Journal of Dharma Studies (2025) 8:347–372
https://doi.org/10.1007/s42240-025-00203-5

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Almost Different, but Not Quite: Neoliberal Discourses on the *Mahābhārata*

João Pedro Oliveira[1]

Accepted: 13 March 2025 / Published online: 31 March 2025

Abstract

This paper analyses a corpus of contemporary English-language adaptations of the *Mahābhārata* sold via Amazon India and takes a qualitative discourse analysis approach to describe and sort out the linguistic, narrative and discursive techniques that most writers use in their biographical notes and novels' summaries to make their works commercially appealing. I conclude that most authors claim to come from a technological background and adhere to a neoliberal and exclusivist nationalistic ideology. They claim to be doing something entirely innovative and, by falsifying past interpretations of the epic influenced by (post-)Orientalist scholarly and Westernised left-wing Indian discourses, to unveil the "lost secrets" which were already present in the canonical Sanskrit version of the epic. By working as a historical account of the past and as a mythic blueprint for contemporary individual, social and national lives, the *Mahābhārata* is represented as a connecting point between the precolonial Indian Golden Age and postcolonial neoliberal India, which is depicted as reviving that Golden Age.

Keywords *Mahābhārata* · Neoliberalism · Mythological fiction · History · *itihāsa* · Nationalism

Introduction

Together with the *Rāmāyana*, the *Mahābhārata* is one of the most significant narratives in Indian history and culture. As the volume *Many Mahābhāratas* (Hawley and Pillai 2021) shows, rather than a single text, the *Mahābhārata* is a transhistorical, transliguistic and transmedial genre which has been constantly recreated and reinterpreted across the South Asian social spectrum throughout the past two thousand years. Hawley and Pillai's scholarly approach clearly follows similar ones

✉ João Pedro Oliveira
john.olivetree@gmail.com

[1] Universidade Católica Portuguesa (UCP), Research Centre for Communication and Culture (CECC), Lisbon, Portugal

related to the *Rāmāyana* and implicitly constitutes a response to less diverse ideological takes which have been popular in contemporary India. *Many Mahābhāratas* was clearly influenced by the similarly titled *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Richman, 1991), which begins with Ramanujan's celebrated "Three Hundred Rāmāyanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation". In this essay, Ramanujan celebrates the diversity of the *Rāmāyana* across Indian history, geography and society. In a well-known attempt to legitimise a specific interpretation of the epic while delegitimising others, protests took place near Delhi University on 25 February 2008 over the inclusion of Ramanujan's essay in the syllabus for the *Ancient Hindu Culture* B.A. programme at Delhi University (Dharwadker, 2012). While the *Rāmāyaṇa* has become particularly contentious in the contemporary Indian atmosphere (Rajagopal, 2001), Hawley and Pillai (2021) not only claim to follow "the spirit of Ramanujan's model" (14), but also point to similar novel tendencies to censor specific readings of the *Mahābhārata* and to privilege others, specifically by imagining a single Sanskrit Ur-text as the "true" version and by disqualifying all others as corruptions (30). However, identifying a singular "true" Sanskrit version across time and space is challenging. Not only have most people throughout history lacked direct access to this textual version, but, as Hawley and Pillai also highlight, the vulgate version was compiled in the seventeenth century, while the critical edition emerged only in the twentieth century (16). According to van der Veer (2001), the goal of such critical editions of the epics was to represent Indian civilisation and Hinduism as modern and as on par with Western civilisation and other world religions with similar canonised scriptures (119–122), which means that the attempt to find a single pre-modern version of classical texts should not be understood outside of modernity itself.

Lothspeich (2009) has conducted a study on the boom of the *Mahābhārata*-inspired literary works in the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, that is, during the late colonial period. The author argues that the *Mahābhārata* has been recreated both to criticise British colonialism and to gather anticolonial resistance around the same narrative and cultural script. This approach to the *Mahābhārata* is hardly surprising, not only due to the popularity of the tale, but due to the fact that, as Pollock (2006) points out, the epic has been "premodern India's most sustained and profound discourse on power" (223–224). Hegarty (2013) argues that the canonical Sanskrit version was already important in envisioning the past through a contemporary cultural and religious lens when it was first written. This approach remains alive nowadays in recent adaptations of the epic, even though the contemporary cultural and religious lenses may vary considerably. Kanjilal's (2017) *Modern Mythologies: The Epic Imagination in Contemporary Indian Literature* focuses specifically on twentieth century and some twenty-first century English, Hindi and Bengali versions of the *Mahābhārata* in different media (literature, comics and televisions serials) to argue that English versions, a language which in India is still closely associated with the Indian middle class, tend to promote a more politically and socioculturally conservative worldview.

Recently, many English-language literary retellings of this epic have been published by Indian authors. One may notice the meteoric rise of retellings since 2013 by analysing a corpus of 140 recent adaptations of the epic I collected from Amazon

India: 2009 (1), 2010 (1), 2011 (1), 2012 (2), 2013 (8), 2014 (3), 2015 (12), 2016 (10), 2017 (15), 2018 (7), 2019 (11), 2020 (17), 2021 (19), 2022 (14) and 2023 (18). Kamesh Ramakrishna, the author of three retellings, refers to this growing popularity in his biographical note in Amazon India. He states that, while studying IT, he started writing fiction based on the epic "without finding anybody who was doing what he [written in the third person in the original] was doing. In the meantime, out of India came a veritable flood of Mahabharata story-telling and interpretation, threatening to swamp the market".[1] It is worth noting that other classical Indian texts, both narrative, such as the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and non-narrative, such as the *Bhagavad Gītā* (itself part of the *Mahābhārata*) and the *Arthaśāstra*, have also been reinterpreted in similar ways—sometimes by the same authors who have adapted the *Mahābhārata*. However, the *Mahābhārata* appears to have inspired a greater variety of thematic adaptations than any other classical Indian text. For instance, due to their non-narrative nature, the *Gītā* and the *Arthaśāstra* are rarely reimagined as narratives. Meanwhile, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, given its historical and ongoing connection to politics, has been frequently adapted into novels but less often repurposed as a business guidebook. This phenomenon begs several questions. How to explain this sudden rise in retellings of this epic since 2013? Who are the authors of these versions? What does the *Mahābhārata* represent for them? What strategies do they use to make their products appealing to their audience? Building on Lothspeich's (2009) conclusions about the role of the *Mahābhārata* in the late colonial period, I argue that this epic has become a more popular source for adaptations in recent years because its narrative and structural complexity make it particularly suited to decolonial strategies. Unlike the *Rāmāyaṇa*, which presents a more straightforward and morally dualistic narrative (Pollock, 1993), the Mahābhārata lends itself to the idea of a lost, native cultural code, one that, when accessed and reclaimed by Westernised Indians, is seen as offering a powerful alternative to Western global culture.

These adaptations belong to what Gupta (2012) calls "new commercial fiction", a kind of fiction that is often based on ancient Indian history and/or mythology and which conveys positive ideas about Indian culture for young readers. Fiction based on mythology is often called "mythological fiction" (Varughese, 2017). The exponential growth of this kind of fiction may be explained by intertwined political, economic and social factors. In economic terms, one should mention the introduction of neoliberal policies in 1991. Neoliberalism is a political and economic philosophy according to which everything can be commodified and decentralised, which means that national governments should play no role in interfering with economics (Abramovitz, 2012). Given the deemphasis on the welfare state, according to neoliberalism, individuals are ultimately responsible for their success (Binkley, 2011), which means that their degree of failure or success is evaluated in terms of whether they are talented and/or diligent enough and not on wider sociopolitical forces. In India, the introduction of neoliberal policies enabled the reorientation of middle-class

[1] https://www.amazon.in/stores/Kamesh-Ramakrishna/author/B01LYIC7OP?ref=sr_ntt_srch_lnk_1&qid=1709228245&sr=1-1&isDramIntegrated=true&shoppingPortalEnabled=true (accessed on 29/2/2024).

economic, political and sociocultural values in ways which differ from the one the mostly liberal values which emerged during the colonial and post-independence periods (Fernandes, 2006). According to Das (2000), the traditional middle class stemmed from an upper-caste milieu and grew in prestige and influence by mimicking British colonial culture. The neoliberal middle class, however, is made up of technocrats who may come from any social stratum, given neoliberalism's reliance on education and professional talent and effort. Jaising (2023) has specifically highlighted how this type of narrative discourse, which emphasises individual knowledge and talent while downplaying the role of the state, which she calls "neoliberal script", has permeated contemporary Indian fiction.

In political terms, one should note the rise of Hindu nationalism, which was first named in the 1920s, even though one could argue that the ideology already existed previously. This ideology is rooted in a nativist and atavistic interpretation of culture and identity. It asserts that Hinduism is the historically and geographically legitimate "way of life" in India, warranting primacy over all other traditions, and that non-Hindus Indians must adapt to Hinduism. Since Modi's election in 2014, Hindu nationalism has firmly consolidated its political dominance (Jaffrelot, 2021). This period coincides with a rise in adaptations of the *Mahābhārata*. This ideology contrasts sharply with the secular nationalism that emerged in the immediate post-independence period and is commonly referred to as Indian secularism (Tejani, 2011). While often drawing from Indian cultural and religious discourses (van der Veer, 1994, 23), Indian secularism prioritises civic nationalism over ethnonationalism, making it more inclusive of diverse worldviews and identities. One notable author who writes about the *Mahābhārata* and Indian narrative traditions from a secular perspective, while also appreciating Indian and Hindu cultural traditions, is Shashi Tharoor, a prominent Congress politician and critic of Hindu nationalism. His interpretations of the *Mahābhārata* include both fiction (Tharoor, 1989) and nonfiction. Inclusive interpretations of the *Mahābhārata* have continued into the twenty-first century, with prominent examples including Das' (2009) *The Difficulty of Being Good: On The Subtle Art of Dharma* and Pattanaik's (2010) *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*. However, such perspectives have recently been quantitatively overshadowed by versions that promote a monocultural discourse aligned with both neoliberalism and Hindu nationalism, along with the sociocultural mores these two systems may entail.

