

## The Larger-than-life-hero: Arjun in Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Arjun* (1971)

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### Abstract

This paper explores the legacy of Arjuna in the Bengali novel *Arjun*. To describe the events of Arjun's life, the author Sunil Gangopadhyay cleverly employs myth of Arjuna found in the *Mahabharata*. When Arjun had to face his own people, he had several concerns similar to the incidents in the epic. The concept of subalternity as a postcolonial concept is also obvious here. The families are victims of British rule's political ramifications. They are compelled to accept their fate and not voice their dissatisfaction. They have been stripped of their identities and denied access to any form of power. As a result, an episode from the Mahabharata becomes relevant in the context of India-Pakistan partition and the twentieth-century struggle for existence.

**Keywords:** Partition, Subaltern, Myth, Subjugation, Kinship

### INTRODUCTION

The legacy of Arjuna is explored extensively in the Bengali novel *Arjun* written by Sunil Gangopadhyay. As the title suggests, the myth considered here is that of Arjuna taken from the *Mahabharata*. The novel is in twelve sections of which the first section alone is the authorial narration wherein he introduces all his characters. The other sections are narrated from the protagonist Arjun's point of view. Arjun Raychoudhury, the main character in the novel, faces the dilemma of whether he really needs to fight his own people; similar to Arjuna's plight in the *Mahabharata*. Several incidents lead to this situation in the novel. In the first section itself, we come to know that some unknown assailants had injured Arjun in the head with a crowbar. His neighbour Labonya had discovered him lying unconscious in his room. She at once raised an alarm and he was immediately taken to a hospital. Arjun survived the attack. His doctor and his friends constantly asked him questions about himself only to check if he had not lost his memory. He was fine and through his memories, the author acquaints the readers with his past. One of the major incidents of his past related to the India-Pakistan partition, which brought several families as refugees to India; Arjun's family was one among them.

Soon after the partition, the story revolves around Arjun who lost his father and is forced to move across the borders to India and settle down in Bengal. Later, he lost his insane brother too. His own childhood was a deprived one. His much-loved Navy Uncle had brought him gifts from Germany when he once met Arjun and that red and blue pencil and silver harmonica were his prized possessions. However, he lost both in school when some boys fought with him and forced him to part with his favourite gifts. He could never forget this incident in his life. He was too young to acquire survival instincts. However, he did not lose hope, he studied well and took his Master's degree in Science and pursued research in Sciences, thanks to his professor Abanish. He also received a monthly scholarship with which he bought a sewing machine for his mother so that she could earn money as a seamstress.

## **THE USE OF MYTH**

The author cleverly makes use of myth to describe the happenings in Arjun's life. Their exodus from Pakistan to India is similar to the one the Pandavas had to suffer due to their wicked cousins. Arjun's family too went through several struggles in their life. The first one was the death of Arjun's father due to apoplexy; soon after, their house was burnt down; then several families were forced to leave Pakistan. He remembers:

I left my country at the age of eleven. Yes, my country. I cannot remember the time of partition very well. But my earliest memories do go back to an awareness of belonging to Pakistan. My father's generation spent time lamenting the glories of the past. (Gangopadhyay 33)

They did not even get a proper place to settle down until they had come to the suburb of Dum Dum. It was here that Biraj Thakur provided them with property. They settled down in this place and named it 'Deshpran Colony', that is, the colony of patriots. Here, Arjun and his mother had to struggle a lot for their survival. Arjun recounts: "It is hard enough to forget the sorrow of forcible eviction and not being able to return. Over and above, there is another sorrow, that of having been treated like beggars and destitutes here. No one showed us any kinship, any closeness" (Gangopadhyay 103).

