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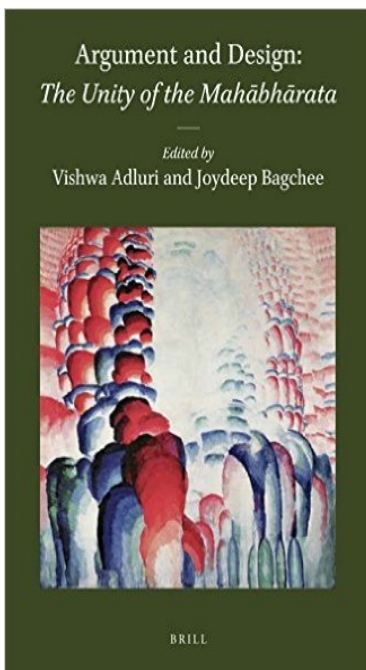
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Argument and Design The Unity of the Mahābhārata

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Editor(s): Vishwa Adluri, Joydeep Bagchee

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Review

Argument and Design: The Unity of the Mahābhārata is the outcome of a series of three panels dedicated to the renowned scholar of the Mahābhārata, Alf Hiltebeitel, organized by his favorite disciple, Vishwa Adluri on the occasion of Alf's seventieth birthday. Per its author "whatever is found here [in

the Mahābhārata] may be found elsewhere, but whatever is not, will be found nowhere else” (ix). In his foreword, Robert P. Goldman says that, despite having so many dimensions encompassing so many fields, in the end the Mahabharata “is just a rollicking great tale that has inspired countless retellings and kept audiences fascinated for millennia” (x). Adluri, one of the editors, introduces “the premise” of this volume to be “that the Mahābhārata is a work of literature and that its upākhyānas (subtales or, perhaps more accurately, proximate narratives) are central to its literary project” (1).

This is not just one among numerous books written on the Mahābhārata, but a fresh scholarly look at some controversies about the epic, leading to some definite conclusions. In his essay, “The Tale of an Old Monkey and a Fragrant Flower: What the Mahābhārata’s Rāmāyaṇa May Tell Us about the Mahābhārata”, Bruce M. Sullivan addresses the old objection that Mahābhārata’s size and diversity of styles and ideas make it impossible to be a composition of one person by saying that these “are assumptions rather than persuasive arguments” (188). Adluri summarises Sullivan’s argument: “If Isaac Asimov could publish some 500 books in all ten major categories of the Dewey Decimal System, there appears nothing inherently implausible in the idea that the Mahābhārata, whether composed by one individual or as Hildebeitel advocates ‘by committee,’ should have a certain inner harmony” (3).

This volume could be seen as the beginning of approaching the Mahābhārata from the perspective of the upākhyāna and “a new way of navigating the epic, using not the so-called heroic epic as our guide but the epic’s own musings about itself and its characters, provided self-reflexively via its narration of its upākhyānas” (7). Adluri masterfully lists the conclusions of the contributors to this volume: “(1) the upākhyānas are meaningful; (2) their inclusion—or addition, if one prefers—in the epic follows a design; (3) together, they yield an *argument*; and (4) this argument shows the Mahābhārata to be a highly self-conscious work of literature, a dharma text from its inception and not a Kuru epic with didactic interpolations” (7). Thus, it becomes clear that these proximate tales are not ancillary but principal to the Mahābhārata’s theme.

The authenticity of the Mahābhārata cannot be established without some empirical evidence to corroborate its contents. An attempt to trace the geography of the epic is subject of the last chapter of this book, here Hildebeitel analyses the various narratives of the Mahābhārata—classified into four sections of the text—to see how they function with respect to space, time, and history.

A mammoth text like the Mahābhārata is often not studied in detail due to its sheer volume and this leads to various theories—some of which are baseless—about its authorship and originality. This volume brings to the reader a critical appraisal of various aspects of the Mahābhārata and persuades one to question the passive way in which the text is generally approached. For instance, Thennilapuram Mahadevan historically analyses the personality of Mudgala to the lineage of Mudgala Brahmans from Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu of India, with a timeline of 3,000 years. He follows the migrations of these people that “were not haphazard” and are “nothing like it in human history” (386). The enormous fieldwork behind this research encourages other scholars to embark on similar pursuits.

Nicolas Dejenne’s chapter is striking in that it summarizes the work on the Mahābhārata by Madeleine Biarreau—the famous French Indologist—and after studying it by classifying it in four phases. Dejenne concludes that Biarreau’s study of the upākhyānas of Mahābhārata “represents a significant and invaluable contribution to the understanding of their place and resonance not only in the epic and Purāṇic corpus but also in Sanskrit literature as a whole, including kāvya texts” (368).

The gender-dynamics of the Mahābhārata are analysed by Adluri in “The Divine Androgyne: Crossing Gender and Breaking Hegemonies in the Ambā-Upākhyāna of the Mahābhārata.” Explaining the sexlessness of the ultimate Reality, Adluri expresses the limitation of his analysis: “Those who know the secret of the One and the many know that the One can never ‘become’ many. To such readers, no explanation is necessary. To those who do not understand these matters, no explanation is possible” (316). Adheesh Sathaye evaluates the representation of the Mahābhārata characters within the upākhyānas, particularly the exhibition of Mādhavī. Sathaye considers “the Mahābhārata as resembling a modern museum, insofar as it was a cultural institution whose textual floors and corridors were designed to regulate its visitors’ experience of artifacts from what James Hegarty calls the ‘significant past’” (238–9).

Three chapters in this volume connect the Mahābhārata with the Rāmāyaṇa and provide pointers to the interconnections of their upākhyānas. The research presented in this volume is proof that, behind every mythical tale or sub-tale, is a labyrinth of historicity, culture, religion, linguistics, and representations, and unravelling these completely could take the efforts of hundreds of scholars. This book encourages one to approach the Mahābhārata as a piece of literature of “both argument and design” (9). With fourteen chapters on a wide range of topics—from the connection of Rāmāyaṇa’s Uttarakāṇḍa to the Mahābhārata to the depictions of some Mahābhārata’s characters—*Argument and Design* is a welcome relief from the existing predictable literature on the Mahābhārata, and could be a good starting point for anyone who wants to critically study the epic “as a whole.”

About the Reviewer(s):

[Swami Narasimhananda](#) is the editor of *Prabuddha Bharata*.

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Vishwa P. Adluri is Adjunct Associate Professor of Religion at Hunter College, New York and the author of numerous articles and essays on the Mahābhārata. His work mainly focuses on the reception of ancient thought—both Greek and Indian—in modernity. Vishwa has a PhD in Philosophy from the New School, New York and a PhD in Indology from Philipps-Universität Marburg.

Joydeep Bagchee is a post-doctoral fellow at the Freie Universität Berlin. His current research focuses on the intersection of the textual sciences, philology, textual criticism, and the history of science. Joydeep is co-author, with Vishwa Adluri, of *The Nay Science: A History of German Indology* (Oxford University Press, 2014) and *Philology and Criticism: A Guide to Mahābhārata Textual Criticism* (Anthem Press, 2015).

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