Between the Ancient and the Animated: Visual and Narrative Adaptation of Select Epic Characters of *The Mahabharata* in Grant Morrison's 18 Days

Pratishtha Thakur
PhD Research Scholar, Department of English, Himachal Pradesh University, India

Abstract: Epics, whether ancient or modern, are not merely narratives; they are dynamic cultural blueprints that continue to evolve across cultures and time with each retelling, reflecting the moral, political and imaginative horizons of the societies that engage with them. The ancient Indian epics, *The Ramayan* and *The Mahabharat*, are some of the exemplifications which embody the collective values and ideals of the Indian ethos. As Devdutt Pattnaik mentions in the dedication to his book *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana,* "In one, the protagonist is a kingmaker who can move around rules, while in the other the protagonist is a king who must uphold rules, howsoever distasteful they may be."

As culturally embedded narratives, epics have undergone diverse generic adaptations over time, with comic books emerging as one of the more recent and dynamic mediums of their representation. One such recent and masterful example is the comic book series, *18 Days* by Grant Morrison, which reimagines the ancient epic within a futuristic and stylised visual framework, blending mythic motifs with contemporary narrative and aesthetic sensibilities.

The research paper aims to critically examine how the comic book series reinterprets the epic through a shift in genre, medium, and cultural context, and to explore how this adaptation reconfigures the characters of the epic, revealing contemporary perspectives on heroism, divinity, and moral complexity within modern frameworks of myth-making. It shall also place 18 Days within broader discussions of adaptation, transmedia storytelling, and the role of genre, particularly Cyberpunk, in shaping new narrative possibilities for classical epics.

Keywords: Adaptation; Cyberpunk; Contemporaneity; Myth-making; Representations

Introduction

Epics throughout literary and mythological history have been passed on across generations as embodiments of cultural blueprints, highlighting culture, language, ethos and traditions. Among the corpus of epics produced in India, The Mahabharat is an epic whose relevance remains unmatched in terms of its interpersonal, political, spiritual and mythological aspects, whether it's superhuman demigods striving for power, struggling with political strategies and the inevitable consequences of their actions, or the spiritual and metaphysical teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, the epic has everything for it to be deemed a "living epic." Much like any other literary text, epics have also been adapted, adopted, and abrogated across different generic forms. As Hutcheon opines:

> First, seen as a formal entity or product, an adaptation is an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works. This 'transcoding' can involve a shift of medium (a poem to a film) or genre (an epic to a novel), or a change of frame and therefore context: telling the same story from a different point of view, for instance, can create a manifestly different interpretation… Second, as a process of creation, the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation; this has been called both appropriation and salvaging, depending on your perspective…Third, seen from the perspective of its process of reception, adaptation is a form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations (as adaptations) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation. (Hutcheon 7,8)

Similarly, *The Mahabharata* is a text that has always thrived on retelling, reshaping and recontextualising. While originally composed in Sanskrit verses between 400 BCE and 400 CE, Bhasa's dramatic reinterpretations around the 2nd century CE present alternate and tragic perspectives on the epic. What followed were several regional vernacular retellings in the medieval and early modern era, namely Perundevanar's *Bharatha Venba*, an 11th-century Tamil rendition of the epic in 12,000 verses; *Kāśīdāsī Môhābhārôt*, a 16th-century re-telling of the epic in Bengali by

Kashiram Das and several more. This was followed by K.M. Ganguly's first complete English translation of the epic in the 19th century.

Apart from textual literature, *The Mahabharata* has also taken the form of stage, folk and oral performances like the Yakshagana, the tradition dance-drama originating in Karnataka along with Wayang kulit, a form of shadow puppetry originating from Indonesia which dramatizes episodes from both The Ramayan and The Mahabharat, alongwith B.R. Chopra's groundbreaking television series, *Mahabharat*, which aired between 1988 and 1990, making it a landmark Indian television adaptation of the epic. Such reinventions are possible mainly because *The Mahabharat*, like any other epic, has a fluid structure, despite its complex plot, with multiple characters who exhibit moral ambiguities and arcs. From ancient scriptures passed along orally to their vernacular variants, film and TV adaptations, the epic has thrived across generations.

