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**PLURALITY OF VOICES IN THE
MAHABHARATA: A STUDY OF ANAND
NEELKANTAN'S AJAYA: ROLL OF THE
DICE**

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Abstract

The Mahabharata is a typical epic having characters having divine influence. Apart from this there are many other traits of the great epic which pit it into the category of postmodern text. The layered stories of the epic, the vivid characters, the splaying of the set patterns and theories, plurality of voices, marginality and many others as well. The author of the book, *Ajaya: The Roll of The Dice*, has written the book which displays postmodern traits. Starting from clashes in the family till believing the unfair to be fair, the marginalised to be hero and the antagonist to be protagonist. The book covers all the facets of postmodern text. Duryodhana has been soena s hero of the book. Although lot of criticism is being done for th book published in 2013. The critics say that the story has no connection with fact and it is the author's fantasy. The study of various versions and then coming to 'Ajaya' is a kind of shock to the Hindu followers. However in this democratic country the unheard voices are also heard. The paper attempts to analyse the attempt of Mr Neelkantan's of making the villain as hero. For meeting his plans the author has used many characters which support his notions.

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Full text of the paper

I have lost the war," Duryodhana sighed, "but the Pandavas... they too lost everything". These were the last words of King Duryodhana, the eldest son of Dhritrashtra and Gandhari of the famous Hindu epic Mahabharata. It is widely known and read that the Kuru Dynasty is famous for its "Ku" that is bad activities and actions. The epic declares the Kaurava clan to be the wicked. Duryodhana is portrayed in popular lore as the ultimate villain of the Mahabharata and considered second only to Ravana of the Ramayana as the epitome of evil. He orders his cousin's wife stripped in the sabha; he is the power hungry prince who leads his people into an apocalyptic war; the man who refuses to acknowledge the divinity of Krishna... But PRINCE SUYODHANA, heir to the throne of Hastinapura, stands tall, determined to claim his birth right and act in accordance with his conscience. He is the maker of his own destiny or so he believes. However, if the text is read with an unbiased mind perhaps the conclusion can differ from the existing one. Duryodhana, also known as Suyodhana, is the chief contender in the Hindu epic Mahabharata. Mahabharata has manifold characters with different stories other than what is heard and spread through oral literature. The reason behind this plurality is the different versions by different authors written at a different point of time. Therefore, the text holds various interpretations leading to diverse interpretations. Like wise is the case of the understanding of characters. For instance, character of Duryodhana and his brothers is commonly accepted by the readers and reviewers as evil minded. Those who do not read and are only believing on oral literature also considers them to be the culprit of the Great War of India.

The long narrative, 'Mahabharata', begins with the story of King Shantanu, the Pandavas' great-grandfather, and ends with King Janamejaya, the Pandavas' great-grandson. The readers will meet Draupadi,

the heroine who is married to all five of the Pandava brothers, and it is also read that they also meet Krishna, the human avatar of the god Vishnu who sides with the Pandavas in the war. Breaking the conventional track of presenting the positive as positive Anand Neelkantan has hit the story of Kauravas from the Kauravas' point of view. For the first time the story of Kauravas is written with the Kaurava's angle. The story of The Mahabharata from the depth of the characters who had fallen at Kurukshetra. Is claimed as justified by the author. *Ajaya : Roll of the Dice*, gives a narrative about the role of Kauravas, who were slaughtered to the last man, as they would have seen it. It is well conceived Duryodhana as the eldest of the hundred brother Kaurava clan. Duryodhana is well known as the most cunning prince in Mahabharata, a character hated by one and all. But with 'Ajaya', he is seen in a different shade. The well-known villain becomes a protagonist in this tale and though it might be hard to digest for many, it will be good for further study for the historians and literary artists to read more versions of Mahabharata to decode the actual reason behind the crudity of his comportment. Jaya is the story of the Pandavas, told from the perspective of the victors of Kurukshetra, Ajaya is the tale of the Kauravas, who were decimated to the last man. From the pen of the author who gave voice to Ravana in the national bestseller, ASURA, comes this riveting narrative which compels us to question the truth behind the Mahabharata. Giving voice to the damned, the defeated, and the forgotten men like Ekalavva, Aswathama. Jarasandha, Vasuki, Mavasura and Jara: and women like Gandhari, Lakshmana, Revati and Bhanumati. *Roll The of Dice: Duryodhana'a Mahabharata* holds one enthralled while imprinting deep questions in the mind of readers. The book has a very different story from what the readers must have heard about in the past versions. It professes all the tenets of postmodernism. The concept of postmodernism and its