Such sociocultural mores include efforts to purge colonial remnants and restore a native, pristine Indian, and specifically Hindu, culture (Guichard, 2010). These attempts are often linked to the rise of a new intelligentsia, frequently educated in technological fields (Sajjanhar, 2024). A concrete example of this sociocultural trend can be seen in the work of Vashi Sharma and Sanjeev Newar, both trained in IT, who frequently write about contemporary Indian culture from an anti-Muslim, anti-Western, and pro-Hindutva perspective. In *A Liberal's (F)LAWS: Hypocrisies that Feed Terrorism* (Sharma & Newar, 2018), they critique what they perceive as liberal interpretations of India and Hinduism. The book's cover, featuring a seemingly generic smiling Western scholar, symbolises their argument that liberal discourse is hypocritical and violent, essentially mirroring the way liberal narratives often depict Hindu nationalist ones.

In more general, thematic terms, a common example is the discourse on the condition of Indian women. Contrary to Orientalist discourses, which have created representations of oppressed Indian women (Mohanty, 1984), contemporary Indian discourses have created the stereotype of the "new Indian woman", who is simultaneously contemporary and traditional and, as a result, simultaneously globalised and fully Indian (Dhawan, 2010). This mixture of modern and traditional elements may explain the contemporary profusion of literary works centred on mythic (Luthra, 2014) female characters who, by being recreated with modern traits, retroactively become examples to living women. At the same time, they "show" that Orientalist discourses influenced by a Western mentality were wrong and that negative representations of Indian classics were either misleadingly selective or false.

In short, these recent trends assume that the knowledge about Indian and Hindu cultures theorised by Western scholars and left-wing Indians has distorted and undermined the "genuine" essence of these traditions. They argue that, while physical colonialism has officially ended, psychological colonialism remains active. Consequently, they call for an urgent process of psychological decolonisation, which involves a return to imagined pure roots. As such, these discourses easily fall into the concept of "collective memory". As Zelizer (1995) states, this kind of memory tries to synchronise present actions with the fictional(ised) construction of past memories (216). In the Indian case, this means that mythological fiction may be regarded as an attempt to make an ontological association between the precolonial past and the neoliberal present. The fact that paradigms regarding the past change does not necessarily mean that new evidence has been found, but that, at least, perceptions regarding the past have either changed organically or have been artificially modified to fit present ideological agendas. Malhotra (2013), an Indian intellectual who studied physics, initially worked as a software engineer and then turned into a cultural activist, is the most influential intellectual who exemplifies this kind of discourses in India. Outside India, Malhotra is also influential among the Indian diaspora, of which he is a part. He also plays an active role in advancing the careers of new members of the new intelligentsia who share similar curricula and ideological interests (Kurien, 2007).

Another relevant sociocultural phenomenon in neoliberal societies is noted by Carrette and King (2005), who analyse modern spirituality as a development of individual psychology adapted to the corporate world and to material gains, which are regarded as the object of devotion of the neoliberal "religion". While Carrette and King discuss Asian spirituality in America, the prevalence of discourses about Indian spirituality in Orientalist (Inden, 2001 [1990]), anticolonial (King, 1999) and modern countercultural discourses (Clarke, 2006, 207–233) makes India stand out as a stereotypically "spiritual" nation. As Shani and Kibe (2019) argue, this notion was intentionally cultivated by colonised nations as a means of resisting Western culture while simultaneously embracing its science and technology (2). As a result, history and mythology may be regarded as guides for individuals to follow in the corporate work environment that is so highly regarded in contemporary India, and the economic success of which relies heavily on the IT sector.

In sum, according to neoliberal discourses, Indian precolonial knowledge is not only true but can be revived and adopted for personal, professional and national

success. This explains why Das (2000) states that the new middle class, while pragmatic and more interested in making money than in making politics, has had a tendency to lean towards *Hindutva*, a political ideology that has adopted the economic principles and the sociocultural values prized by this class (327). This does not mean that all members of this class follow the physically or verbally violent discourses often associated with *Hindutva* ideology and not even that they are Hindu in the religious sense. They do, however, tend to follow what Amartya Sen (2005) has called the "dazzlingly glorious" (140) representation of India's history and present as imbued with great virtues. A notable example, which I will analyse later, is Christopher C. Doyle. Although he is a Christian, his mythological fiction, like the mythological fiction of most other authors, strongly celebrates the pre-Muslim and pre-British Indian past in ways that can readily align with hegemonic Hindu nationalist discourses.

In this paper, I examine authors' biographical notes and the summaries of their works as presented in Amazon India.[2] I use these as a platform to understand how the authors represent themselves, their interpretations of the *Mahābhārata* and, by extension, Indian civilisation. These brief texts are often a reader's first point of contact with an author's work. Their brevity and direct appeal enable a broad comparative analysis, which, while not replacing the study of full texts, offers an alternative scholarly approach. In *Indian Writing in English and Issues of Visual Representation: Judging More than a Book By Its Cover*, Lau and Varughese's (2015) show how analysing and book covers within the same genre may yield relevant conclusions about discursive representation. Book summaries and author's biographical notes, which serve a similar marketing function, can be studied in the same way. Designed to attract readers, these elements condense complex information, communicating both a book's content and its broader significance at an individual and social level. I use qualitative data and resort to discourse analysis to understand the patterns which appear in most discourses related to these authors and their works. I sometimes write key expressions in quotations in bold to emphasise the strategy under discussion.

As a final note, it is important to emphasise that, unlike in technocratic circles, academic discourse often praises the liberal values of Indian secularism while critiquing Hindu nationalism and its associated cultural products. Consequently, my analysis might be interpreted as an endorsement of the former and a critique of the latter. However, my approach is intended to be descriptive rather than prescriptive, leaving the qualitative assessment of the strategies I examine to the reader. My focus is on analysing the discursive strategies most commonly employed by these authors and how, by reflect contemporary hegemonic economic, political, and sociocultural trends, they constitute a relatively cohesive worldview. Along the way, some strategies may appear to introduce new trends, while others, though not entirely novel, may be reinterpreted in light of India's current context, forming an integral and prominent part of the broader discourse.

[2] All consulted on 29/2/2024.

The Authors

Most authors constitute a relatively homogeneous group at the social and discursive levels, which becomes apparent when considering their biographical notes. One notes their frequent association with the corporate and, more often than not, IT sectors. Showing this close professional and/or personal relationship with IT, most authors give their e-mails or social network accounts in their biographical notes. Besides IT, common sectors of study and/or activity include marketing and advertising, management, economics, accountancy and finance. The few authors connected to humanities disciplines often add that they have also worked in the corporate sector. Utkarsh Patel, for instance, introduces himself as a corporate professional who turned into a mythologist with qualifications in Indian and world mythology and now teaches "Comparative Mythology" at the University of Mumbai.[3] Few authors introduce themselves as having studied or worked in the humanities, something which might be expected from authors of retellings of an ancient narrative tradition with deep historical and cultural dimensions. Authors almost invariably begin their biographical notes with their education and professional resumes. They often omit their literary aims or introduce them only after this part. Saurabh Khanna, for instance, states that he "is a highly qualified professional" who "works in a top position for one of the most reputed global Infrastructure Consulting firms".[4] When they mention their field of activity, authors also often state their years of experience. Some talk about their personal lives and introduce their partners and children, sometimes including even education and professional resumes about the latter. It is clear that these accomplishments are regarded as relevant for the authors and that the authors believe that they may also be relevant and appealing to their readership.

Some authors, such as Shinde Sweety,[5] M. L. Raja[6] and Sumitra Agarwal,[7] sign their works with the title *Dr.* Given the content of M. L. Raja's *Astronomical Evidences of the Mahabharata War*, one may guess that the title aims to give greater scientific credibility to this work. Indeed, several authors explicitly legitimise their scientific methodologies. Nilesh Oak, whose works aim to validate Indian mythology through astronomical calculations, states that he "helps Indians become aware of the deep antiquity of Indian civilization so that they truly comprehend, present, or defend the grand narrative of India unlike most other Indic researchers because he builds it through scientific acumen and logical reasoning".[8] Nilesh Oak does not define these "other Indic researches" who do not defend the great narrative of India, an ideological project which is announced a priori. However, as noted in the introduction, stereotypical *Hindutva* discourses, shaped by a neoliberal mindset, often

[3] https://www.amazon.in/Shakuntala-Woman-Wronged-Utkarsh-Patel-ebook/dp/B015HDBDCI/.
[4] https://www.amazon.in/DRAUPADI-Me-through-own-eyes-ebook/dp/B079ZY5FD1.
[5] https://www.amazon.in/stores/Dr.Shinde-Sweety/author/B00SZ35C0C.
[6] https://www.amazon.in/Astronomical-Evidences-Mahabharata-War-M-L-Raja-ebook/dp/B081NWQ491.
[7] https://www.amazon.in/Draupadi-Polyandry-Dr-Sumitra-Agarwal/dp/1649513305.
[8] https://www.amazon.in/stores/Nilesh-Nilkanth-Oak/author/B0059UNMK6.

associate them with foreign scholars and left-wing Indian intellectuals. It is clear that, in Oak's mind, the arguments of these "others" are built neither through scientific acumen nor logical reasoning. In any case, while Raja and Oak aim to have this scientific dimension, the works by Sweety and Agarwal are popular novels, which means that, in principle, the title *Dr.* should have nothing to do with the veracity of their content.

