

Negotiating *The Mahabharata* as a Trauma Narrative

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ABSTRACT: *The great Indian epic, The Mahabharata inspires us to navigate through the height of joy on winning a battle or a kingdom and the depth of sorrow over loss of life, property and so on. The characters witness the prognosis of their distressing and disturbing lives having immense psychological ramifications. In this research, The Mahabharata will be discussed in the light of various trauma features expounded by Vickroy (2002), Skultans (2007), Arizti (2011) and Baelo-Allue (2012) to examine if the epic, being “a treatise on Artha, on Dharma, and on Kama” (Ganguli, 2006, p. 31), can fit into the scheme of trauma narrative. An in-depth analysis of the epic finds that its narrative accommodates most of the theme-based and technique-based trauma narrative features. Besides, the epic embodies trauma as one of its primary themes. Further, the narrative techniques, such as, hamartia, peripetia, tone, repetitive designation, amplification, flashforward and the use of long expressions, embedded in the narrative of the epic, but are not considered in trauma theories, are found representing the psychological trauma of the characters of the epic effectively, thus contribute to broaden the scope of trauma theories by adding new features.*

KEYWORDS: Trauma, Narrative turn of trauma, Trauma narrative, Negotiation, *The Mahabharata*

INTRODUCTION

The Mahabharata compels us to return to it time and again (Jhaveri 2006). It is “a living text that permeates contemporary thought and spirit” (Weisman, 1987, p. 17). The richness of the epic owes much to its dealings with every human life-situation and the way it houses the variegated human emotions in their totality. “*The Mahabharata* presents us with a veritable array of human characters, from the sublime to the ridiculous. No type of human emotion, no deed of valour, generosity, sacrifice or meanness is missed here” (Harshananda, 1990, p. 329). Debroy (2010) writes: “every conceivable human emotion figures in it, which is the reason why it is possible to identify with it even today. The epic not only permeates religious, political, social and economic aspects of society, but every then and now, it often addresses the sensible issues of the society. “The epic being a social drama opens and connects the maze of Indian society...encompasses all sorts of contemporary feminist agendas like gender discrimination, sexuality, female body politics, women disposition, marriage, kinship and so on...” (Biswas, 2016, p. 52).

The socio-cultural relevance and significance of *The Mahabharata* have drawn much scholarly attention. Across the ages and boundaries, academia explores its various aspects. Its cultural, political and religious perspectives have always been studied. However, the boundless dimensions of the epic still invite serious research on its various unexplored aspects. Discussion

of trauma in *The Mahabharata* happens to be one such aspect that has received attention from researchers including Kahlon (2011), Cederman (2013), Vat and Tray (2015), Hildebeitel (2018) and Khangai (2018). However, there is a lack of research on a holistic interpretation of trauma conditioned by psychological ramifications of characters due to different pre-war, war and post-war events.

My research attempts to close that gap by analysing *The Mahabharata* through the lens of trauma studies. It will discuss the psychological trauma of the selected characters, caused centrally due to the great war and due to the pre-war adversities, that the characters have lived through. This research will explore how *The Mahabharata* features the trauma of the characters in its narrative framework.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Portrayal of women characters in *The Mahabharata* and how they contest patriarchy and traditions of gender relations, the notions of victimhood and agency have been the focus of many researchers (Kahlon (2011, 2015), Cederman (2013), Biswas (2016), Maitra and Saha (2016) and Vat and Tantray (2016)). Sanyal (2015) explores how Ekalavya and Karna have been side-lined and victims of constant ridicule because of their low caste. Hildebeitel (2018) adds a new dimension to the study of the epic by attempting a psychoanalytic reading of it. Freud and Bose's concept of "Uncanny" and "dead mother" (Hildebeitel, 2018, p. 33) has been used to examine how past trauma, loss of memory and the return of the repressed immensely contribute to the formation of religious traditions. Munawar (2019) discusses the relationship between care ethics and virtue epistemology in the context of *The Mahabharata*. She tends to provide a feminist vision for truth that lies with ethical relations and justice. Jha and Chandran (2018) discuss graphic-novel retellings of the epic to explore how both the literary and non-literary elements of the graphic retellings are inextricably entangled to represent the theme. Kaipa (2014) explores into leadership lessons, particularly decision-making skills in the epic. He relies on recent developments in brain studies and the ancient epic of India to outline the importance and complexity of decision-making.

The researches reviewed have explored diverse socio-cultural and political issues such as the notions of victimhood, patriarchy and traditions of gender relations and the subordination of women in terms of marriage, sexuality and *streedharma*. The caregiving ethics and leadership lessons have also been explored. However, the boundless dimensions of the epic still invite serious research on its various unexplored aspects. Discussion of *The Mahabharata* as a trauma narrative happens to be one such aspect that this paper attempts to explore.

Objective

This paper will analyse following objectives to answer the main research question:

- To analyse *The Mahabharata* using trauma narrative features
- To explore if the epic can be read as a trauma narrative
- To explore if analysis of the epic contributes to broaden the scope of trauma theories by adding new features

METHODOLOGY

This research paper adopts a close reading and an in-depth qualitative analysis of the epic to explore how *The Mahabharata* accommodates trauma narrative features to be entitled as a trauma narrative.

