

The implications of destiny and dharma in the mahabharata



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The Mahabharata is one of the two great Indian epics, the other being the Ramayana. Composed in Sanskrit, it embodies the quintessential definition of the word epic with length of roughly 90, 000 verses and a clearly defined hero upon whom his tribe depends. The hero of the Mahabharata is Yudhishtira, the son of Dharma and leader of the Pandavas. This hero, as is true of many epics, must fight heroic battles against an anti-hero, the role of which in the Mahabharata is played by Duryodhana, the leader of the Kurus. Complicating this struggle between good and evil is the fact that these two sides do not begin as sworn enemies but are rather kinsmen. While the conventions used are traditionally epic, the work takes on a uniquely Indian tone as the struggle between the Pandavas and the Kurus is further muddled by issues of destiny and dharma. These two themes surface repeatedly throughout the Mahabharata culminating in an exchange between King Dhritarashtra and his subjects as he requests that they allow him to resign from the kingship to live out his days in the forest. In William Buck's retelling of the epic, his subjects accept his resignation and stand in agreement that his sons died not because he was a poor ruler, but because of the role of destiny in the battle and the righteous and strict adherence to Kshatriya caste dharma that his sons so bravely exemplified as they respond to the king, " The destruction of the Kurus...was not brought about by you [Dhritarashtra]. Such a thing could never happen without the influence of dharma. Kshatriyas especially should kill enemies and meet their deaths in battle." The Hindu ideas of destiny and dharma arise consistently throughout the Mahabharata and often allow characters to shed responsibilities for their actions and consequences that arise as a result. The tension between the Pandavas and the Kurus is caused by the fact that the clans borne of two

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brothers, Pandu and Dhritarashtra, are vying for control of their family's kingdom. Dhritarashtra, the blind and levelheaded king, intends to give the Pandavas rule over half of the kingdom in order to keep peace within the family. He plans to do so as a wedding present to the five Pandava brothers, all of whom have married Draupadi. His stubborn and heavy-handed son learns of this plan and responds with an impassioned speech regarding how unnecessary such an attempt to restore harmony would be. He enters the room and begins, "What do we need with the Pandavas? If the whole world is against you, you will keep your kingdom if that is your destiny, although you exert yourself only to breathe air! And if you are destined to lose a throne—do what you will, with all your strength, you shall fall" (Buck 75). This is one of the first instances in which a character will remove himself from all responsibility and liability for the outcome of his actions, blaming fate rather than his own poor choices. Duryodhana claims that it is pointless to give land to the Pandavas, for if war is to occur under the laws of destiny, then it will occur no matter what preventative measures are taken. It is this sentiment that is echoed when the subjects proclaim Dhritarashtra and his son Duryodhana blameless in the war that destroyed the Kuru clan. When Duryodhana travels to the kingdom given to the Pandavas, he falls into an invisible pool of water and is mocked by an unknown onlooker. In order to recover his pride, he challenges Yudhishtira to a game of dice. Yudhishtira responds, "Like a brilliant planet cast down from the sky, reason is overthrown, and man bows to his fate" (Buck 91). In this way, he absolves himself the repercussions of the dice game, may they be good or bad. He acknowledges that a throw of the dice cannot be reasoned with. The dice are subject to fate alone. It is in this game of dice, which Yudhishtira gambles

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away the Pandavas' possessions, kingdom, wife, and the Pandavas themselves. Given the chance at one more dice throw, with the victor taking all the kingdom and the loser forced into exile for thirteen years, Yudhishtira says, " Success or misfortune will come to me whether I play or not...I am not afraid" (Buck 103). Once again in this final dice throw, Yudhishtira acknowledges that the outcome for the Pandavas will be the same whether he throws the dice a final time or not. This is because all outcomes, for Yudhishtira, are the result of destiny and not of his inability to stop gambling when he is losing. The dice game itself can be construed as an embodiment of destiny. Yudhishtira, with his apparent gambling problem, continuing playing even after he has bet and lost himself, is merely expressing his desire to control his fate and the fate of his clan. The fact that he fails is also significant as his attempts to control fate are unsuccessful. In addition to allowing characters to shirk responsibility for the outcomes of their actions, destiny also acts to levy a sense of hopelessness upon the Kurus and causes a general discontentment within the clan. In a conversation between Duryodhana and Karna on the current direction of the war, they discuss their failings as they continue to be defeated by their enemy. When Duryodhana claims that Drona's affection for his clansmen clouded his judgment as he failed to capture Yudhishtira, Arjuna rebuts, saying, " Where is the wonder in that? Seeing how destiny defeats us whatever we do, how many have not died or left us?" (Buck 287). Once again, the main characters are blameless as it is the role of destiny that resigns them to failure. In this worldview, it is not the fault of the Kurus that they have failed to achieve victory up to this point but the fault of destiny, which has consigned unto them a war full of defeats. In addition to the role