Another genre that has substantially grown over time in its portrayal and retellings of the great Indian epic is comics, which have emerged as a dynamic, modern medium of retelling epics. A comic book series which has emerged as a prime example of the same is *18 Days* by Grant Morrison, with illustrations by Mukesh Singh. *18 Days* covers the story of the war of Kurukshetra from *The Mahabharat*, blending mythic motifs with futuristic and stylised sensibilities of the cyberpunk subgenre of Science fiction. Initially published as a story bible with detailed notes on the characters, events, weapons and artistic style of the series in 2010 and as a comic book series between 2015 and 2017, 18 Days masterfully captures the essence of the Indian epic and blending it with the comic book tradition of the west- amalgamating ancient *astras* with futuristic technology and portraying the original linear narrative of the story in a non-linear mode. Apart from the narrative structure and the cyberpunk elements, *18 Days* also reconfigures the characters from the epic through shifts in terms of genre, medium and cultural context by placing these characters who are deeply rooted in Indian ethos at a global level and offering perspectives on heroism, moral complexity and divinity.

Comics in this case become a uniquely powerful, multi-modal form for epic narratives, and Morrison's choice of a comic book series for retelling the story of this immense epic gives it a

cinematic, globally accessible yet stylised form that appeals to young and old alike. For Morrison, the real appeal of the epic lies in the characters who, despite being demigods and supreme warriors, are flawed in their own unique ways:

> It has the best cast of characters of pretty much any myth I think… and they're so human, it's very different from the myths in the west where people are superhuman characters like Hercules or Achilles. But in this one, everything that makes them heroic winds up destroying them and that's why I love it. It really fits the times because it's looking at the heroic ideal and then we have an 18-day war… (Interview with Brian Walton from Nerdist News during San Diego Comic-Con on the Geek Week Stage, 2013)

The adaptability of *The Mahabharat* does not simply lie in its narrative structure but in the characters of the epic as well, because they embody the moral, political and spiritual dilemmas. Furthermore, through a multi-modal lens, the visual elements and dialogues of each character deliver a deeper message than what simply meets the reader's eye. This shift to comic and cyberpunk is not merely cosmetic in its approach-it reflects the survival of the epic in a world saturated by media, proving that its characters remain relevant as they negotiate futuristic anxieties.

Visual and Pictorial Elements

One of the most striking facets of character adaptation in Morrison's *18 Days* is its innovative visual and pictorial representation, especially because it merges traditional epic symbolism and characters with contemporary cyberpunk elements and aesthetics. For Hutcheon, "Adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication. And there are manifestly many different possible intentions behind the act of adaptation: the urge to consume and erase the memory of the adapted text or to call it into question is as likely as the desire to pay tribute by copying" (Hutcheon 7). A key aspect in this regard is the costumes and attire of the characters. For instance, the character of Arjuna transforms from a dhoti-clad, exiled warrior in the initial issues of the series to a cybernetically enhanced archer clad in high-tech battle gear, reflecting how Morrison situates the struggle for dharma in the third age. This reconfiguration implies that in contemporaneity, moral dilemmas are no longer fought through a

purely ascetic, self-disciplined moral compass, but are mediated by technology, echoing cyberpunk anxieties linked with the posthuman condition.

Bhima's weapon takes inspiration from the tradition of Marvel and DC comics, for it is called "the techno-atomic mace, World-breaker," which is fuelled by the energies of his armour; similarly, Duryodhana's mace is called "Shatterstar" much like Thor's "Storm-breaker" in the Marvel cinematic universe, a detail which has been deliberately crafted to appeal to a contemporary global audience, signalling a direct convergence of epic weaponry with global superhero iconography. While this globalises *The Mahabharat* for the contemporary reader familiar with the Marvel and DC cinematic universes, it also raises questions about cultural translation and whether this amplifies, for instance, Bhima's heroism, or does it risk portraying him as a mere derivative comic-book superhero archetype or not. This synthesis not only redefines the physical appearances of these iconic figures but also amplifies their narrative roles and thematic significance in the unfolding of the events of the story. The use of glowing neon colours for the bows of Arjuna and Karna, the metallic textures and the dynamic armour plating visually signal a radical departure from traditional portrayals, especially from the tradition of Amar Chitra Katha, embedding the character of Arjuna, for instance, within the cyberpunk milieu while retaining the heroic motifs of the original text in a recognisable format. Furthermore, *18 Days* retains the concepts of *Gandiva*, the Solar Astra, the *Brahmastra*, and the *Vimanas*, and amalgamates them with cyberpunk elements. The chariots in the original epic are replaced with spaceships and battleships floating over the battlefield of Kurukshetra.