The neoliberal ideal of the self-made individual who started with nothing and who, through effort and merit, rose to the top is important for the self-representation of most authors. Eric Alagan starts his note by stating that, when he was young, he began his career by cleaning toilets and making coffee for airport mechanics. Later, he also turned into a "grease monkey". "After swimming with sharks for a further twenty plus years" in "corporate suites", he devoted himself to his true passion of writing.[9] Despite this focus on humble roots, what usually matters for most authors is the professional path they have taken and the accomplishments they have achieved along the way.

Biographical notes tend to reveal neither social preoccupations nor empathy towards subaltern groups. The only exception is related with gender. Ira Mukhoty writes that she has always been interested in history and mythology, in the omission of women's roles from these discourses and in the effects of such omissions on the status of Indian women.[10] Rsvika Tripathi writes that she adopts an "empathetic approach (…) to showcase strength, resilience, and agency of women in their narratives".[11] Even Vamshi Krishna, who is a male author, mentions that "he loves to write honest and relatable fiction based on women's emotions".[12] No author makes similar statements regarding questions of caste or class, which are as controversial and as historically and culturally relevant in India's past and present as is gender.

Given the importance of the concept of "leadership" and of the figure of the corporate executive in the neoliberal world, many authors represent themselves as inspirational and charismatic leaders. Pranay associates the corporate world to spirituality when stating that he is a "mystic philosopher" whose courses on "'Advanced Spirituality for Leadership and Success' (…) have won global acclaim".[13] Christopher C. Doyle "**coaches** CEOs"[14] and Vivek Dutta Mishra is a "Software Technology Enabler", a title the author invented for himself and which consists in being a "software architect, mentor, trainer and speaker".[15]

It is common for the authors to present their real passion (writing) after their curricula. The trope *author X is [profession X] by profession and a writer by passion* is common. M. Kaarthika Santhosh states that she "is an engineer by education, cost manager by profession and a writer by passion",[16] and Vamshi Krishna "a software

[9] https://www.amazon.in/stores/Eric-Alagan/author/B00JDZ0IWI.
[10] https://www.amazon.in/Song-Draupadi-HB-Ira-Mukhoty-ebook/dp/B093GQDHK3.
[11] https://www.amazon.in/stores/Rsvika-Tripathi/author/B0C9XG4S7G.
[12] https://www.amazon.in/stores/Vamshi-Krishna/author/B07T58G227.
[13] https://www.amazon.in/Lessons-Mahabharat-Greatest-Spiritual-Wisdom-ebook/dp/B0C6W3PMYP.
[14] https://www.amazon.in/stores/Christopher-C-Doyle/author/B00QVDYDW6.
[15] https://www.amazon.in/stores/Vivek-Dutta-Mishra/author/B085VVV97P.
[16] https://www.amazon.in/stores/M-Kaarthika-Santosh/author/B07B2L1PPB.

engineer by chance and a writer by choice".[17] Resorting to a similar antithesis, Gunjan Porwal is "engineer by day, and writer by night".[18] Most authors position this antithesis in a neoliberal discourse of hard work and gradual advancement until one achieves one's personal goals. Christopher C. Doyle's biographical note states that "before he finally embarked on the journey of achieving his childhood dreams, Christopher pursued a career in the corporate world".[19] Similarly, Gourav Mohanty states that "though he was doing well as a lawyer in Mumbai, he is now pursuing the infinitely more unattainable dream of being the first 'epic fantasy novelist' of India".[20]

While the education and professional path of most authors is unrelated to the study of culture, mythology or history, many authors mention their passion for Indian mythology and history, two fields which often remain ontologically indistinguishable in their discourses. In other words, it is often deliberately unclear where history ends and mythology begins or vice versa. The *Indian* part is often stressed and few authors specifically claim to be interested on other histories and/or mythologies. Aditya Vungarala claims to be a "nerd",[21] Aniket S. Sharma an "ardent follower"[22] and Gourav Mohanty a "connoisseur"[23] of Indian history and mythology. Although the colloquial term *nerd* and the term *follower* may point to the world of IT and social networking and the French term *connoisseur* to a formal and highbrow milieu, all convey the idea of someone who is passionately interested in a topic without necessarily being a (certified) specialist. Similarly, authors claim to write for other enthusiasts and not for specialists. Rashmi Chendvankar states that, while she is an avid reader of ancient Indian history, she finds history books "boring" and adds that her goal is to make lighter versions for youngsters.[24]

In sum, the majority of contemporary English versions of the *Mahābhārata* are authored by a group of technocrats rather than by previously accepted authorities, be they the Brahmins versed in sacred Sanskrit texts or modern scholars specialising in philology, history, archaeology or related fields. This new intelligentsia has created a market in which know-how in fields with which the *Mahābhārata* has not been traditionally associated and in which the ability to be an inspirational, charismatic individual who influences corporations at the individual and group level constitute the main keys for personal, professional and even national achievements. I do not claim that traditional authorities should have the monopoly on such discourses. My aim is to draw attention to this qualitative intellectual shift in the Indian public sphere, here exemplified by contemporary English-language popular adaptations of the *Mahābhārata*.

[17] https://www.amazon.in/stores/Vamshi-Krishna/author/B07T58G227.
[18] https://www.amazon.in/gp/product/B07HJ48B4B.
[19] https://www.amazon.in/stores/Christopher-C-Doyle/author/B00QVDYDW6.
[20] https://www.amazon.com/stores/Gourav-Mohanty/author/B09YTPPV7T.
[21] https://www.amazon.in/stores/Aditya-Vungarala/author/B08KWPYGMH.
[22] https://www.amazon.in/stores/Aniket-S-Sharma/author/B00EFAGDPW.
[23] https://www.amazon.com/stores/Gourav-Mohanty/author/B09YTPPV7T.
[24] https://www.amazon.in/Rigveda-Code-Rashmi-Chendvankar-ebook/dp/B06XHMX6YS.

The Adaptations

Linguistic Strategies

Given that many authors have studied and/or work in the marketing sector, the summaries of their adaptations adopt several linguistic and discursive marketing strategies. The clearest one consists in the constant use of sensationalistic adjectives (*drastic*, *shocking*, *gripping*, *spell-binding*, etc.). *Draupadi's 13 Relations: The Lotus* (Rsvika Tripathi 2023) claims to be "an **enchanting** and **gripping** tale that delves into the **captivating** world of the epic Mahabharata from the perspective of Draupadi, the **legendary** princess of Panchal".[25] *Sons of Darkness* (Gourav Mohanty 2023) contains a series of repetitive and concise reviews by different authors and venues: "incredible", "exhilarating", "a stunning debut", "unforgettable", "outstanding", "vivid…riveting", "breathtaking", "a series to watch", "wild, intriguing", and "vast and sweeping".[26] While these marketing strategies are not new and are common in capitalist discourses worldwide, when linked to the half-mythical, half-historical world of the *Mahābhārata*, their hyperbolic sensationalism clearly appeals to a hypernationalistic atmosphere. In this context, the distant past is imagined as a repository of extraordinary characters and events, often described using similarly exaggerated language to emphasise the grandeur of ancient India.

Another technique consists in interrogating the reader, such as posing *wh-* questions to which the reader is not expected to know the answer and, as a result, creating curiosity and implying that the book holds the key to discovering it. The summary of *Untold Tales from the Mahabharata: Epic beyond the obvious* (Uday Shankar 2021) begins with seven such questions:

> **Which** Kaurava was inspired by the birds to commit one of the most grotesque murders in the Mahabharata? **Why** did King Muchkund sleep for a million years and wake up in the Dwaparyug? **Whose** soul had entered the dice of Shakuni? (…).[27]

The second kind consists in *what-if* questions. In this case, it is common to refer to well-known events and make the reader imagine how the narrative, historical and cultural implications might have changed had those events unfolded differently. One properly titled adaptation, *What-If Tales From Mahabharat* (Anindita Basu 2017), invites the reader: "[c]ome, re-read it [the *Mahābhārata]* through these snippy tales that take an alternative path, that ask 'What if it happened like this…'".[28]

A third strategy consists in the use of first-person narration, which is clear in titles such as *I, Duryodhana* (Pradeep Govind 2019) and *I am 'Draupadi': Me Through my Own Eyes* (Saurabh Khanna 2018). This strategy relates to several themes, such as individualism, which is important in a neoliberal context. Of the 140 adaptations,

[25] https://www.amazon.in/Draupadis-13-Relations-Rsvika-Tripathi-ebook/dp/B0C6GTGT8D.
[26] https://www.amazon.in/Sons-Darkness-Gourav-Mohanty/dp/9355590830.
[27] https://www.amazon.in/Untold-Tales-Mahabharata-Beyond-Obvious/dp/9390358221.
[28] https://www.amazon.in/What-If-Tales-Mahabharat-Anindita-Basu-ebook/dp/B0753JKTMV.

almost half (66) focus on individual characters. First-person narration also makes the narrative more realistic. In *Winds of Hastinapur* (Sharrath Komarraju 2013), the narrator states that "It is my intention (…) to tell you the story as it happened, as I saw it happen".[29] Similarly, *Yudhisthira: The Unfallen Pandava* (Mallar Chatterjee 2017) is described as a fictional autobiography which "retells the events of the Mahabharata in first person giving a first-hand account, as if he [Yudhiṣṭhira] witnessed the incidents himself".[30]