Narrative Turn of Trauma

“Narratives about trauma flourished particularly in the 1980s and 1990s with increased public awareness of trauma and trauma theory” (Vickroy, 2002, p. 2). The Holocaust, the two World Wars and the Korean and Vietnam wars, amongst all, served as a prelude to the understanding of contemporary trauma and subsequently to the rise of trauma narratives. Further, the theorization of trauma by Erikson (1991), Felman and Laub (1992), Hartman (1995) and Caruth (1996) gave a boost to the proliferation of trauma studies. According to Whitehead (2011), trauma theory and a new interest in it have provided writers with possibilities and ways to understand traumatic experience and search for ways to represent it. The representation of trauma in literature has prompted a great deal of attention and scholarship. The importance of narratives for the representation of the traumatic past is emphasised by Goldberg, who notes that “meaning always comes afterward, when things have already happened. Only then does it become necessary to organise the events into some meaningful story or structure” (2006, p.131).

Defining Trauma Narrative and its Features

Trauma narratives primarily deal with traumatic experiences. According to Vickroy (2002) these are the fictional narratives that help readers to access traumatic experiences. These narratives tend to present the “unbearable story of death and the unbearable story of life” (Caruth, 1996, p. 8), thus leading to “more listening, more hearing of words within words, and a greater openness to testimony” (Hartman, 1995, p. 541). These narratives deal with dilemmas experienced by characters, which confront us with many of our own fears. Trauma narratives tend to “go beyond presenting trauma as subject matter or character study” and “internalize the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of traumatic experience within their underlying sensibilities and structures” (Vickroy, 2002, p. 3). Whitehead adds others features to it by saying “trauma carries the force of a literality which renders it resistant to narrative structures and linear temporalities” (1995, p. 5). As far as trauma narratives are concerned, the focus remains with “human made traumatic situations and are implicit critiques of the ways social, economic and political structures can create and perpetuate trauma” (Vickroy, 2002, p. 4). In this connection, she believes that the aim of trauma narratives is “to reshape cultural memories through personal contexts, adopting testimonial traits to prevent and bear witness against such repetitive horrors” (Vickroy, 2002, p. 5).

The writers of trauma narratives, Vickroy (2002) believes, use popular forms of writing to draw the readers’ attention to the victim’s pain. These narratives “attest to trauma” and at the same time “serve to exhibit its workings by mimicking its symptoms through layout, language and narrative structure” (Vickroy, 2002, p. 3). The writers of trauma narratives rely much on non-linear narrative structure, symbolic language, metaphors and repetitions for carrying the effects of trauma. Rather than focusing on the progress of the plot, they focus on duration, on

temporal and spatial shifts. There is a disruption of the chronological order of the events in these narratives. These adopt a “constant shift between the past and the present timeframes, thus hinting at the intrusion of the past into the present” (Vickroy, 2002, p. 5). Skultans (2007) also observes how the trauma victims tend to switch between the past and present tense while recounting past experiences. According to Vickroy (2002), the writers often use repetition of words, sentences, symbols and images to represent such memories. She also finds that some rely on the presence of multiple voices and shift between the first-person and third-person narrative. Moreover, “metaphors are often used in trauma narratives to indirectly refer to what one really is trying to say” (Vickroy, 2002, p. 31). They allow the writer/narrator to distance himself from the actual events by codifying them into symbolic language and images. Skultans (2007) points out how these narratives offer the switching between personal pronouns, *I/he/she*, *we/they*. According to Baelo-Allue “literary techniques that tend to recur in trauma narratives, mirror, at a formal level, the effects of trauma and include intertextuality, repetition and fragmentation” (2012, p. 69). Arizti agrees that “[r]epetition concerning language, imagery or plot is one of the most common strategies for translating trauma into narrative” (2011, p. 177). Whitehead explores the cause and necessity of repetition. She argues that repetitions “act as a form of binding” which allows the reader “to connect one textual moment to another in terms of similarity or substitution and so make sense of the narrative” (2011, pp. 86, 125). The other features of trauma narrative include incoherence, flashbacks and digressions or “events in parallel”, while topographic features may include “[d]ashes and suspension points” (Arizti, 2011, p. 179).

In short, the discussion on the trauma narratives finds two sets of features which can be termed as: the theme-based features, concerning the theme of trauma and technique-based features that deal with the linguistics and formal features employed to represent trauma. The theme-based features address how these narratives:

- allow readers to access traumatic experiences
- assemble the unbearable story of death and life
- enable exploration of the dilemmas experienced by characters
- concern with human made traumatic situations and are implicit critiques of the ways social, economic and political structures can create and perpetuate trauma
- allow for more listening, more hearing of words within words
- reshape cultural memories through personal contexts

On the other hand, the technique-based features focus on:

- non-linear narrative structure, symbolic language and metaphors
- repetition of words, sentences, symbols and images
- presence of multiple voices and shift between the first-person and third-person narrative
- the switching between the past and present tense while recounting past experiences
- the switch between personal pronouns: *I/he/she*, *we/they*
- intertextuality and fragmentation, flashbacks and digressions or events in parallel

Negotiation of *The Mahabharata* as a Trauma Narrative

This paper will utilize both the theme-based and technique-based trauma narratives features, mentioned above, to negotiate *The Mahabharata* as a trauma narrative.