In the web series, the character of Krishna undergoes a dynamic shift, especially when he delivers the message of the Bhagvad Gita-Krishna transforms from a two-dimensional character to a three-dimensional one as Krishna reveals his cosmic, universal form—the Vishwaroop. Krishna's transformation and revelation demonstrates a rather unique capability of comics as a medium: sequential art can render the complex concept of divinity both visually and instantaneously as compared to textual descriptions, which primarily rely on metaphor. The most metaphysical moment in the epic is therefore reframed not only as a visual spectacle, but also as a metaphorical

transformation of divine revelation into cinematic awe. The panels which portray the episode of how the hundred Kaurav brothers were born take on a rather dark colour scheme, with Ved Vyasa brutally cutting the mass Gandhari gave birth to into a hundred and one pieces. The Rishi Markandeya from the original epic is depicted as a wise spirit in blue hues, with cogwheels around him as he tells the story of the four ages and how things will unfold at the end of the third age, the point when the battle of Kurukshetra takes place. Abhimanyu enters the battlefield, manoeuvring a spaceship as Duryodhana peers at the battlefield through a pair of tech-binoculars. When combined, these visual and pictorial reimaginings depict how *18 Day*s adapts *The Mahabharat* in the contemporary style of comics without losing sight of its epic origins. These innovations suggest how the characters of the original epic, when filtered through the multi-modal medium of comics, become global icons who remain rooted in their traditional ethos simultaneously.

Dialogue and Language

Apart from visual reinvention, the adaptation of the multitude of characters in *18 Days* is also articulated through each character's distinct dialogue and language. The dialogues are an amalgamation of contemporary conversational tones with ancient gravitas. For instance, in the fourth chapter of the second volume titled "Draupadi, The Greatest Astra", Draupadi's narrative dialogue reads, "They say I am the most beautiful woman in this age. But then, men say this. And they say that of most queens, don't they?" This not only reflects Draupadi's unwavering spirit, but at the same time delivers its impact with a tone rather informal if compared with the sensibilities of the original text. Morrison resists the tendency to portray both Draupadi and Hidimba as objects of male desire and reclaims their narrative voices, aligning the adaptation with contemporary feminist discourses, accentuating agency and wit as central aspects to their characterisation rather than passivity. On the other hand, Krishna's speech embodies his dual role in the battle of Kurukshetra through the juxtaposition of his timeless wisdom blended with sharp wit while still retaining the philosophical depth of his character. This creates a hybrid register that preserves his role as both a charismatic political strategist and Arjuna's divine counsellor, an element suited to contemporary storytelling,

where the audience is accustomed to witty mentors in comic and film traditions. In contrast, Duryodhana's speech is marked by a rather aggressive rhetoric, allowing him to emerge as a clear antagonist whose language reflects his ambition, making him recognisable among the global audiences as the archetypal villain in comic-book traditions. His dialogues are terse, confrontational and belligerent, especially in comparison to Yudish's (Yudhishtir) dialogues, which are mostly measured and reflective. Moreover, Morrison's narrative rather simplifies the ethical complexity of Duryodhana's character, since his grievances are rather ambivalently rooted in questions of justice and legitimacy in the original epic. The dialogue reveals interpersonal dynamics between the characters, especially in terms of heightened tension, alliance or rivalry, which Morrison reveals through his use of modern speech patterns and rapid exchanges, allowing him to revitalise these epic characters in contemporaneity.