Individualism and realism make the reader feel greater empathy towards the protagonist. In *Yuyutsu: Rise of the last Kaurava* (Aniket Sharma 2020), this is achieved through the repetition of *I* and *my*: "**I** wanted to reclaim what was always mine, **I** wanted to announce what I was truly capable of, **I** wanted to prove that karma could overrule bloodlines and most importantly, **I** wanted to be much more than a mere king! This is **my** journey". This novel also resorts to the strategy of questioning the reader: "would you listen to **my** side of the story?".[31] In *Blood & Iron*, Deepak M. R. (2023) writes that he uses the "unique" technique of narrating each chapter through the point of view of a different character, an approach that "will help you get into the minds of the legendary characters".[32] In the summary of two other novels by the same author, this invitation to enter the protagonist's mind is made explicit. In *Abhimanyu: The Warrior Prince* (2021), for instance, Deepak suggests: "**Experience** his struggles to become a great warrior, and **join him** in his quest to find his father. **Exult** as he finds love in Uttara and enjoys life with his family. **Accompany him** to the battlefield where his destiny awaits him".[33]

These dimensions (individualism, realism and empathy) are associated with the concept of *voice*, that is, the idea that individuals have the ability to communicate and assert their ideas. These traits are regarded as desirable in a neoliberal context and possibly explain why many authors represent themselves as speakers or as coaches who help others find their voice. Govinda Das' (2017) *Voice Your Choice: Ethics from Epics* vows to "assist one in empowering the inner voice".[34]

As the foundational texts of Indian culture are often regarded as patriarchal (Brockington et al., 2016), the concept of *voice* is often associated with contemporary feminism (Spivak, 1988). Feminist writers use their adaptations of the epic to improve representations of the condition of contemporary Indian women or to reformulate the condition of past Indian women and state that they had more power to voice their opinions and assert their wills than previous texts or popular imagination make one believe. The work that has seemingly initiated this kind of mixture of mythological and feminist discourses in the English-language mythological fiction market was Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's (2008) *The Palace of Illusions*,

[29] https://www.amazon.in/Winds-Hastinapur-Sharath-Komarraju/dp/9351160874.
[30] https://www.amazon.in/Yudhisthira-Unfallen-Pandava-Mallar-Chatterjee/dp/938585481X.
[31] https://www.amazon.in/Yuyutsu-Rise-Kaurava-Aniket-Sharma-ebook/dp/B08WWTNM3R.
[32] https://www.amazon.com/Blood-Iron-Kurukshetra-Chronicles-Book-ebook/dp/B0C8YZ5G6N.
[33] https://www.amazon.in/Abhimanyu-Warrior-Prince-Deepak-M/dp/9354351115.
[34] https://www.amazon.in/Voice-Your-Choice-Ethics-Epics/dp/9381283044.

an adaptation which is focused on Draupadi and is narrated by her.[35] Divakaruni (2008, 2019) frequently asserts, both in the nonfiction sections (such as prefaces and author's notes) and in the fictional narratives of her epic adaptations, that her female characters speak for themselves, ensuring they are not misrepresented by others.

The fourth strategy consists in informing readers that, in contrast with canonical versions of the epic or academic works, these popular adaptations are simple and concise. Author M. Kaarthika Santosh writes that "a story with simple diction reaches more readers", that being the reason why she keeps her works "simple worded".[36] Contemporary adaptations are also adapted to readers unwilling to spend too much time and/or resources. In other words, they are adapted to contemporary audiences used to IT media which, as exemplified by news feeds and short messages in social networks, also promise lots of information in a few words. Kevin Missal, for instance, positions himself in this contemporary fast-paced, media-saturated world by claiming to be a "pioneer in writing the World's First InstaRead",[37] a form of storytelling whose name reminds one of the social network Instagram and, like other platforms such as Twitter/X, is designed for quick consumption. This association is also clear in *#Kurukshetra: The 18 day epic battle of Mahabharata narrated in Tweets* (Saiswaroopa Iyer 2021), which consists of a "compilation of an 800 tweet long thread **summarising** the famed war of Mahabharata" and is "an attempt to bring the scale and detail of the epic of Veda Vyasa to the twenty-first century reader and also convey **snippets** hereto forgotten to popular memory".[38] Some leadership and business guides even state on their covers how long the book takes to read. It is clear that low numbers are preferable to higher ones. Despite their brevity, most adaptations claim to be comprehensive. In *Markandeya Ramayana: The story of Rama from the Mahabharata*, Deepak M. R. (2024) warns readers that, if they had not read the *Rāmāyaṇa* yet, this adaptation of the version present in the *Mahābhārata* "sums up the story". However, this book "is not just a summary but narrates the **entire story** of Rama. It is an ideal book for beginners who want to know the story **in brief**. The book is best suited for young people who wish to know the story of Rama and are looking for a book that presents the story **succinctly**".[39] There are no summaries stating that the adaptations that they introduce are long and complex and require lots of time and hard work.

Narrative Strategies

I call the most common narrative structure in contemporary adaptations of the *Mahābhārata* "the *rise-fall-rise* trope": an initially calm and prosperous universe which falls into a crisis, but which, through the hands of a charismatic character,

[35] Divakaruni has lived and worked in the USA for decades, but her mythological works are popular in India and often integrate lists of Indian mythological fiction.

[36] https://www.amazon.in/stores/M-Kaarthika-Santosh/author/B07B2L1PPB.

[37] https://www.amazon.in/stores/author/B075VWWC6H.

[38] https://www.amazon.in/Kurukshetra-battle-Mahabharata-narrated-Tweets-ebook/dp/B093MM3JWV.

[39] https://www.amazon.in/Markandeya-Ramayana-story-Rama-Mahabharata-ebook/dp/B0CSTYHL4L.

returns to the previous desirable state. This kind of narrative, which is part of the larger neoliberal script, is widely appreciated in contemporary mythological fiction books and in other kinds of narratives and media, such as Bollywood cinema. Stories about subaltern characters who, after facing many hardships, achieve their improbable goals constitute common tropes. In the process, the heroes and heroines, whose story is reimagined through a neoliberal lens, become role models for contemporary Indians. In *The Raudradharya Abhimanyu: Hidden Prince* (Aditya Vungarala, 2020), it is stated that "there are powerful forces in the background moving the people as pawns, playing their own game. Will Abhimanyu become another pawn? Did he bow down to his fate, or did he fight back and mark his own path"?[40]

There are adaptations about the *fall*, such as *Fall of The Kurus* (Kamesh Ramakrishna 2019; 2023) and *Fall of the Patriarch* (Deepak M. R. 2023); about characters who did not fall (*Yudhisthira: The Unfallen Pandava*, Mallar Chatterjee 2017); and about the *rise*, such as *The Rise of Hastinapur* (Sharath Komarraju 2015), *Palace of Assassins: The Rise of Ashwatthama* (Aditya Iyengar 2017), *Ashwatthama's Redemption: The Rise of Dandak* (Gunjan Porwal 2018), *Rise of Dharma* (Semanti Chakraborty 2020), and *Yuyutsu—Rise of the last Kaurava* (Aniket Sharma 2021). While it follows a similar structure, the canonical *Mahābhārata* ends on an ambiguous note. Yudhiṣṭhira, one of the main protagonists, comes to realise that the primary antagonists attain a favourable outcome, whereas the other protagonists do not. This is often interpreted as a rejection of moral dualism and, by extension, of absolute notions of happiness and sorrow. However, such an ambiguous resolution would likely struggle to resonate with the materialistic and highly polarised mindset of contemporary middle classes in India and beyond.

The Indian historical narrative created by European Orientalists and epitomised by James Mill (2010 [1818–1823]) is also structurally comparable to the rise-fall-rise trope. India was stereotypically regarded as a great civilisation which had declined and had ended up being invaded by Muslims, a narrative which fit the British agenda for colonial intervention. Anticolonial discourse also adapted a similar discourse, even though it regarded the British period as a period of decline in need of being reversed by a group of Westernised Indians. Finally, neoliberal *Hindutva* discourses have also adopted this storyline, while introducing the idea of an economic and cultural comeback made possible through the hand of non-Westernised Indians.

The summary of *Astronomical Evidences of Mahabharata War* (M. L. Raja 2020) reflects the latter discourse most clearly. Raja writes that the Orientalist tendency of dismissing native Indian culture would be ridiculed in any postcolonial context, but that in India it was lauded and fomented. He adds that this happened because, contrary to past invaders, the British "polluted and infected" the Indian cultural conscience even after the colonial period, this being the cause of Indian backwardness and its "pathetic inferiority complex". Raja suggests that India follows Russia, which "carry conscious efforts to flaunt the Russian involvement in every scientific and cultural milestone of mankind". In other words, such significant scientific and cultural

[40] https://www.amazon.in/Raudradhari-Abhimanyu-Hidden-Aditya-Vungarala/dp/8194756103.

achievements are deliberately and inherently linked to a specific and broad identity group, with this intrinsic aimed at boosting national pride taking precedence over a more objective and detached view of science and culture. A key difference, crucial to this analogy yet overlooked by the author, is that while Russia is a relatively recent civilisation, at least in comparison to India, and has historically colonised others, India is an ancient civilisation with extensive textual and archaeological records. Moreover, India itself was colonised by the very culture that has most hegemonically shaped the linguistic and epistemological framework of contemporary globalisation. This difference clarifies why Russia undertakes such conscious efforts and why it has been more challenging for India to do so, even in the postcolonial era. Finally, Raja pokes fun at the USA, whose "history is less than 300 years old".[41] While one could argue that, in the modern sense, no nation-state would be more than 300 years, it would still be unclear why nations should be measured quantitatively, even though this is clearly so for this author, who tries to measure the antiquity and epistemological superiority of India by proving the historicity of the *Mahābhārata* war. The *rise-fall-rise* discourse of mythical characters therefore works as a metonym for the universe of the epic, which may be regarded as a metonym for this history of India and is also a model for the biography of hypothetical or real individuals living in the contemporary nation-state. By tracing this discursive path, the contemporary interest in reviving the *Mahābhārata* becomes understandable.

