encourages contemporary reinterpretations of the Mahabharata that recognize the centrality of

female perspectives in shaping narrative, moral, and political outcomes. The agency of Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, and other female characters thus becomes a lens through which the epic's ethical universe can be re-evaluated, highlighting the intricate interplay of gender, social hierarchy, and ethical responsibility in both historical and contemporary frameworks.

Ajaya not only re-centers women in a canonical narrative but also challenges readers to reconsider the conceptualization of agency, power, and morality in epic literature. Neelakantan's work exemplifies how retellings can simultaneously restore marginalized voices, critique structural inequality, and deepen ethical understanding. By highlighting the nuanced, multidimensional, and relational forms of female agency, the duology provides a rich and compelling template for reinterpreting classical epics in ways that are socially conscious, ethically sophisticated, and narratively inclusive. Ultimately, the significance of Neelakantan's contribution lies in its ability to demonstrate that the moral, political, and strategic insight of women is essential for a holistic comprehension of epic narratives, asserting that gendered agency is not an ancillary dimension but a central and indispensable element of mythopoetic storytelling.

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