Characterisation and Personality

The portrayal of heroism surpasses the binaries of good and evil in Grant Morrison's *18 Days*, as it embraces a rather delicate spectrum of moral and political complexities which mirror modern ethical sensibilities. Characters who were once the embodiments of virtue and Dharma are reinterpreted with a certain amount of psychological depth that reflects their internal conflicts, moral ambiguities and contradictory demands of duty, especially in the case of Karna, and personal desire, as is the case with Duryodhana, within a dystopian, cyberpunk-infused landscape.

For instance, the character of Arjuna continues to be the archetype of a warrior struggling with ethical dilemmas, and this inner turmoil is amplified in 18 Days through both visual and narrative elements. This reframes him not only as the ideal warrior but also as a hero negotiating his fragmented identity, an element central to the cyberpunk genre's broader concern with instability of selfhood and alienation. Similarly, Karna, a character typically celebrated as the tragic hero, is depicted with layers of moral tension. Despite having complete knowledge of his parentage and past, his fierce loyalty to Duryodhana places him at odds against the Pandav brothers, and Morrison's adaptation continues to highlight his honour and personal code, which invites the sympathies of the readers despite his clear

antagonistic position against the Pandavas. Duryodhana's character in *18 Days* takes on a clear antagonistic role as well, as opposed to his morally ambiguous depiction in the original epic. By intensifying Duryodhana's antagonism, Morrison trades the epic's moral ambiguity for a comic-book simplification of heroes versus villains, foregrounding The Mahabharat's unique capacity to stage ethical dilemmas without resolution. On the other hand, while retaining his role as the political strategist and moral compass in the events of *The Mahabharat*, Krishna's role in 18 Days takes on a more pragmatic, enigmatic take as a character whose methods and motives provide the readers with a reflection on the nature of Dharma in a fractured world and confront the complexities of leadership and morality in a dystopian age.

Narrative Role and Development

The plot and narrative structure of *18 Days* is majorly non-linear as opposed to the original epic. *18 Days* opens as the Pandav brothers, in exile, are joined by Krishna as Markandeya foretells the future of the third age and the onset of the fourth. In contrast, the original epic uses a multi-layered narration—with Sauti, a wandering bard, narrating the story of the epic in front of sages in the Naimisharanya forest, where Janamejaya, the great-grandson of Arjuna, was performing a snake sacrifice to avenge the death of his father by snakebite. In contrast, it is made clear that it was Ved Vyas who originally wrote the epic. From this point onwards, the story of the original epic is strictly linear, but this is not the case with *18 Days*, in which the characters' backstories are mostly revealed through flashbacks as the main narrative strictly follows the eighteen days of the war of Kurukshetra. Morrison not only reinterprets the plot structure of the original epic but also reshapes the narrative roles and developmental trajectories of key characters, aligning them with both the epic's original sensibilities and the cyberpunk-infused narrative style of Morrison's adaptation.

Genre and Medium Influences on Character

The adaptation of characters in *18 Days* is almost entirely shaped by the interplay of genre conventions and the storytelling capabilities of the medium of comics. The fusion of the grand Indian epic with the cyberpunk genre is deliberate, allowing the narrative to explore the themes of

technology, identity and dystopia through the visual and narrative strengths of comics. The cyberpunk genre is characterised by high tech yet low life, dystopian settings, explorations of the integration of humans with technology, with neon-lit visuals and its exploration of posthumanism. These elements are evident in the technologically advanced cybernetic weapons and armours of Arjuna and Karna, which not only symbolise their prowess but also their engagement in Morrison's futuristic power structures.

While the medium of the comic allows for spectacular and engaging visual reimaginings, it also imposes certain constraints, especially in terms of condensed internal monologues moulded into concise dialogues and captions. By embedding *The Mahabharat* within this framework, Morrison situates the epic in conversation with contemporary anxieties about technology, artificial intelligence and posthuman identity. The struggle for establishing dharma thus becomes a meditation on the future of humanity in the face of technological dominance. In this context, comics as a medium condenses the philosophical enquiries of the epic into colourful panels and concise speech bubbles, prioritising visual spectacle and immediacy. While this creates availability and accessibility for global audiences, it also reframes the epic into a cinematic, entertainment driven idea.