theories are commonly noted in the layered stories of the epic. (11)Mr Neelkantan's story of Duryodhana carries all the features of a postmodern hero. Characters like Duryodhana, Karna, Shalva, Shakuni all holds grudge against the Pandavas. They wish to change the set patterns and theories of the ancient system. The birth of Karna has a mystery behind. Later on it is known that he is the eldest son of Kunti, the mother of Pandavas. It was by mistake that she got Karna as a gift of lord Surya to her service for him. Kunti belonging to a reputed family could not accept the baby and she somehow manages to get rid of the baby. The baby is brought up by a marginalised community of that time. Therefore the concept of marginality and quest of identity can also be seen in the character of Karna. Same is the case of Ekalavya. Ekalavya learnt the lessons of Archery through Dronacharya but the teacher considered it as an unfair mean to acquire any education. As a consequence he asks Ekalavya to chop out his thumb and give it as a gift to him as 'Guru dakshina'. The author has symbolized the characters with the angle of postmodern hero, who shatters all the set patterns of the set theories and principles. The title says that it is the story of Shakuni. However, it ends with detailing of other characters of Mahabharata. The voice of plurality is seen throughout the novel, which added to the enhancement of the technicality of the postmodern traits. (97). For instance, character of Bhishma is shown in an absolute different vision. He is shown as a common mortal which he was not. The story narrated by Neelkantan has depicted Gandhari extremely beautiful with grey eyes. The text claims that Bhishma felt the anguish of his oath after seeing the beauty of Gandhari. The author writes that, "It was raining heavily when the General entered the palace. Except for the dull rhythm of the falling rain, the palace was eerily silent. The General halted at the foot of the wooden stairs; his heart filled with apprehension. Pools of water formed strange patterns at his feet in a curious shade of red, made

more prominent by the lily whiteness of the cold marble floors. (86) He adjusted his battledress and winced as blinding pain shot through him. He was bleeding from many wounds, yet he held his tall and powerful frame erect. A cold wind from the distant snow-covered peaks ruffled his long, dark beard and pierced his body as if with icy shards. He was chilled to the bone, unused to these rugged mountainous terrains and snow-laden passes. He was from the East, a son of the vast Gangetic plains. The naked sword he gripped in his right hand had slain scores of warriors in the past hour. A few paces apart, his men stood reverently. (87)The rain had lost its fury and become a drizzle. Rainwater dripped from the roof into the gutters, forming eddies of darkness before rushing down the mountainside to join the waters flowing through the distant and dusty plains to the sea, carrying with it human flesh and the blood of unknown warriors who had guarded the mountain city of Gandhara just a few hours before. The General stood stiff and unmoving, frowning at the faint sounds of sobbing coming from the floor above. Somewhere a cock crowed, followed by the clucking of hens. A peddler cried out his wares from outside the fort walls, and a bullock cart passed by, the jingling of its bells fading away. The General took a tentative step to climb the stairs but stopped again. Something had caught his eye. He bent down painfully and picked it up. It was a wooden cart with a broken wheel - a little boy's toy. A smear of blood had dried on its broken side. With a sigh, the General started climbing up. (90)The steps groaned in protest. As if on cue, the sobbing stopped. The long verandah ran a considerable distance, vanishing into shadow. It started snowing and the white flakes fell on the wooden benches placed along the corridor, forming strange shapes. The General walked slowly, careful not to step on the dead soldiers. He held the broken toy in his left hand and a curved Indian sword in his right. He hated the snow and the bitter cold of the mountains and