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that destiny plays in the Mahabharata, another strong, equally important Hindu theme is reflected not only in the subjects departing words to their well-loved king but also throughout the epic: the role of dharma, specifically the dharma of the Kshatriya, or warrior, caste. This, too, gives men cause to shed the outcomes of their actions by claiming that in order to act according to dharma, they have no choice in most matters because to make one choices acts in accordance with dharma while the other is forbidden by dharma. The use of dharma to excuse one's poor actions is first seen in an exchange between Duryodhana and Krishna, in which Krishna tells Duryodhana that he will lead a richer life if he simply returns the Pandavas' land. Duryodhana, in his usual stubborn way, responds by saying, " Krishna, what need of many words? Have you never heard the Kshatriya Dharma: Stand straight and never bow down, for this alone is manliness. Rather break at the knots than bend" (Buck 242). In addition to destiny, Duryodhana is also acting according to dharma, neglecting whatever complications may arise as a result of his actions. In his view of the world, one should act solely according to their dharma and leave the rest to destiny for the outcome will be the same anyway. Another shift away from the individual's choice to the choice demanded of them by dharma comes as Sanjaya is relaying to the blind King Dhritarashtra what is occurring on the battlefield. He begins his description of the brutality and carnage that warfare has brought to the Pandavas and the Kurus by saying, " Kshatriya Dharma is cruel, Dhritarashtra, for in the blink of an eye those two armies had rushed together in hopeless confusion" (Buck 265). This once again removes blame from the individual soldiers who have chosen to kill their own kinsmen and from Duryodhana who has ordered them to do so, and places it squarely on <https://assignbuster.com/the-implications-of-destiny-and-dharma-in-the-mahabharata/>

the soldiers of Kshatriya Dharma, personified by Sanjaya as a “cruel” force. Once again, this absolves all of the main characters of any wrongdoing, much in the same way that the personified force of destiny allowed them to make poor or unreasonable choices with no worry of the eventual consequences. A final example of the Kshatriya Dharma acting to absolve a character of moral responsibility for their actions comes in the Bhagavad-Gita, a long discourse between Arjuna and Krishna that is notably removed from Buck’s translation of the Mahabharata. In this conversation, Arjuna is conflicted as to whether or not he should take the lives of his fellow kinsmen in battle: Annihilate a family, and with it/Collapse the eternal laws that rule the family. /Once law’s destroyed, then lawlessness/Overwhelms all [we know as] family. /With lawlessness triumphant, Krishna, /The family’s [chaste] women are debauched;/From debauchery of the women [too]/Confusion of caste is born. (Zaehner 318). Krishna spends nearly the entirety of the Bhagavad-Gita trying to communicate to Arjuna in various ways that it is okay to kill your brethren in time of war, especially if you are in the Kshatriya Varna. While Arjuna sees murdering his kin as the catalyst to caste confusion, Krishna sees it as an action that not only will leave the Kshatriya caste intact but also help to preserve it: Consider thine own (caste-)duty (dharma),/Then too hast thou no cause to quail;/For better than a fight prescribed by duty/Is nothing for a man of the princely class. /Happy the warriors indeed/Who become involved in war, —/ [A war] like this presented by pure chance/And opening the gates of paradise! (Zaehner 323). Krishna’s argument to Arjuna is that there should be no greater desire for a man of the Kshatriya class than to be forced to fight in a war. The only wrong that can be done in this situation, is failing to live up to one’s own

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caste dharma. By refusing to fight, Arjuna would be “ casting off both honour and (caste-)duty” (Zaehner 323). Therefore, the consequences of his actions no longer rest with him, but with his dharma, allowing him to shift responsibility from himself onto his caste. The Mahabharata may seem like a traditional epic story of good versus evil, but the elements that give it a uniquely Hindu perspective also make it extremely interesting and complex. Without the roles of dharma and destiny, both of which allow the characters to sidestep responsibility, surely the subjects would not have been so understanding and willing to except the losses and destruction that came at the hands of Duryodhana. However, because these forces are continuously invoked and personified, many of the poor, rash, and stubborn decisions that led to war and countless deaths are excused as they were in accordance with the Kshatriya Dharma or were destined to occur by the ways of fate.