Negotiation Using Theme-Based Features

The Mahabharata, an epic narrative of the Kurukshetra war and its consequent carnage and of profound human ordeals, allows the readers to access traumatic experiences of its characters. Most of the leading characters of the epic are found to be trauma victims as they have witnessed traumatic events and gone through psychological turmoil. Their diverse traumatic experiences are found to be caused due to human made situations. The incidents: “the unfair play at dice” (Ganguli, 2006, Drona Parva, p. 282), the loss of kingdom and prosperity, the years of exile and the devastating war leading to massive carnage, that lead to the psychological turmoil of the Pandavas, are triggered by different characters under various socio-cultural, political and economic contexts. Draupadi’s psychological trauma is caused due to the insult and humiliation perpetrated on her, in the Kuru assembly, for being dragged to the court during her season, “stained with blood, with but a single cloth on, trembling all over, and weeping” (Ganguli, 2006, Vana Parva, p. 31) and the assault by Kichaka in the very sight of the wicked king of the Matsyas. The events that remained her traumatic stressors can be viewed as the critique of the then patriarchal society. The case of Kunti, for setting adrift the new-born, Karna in the river during her maiden days and its guilt leading to her psychological turmoil, can also be ascribed to the rigid socio-cultural practices that views mothering during maidenhood as unethical. The readers can access to the traumatic experiences of Drona, Karna and Eklavya. The insults and humiliations, they confronted in various social, economic and political situations, act as traumatic stressors for them. Drona’s poverty and inability to fulfil the needs of his son, Aswathaman and the insulting words of Drupada regarding his poverty become his traumatic stressors. Karna confronts traumatic experiences for being abandoned as soon as he was born, not allowed to fight with Pandava prince, Arjuna to prove his merit due to his “inglorious lineage” (Ganguli, 2006, Adi Parva, p. 289) and not being selected by Draupadi in the swayamvara for his low birth. This shows that he has been fighting the battle against identity and acceptance throughout his life. Ekalavya has gone through the same traumatic experiences as Karna, for being ridiculed of his low caste and being subjected to the assault and humiliation for aspiring to become a great archer. Due to his low caste, he has not been accepted by Drona as his disciple but made to “cut off without ado his thumb, and [give] it unto Drona” (Ganguli, 2006, Adi Parva, p. 281), paving the way for Arjuna to become the greatest archer of all time. He confronts “due share of deprivation in the epic due to societal norms” and “injustice” (Sanyal, 2015, p. 621) and therefore suffers.

The epic assembles the unbearable stories of life and death that lead to the psychological trauma of the selected characters. It also throws light on the dilemmas experienced by the characters. The game of dice, the war and their fatal consequences put both the Pandavas and the Kauravas into dilemmas. The sudden and unexpected occurrence of the war and the massive carnage, particularly the death of sons and kinsmen push the Pandavas pass their days in “wakefulness and great sorrow” (Ganguli, 2006, Karna Parva, p. 96), a symptomatic behaviour of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a set of reactions like sleeplessness, nightmares and severe anxiety that can occur to a traumatized. Dhritarashtra and Gandhari are found to be quite

bothered and disturbed about the outcomes of the war; losing the battle and thereby losing all their sons and kinsmen. This sense of loss has snatched away their peace of mind, thus making them fall down on the ground senseless and pass “nights in sleeplessness, breathing deep and hot sighs” (Ganguli, 2006, Udyoga Parva, p. 123), an indication of how they suffer from PTSD. Bhishma and Vidura are found to be in dilemmas how to avoid the war and give justice to the Pandavas. They fail to obtain sleep and peace of mind envisioning the destruction of Kurus, thus undergoing pre-traumatic stress reactions, characterized by helplessness and severe anxiety leading to sleeplessness, nightmares and other such intrusive experiences. Further, Bhishma’s lying on the bed of arrow stands testimony to his unbearable story of life and death. The readers bear witness to such extreme traumatic experiences and, in the process, they participate in “reliving and reexperiencing” (Laub, 1995, p. 76) the trauma testimonies of the Pandavas and the Kauravas, thus enabling secondary witnessing. The epic also narrates Duryodhana and Ashwatthaman’s unbearable stories of life and death, leading to their psychological turmoil. Duryodhana is found to be utterly helpless and moved by witnessing the extermination of his own army” (Ganguli, 2006, Shalya Parva, p. 29) and particularly the death of Bhishma, Drona, Karna and Dussasan. The fatal consequences of the war paralyzed his conscience and wrecked his mental stability, exposing his traumatic self, pitifully oscillating between life and death. The unfortunate death of his father in the battle turned to be a traumatic stressor for Ashwatthaman. His words, “I fail to obtain peace... The thought of that slaughter is cutting all my vitals” (Ganguli, 2006, Sauptika Parva, p. 4), stand testimony to his traumatic experiences.

The traumatic experiences of the characters are, of course, subjective, but subsequently they become a part of collective memory as the narrator and the listener/ reader participate reliving those experiences. The psychological ramifications of the game of dice and the war have crept into the socio-cultural milieu and become a part of it. Even today people cite from *The Mahabharata*. Debroy (2016) ardently says that the reason why all of us continue to identify with *The Mahabharata* even today is that the context may be different, the socio-economic milieu may be different, but the conflict of dharma, the dilemma, the personal choices, the personal conflicts remain the same.

The narrative of *The Mahabharata* represents the theme of trauma and allows the readers to access the diverse traumatic experiences of the characters caused due to the human made traumatic situations. It is also found to be critiquing the social-cultural, economic and political structures of the society that create and perpetuate the trauma of the characters. The presentation of unbearable story of life and death, the dilemmas and psychological conflicts of the characters reveals the epic’s confirmation to trauma narrative features. In short, the narrative of the epic accommodates all the theme-based features of trauma narratives.

Negotiation Using Technique-Based Features

The Mahabharata, on the altar of non-linear narrative structure, presents the life journey of its characters and their psychological trauma. The main plot of the epic revolves around the familial discord between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, run from the game of dice to the devastating war and its aftermath. However, the narrative does not progress in a straight forward way, from the game of dice to the end of the war, it is punctuated by digressions. For instance, in between these two events, the epic offers full-length narration about the attributes

of the king, about anger and angry men, falsehood and *streedharma*. It incorporates the episodes of Savitri- Satyavan, Nala-Damayanti and the wars between Gods and Asuras. There are also mentions of various *tirthas*. The chapters of *Bhagavata Gita* are also injected into the structure, exposing its intertextual stance. Further, the chronology has been disrupted by the frequent use of flashback of the events of game of dice and its consequences and the flashforward techniques or sometimes by events in parallel, contributing to the feature of fragmentation. On the top of everything, the focus remains with portrayal of the life struggles and the psychological turmoil of the characters.