## **THE SUBALTERN**

The postcolonial concept of subaltern is evident here. The families are a victim of the political implications of the British rule. They are forced to accept their fate and not complain. They have been subjugated to the position of the marginalized. They have lost their identities and they are denied access to any kind of power. The dismembering of identities at the wake of the India-Pakistan partition is evident here. Arjun's childhood memories only give him the picture of being deprived, he lost his prized possessions of the pencil and the harmonica, and he also says that along with those he "lost the red and blue and silver dreams" of his childhood (Gangopadhyay 40). However, with limited opportunities at hand, Arjun and the rest were keen on improving their condition on their own. He was keen on pursuing his studies and completing his thesis. Everything moved on smoothly until Kewal Singh came to this colony, wanted to establish a factory, and promised to provide employment opportunities for the people of the colony. He, in fact, started a factory; however, later, he wanted to acquire an extra piece of land to expand his factory. This meant that five families would lose their homes. Grandfather Nishi, the elderly one in the colony, immediately called a meeting so that they could discuss this matter. It was in this meeting that Dibya, the strongest one in the village in terms of physical courage, voiced his allegiance to Kewal Singh. Grandfather Nishi could be equated to the Great Bhishma of the *Mahabharata*, the elder in the community whose opinions are usually adhered to. However, he too is helpless in the face of the new troubles that had brewed within the community, similar to Bhishma's plight in the *Mahabharata* who is not able to stop the growing enmity between the Pandavas and the Kauravas and thus stop the Great War. The war could have been easily averted by him, but the Gods had other plans. Similarly, here, Grandfather Nishi could have easily stopped the battle

between Arjun's faction and Dibya's faction by advising them in the right way. However, the might was in the hands of the young men, not in the hands of the old.

Dibya is a reflection of Duryodhana, the eldest son of the Kaurava family in the *Mahabharata*. The mythical events take the same course in this novel in the life of Arjun. Though Dibya and Arjun grew up together in the same circumstances, and studied in the same school, Arjun came up in studies and Dibya was a failure. Arjun was doing his research and he would have a good job for himself soon, but Dibya is jobless and this was reason enough for him to bear a grudge towards Arjun. This resentment increased in magnitude during this meeting. Arjun tried to make Dibya understand the plight of those five families who have to be evicted, but in vain. It was like a war between Dibya and his party, very obstinate revolutionists, and Arjun and his party, calm and reasonable communists. Thus, the unity among the members of the colony had been destroyed. Arjun tried his best to bring about an amicable solution to this problem by approaching Mr. Chakrabarty of the Refugee Rehabilitation Department, but in vain, because the property did not belong to those five families legally. One could solve such property-based issues only by taking it to the court. However, Arjun was aware of the procedures of the court; the case would not be solved in the next four or five years.

Meanwhile, Shantilata, Arjun's mother, (who could be equated to Kunti of the *Mahabharata*) who was very worried over the state of affairs in Deshpuran Colony, especially, the war of words that ensued between Arjun and Dibya, tried to talk to Dibya and solve the differences between them. She pleaded,

Please listen to me, Dibya. Arjun is like your younger brother. Don't you remember how you used to play together as children? Aren't you supposed to look after him in times of trouble? (Gangopadhyay 186)

But Dibya, the obstinate one, only advised Shantilata to move out of the colony along with Arjun to some other place to avoid any conflict. Therefore, realizing that her son is in danger, she tells him to search for a new house in the city. When all these incidents were happening, another disaster struck the colony. The five houses of those families that were supposed to be evicted were burnt down. There may be a parallel here to the burning of the wax house in which the Pandavas were lodged. Immediately after this disaster, Kewal Singh built a wall to protect the area. This increased Arjun's fury and he called all his friends; they marched towards the factory to break the newly built wall. However when they got there, Arjun found his own people on the other side and was overcome by sorrow: "No, let it be [...] Let's just go back [...] shall we fight our own people?" (Gangopadhyay 193). This was exactly the same plight that befell Arjuna in the *Mahabharata* when he was in the battlefield and he found his own people on the other side. Arjuna did not like, "the idea of fighting his way to a kingdom through the blood of his kindred, and declared that he would rather be killed himself than continue to fight them" (Garrett 73). Krishna advised Arjuna that he belonged to the military caste and that his duty was to fight. Krishna also convinced Arjuna that he was sent to the earth to perform certain duties and he should not refrain from them. This instills courage in Arjuna and he fights bravely from then onwards to bring victory to the Pandavas.

Similarly, in this novel, when Arjun had to confront his own people, doubts arose in his mind. He remembered how they used to play together in the colony as children. They even would have their food together on so many occasions. For Arjun, it was better to beg

for alms for the rest of his life than kill his own people: “Doubt paralyzed Arjun with a trembling helplessness” (Gangopadhyay 194). However, when his friend Kartik was hurling abuses in return to his opponent’s abuses, they threw a brick, which narrowly missed Arjun and hit his dog Becharam on the head. The dog lay writhing on the ground. This was the turning point for Arjun. All doubts left him and he geared up to match his opponents. The fight went on and they won. Kewal Singh was literally thrown out of their community. The government too came to their rescue by giving everyone registered deeds of ownership to the land within that particular month.