Despite the attempt to ignore or contradict Western discourses, they frequently appear as terms of comparison and legitimation. In an attempt to integrate Indian mythology into the contemporary epic fantasy genre, which has roots in the West, Gourav Mohanty writes in his biographical note that he wishes to join the worlds of Vedic India and (Western) Medieval Renaissance.[42] His novel *Sons of Darkness* (2023) is described as a mixture of *The House of the Dragon* and *Succession* (both American series) and the *Mahābhārata*. One review quoted in the summary states that this work is like *The Game of Thrones*, although in an alternative Indian universe. Another review states that it mixes the *Mahābhārata* with *A Song of Ice and Fire, The First Law* saga and *Malazan Book of the Fallen* which are sagas written by American, British and Canadian authors, respectively.[43] In a more contrastive vein, according to *Karna: The Unsung Hero of the Mahabharata* (Umesh Kotru and Ashutosh Zutshi 2015), Karna has no rival in world literature. While this is a universalising statement, the authors only give examples of classical Greek (Hector) and Judaeo-Christian (Moses) cultures,[44] which happen to have been the most important for the development of what is stereotypically regarded as "Western culture". In sum, these discourses exhibit a selective approach towards what is perceived as Western culture, marked by both acceptance and rejection. On the one hand, the authors embrace the discursive language of global popular culture, which is largely

[41] https://www.amazon.in/Astronomical-Evidences-Mahabharata-War-M-L-Raja-ebook/dp/B081NWQ491.

[42] https://www.amazon.in/stores/Gourav-Mohanty/author/B09YTPPV7T.

[43] https://www.amazon.in/Sons-Darkness-Gourav-Mohanty/dp/9355590830.

[44] https://www.amazon.in/Karna-Unsung-Mahabharata-Umesh-Kotru/dp/9352013042.

rooted in American influences. On the other hand, they employ this contemporary framework to anachronistically reimagine an ancient India that is entirely distinct from later foreign influences.

Karna is the male character who is most often associated with the *rise-fall-rise* trope. This is reflected in the fact that the majority of adaptations about individual male characters are centred on him. There are 66 novels about individual characters, 27 about male characters, 8 of which are about Karna. Given the stark contrast between his perceived and actual social origins, he has long been regarded as a tragic hero (McGrath, 2004). While this disparity has traditionally been analysed through the lens of caste, in the context of contemporary India, it can also be interpreted in socioeconomic terms. Karna may be seen as a figure who must rely on his individual talent rather than birth or external advantages to achieve his goals and, as a result, function as a kind of neoliberal model. Summaries constantly emphasise these points. While they often mention caste and other social problems, they tend to emphasise abstract non-human forces (destiny, fate, odds, circumstances), which can be easily reinterpreted in a modern urban context. Besides, Karna was not really of low caste. He just came of age without knowing his real social condition, a narrative idea which can be compared with the common neoliberal discourse of realising one's "potential".[45] In *Karna: The Unsung Hero of the Mahabharata* (Umesh Kotru and Ashutosh Zutshi 2015), his "whole life was one great struggle against **cruel destiny**, and against all the **odds** placed in his way by the inequities of his time. In the process, he blazed a new trail of glory, **emerging** as the adorable exemplar of purushakaara (manly effort), with tremendous achievements both as a man and also as a warrior".[46] In *Angaraj Karna* (Indrayani Sawkar 2019), Karna

> epitomizes terrible **sufferance, ignominy and oppression** imposed by an indomitable caste structure. And yet he is not a mourner. A war hero of incomparable valour, he **rises** above anguish**;** reconstructs himself into a magnificent death-defying persona and **towers** over all others by virtue of forbearance, generosity and magnanimit**y**.[47]

Finally, *Radheya: The Outcast King of Mahabharata* (Prerana Panth 2024) tells the story of how he "grapples with ridicule, betrayal, and his own identity, Karna **rises repeatedly**, a testament to his unwavering spirit".[48]

Adaptations which focus on female characters are even more numerous (39) and tend to follow similar narrative strategies. Here, as in the novels about Karna, there is a strong emphasis on female characters who face hardships and, as strong and independent individuals, actively resist and overcome them. In *Shakuntala: The Woman Wronged* (Utkarsh Patel 2015), Śakuntala is said to be "a strong, fiery woman who stood up for her rights when she was spurned by her beloved" and

[45] https://www.amazon.in/Five-Seats-Power-Mahabharata-Discovering/dp/9354892310.
[46] https://www.amazon.in/Karna-Unsung-Mahabharata-Umesh-Kotru/dp/9352013042.
[47] https://www.amazon.in/Angaraj-Karna-Indrayani-Sawkar-ebook/dp/B07TF7TF9P.
[48] https://www.amazon.in/Radheya-Outcast-Mahabharata-Prerana-Pant/dp/B0CTXP3W2F.

who did "not surrender to anyone, not even the king of Hastinapur".[49] In *Satyavati* (Utkarsh Patel 2019), Satyavati is a "woman who fought destiny to march to her own drum beats".[50] In *Nala Damayanti: An Eternal Tale from the Mahabharata* (Anand Neelakantan, 2023), Damayantī is a "feisty beauty who has a mind of her own. She is no damsel in distress and has no need for a prince to rescue her".[51] *Chronicles of Kuru Woman: Krishna's Sister* (Priyanka Buyan 2020) is the story of Subhadrā, a "woman who had everything yet who lost everything and rose when everyone gave up".[52] In *The Triumph of Love: The Immortal Romance of Savitri and Satyavan* (Shivdutt Sharma 2015), Sāvitrī is

> a victim of circumstances; unlike them [other female characters of the epic] she does not seek help from without to free herself and her husband from a tragic fate. Once she has decided to marry Satyavan, even with the dire foreknowledge of the catastrophic event, she does not regret or waver from her choice. In fact, she becomes determined to confront and challenge fate and bend it to her indomitable will.[53]

Summaries often present these and other female characters as exceptional, justifying their prominence in the narratives. However, given the recent proliferation of adaptations focusing on nearly all major characters—and the consistent ideal of individuality across them—these supposedly unique traits ultimately appear quite similar. While these desirable qualities are not necessarily new and can be found in the canonical or other versions of the epic, contemporary authors deliberately emphasise them to contrast "true" portrayals of resourceful, proactive women with the "false" or at least misleading passive representations that have long been prevalent in Indian popular culture. Once again, the underlying notion is that a cultural interregnum occurred, and these new retellings are reviving an authentic past.

Due to the perceived power imbalance between genders, besides fighting against an impersonal destiny, most female characters have to fight against patriarchy. In *The Rise of Hastinapur* (Sharrath Komarraju 2015), "circumstances and men conspire against her [Amba]".[54] Although in *Bride of the Forest: The Untold Story of Yayati's Daughter* (Madhavi Mahadevan 2020) Dṛṣadvatī is said to be depicted in popular imagination as a "helpless woman", here she is "a girl who is surprisingly radical in her ultimate rejection of patriarchy".[55]

Draupadi, the main protagonist in 14 of the 38 novels about single female characters, is the most commonly represented female character. Contrary to Karna, a low caste man who later realises he is of royal lineage and is valued for his high caste virtues, Draupadi, like most female characters, is valued for her femininity.

[49] https://www.amazon.in/Shakuntala-Woman-Wronged-Utkarsh-Patel-ebook/dp/B015HDBDCI.
[50] https://www.amazon.in/Satyavati-Utkarsh-Patel/dp/9387809773.
[51] https://www.amazon.com/Nala-Damyanti-Eternal-Tale-Mahabharata-ebook/dp/B0BZT4FZ9L.
[52] https://www.amazon.in/Chronicles-Kuru-Woman-Krishnas-Sister-ebook/dp/B086JTFY7V.
[53] https://www.amazon.in/-/hi/Shivdutt-Sharma/dp/9382742336.
[54] https://www.amazon.in/Rise-Hastinapur-Sharath-Komarraju/dp/9351773760.
[55] https://www.amazon.in/Bride-Forest-Untold-Yayati%C3%A2%E2%82%ACTMs-Daughter/dp/9389958563.