The narrative relies on multi-perspectivity and narrative shift to project the use of multiple voices, especially the voices of Vaisampayana, the omniscient narrator and the characters. The traumatic events at the game of dice have been voiced by various characters, bringing about a new perspective each time. Kunti, for instance, sees it from the perspective of Draupadi, basically how she has been “dragged into the assembly while clad in a single raiment and made to hear bitter words” (Ganguli, 2006, Udyoga Parva, p. 186). Yudhishtira focuses on how the event deprived them of kingdom and caused their exile into woods. The multi-perspectivity, used in the narrative, also includes Dhritarashtra’s discernment that “the diverse acts of wrong” which his “wicked son of exceedingly evil understanding perpetrated” (Ganguli, 2006, Asramavasika Parva, p. 29) lead to traumatic experiences of the Pandavas and Draupadi. Draupadi cannot forget the cruel treatment made to her in the Kuru assembly. In all these cases, the traumatic event and its psychological ramifications are prioritized. The narrative of the epic employs narrative shift to represent the psychological trauma of the characters. While presenting the distressing and traumatic experiences of Draupadi, Vaisampayana, the narrator presents the painful situation of Draupadi in these words, “[a]nd Dussasana dragging Krishna of long locks unto the presence of the assembly--as if she were helpless though having powerful protectors--and pulling at her, made her tremble like the banana plant in a storm” (Ganguli, 2006, Sabha Parva, p. 128). Then a narrative shift is noticed when Draupadi is made to express her own plight: “[w]retch! it ill behoveth thee to take me before the assembly. My season hath come, and I am now clad in one piece of attire” (Ganguli, 2006, Sabha Parva, p. 128). With the narrative shift, the changes of personal pronoun from “she” to “I” and the tense form from past to the present are noticed. Further, when the vast Kuru army is on the verge of destruction, Vaisampayana presents the trauma of Dhritarashtra in a rather casual way stating how he “felt his heart to be exceedingly agitated by grief” (Ganguli, 2006, Drona Parva, p. 7). Suddenly the narrative shift is noticed when Dhritarashtra says “having heard of this dire calamity, my heart is greatly agitated. My senses are being stupefied, and my limbs are about to be paralysed!” (Ganguli, 2006, Drona Parva, p. 7). The emblematic narrative shift cannot be overlooked here by any means. It is only through this shift, the actual mental condition of Dhritarashtra is understood, so as his trauma which otherwise could have been inaccessible. The shift is also found when the trauma of Gandhari is presented on the occasion of the death of her sons. Vaisampayana mentions her condition as, “deprived of her senses by grief, suddenly fell down on the earth like an uprooted plantain tree” (Ganguli, 2006, Stri Parva, p. 17) but Gandhari’s account, “Alas, O son! Alas, O son! ... He who was formerly encircled by kings vying with one another to give him pleasure, alas, he, slain and lying on the ground, is now encircled by vultures!” (Ganguli, 2006, Stri Parva, p. 17), presents her traumatic experience in a more poignant way. The words of Vaisampayana, of course, present the traumatic condition of

Gandhari, but the words of Gandhari seem to be a victim-voice; witnessing the traumatic event, reliving in it and expressing.

There are instances of the use of events of parallel and intertextuality in the epic. Draupadi, for instance, draws events in parallel in connection to the present traumatic situation of being disrobed of kingdom, and leading life in exile. Her recollection of the past testimonies includes how the Pandavas along with their mother were sent away from the kingdom, how Duryodhana mixed virulent poison in Bhima's food to kill him and how the House of Lac was set fire to burn the Pandavas along with their mother. These events in parallel act as a re-enactment of the traumatic past for Draupadi, thus haunt her and traumatize her. The narrative of the epic has profusely used flashback technique in order to present the re-enactment of the traumatic past, leading to fragmentation. The Pandavas, Draupadi and Kunti revisited their traumatic past of the game of dice which have altered the course of their life. Through the flashback, the re-enactment of the event is projected, thus traumatizing the characters.

The narrative of the epic abounds with images that are used to symbolically present the trauma of the characters. Dhritarashtra has already been traumatic about the war and its fatal consequences. When he imagines Bhima in full aggression, fighting in the battle against his sons and kinsmen and smashing his army “[a]s a blazing fire in the summer season, when urged by the wind, consumeth dry grass, so will Bhima, mace in hand, and united with Arjuna, slay all on my side!” (Ganguli, 2006, Udyoga Parva, p. 125). As blazing fire destroys everything that comes on its way, similarly Bhima, he thinks, will destroy his army. The image of blazing fire causes and perhaps intensifies his sense of trauma. His distressed and helpless condition, after the death of all his sons, is presented with an imagery of a “tree shorn of its branches” (Ganguli, 2006, Stri Parva, p. 1). The tree image may also show his hopelessness and helplessness after losing all his sons like the branches to a tree. He looked cheerless, being afflicted with grief and overwhelmed with anxiety. Finally, he has lost his power of speech, the most essential thing for him as branches to the tree. His traumatic situation thus gets better representation through the incorporation of images in the narrative of the epic. The distressed and fairly traumatic condition of Draupadi, after knowing her sons being killed, is presented as “trembling like a plantain tree shaken by the wind” and her face “seemed to be darkened by grief like the Sun himself when enveloped in darkness” (Ganguli, 2006, Sauptika Parva, p. 11). The images of nature are used here to represent the mental condition of Draupadi that is completely shaken and fallen like a plantain tree shaken by the wind. Her sorrowful face is represented as the Sun enveloped in darkness. All these images stand as a testimony to her traumatic condition. Karna seems to be traumatic when he visualizes, “[t]he jackals yell hideously,” “diverse birds, each having but one wing, one eye, and one leg, utter terrible cries” and “fierce birds with black wings and red legs hover over the Kuru encampment at nightfall,” symbolically indicating their defeat (Ganguli, 2006, Udyoga Parva, p. 277).