The author, thus, successfully projects the predicament that the *Mahabharata*’s Arjuna faced when he met the Kauravas on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, upon his character Arjun in the novel. However, in the *Mahabharata* it was Krishna who advised Arjuna about his duty as a warrior and Arjuna realizes that he should sacrifice his personal feelings of attachment and fight to the best of his ability for a noble cause; thus the war, and in the end, victory for Arjuna; a victory for righteousness and justice. Here, in this novel, Arjun’s will to face challenges sags for a minute and then, when he sees his pet dog Becharam being killed by Dibya and his friends, Arjun musters courage, “[...] is roused to become the fearless, rage-filled, larger-than-life hero who will fight, and fight to win” in the words of the translator Chitrita Banerji-Abdullah (Gangopadhyay 10). The novel, however, ends in a psychological assertion that Arjun makes throughout the novel: “I will survive. Yes, certainly, I shall” (Gangopadhyay 204).

## LABONYA

The character of Labonya is also quite important in the novel. She is representative of those women who would not simply accept their fate to be written by the men of their society. Labonya is a beautiful girl and an unwilling prey to the hungry eyes of several men of her colony. She was very interested in studying and she would go to Arjun’s house often to seek his help in her studies. This was not liked by one of the boys of her colony, Sukhen, who was very intent on marrying her. He brings her by force to Dibya whom he requests to try and make her accept his proposal. But matters got ugly in that meeting; she angers Dibya and she was injured in the neck when Dibya forced himself on her. She tried to run away; but Dibya was not ready to let her go. She lay still “like an injured animal” (Gangopadhyay 170). Sukhen was completely shattered at the turn of events and sincerely apologized to Labonya. But, Labonya never recovered completely from the incident. She could not write her exams well. She was in a delirium for a few days. She stopped talking to people. She was not ready to talk even to Arjun. There were indications of insanity in her too, much to the anguish of her family. When Arjun tried to take her to a doctor, she refused to go. She was very adamant and Arjun tried in vain to help her out of her situation. However, in the wake of the other events in the colony, he gave up on her and concentrated on the other major issues of the colony.

Nevertheless, Labonya had her revenge fulfilled by plunging a knife into Dibya’s arm on the day of the fight between Arjun’s faction and Dibya’s faction. She had been the colonized at the hands of the colonizer Dibya and she gathered her courage for the day when she could take revenge on the colonizer without anybody’s help, all by herself. Labonya’s character in the novel could be equated to that of Draupadi in the *Mahabharata*.

The scene in the *Mahabharata* wherein Draupadi's hair was pulled by Dusshasana and she was brought into the court is similar to the scene wherein Labonya was trying to run away from Dibya and he caught hold of her hair to get her. Her sari falling of her shoulders is again reminiscent of Draupadi's illtreatment in the court by Dusshasana. Finally, her husbands fulfilled her vow of revenge to have her hair soaked in the blood of Dusshasana. Here, Labonya, the new age woman, seeks her revenge alone.

## CONCLUSION

The Indian novelists have the privilege to derive several of their ideas from the *Mahabharata*, which is a storehouse of stories and morals. An extreme, pietistic position would maintain that the whole of India's philosophy, religion, culture and the code of conduct is enshrined in this epic and that there is absolutely no room for any mistake in its teachings. However, a number of writers have discovered the subtle discrepancies, gaps, silences and debatable issues in the epic. Such writers have cut across languages and genres. There are works of prose, fiction and drama that have adapted, re-told, interrogated and critiqued the ancient Hindu epics. Increasingly, *Mahabharata* and, perhaps to a lesser extent, *Ramayana* are coming to be seen not as enshrining rigid or absolute creeds or morals but as throwing up a number of crucial issues that need constant review. In Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Arjun*, the myth is taken from the *Mahabharata* and the story is that of a village in Bengal that had to deal with the problems of the India-Pakistan partition. Thus, an episode of the *Mahabharata* becomes contemporary in the backdrop of India-Pakistan Partition and the struggle for survival in the twentieth century.

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