Following the *rise-fall-rise* trope, in *Draupadi* (Saiswaroopa Iyer 2019), Draupadi is said to suffer from "complicated marital relationships, a **meteoric rise** and a **fateful loss**, humiliation unheard of and a pledge of revenge, all culminating in a bloody war (…). Yet she stands up to it all—never succumbing, never breaking" and showing "what a woman is capable of".[56] The choice of Draupadi as a literary heroine is also understandable in light of patriarchy and resistance to it, given that she is arguably the central female character of the canonical *Mahābhārata* and is often manipulated and humiliated by the main male characters. In *Draupadi: India's First Daughter*, Vamshi Krishna (2020), a male author, writes that he felt himself "drowning in shame as a man" due to popular descriptions of Draupadi, that being the reason why he decided to represent her as a woman who "strongly believed in avenging those lecherous men for the humiliation she was meted out".[57] Finally, there is a strong tendency to portray Draupadi in modern roles, reinforcing a sense of cultural continuity between contemporary India and its deep pre-modern past. In *The Empress of Indraprastha: Entering Kuruvansh* (Sonali Raje 2023), it is thanks to her mother's education that Draupadi becomes a "strong character (…) a proponent of human rights and a shrewd politician".[58] In *Empress of Indraprastha: Building an Empire* (Sonali Raje, 2023), the sequel to the previous novel, these political, humanitarian and other traits (ecological) are materialised into invitations to the reader and are contrasted with less ideal actions by male characters:

> Follow Draupadi in action, as she devises and implements financial strategies to jumpstart the economy. Tread delicate waters as Draupadi seeks answers from her husbands for causing the death of a Bhil [tribal] woman and her five sons to save their own skins in the Vaarnavat fire. Watch her probe Krishna for justification about his role in the destruction of an indigenous asura habitat [a forest], simply to satiate Agni's hunger. Plunge into the depths of her marriage with Arjun, that hits its nadir when she criticizes him for not protecting Eklavya [an outcaste].[59]

The figure of the charismatic leader who overcomes adversity and inspires their group is evident not only in the way authors portray themselves but also in their depictions of mythic male and female protagonists, thereby conflating themselves with these figures. Indeed, the *Mahābhārata* has been recreated as a guide to fields such as popular psychology, self-help, spirituality, leadership and business. As Carrette and King (2005) say, in neoliberal contexts, these fields are often interrelated. In *Lessons from the Mahabharat*, Pranay (2022), the author who represents himself as a "mystic philosopher" who creates advanced courses on leadership, writes that he uses the epic to teach the reader how "to live with excellence, deal with life's vagaries, and yet not lose the essence of who you are".[60] Many of these guides adopt

[56] https://www.amazon.in/Draupadi-Saiswaroopa-Iyer/dp/9353333156.
[57] https://www.amazon.in/Draupadi-Indias-Daughter-Vamshi-Krishna/dp/9387131556.
[58] https://www.amazon.in/EMPRESS-INDRAPRASTHA-Entering-Kuruvansh/dp/9393757232.
[59] https://www.amazon.in/Empress-Indraprastha-Part-Building-Empire/dp/9395481269.
[60] https://www.amazon.in/Lessons-Mahabharat-Greatest-Spiritual-Wisdom/dp/9354400787.

fictional narratives. *Leadership Dharma: Arjuna The Timeless Metaphor* (Raghu Ananthnarayan 2016), which states that the epic is a "profound source for understanding (…) the dilemma's of Leadership", tells the story of an entrepreneur who uses the epic in order to renovate his stagnated company.[61] Nonfiction guides also appear under the same leadership discourse. *Demystifying Leadership: Unveiling the Mahabharata Code* (Asha Kaul and Vishal Gupta 2021) is said to be directed towards "leaders and managers"[62] and *The Dharma of a Leader: Executive Management and Ethical Leadership Secrets Derived from India's Epic, the Mahabharata* (Zubin d'Souza 2021) is written "as if the Mahabharata were originally written to be read as a leadership manual".[63] *Five Seats of Power: Leadership Insights from the Mahabharata: Discovering the Best You Can Be through the Mahabharata* (Raghu Ananthanarayanan 2022) teaches the reader how to achieve "behavioural transformation (…) that, in turn, will ignite an individual's natural genius" and contains interviews with business leaders who exemplify the teachings derived from actions by epic characters.[64] Finally, doing away with psychology and spirituality altogether, *Money and the Mahabharata* (Govinda Das 2020) mostly teaches readers how to get rich.[65] While the *Mahābhārata* offers extensive insights into *Artha*, wealth and power, as well as into the other *puruṣārthas*, the discursive choices of these authors reveal a greater focus on constructing a seamless continuity between India's past and present rather than engaging with the historical nuances of how these concepts were understood in their time. In this sense, these works are not entirely novel but align with a broader transnational trend of reinterpreting classical texts, such as Sunzi's *Art of War*, in an ahistorical and universalising manner. However, as the next section explores, history remains a central concern for many Indian mythological fiction writers.

Myth or History?

As the *Mahābhārata* is regarded by many authors of contemporary adaptations as a historical work, the epic assumes a prominent role in historical revisionism, a discursive strategy which is often associated with the *Hindutva* ideology. An historicising tendency is evident in some of the tropes I have analysed, such as the focus on first-person realistic and emotive accounts and in the *rise-fall-rise* narrative, which mirrors colonial and contemporary representations of Indian history. In India, the *Mahābhārata* is usually regarded as the foremost representative of *itihāsa*. This Sanskrit term, which is often literally translated as "thus it happened", mixes what in contemporary academia would be regarded as "real" historical discourses

[61] https://p-nt-www-amazon-in-kalias.amazon.in/Leadership-Dharma-Arjuna-Timeless-Metaphor-ebook/dp/B01MT2TEOA.

[62] https://www.amazon.in/Demystifying-Leadership-Unveiling-Mahabharata-Code-ebook/dp/B095RFN1XC.

[63] https://www.amazon.in/Dharma-Leader-Management-Leadership-Mahabharata/dp/1936411717.

[64] https://www.amazon.in/Five-Seats-Power-Mahabharata-Discovering/dp/9354892310.

[65] https://www.amazon.in/MONEY-MAHABHARATA-Govinda-Das-ebook/dp/B08N6ZV39M.

and "hypothetical", fictional ones with an added emphasis on moralising (Ghosh, 2007). This duality is clear, for instance, in the questioning strategy, with *wh-* questions apparently pointing to reality and *what-if* to potentiality. As Truschke (2021) remarks, the idea that colonial nations did not have a historical tradition is an Orientalist stereotype which has survived into postcolonial times. The author argues, the same could be said about the West, which also lacked a modern historical tradition before the meaning and methods of the discipline were fixed in modern times (7). One could also argue that there have been previous Western attempts at protohistory. However, if one is to accept such cultural continuity for the Western case, why should similar arguments for the continuity of previously colonised cultures be regarded as fabrications? With this discursive hierarchical disparity in mind, Truschke states that, if we broaden the scope of "history" to include narratives which refer to historical events, then not only pre-modern Europe but also colonial nations had historical traditions. However, Truschke also asserts that this does not grant jingoistic proponents of alternative histories the license to arbitrarily impose their agendas on historical analysis or to selectively cherry-pick or falsify evidence, practices that have become increasingly common in contemporary mediascapes. This is a particularly contentious point given that many authors of contemporary adaptations of the *Mahābhārata* who write about Indian history and culture follow such jingoistic discourses and adopt the same strategy. In other words, they blame their ideological opponents for cherry-picking and/or falsifying evidence so that it fits agendas whose aim is to destroy "the grand narrative of India". It is therefore evident that authors make considerable efforts to legitimise or even to transform collective memory, in which mythology holds a preeminent role, into tangible history.

Harshwardhan (2020) begins the summary of *The Genius of Indraprastha* by asking "Is the rich Aryan past a myth or history? If it is history, what happened to the rich technological heritage of the Mahabharata times"?[66] While the first question seems to leave room for doubt, the second one already presupposes the answer. Other adaptations concerned with the debate on historicity tend to be less ambivalent. In *Mahabharata: Dice Game and Exile*, Eric Alagan (2023) says he "renders myths and legends into believable history because recent discoveries arguably prove that Mahabharata is based on true events", that being the reason why this "novel will leave you wondering where fiction stops and antiquity starts".[67] In *Break Your Leadership Chakravyuh: Stories and Learnings from Indian Mythology*, Nanda Mehak Mahajan (2020) mentions "Ancient Indian history, popularly known as Indian Mythology" and, therefore, implies that there is no ontological distinction between these fields.[68] In *Mahabharata—Myth or History?*, Chandru Ramesh (2023) is more abstract when stating that he delves "into unexpected quarters to find evidence of the existence of the great Indian epic, inspired by those who dismiss it as mere myth". While the referent of the pronoun *those* is not specified, it seems to stereotypically point to foreign scholars and left-wing Indians, the ones who are

[66] https://www.amazon.in/Genius-Indraprastha-Gondwana-Chronicles-Book/dp/B08R7QF2XY.
[67] https://www.amazon.in/Mahabharata-Dice-Game-Exile-2/dp/B0CCSZPNXN.
[68] https://www.amazon.in/Break-Your-Leadership-Chakravyuh-Learnings/dp/1646786998.

most often criticised in right-wing circles for questioning the historicity of the epics. Interestingly, one could argue that the distinction between history and mythology is a relatively recent development and that dissolving this boundary could serve as a means of decolonising Indian knowledge. However, unlike the authors and works previously discussed, which often rely on astronomical evidence, Ramesh claims to have collected more palpable evidence "from various fields, including archaeology, epigraphy, numismatics, petroglyphs, sculptures, and more".[69] These discrete, modern disciplines, rather than undermining his argument, actively reinforce its legitimacy; hence, they are not discarded but embraced.

One also finds the statement that, more than historical, the *Mahābhārata* is contemporary or even "timeless" in its relationship with collective memory. Pranay (2022) writes in *Lessons from the Mahabharat* that the epic's "life lessons are universal, relevant for every era".[70] In *Decoding the Metaphor Mahabharata*, Diwaker Ikshit Srivastava (2017) states that it is "as relevant today as it was back then. And more needed today, than ever before".[71] These words are repeated almost verbatim in *Mahabharata Unravelled—II: The Dharma Discourses* (Ami Ganatra 2024), which states that the epic's "teachings hold true even in current times, perhaps more so than ever".[72] Such descriptions go beyond the previous one, given that they describe the epic, not as a work of the past which is still relevant, but as a contemporary narrative which happened to be created in the deep past. However, it is never explained why the *Mahābhārata*, which has had great cultural impact for centuries, is more relevant now than it had ever been. This probably constitutes another common marketing technique to make potential readers believe that they are reading something unique and timely.