longed for the sunny plains of his homeland. He wished only to finish this task and get back to the banks of the Ganga. He paused to listen. There was a rustling of clothing and he sensed somebody waiting for him within. His wounded body tensed. The toy in his hand had become a burden. 'Why did I pick it up?' he wondered. But now he did not wish to throw it away. With the tip of his sword, he slowly pushed at the half-open door. The General entered the room, his tall and broad silhouette throwing dark shadows into the dim room. Once his eyes had adjusted to the darkness, he saw her; partly veiled by the shadows that cloaked the room. She sat with eyes down cast and her arms wrapped around her knees. She looked tired of waiting for her fate. The warrior's tense muscles relaxed a little as he let out a weary sigh. 'Thank God, no more bloodshed today,' he thought. An oil lamp in the corner apologetically spread a small circle of dull light. It only served to amplify the darkness beyond the reach of its frail aura. (43) The General turned up the wick and a golden light fell upon the exquisitely beautiful woman. 'My fate is to bring unhappiness to such beautiful creations of divinity,' he thought with sudden anger. He cursed the day he had impulsively taken the oath of celibacy to satisfy his father's lust. It had made almost all the women in his life unhappy and ruined the lives of some. 'Today, I add one more to that unhappy list,' he thought in frustration, and then contritely chuckled at the irony of fate which deigned that a celibate like himself should hunt women and spill blood for them. Pushing aside his dark thoughts, the General made an elaborate bow to the lovely woman before him. "Daughter, I am Gangadatta Devavrata, Grand Regent of Hastinapura. You may perhaps have heard the name Bhishma. I have come to seek your hand in marriage for my nephew, Dhritarashtra, Prince of Hastinapura." In the thick silence that ensued, Bhishma kept his gaze averted from the lovely grey eyes that burned with such fire. In the years to come, Bhishma

would always remember those eyes staring into his own, even when they were hidden from the world. The girl let out a wrenching sob that pierced his heart. Collecting herself, she stood up, raised her head, and said with majestic dignity, "Grand Regent Bhishma, I trust Gandhara has not failed in its hospitality towards you. I apologise that my father is not here to greet you himself. I, Gandhari, Princess of Gandhara, welcome you in his name." Bhishma stood paralysed by the icy chill of her voice. He felt a strange urge to confess everything to her; to justify the acts he had been forced to commit for the sake of his kingdom. (124) He felt small and mean before this young girl who carried herself with such dignity and composure in the face of so much tragedy. Bhishma felt like a brute. He wished his anger would return so that he could take her by her narrow waist and ride off to Hastinapura with her, like a warrior of fable. But he could not; he was a warrior of the old school and a man of chivalry. "I do not have a choice do I, Sir? When the Regent of Hastinapura decides which maiden is to be stolen as a bride for his nephew, what choice do we, who live on the borders of the great Indian empire, have? Do not perturb yourself... our resistance is at an end. Gandhara has been routed as you intended. I am your captive and shall go with you to become your blind nephew's bride." Bhishma found he had lost the ability to speak. He looked into the distance, at the snowy slopes of the mountains and thought she could finish him off right now with a quick thrust of a dagger into his back. (176) Yet he did not want to face her and gaze into those grey eyes. Being stabbed by this beautiful woman would be a good way to end his dry life; it was better than knowing such beautiful women existed in the world but all he could do was steal them on behalf of his incompetent or impotent nephews, or whichever fool sat on the throne of Hastinapura. Life had been a series of battles, treachery, politics and intrigue, and he was weary of it - the bloody defence of

others - his father, his country, his brothers, his nephews, but never for himself. Character of Bhishma is narrated entirely from an altered angle. No other version of Bhishma is narrated in the way Ajaya describes him. Bhishma can be acclaimed central character of the epic, however, there are many others who hold the qualification to be the central character. Taking into consideration the women characters like Draupadi, Kunti, Amba, Ambalika it can be submitted that they played an obvious role in keeping the story in motion. If Kunti would not have tried to check the power of Surya Karna would not have come to existence, If Draupadi would not have uttered the insulting words to Duryodhana, the war would not have taken place at all. The author has tried to put his ideas perhaps to change the set pattern of the readers to take other characters of the epic into serious positive consideration. The character depiction shows there was plurality of voices; voice of Kunti, voice of Draupadi, voice of Bhishma, voice of Pandavas, voice of Ashwathama, voice of Ambalika, so on and so forth.

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