It is important to notice that the narrator has used here repeated sentences like “[a]ll this is an indication of defeat,” in order to show how overwhelming the situation was (Ganguli, 2006, Udyoga Parva, p. 277). Dhritarashtra’s traumatic situation, in the context of the war, is represented through the use of repetitive sentence structure like “where shall I go?”, “What shall I do” and “how shall I do it?” (Ganguli, 2006, Udyoga Parva, p. 125). The sentences are not exactly repeated, but the very structure of it. Further, when he hears the death of Bhishma and Drona from Sanjaya, he experiences the greater traumatic blow. The narrative is very keen

to articulate his traumatic condition by encompassing his expression, “my heart is greatly pained” (Ganguli, 2006, Karna Parva, p. 2). He repeats the same sentence three times in the same passage by altering the qualifying adjectives between “greatly” and “exceedingly” (Ganguli, 2006, Karna Parva, p. 2). Here the sentence structure remains the same. This can be viewed as the behaviour of a traumatic character who almost “unwittingly” (Caruth, 1996, p. 4) repeats things, so the sentences.

In short, the narrative of *The Mahabharata* accommodates technique-based trauma narrative features: a non-linear narrative structure, flashbacks, digressions, element of intertextuality and fragmentation, multiple voices and narrative shift, use of symbolic language, metaphor, repetition of words and sentences, switching between personal pronouns and tense forms.

FINDINGS

The paper finds that:

- the narrative of the epic represents the theme of trauma by employing various narrative strategies such as non-linear narrative structure, flashbacks, events in parallel, element of intertextuality and fragmentation, multiple voices and narrative shifts.
- For the representation of traumatic experiences of the characters, the narrative of the epic also employs symbolic languages, metaphors, repetition of words, sentences and images.
- it surfaces the dilemmas and psychological conflicts of the selected characters and the unbearable story of life and death, leading to their psychological trauma.
- the characters have confronted the human made traumatic situations, be the traumatic events at the game of dice or the war and their fatal consequences. In all the cases social-cultural, economic and political structures of the society are found to be creating and perpetuating the traumas of the characters.
- there is constant switching between personal pronouns: *I/he/she*, *we/they* and between the past and present tense.

From the above findings, it is clear that the narrative of *The Mahabharata* accommodates almost all theme-based as well as technique-based trauma narrative features. However, it does not have textual gaps nor the purposeful use of dashes and suspension points, specific characteristics of trauma narratives. It can be argued that *The Mahabharata*, “a treatise on *Artha*, on *Dharma*, and on *Kama*” (Ganguli, 2006, “Preface” p. 31), written, as Sanyal (2015) asserts, somewhere between 8th and 9th centuries BCE, is not designed primarily to represent the psychological trauma of its characters. Hence, it cannot be expected to accommodate all trauma narrative features, brought to academic focus with the evolution of trauma studies, “only after the mid-1990s” (Luckhurst, 2018, p. 497). To be precise, thematically as well as technically the epic can be negotiated as a trauma narrative.

Further Negotiation

The very notion of trauma as unspeakable and unrepresentable, held by Caruth (1995, 1996), Felman and Laub (1992), and Hartman (1995), can be contested through the analysis of *The Mahabharata* in which the selected characters express their psychological trauma in an

eloquent way. Further, the analysis of the epic finds limitation of trauma narrative features promulgated by Vickroy (2002), Skultans (2007), Whitehead (2011), Arizti (2011) and Baelo-Allue (2012) for the representation of diverse everyday traumatic experiences of the characters of the epic. The narrative of the epic, being wordy and full of details of the traumatic experiences, goes beyond expected trauma narrative conventions, but represents the indigenous traumatic experiences of the characters in an effective way.

For further negotiation, this paper will examine six narrative techniques, hamartia, peripetia, tone, repetitive designation, amplification, flashforward and the use of long expressions, which are not under the consideration of western model of trauma narrative features, to find if these can be used as means of representation traumatic experiences of the characters of *The Mahabharata*.

Hamartia and Peripetia

Trauma narratives are essentially tragedy, present the tragic story of the protagonists. The tragic narrative features like *hamartia* and *peripetia* proposed by Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) can help explore and understand the struggle, suffering and traumatic experiences of the characters. In *The Mahabharata*, there are several characters who can be read and understood as tragic characters, suffering from their tragic flaws, either from ignorance of affairs or from human passion. Yudhishtira is such a character who commits the error of judgement to play the game of dice and stake everything, almost thoughtlessly, confirming to the *hamartia*, of his character. The dire consequences of the game of dice, losing the kingdom and leaving everything for the exile, undoubtedly proved to be traumatic for them. Their change of fortune, i.e., the change of their lives from princely luxury to lives in the woods, rooted into the narrative, appeared as *peripetia* of their characters. The use of *hamartia* and *peripetia* has thrown light on the aspects of the characters of the Pandavas which brought them unintended tragic fate and psychological trauma. Duryodhana and Dhritarashtra can also be viewed as tragic characters suffering from *hamartia* and *peripetia* of their own. Both of them made error in judgement by inviting Yudhishtira into the game of dice, humiliating them and finally sending them into exile. All these consequently led to the war and the great carnage. Their lives have been reversed from prosperity to misery, conforming to *peripetia*. Other characters can also be evaluated and their traumas can be represented by using the said tragic narrative features.