Given that contemporary adaptations regard the *Mahābhārata* as a historical narrative which morphs the mythic India of the past into the neoliberal India of the present, it is clear that, according to these discourses, ancient India was already advanced in every sense, be it social or technological. In *When Did The Mahabharata War Happen*, Nilesh Oak (2011) writes that astronomical observations of the epic "compel us to search for the likes of Newton and Lagrange, among the Sages of India, at least thousand years before Sir Isaac Newton & Joseph-Louis Lagrange".[73] Again, it is not by chance that this and other authors choose Western examples, given that this exemplifies the paradigm of Western scientific innovation that they have set out to overthrow.

Given the antiquity of the *Mahābhārata*, the fact that its canonical version is vast and written in an archaic language (Sanskrit), as well as the fact that ideas of secrecy and innovation are common in marketing, the epic is often referred to, not as a story with several philosophical digressions, but as an esoteric work which contains lost secrets and arcane codes. These codes, in turn, hide holistic information

[69] https://www.amazon.in/Mahabharata-History-English-Chandru-Ramesh/dp/8195892507.
[70] https://www.amazon.in/Lessons-Mahabharat-Greatest-Spiritual-Wisdom-ebook/dp/B0C6W3PMYP.
[71] https://www.amazon.in/Decoding-Metaphor-Mahabharata-Diwaker-Srivastava/dp/9352010000.
[72] https://www.amazon.in/Mahabharata-Unravelled-II-Dharma-Discourses-ebook/dp/B0CTFMD1CQ.
[73] https://www.amazon.in/When-Did-Mahabharata-War-Happen/dp/0983034400.

about space and time that can finally come to light again in neoliberal India. *Decoding the Metaphor Mahabharata* (Diwaker Ikshit Srivastava 2017) states that Indians only know the outer veil of the epic, while everything in it (names, places, episodes) is a lost and forgotten metaphor hidden behind that veil which, implicitly, this specific book unveils. The same idea is also clear in titles such as *The Mahabharata Code: Yet another retelling of the Mahabharata, or is it?* (Karthik K. B. Rao 2016), *Decoding the Metaphor Mahabharata* (Diwaker Ikshit Srivastava 2017), *The Rigveda Code* (Rashmi Chendvankar 2017),[74] *Demystifying Leadership: Unveiling the Mahabharata Code* (Asha Kaul and Vishal Gupta 2021), and the two volumes of *Mahabharata Unravelled* (Ami Ganatra 2021; 2024). In narrative, where fiction and nonfiction often blend, this type of discourse was popularised by the pioneering thriller *The Da Vinci Code* (Dan Brown 2003) and fuelled by the rise of digital media, which has amplified interest in historical mysteries and global conspiracies. The fact that the *Mahābhārata* is often defined as a "code" may also be appealing to readers, who may associate this term with the codes (programming languages) that many Indian writers and readers use in their daily work, as well as with Sanskrit, which is often represented as a logical and scientific code and as a genetic ancestor of contemporary programming languages (Bennett, 2017, 190).

The author who stands out most clearly as exemplifying this pseudo-esoteric tendency is Christopher C. Doyle, who has published several works of fiction similar in style and content to Dan Brown's thrillers, although adapted to the Indian world, given that they deal with conspiracy theories and the *Mahābhārata* and are marketed as mixtures of Indian mythology, history and science. His works include *The Mahabharata Secret* (2013), *The Mahabharata Quest: The Alexander Secret* (2014), *The Mahabharata Quest: The Secret Of The Druids* (2016), *A Secret Revealed* (2016), and *The Mahabharata Quest: The Khandavaprastha Conspiracy* (2022). One notices the pleonastic emphasis on a "secret" that has remained hidden due to a "conspiracy". This secret compels characters to start a "quest" to "reveal" it. The insistence on themes such as *secret*, *enigma* and *riddle*, words which frequently appear in the summaries of Doyle's works, is evident in the summary of *The Mahabharata Quest: The Alexander Secret* (2014), announced as a novel about a "**secret** quest" which leads Alexander "to an ancient **secret** concealed in the myths of the Mahabharata; a **secret** that is powerful enough to transform him into a god". The characters "encounter shocking **secrets** from the past; **secrets** that will reveal mystifying links between ancient history [and] the Mahabharata".[75]

Following the common *rise-fall-rise* narrative, these thrillers create a literary universe where the previous Golden Age has been lost or forgotten and should be rediscovered or revived. This means that present or future success implies a return to the roots. As often happens in this kind of speculative fiction, there are usually two different temporal narrative lines, one in the ancient past and another in the present, when a character unravels the *secret* and finds the lost or forgotten connection

[74] Despite the title, this adaptation takes place during the aftermath of the *Mahābhārata*, and is thus influenced by its universe.

[75] https://www.amazon.in/Alexander-Secret-Mahabharata-Quest-Book/dp/9395767251/.

between past and present. Such ideas of *lost* and *forgotten* are clear in titles such as *The accursed God: the lost epic* (Vivek Dutta Mishra 2020) or *The Forgotten Wife: The Story of Hidimbi and Bheem* (Madhavi Mahadevan 2023), as well as in the many novels that claim to be about *untold* or *unsung* characters: *Karna The Unsung Hero of the Mahabharata* (Umesh Kotru and Ashutosh Zutshi 2015), *Vikarna: One of the Unsung Heroes of the Mahabharatha* (S. A. Krishnan 2017), *Unsung valour: Forgotten Warriors of the Kurukshetra War* (several authors 2020), *Suryaputra Karna: The Untold Story of a great warrior* (Dibyanshu Kumar 2020), *Bride of the Forest: The Untold Story of Yayati's Daughter* (Madhavi Mahadevan 2020), *Untold Tales from the Mahabharata* (Uday Shankar 2021), *Trihayani: The Untold Story of Draupadi* (Rupande Mehta 2022), and *Untold Stories from the Mahabharata* (Aditya J. 2024). Whereas the representation of a present in which the lost/forgotten past is rediscovered is already implicit in the previous titles, it is made more explicit in others such as *Mahabharata Unravelled* (Ami Ganatra 2021, 2024) and *Draupadi Demystified: Facts Of Mahabharat* (Mahendra Arya 2022).

The idea of something that has never been said or contradicts everything that has been said before is common in the summaries and, at times, in the titles of the adaptations. *Duryodhana* (V. Raghunathan 2014) claims to offer "for the first time (…) a different meaning into episodes we may be familiar with".[76] *The Thirteenth Day* and *A Broken Sun* (Aditya Iyengar 2015; 2018) "re-imagines India's greatest epic like never before".[77] The same expression is used in relation to Draupadi in *Trihayani: The Untold Story of Draupadi* (Rupande Mehta 2022).[78] Almost ten years after Raghunathan's work, Deepak M. R. (2023) still writes that his *Fall of the Patriarch* series on the epic is "unique and first of its kind".[79]

Besides marketing motivations, most authors claim innovation because they consider that past interpretations of the *Mahābhārata* have been wrong and that their interpretation, which is said to be grounded in the canonical *Mahābhārata*, will correct past mistakes and reinstate the truth. It is clear that, in this discourse, the great conspiracy consists in the corruption of Indian history and culture perpetrated by British imperialists and mimicked by the Westernised Indian middle class which emerged during the anticolonial and postcolonial periods. By contrast, by being freed from foreign shackles and being deeply involved with their native culture, contemporary neoliberal authors regard themselves as qualified to present the "true" *Mahābhārata*. As noted in bold, the following chronologically organised examples make use of a profusion of polarising positive terms and their negative counterparts with the aim of legitimising the truth of the canonical *Mahābhārata* and the one being advertised, as well as of dethroning the false versions which came in-between. In his biographical note, Vivek Dutta Mishra, who calls himself a Storian, an epithet which mixes the concept of *storyteller* and *historian*, claims to unravel "the **interpolations** that have **distorted** this ancient epic [the *Mahābhārata*]" and to aim

[76] https://www.amazon.in/Duryodhana-V-Raghunathan/dp/9351363309.
[77] https://www.amazon.in/gp/product/B016APQK3E.
[78] https://www.amazon.in/Trihayani-Untold-Draupadi-Rupande-Mehta-ebook/dp/B09T77W319.
[79] https://www.amazon.in/stores/Deepak-M-R/author/B096HB92M7.