Cultural and Ideological Context

In terms of myth-making, *18 Days* operates at the intersection of the ancient Indian epic tradition and contemporary global culture, which creates a narrative that both honours the mythological foundation of the original epic and, at the same time, transforms it in contemporaneity. In a similar light, Morrison linked the origins of Superman with the origins of Karna:

> You even find like the character Karna who's one of the best characters in Mahabharat, a very conflicted man who's working for both sides almost… he's fighting against his brothers… That character, like Superman, was placed in a basket and sent down the river like Moses, so Karna was the (kind of) origin of that Superman idea of a mother and father sending the son down the river of destiny and hoping his life will work out and eventually becomes this incredible figure

at the centre of mythology. So we are drawn in very much the same archetypes as all the great

stories of the past.

By establishing a link between Karna and Superman, Morrison universalises *The Mahabharat* by

placing it in a discourse with Western archetypes. At its core, *18 Days* discusses the tension between

tradition and modernity, since it utilises the cyberpunk genre as a lens to explore how classical

narratives and characters can be reimagined to reflect contemporary issues. The characters portray

complex motivations that resist binary categorisation, which mirrors contemporary discourses on the

multiplicity of truth and conventional ideas of morality. This pluralism invites readers to reconsider

the foundational values of the epic juxtaposed with evolving social and political realities.

Reader and Audience Reception

The reception of *18 Days* is significantly influenced by the dynamic transformation of the classical

epic into a contemporary adaptation, accentuating both its cultural resonance and the challenges the

audience can possibly face in interpreting a transmedia text. The cyberpunk-infused characterisations

invite readers on a global scale to reconsider their notions about heroism, ethical and moral ambiguity,

and political justice. For readers unfamiliar with the original text and the multitude of characters and

their respective lores, *18 Days* presents the traditional ideas of *astras*, *vimanas*, weapons, boons and

curses in a way which is easier for such audiences to comprehend without making it overwhelming.

For this reason, the names of several characters are also altered or shortened—Yudhistir becomes

Yudish; Dhritrashtra becomes King Drith; Ghatotkacha becomes Gatok or Gatokacha and so on. This

deliberate shortening of names not only renders the epic legible to global audiences who are

unfamiliar and rather intimidated by Sanskritic nomenclature, but it also highlights compromises of

cultural translation at the same time. The availability of *18 Days* across different mediums—whether

it is a comic book series or a digital web series on platforms like YouTube, makes it possible for the

readers to find Morrison's morally complex characters relatable. Arjuna's doubt, Karna's internal

conflicts, Draupadi's resilience and Bhishma's conflicted stance are elements from the original epic

which resonate with audiences accustomed to "grey" protagonists in modern storytelling. For Indian

audiences, the adaptation not only evokes nostalgia for generations that grew up watching B.R. Chopra's *Mahabharat* on television, but also encourages critical reflection on tradition and cultural identity in the digital age, especially given its graphic storytelling medium.

Conclusion

One of the reasons why *The Mahabharat* has survived across centuries and generations is because of its openness to transformation and not merely its fidelity to a fixed source. Grant Morrison's 18 Days repositions the characters of the epic within a hybrid medium of the global genre of cyberpunk science fiction and comics through multimodal visual strategies that range from futuristic armour to innovations in dialogues, names and pictorial representations to place the epic in contemporaneity. Simultaneously, *18 Days* places The Mahabharat within global visual culture by amplifying the original epic through cyberpunk tropes rather than diminishing it. What emerges as a result is a reinterpretation of epic characters dealing with questions and dilemmas about heroism, moral ambiguities, duty, fate and divinity.

In conclusion, *18 Days* underscores the vitality of epics and their reimagining of epic characters in the twenty-first century, which further reflects what Hutcheon calls "repetition without replication." The characters remain recognisable as epic figures; however, they are transformed through visual stylisation, dialogue and narrative framing to mirror the sensibilities of the contemporary age. Ultimately, *18 Days* becomes a dynamic text-a living constellation of epic characters rooted in contemporary culture-proving that as long as its characters continue to evolve, *The Mahabharat* will never cease to speak.

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