Tone

Understanding *tone* in the narrative is very crucial because it helps understand the moods and attitudes the narrator(s). In *The Mahabharata*, the characters are often made to represent their own traumatic experiences in their own voice. Their tones convey their sense of trauma. Karna, for example, while in verbal exchange with Krishna said, “she abandoned me as soon as I was born... Kunti, however, abandoned me without thinking of my welfare” (Ganguli, Udyoga Parva 272). The complaining tone, in this sentence, shows how much distressed and disturbed he was. The tone of Dhritarashtra states much more about his helplessness, distress and trauma. Upon the death of Duryodhana, he said:

Hearing today that have been slain and divested of prosperity and energy, I fail to obtain peace of mind, being overwhelmed with grief on account of the distress that has overtaken them. Come, come, O king of kings (Duryodhana) to me that am without a protector now! Deprived

of thee, O mighty-armed one, what will be my plight? where dost thou go now, O hero, abandoning me that am blind and old? (Ganguli, Shalya Parva 1).

In an emotional and sorrowful tone, he expressed his plight. He appeared to be losing his mind as he addressed his dead son, Duryodhana to come to him.

Kunti's trauma is well presented in her helpless and distressing tone when she pleads Krishna to save Uttara's child from death in these words, "[t]his race (of Pandu) depends upon thee for its protector. ... O Kesava, do thou revive him. ... That child, O son, has been born dead" (Ganguli, Aswamedha Parva 117). Her helpless tone carries her sense of trauma.

In short, tone represents the state of mind of the characters, it reveals their despairing and helpless condition, and thus their trauma.

Repetitive Designation

The narrative of the epic uses repetitive designation which refers to a person or object or event in a narrative who becomes a constant reference point. In the epic, the game of dice, the exile and the war serve as repetitive designation. These are frequently being referred as the cause of perpetuation of psychological trauma of the characters. Duryodhana, who was instrumental in causing all catastrophic events and the trauma of others, had constant a mention in the epic, thus becomes a repetitive designation. The remembrance to all these events and Duryodhana, often in flashbacks, leads to traumatization of the Pandavas, Draupadi and Kunti, amongst others.

The use of repetitive designation in *The Mahabharata* helps trace the cause of traumatic experiences of the characters in a better way as it revolves around the referent.

Amplification

The narrative of the epic makes ample use of amplification, a narrative technique used to add more and more information about a person, object or event in order to increase its understanding. This narrative technique helps provide a fuller and detailed understanding of the trauma of the characters. When Draupadi expressed her psychological turmoil, we find the use of amplification. "Alas, during my season, stained with blood, with but a single cloth on, trembling all over, and weeping, I was dragged to the court of the Kurus! Beholding me, stained with blood in the presence of those kings in the assembly, the wicked sons of Dhritarashtra laughed at me!" (Ganguli, Vana Parva 31). This single sentence has added information about her season like "stained with blood" and "with but a single cloth on," (Ganguli, Vana Parva 31). The use of this techniques helps us understand how helpless she was, how disturbed she had been, screening the cause of psychological trauma. Upon hearing the slain of Bhishma, Dhritarashtra said, "O Sanjaya, for peace cannot be mine, hearing that Devavrata hath been slain, --that father of mine, of terrible deeds, that ornament of battle, viz., Bhishma!" (Ganguli, Bhishma Parva 34). Here, while lamenting his death, Dhritarashtra provides added information about Bhishma and at the same time implies what a great loss it is for him. His complete emotional breakdown is also hinted by the use of such narrative technique. His great sense of trauma borne from the death of Karna can also be read from his expression, "my heart is greatly agitated... My senses are being stupefied, and my limbs are about to be paralysed!" (Ganguli, Karna Parva 7). The use of amplification in this sentence also helps to understand the poignancy

of his trauma. The narrative of the epic achieves the height in the use of amplification in the narration of Bhishma while grading Karna. It can be seen in the following sentence:

As regards this thy ever-dear friend, this one who is always boastful of his skill in battle, this one who always urgeth thee, O king, to fight with the Pandavas, this vile braggart, Karna, the son of Surya, this one who is thy counsellor, guide, and friend, this vain wight who is destitute of sense, this Karna, is neither a Ratha nor an Atiratha (Ganguli, Udyoga Parva 327).

Here, a chain of things is added in a single sentence to show how Bhishma under-estimates and insults Karna. The terrible insult, implanted through amplification, adds to the psychological trauma of Karna. The amplified sentence, “Duryodhana, however, at that time, deeply afflicted and deprived of his senses, and with eyes bathed in tears, wept for the Suta’s son, saying, ‘Karna! Oh Karna!’” (Ganguli, Karna Parva 94), conspicuously voices the trauma of Duryodhana caused due to the death of Karna.

It was truly traumatic for Bhishma to fight against Pandavas, especially with Yudhishtira. His trauma can be understood from the use of amplification in the sentence: “[w]hat can be a matter of greater grief to us than that we shall have to fight against that Yudhishtira who is devoted to the service of his superiors, destitute of envy, conversant with Brahma, and truthful in speech” (Ganguli, Udyoga Parva 269). The use of amplification does not seem to be ornamental in the epic but a narrative need to emphasize the psychological trauma of the characters.