"to **restore** its **true essence**, relying on **authentic** references from antiquity".[80] *I, Duryodhana* (Pradeep Govind 2019) states that "**truth** is frail and often vulnerable to **distortion** as **history** tends to favour the victors".[81] *The Real Side: an authoritative look at the most controversial episodes of Ramayana & Mahabharata* (Govinda Das 2017) vows to "revisit the treasure that Valmiki & Vyasadeva gave by astutely analysing and broadcasting the futility of **new-age opinions** and **speculations** that have regrettably eclipsed the **true essence** of their legacy".[82] In *The Accursed God: The Lost Epic* (2020), Mishra adds that the epic was continuously readapted through "millennia of dust, **fables**, **imaginations**", while "the epic itself is **lost**".[83] In her biographical note, Ami Ganatra writes that her works on the epic "are not **retellings** or **imaginations**, but an attempt to go back to the **original** itihasa and present the story, learnings and nuances for what they are".[84] Ganatra's (2021) *Mahabharata Unravelled: Lesser-Known Facets of a Well-Known History* is said to "**debunks myths**, quashes **popular notions** and offers insights into such aspects not commonly known or **erroneously** known, based solely on **facts** as narrated in Vyasa's Mahabharata from generally **accepted authentic** sources", given that "for a history of such prominence and influence as the Mahabharata, it is important to get the story **right**".[85] Finally, in a sensationalist tone, *Draupadi Demystified: Facts Of Mahabharat* (Mahendra Arya 2022) exclaims: "Mythology does not mean **created myths**! The present form of Mahabharat has been **inflated** by more than thirty times compared to what was written **originally** by Maharshi Ved Vyas! This book **clears up** a lot of mysteries about Draupadi and Mahabharat!".[86]

It seems paradoxical that most authors claim to be doing something entirely new and to reveal the "secrets" of the canonical *Mahābhārata* without beginning by encouraging readers to read the canonical text instead of reading their adaptations. This strategy enables them to claim a common ancient cultural basis for their works while dressing them in a contemporary, globalised garb, as well as to claim the novelty constantly required by the capitalist market. One could adapt Homi Bhabha's (1994, 86) well-known phrase defining the ambivalent postcolonial subject and conclude that, by claiming to be entirely innovative, different from other recent adaptations and closer to the canonical version, neoliberal *Mahābhāratas* are "almost different, but not quite". Despite constant claims to innovation, most versions ultimately follow similar discursive and narrative strategies aligned with neoliberal ideals.

[80] https://www.amazon.in/stores/Vivek-Dutta-Mishra/author/B085VVV97P.
[81] https://www.amazon.in/I-Duryodhana-Pradeep-Govind/dp/9352766199/.
[82] https://www.amazon.com/Real-Side-authoratative-controversial-Mahabharata-ebook/dp/B071DQ2J97.
[83] https://www.amazon.in/Accursed-God-Lost-Epic-Book-ebook/dp/B082RGH4JD/.
[84] https://www.amazon.in/stores/Ami-Ganatra/author/B098PR56F6.
[85] https://www.amazon.in/Bloomsbury-Mahabharata-Unravelled-Lesser-Known-Well-Known/dp/9354351271.
[86] https://www.amazon.in/Draupadi-Demystified-Mahabharat-Mahendra-Arya/dp/B0BPMZHF3P/.

Concluding Remarks

The analysis I have made of biographical notes of authors who have published adaptations of the *Mahābhārata* and of the summaries of their adaptations reveals that, despite the fact that authors often resort to marketing skills to define their products as innovative, most follow recognisable cultural discourses. The majority are members of the middle class who were young or not yet born when neoliberal policies were first introduced. Through their works, they often convey the political and cultural mores associated with this economic reform. They often blame the traditional middle class for being excessively Westernised and claim that, by being unaware of "pure" Indian culture, they collaborated with the previous colonisers in its bastardisation. The new middle class, which adopts a materialistic and self-aggrandising posture towards reality, is bent on reclaiming control of these discourses and, through what they regard as objective historical and scientific evidence, on showing that the "pure" pre-modern India of the *Mahābhārata* universe was already a sociocultural reflection on contemporary India and not merely a "myth". Talented individuals could rise above their destinies, surpass social limitations such as caste or patriarchy, and attain great success and fulfilment. Indian youngsters, who constitute the target audience of these adaptations, are mostly supposed to grow up in an intellectual atmosphere purged of independent academic and Indian left-wing discourses, which are accused of being "infected" by either the psychological remnants of colonialism or by a new neocolonial mindset. Instead, youngsters are encouraged to follow what are regarded as authentic Indian values, which, rather than being archaic or oppressive as they were in stereotypical Orientalist discourses, coincide with contemporary neoliberal ideals. This happens despite the paradox that neoliberalism itself can be seen as a form of transnational economic neocolonialism.

Funding Open access funding provided by FCT|FCCN (b-on). This research was funded with a PhD scholarship (CECC_BD2022/00126/003) by FCT (Foundation for Science and Technology, Portugal) and CECC (Research Centre for Communication and Culture).

Declarations

Ethics Approval This study did not require ethics approval.

Consent to Participate This study did not require the participation of any human subjects.

Consent for Publication This study did not require the participation of any human subjects.

Competing Interests The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

References

Abramovitz, M. (2012). Theorising the neoliberal welfare state for social work. In M. Gray, J. Midgley, & S. Webb (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of social work*. SAGE Publications.
Bennett, B. P. (2017). *Sacred languages of the world: An introduction*. John Wiley & Sons.
Bhabha, H. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
Binkley, S. (2011). Happiness, positive psychology and the program of neoliberal governmentality. *Subjectivity, 4*(4), 371–392.
Brockington, J., Brockington, M., & Bose, M. (Eds.). (2016). *The other Rāmāyana women: Regional rejection and response*. Routledge.
Carrette, J., & King, R. (2005). *Selling spirituality: The silent takeover of religion*. Routledge.
Clarke, P. (2006). *New religions in global perspective*. Routledge.
Das, G. (2000). *India unbound*. Penguin Books India.
Das, G. (2009). *The difficulty of being good: On the subtle art of dharma*. Oxford University Press.
Dharwadker, V. (2012). Guest column: Censoring the *Rāmāyaṇa*. *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America, 127*(3), 433–450.
Dhawan, N. B. (2010). The married "new Indian woman": Hegemonic aspirations in new middle-class politics? *South African Review of Sociology, 41*(3), 45–60.
Divakaruni, C. B. (2008). *The palace of illusions: A novel*. Doubleday.
Divakaruni, C. B. (2019). *The forest of enchantments*. HarperCollins India.
Fernandes, L. (2006). *India's new middle class: Democratic politics in an era of economic reform*. University of Minnesota Press.
Ghosh, R. (2007). India, *Itihasa,* and inter-historiographical discourse. *History and Theory, 46*, 210–217.
Guichard, S. (2010). *The construction of history and nationalism in India: Textbooks, controversies, politics*. Routledge.
Gupta, S. (2012). Indian "commercial" fiction in English, the publishing industry, and youth culture. *Economic and Political Weekly, 46*(5), 46–53.
Hawley, N. S., & Pillai, S. S. (Eds.). (2021). *Many Mahābhāratas*. State University of New York Press.
Hegarty, J. (2013). *Religion, narrative, and public imagination in South Asia: Past and place in the Sanskrit Mahabharata*. Routledge.
Inden, R. B. (2001). *Imagining India*. Indiana University Press. Original work published 1990.
Jaffrelot, C. (2021). *Modi's India: Hindu nationalism and the rise of ethnic democracy*. Princeton University Press.
Jaising, S. (2023). *Beyond alterity: Contemporary Indian fiction and the neoliberal script*. Liverpool University Press.
Kanjilal, S. (2017). *Modern mythologies: The epic imagination in contemporary Indian literature* [Doctoral dissertation, University of South Florida].
King, R. (1999). *Orientalism and religion: Post-colonial theory, India, and "The mythic East."* Routledge.
Kurien, P. A. (2007). *A place at the multicultural table: The development of an American Hinduism*. Rutgers University Press.
Lothspeich, P. (2009). *Epic nation: Reimagining the Mahabharata in the age of empire*. Oxford University Press.
Luthra, R. (2014). Clearing sacred ground: Women-centered interpretations of the Indian epics. *Feminist Formations, 26*(2), 135–161.
Malhotra, R. (2013). *Being different: An Indian challenge to Western universalism*. HarperCollins.
McGrath, K. (2004). *The Sanskrit hero: Karna in the epic Mahābhārata*. Brill.
Mill, J. (2010). *The history of British India* (Vols. 1–3). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1818–1823).
Mohanty, C. T. (1984). Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Boundary 2, 12*(3), 333–358.
Pattanaik, D. (2010). *Jaya: An illustrated retelling of the Mahabharata*. Penguin Random House.

Pollock, S. (1993). *Rāmāyana* and political imagination in India. *The Journal of Asian Studies, 52*(2), 261–297.
Pollock, S. (2006). *The language of the gods in the world of men: Sanskrit, culture, and power in premodern India*. University of California Press.
Rajagopal, A. (2001). *Politics after television: Religious nationalism and the reshaping of the Indian public*. Cambridge University Press.
Richman, P. (Ed.). (1991). *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The diversity of a narrative tradition in South Asia*. University of California Press.
Sajjanhar, A. (2024). *The new experts: Populist elites and technocratic promises in Modi's India*. Cambridge University Press.
Sen, A. (2005). *The argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian history, culture and identity*. Farrar.
Shani, G., & Kibe, T. (2019). Introduction: Legacies and possibilities. In G. Shani & T. Kibe (Eds.), *Religion and nationalism in Asia.* Routledge.
Sharma, V., & Newar, S. (2018). *A liberal's (F)LAWS: Hypocrisies that feed terrorism*. Rashtra Jyoti.
Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture.* University of Illinois Press.
Tejani, S. (2011). *Indian secularism: A social and intellectual history, 1890–1950*. Orient Blackswan.
Tharoor, S. (1989). *The great Indian novel*. Penguin Books.
Truschke, A. (2021). *The language of history: Sanskrit narratives of Indo-Muslim rule*. Columbia University Press.
Van der Veer, P. (1994). *Religious nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India*. University of California Press.
Van der Veer, P. (2001). *Imperial encounters: Religion and modernity in India and Britain*. Princeton University Press.
Varughese, E. D. (2017). Post-millennial "Indian fantasy" fiction in English and the question of mythology: Writing beyond the "usual suspects." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature, 54*(3), 460–474.
Zelizer, B. (1995). Reading the past against the grain: The shape of memory studies. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication, 12*(2), 214–239.