Flashforward

The narrative of *The Mahabharata* has exploited the narrative technique, flashforward (prolepsis) in connection to the war. Dhritarashtra, amongst all the characters, has suffered immense trauma, imagining the great carnage in the war and the death of his sons. For instance, when Sanjaya reveals that the Pandavas may opt war, against the nonacceptance of the peace proposal, he anticipated the fatal consequences of the war and thus filled with anxiety and tremor. He thought that all his sons would be doomed, leaving him to suffer in despair. The sense of trauma can be easily traced from his words, “I see not the warrior amongst us that is able to stay in battle before the wielder of the Gandiva. If Drona, or Karna, or even Bhishma advance against him in battle, a great calamity is likely to befall the earth” (Ganguli, Aranyaka Parva 106). The flashforward technique, used in the narrative projects Dhritarashtra as a traumatized character. The other characters like Kunti, Karna, Vidura, Bhishma and Drona have indulged thinking about the possibility of the war and its fatal consequences. The narrative has implanted the flashforward technique in an apt manner to project the psychological turmoil that all these characters were going through. Kunti imagines, “what can be a greater grief than this that the Pandavas, the Chedis, the Panchalas, and the Yadavas, assembled together, will fight with the Bharatas?” (Ganguli, Udyoga Parva 279). She was deeply concerned about the possible death of kinsmen.

Use of Long Expressions

“Trauma narratives tend to be longer and more detailed compared to other life narratives” as these deal with “an elevated emotional response that can lead to an enhanced memory” (qtd in Fernández-Lansac and Crespo 1). In confirmation to this fact, the narrative of the epic is found to be extremely lengthy. Besides, it embodies long expressions in order to portray the traumatic

characters and their trauma. The long expressions are invariably given to the characters to express their “private thoughts” and traumatic experiences (Abrams 70).

The use of long expressions can be used as means of representation of trauma of the characters of *The Mahabharata*. It is important to understand the way the individual character or narrator communicates the traumatic experiences. The traumatised are often haunted by the re-enactment of the traumatic past, thus it becomes easier for them to provide detailed descriptions of the events and explain their feelings. Though it is not common to trauma narratives, but helps serves the purpose in representing the traumatic experiences. “The way in which the victims express their personal experiences offers valuable information to gain a better understanding of the memory processes involved in the different adaptation trajectories after trauma” (Fernández-Lansac and Crespo 11).

The long expressions were spoken under overtly overwhelming situations, especially upon the death of someone, very close to the heart of the characters. The poignant long passage devoted to describe the distressed and helpless condition of Dhritarashtra after the death of his sons is:

Dhritarashtra, that ruler of men, fell down, O monarch, on the earth, deprived of his senses.... Then king Dhritarashtra, that lord of earth, afflicted with the calamity represented by the death of his sons, slowly and with difficulty regained his life-breaths. Having recovered his senses, the king, with trembling limbs and sorrowful heart, turned his face on every side, and said these words unto Kshatri (Vidura). ... I am lordless and destitute of all my sons.’ Having said this, he once more fell down, deprived of his senses. Beholding him fallen, all his kinsmen that were present there sprinkled cold water over him and fanned him with fans. Comforted after a long while, that lord of earth, afflicted with sorrow on account of the death of his sons, remained silent, sighing heavily, O monarch, like a snake put into a jar.... I fail to obtain peace of mind, being overwhelmed with grief on account of the distress that has overtaken them. Come, come, O king of kings (Duryodhana) to me that am without a protector now! Deprived of thee, O mighty-armed one, what will be my plight? Why, O sire, abandoning all the assembled kings dost thou lie on the bare ground, deprived of life, like an ordinary and wretched king? Having been, O monarch, the refuge of kinsmen and friends, where dost thou go now, O hero, abandoning me that am blind and old? (Ganguli, Shalya Parva 1).

This long passage represents the totality of the psychological trauma of Dhritarashtra. The narrator tends to express every detail of the circumstance and the mental condition of Dhritarashtra upon the death of his sons. To be verbose, is found to be necessary as it helps to picturize how he behaves, feels and acts under such catastrophic scenario.

Gandhari confronted the traumatic event of the death of her sons. When she saw the dead bodies of her sons lying on the battle field, she could not control her emotions and sorrow. The narrator, has expressed her trauma in these words:

Beholding Duryodhana, Gandhari, deprived of her senses by grief, suddenly fell down on the earth like an uprooted plantain tree. Having regained her senses soon, she began to weep, repeatedly uttering loud wails at the sight of her son lying on the bare ground, covered with blood. Embracing her son, Gandhari indulged in piteous lamentations for him. Stricken with grief, and with senses exceedingly agitated, the Kuru queen

exclaimed, 'Alas, O son! Alas, O son!' Burning with sorrow, the queen drenched with her tears the body of her son, possessed of massive and broad shoulders, and adorned with garlands and collar... He who was formerly encircled by kings vying with one another to give him pleasure, alas, he, slain and lying on the ground, is now encircled by vultures! (Ganguli, Stri Parva 17).

This long passage voices the poignancy of the psychological trauma of Gandhari. The passage encapsulates the entire process of her trauma, starting from beholding the corpses of her sons, being afflicted with grief, losing peace of mind, losing sense, regaining sense and so on. The pictorial description, that the narrative has used, helps, to a great extent, represent the veracity of her psychological trauma.

The trauma of Kunti is presented in a long passage that describes the most traumatic scenario that she had to bear witness. Ashwatthaman killed the foetus in Uttara's womb and this traumatic event profoundly distressed Kunti, leading her to traumatization. Her trauma is well presented in her helpless and distressing tone when she pleads Krishna to save the child from death:

Thou art our refuge, and our glory. This race (of Pandu) depends upon thee for its protector. O Yadava hero, O puissant one, this child of thy sister's son, has come out of the womb, slain by Aswatthaman. O Kesava, do thou revive him. O delighter of the Yadavas, even this was vowed by thee, O puissant one, when Aswatthaman had inspired the blade of grass into a Brahma-weapon of mighty energy. Indeed, O Kesava, thy words were even these, I shall revive that child if he comes out of the womb dead. --That child, O son, has been born dead. Behold him, O foremost of men. It behoveth thee, O Madhava, to rescue Uttara and Subhadra and Draupadi and myself, and Dharma's son (Yudhishtira), and Bhima and Phalguna, and Nakula, and the irresistible Sahadeva. In this child are bound the life-breaths of the Pandavas and myself. O thou of the Dasarha race, on him depends the obsequial cake of Pandu, as also of my father-in-law, and of Abhimanyu too, blessed be thou, that darling nephew of thine who was so very like unto thee. Do thou accomplish today what will be beneficial to all these? (Ganguli, Aswamedha Parva 117).

This passage shows how she was traumatic about the end of their dynasty with the death of the foetus in Uttara's womb. This sense of fear, leading to her trauma, is fully communicated in the length of the passage.

The end of the war could not bring peace and happiness for Yudhishtira. He was deeply impacted by the fatal consequences of the war. Basically, the death of sons and kinsmen distressed him, traumatized him. Here is a long and eloquent passage that express the traumatic situations of Yudhishtira in his own words, in the form of a monologue:

"Alas, having vanquished the foe, we have ourselves been vanquished in the end! The course of events is difficult to be ascertained even by persons endued with spiritual sight. The foes, who were vanquished have become victorious! Ourselves, again, while victorious, are vanquished! Having slain brothers and friends and sires and sons and well-wishers, and kinsmen, and counsellors, and having vanquished them all, we ourselves are vanquished at last! Misery looks like prosperity and prosperity looks like

misery! This our victory has assumed the shape of defeat. Our victory, therefore, has ended in defeat! Having won the victory, I am obliged to grieve as an afflicted wretch. How, then, can I regard it as a victory? In reality, I have been doubly defeated by the foe. They for whose sake we have incurred the sin of victory by slaying our kinsmen and friends, alas, they, after victory had crowned them, have been vanquished by defeated foes that were heedful! (Ganguli, Sauptika Parva 10).

The lack of peace and stability of his mind can be easily found from this passage. He talked almost like a crazy person. He appeared to be repeating almost the same thing in different words. The random utterances, given to Yudhishtira, underlines how restless and helpless he was.

FINDINGS OF THE FURTHER NEGOTIATION

A close reading of *The Mahabharata* has revealed that trauma victims are tragic characters confronting some sort of tragedies in their lives. The trauma theory and trauma narratives acknowledge the essential tragedy involved in the trauma of the victims. However, these have not accounted for using tragic features like *hamartia* and *peripetia* proposed by Aristotle (384–322 B.C.). These two tragic features, as available in the epic, help understand and represent the psychological trauma of the characters in a better way by exhibiting their mental condition while undergoing struggles, sufferings and dilemmas, contributing to their trauma. Further, the narrative of the epic has revealed that the use of repetitive designation, amplification and tone, that are not focused in trauma theory and trauma narrative, help in understanding the cause and effect of psychological trauma of the characters. The repetitive designation as found, during the discussion of the epic, contributes to the traumatization process of the characters by drawing their mind repeatedly to the person or event that caused their trauma. The use of amplification and tone have mirrored the mental process and feelings and emotions of the characters of the epic undergoing psychological trauma.

The reading of *The Mahabharata* contests the existing trauma narrative features and techniques that fall short to discuss the psychological trauma of its characters. Trauma theory as well as trauma narrative deal with traumatic past and the re-enactment of it. The flashback technique is often used to represent these and to mark the break of the linear order of the events. The narrative of *The Mahabharata*, of course, relies on the flashback technique. In addition, the epic employs flashforward technique to lend voice to the psychological trauma of the characters. Their trauma is found to be caused from certain fear involved in the process of anticipation of the forthcoming catastrophic event, particularly the Kurukshetra war and the possible great bloodshed. This aspect of trauma cannot be undermined. Trauma is after all a psychic condition of the victim, affected by past traumatic events as well as the upcoming events that appear to be potentially traumatic and threaten the victims' peace of mind and stability.

The characters' testimonies are found going beyond expected narrative conventions, challenging the Western model of trauma and bringing to light its limitations. The very notion of trauma as unspeakable and unrepresentable is contested through the analysis of the epic which finds that the selected characters express their psychological trauma in an eloquent way. The narrative is found to be wordy, full of details of their traumatic experiences and how they

deal with such experiences. Lengthy passages, which is not a characteristic of trauma narrative, are attributed to the trauma victims to express their private feelings and their traumatic blow.

In short, the narrative techniques, such as, hamartia, peripetia, tone, repetitive designation, amplification, flashforward and the use of long expressions, found representing the psychological trauma of the characters of the epic in an effective and detailed way.

CONCLUSION

The Mahabharata that accommodates theme-based and technique-based narrative features, specific to trauma narratives, with an exception of textual gaps, dashes and suspension points, can be read as a trauma narrative. Although, originally *The Mahabharata* is a non-trauma-narrative text, it embodies trauma as one of its primary themes. Like other trauma narratives, the epic, employing major techniques, depicts its characters going through psychological turmoil and trauma, thus can be read as a trauma narrative.

Further, the narrative techniques, such as, hamartia, peripetia, tone, repetitive designation, amplification, flashforward and the use of long expressions, embedded in the narrative of the epic, are found representing the psychological trauma of the characters of the epic effectively. These techniques are not considered in trauma theories. Hence, the epic's proposition to add these narrative features into the scope of trauma theories not only contributes to broaden the scope of trauma theories but also enriches trauma studies in general.

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