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The Rhetoric of Krishna versus the Counter-Rhetoric of Vyas: The Place of Commiseration in the *Mahabharat*

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Abstract: In the context of the mixed perception among scholars whether the *Mahabharat* is a pacifist or a militant text, this paper analyzes the rhetorical project of the epic to examine its position on violence. Highlighting the existence of two main arguments in the *Mahabharat*, this paper argues that the author has crafted a grand rhetorical project to question the dominant war ideology of the time that Krishna presents as the divine necessity. Historically, the emergence of Krishna—one of the major characters of the epic—as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu in Hindu tradition and the extraction and elevation of the *Bhagavad Gita* from the epic as an independent text have undermined the complexity of Vyas’ rhetoric. This paper places Krishna’s argument within the broad rhetorical scheme of the epic and demonstrates how Vyas has represented Krishna’s rhetoric of ‘just war’ only to illustrate its pitfalls. By directing his narrative lens to the devastating consequences of the war in the later parts of the epic, Vyas problematizes Krishna’s insistence on the need to suppress human emotions to attain a higher cognitive and ontological condition. What emerges is the difference between how Vyas and Krishna view the status of feeling: the scientist Krishna thinks that human emotions and individual lives are trivial, incidental instances in the cosmic game—something not worthy of a warrior’s concern; Vyas’ rhetoric, this paper argues, restores the significance of ordinary human emotions. It is a war—not human life and feeling—that arises as a futile enterprise in Vyas’ rhetoric.

Keywords: rhetoric in the mahabharat; krishan’s rhetoric; vyas’ rhetoric; commiseration in arjun; south-asian rhetoric

As the battle in the *Mahabharat* is about to begin, the epic’s most skilled archer is overwhelmed when he sees the prospect of killing his relatives fighting against him from the enemy battalion.¹ In this, one of the most unanticipated dramatic moments in this classical South Asian epic, Arjun finds the war futile when compared to the death and destruction that it would bring. Disarming himself, he informs his charioteer Krishna about his decision to not fight the war anymore:

O Krishna, I have no desire for victory, or for a kingdom or pleasures. Of what use is a kingdom or pleasure or even life, if those for whose sake we desire these things—teachers, fathers, sons, grandfathers, uncles, in-laws, and others with family ties—are engaging in this battle, renouncing their wealth and their lives. Even if they were to kill me, I would not want to kill them, not even to become the ruler of the three worlds.²

¹ The epic is available on public domain here: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15474/15474-h/15474-h.htm> (accessed on 13 January 2019.)

² *Gita*, 1: 32–35. For the *Gita*’s citation, the articles uses the following text: Eknath Easwaran, trans., *The Bhagavad Gita* (Easwaran 1985).

Responding to this agonized warrior, Krishna—the revered spiritual master—delivers the long sermon encapsulated in the *Bhagavad Gita*, where he convinces Arjun to resume the war, despite the disciple's constant questioning of the war's ultimate advantage.³ Indeed, Krishna has tried to avert the war before, but he does not use this opportunity to explore the possibilities of peace further. This condition leads to the question: why does he not stop the impending carnage? Given the *Mahabharat's* cultural capital in the South Asian subcontinent, this question has been raised for centuries, primarily to examine the epic's position on the appropriateness of the use of violence and the value of human emotions.⁴

One dominant interpretation has been that the war is preordained in the *Mahabharat*. Built on what Krishna states at one point, that he has incarnated himself to restore the balance in the world through the religious war, this perspective presents Krishna's birth as a fact of the war's inevitability; he is at the scene not to stop the war but to direct it to the desired outcome. So, whatever attempts he carries out to broker the peace between Pandav and Kaurav represent merely playful pretenses, not serious endeavors. The Kaurav brothers are evil, and the only way to get rid of the evil in them is to destroy them through the war. No language of compromise works for them.

This paper begins by questioning the total truth of this interpretation. When all incidents and events in the epic are analyzed together, the war emerges as the product of unresolved negotiations, not an inevitable occurrence. Accepting the predetermination of something precludes the power of rhetorical exchanges to make a difference in the world. Attributing the value of representing Krishna's true intentions to some of his words and actions while relegating others to meaninglessness by characterizing them as playful pretenses may assist his admirers in creating a more favorable image of him, but it fails to accord justice to the whole rhetorical and literary project incorporated in the *Mahabharat*. This paper is a small attempt to change that approach by foregrounding Vyas' rhetorical lens.

Because the issue is central to the Vyas' rhetorical project, this article primarily participates in the scholarly conversation about the use of violence in the *Mahabharat*. Simultaneously, the paper also aims to contribute to the academic discussion of non-western, particularly South Asian, rhetorical tradition. The article should add a new dimension to the scope of South Asian rhetoric by establishing how the *Mahabharat* is a lofty rhetorical project, where the author takes up a celebrated teacher's ethos and argument for 'just war' only to dissect them by presenting their shocking material corollaries.⁵

About the use of violence in the *Mahabharat*, commentators hold divided opinions. Wendy Doniger captures this division succinctly when she highlights how the same book has been used historically both for pacifist and militant purposes. Reviewing Richard H. Davis' *The Bhagavad Gita: A Biography*, she writes, "we might divide [the interpretations of the book] into two broad groups: what I would call the warrior's *Gita*, about engaging in the world, and the philosopher's *Gita*, about disengaging."⁶ Commenting on whether the *Gita* incites violence, Eknath Easwaran points us to Gandhi: "Gandhi had a practical answer: just base your life on the *Gita* sincerely and systematically and see if you find killing or even hurting others compatible with its teaching."⁷ While Easwaran does not foreground this

³ Widely distributed as a separate book, the *Bhagavad Gita* comes from the *Mahabharat*. Suspecting that such a long discourse at the battlefield could not have been a logical part of the narrative, many commentators think of the *Gita* as a later interpolation; see (Pandit 1992). Critics also insist on the integrality of the *Gita* with the epic, emphasizing how the ideas in the *Gita* are thoroughly interwoven throughout the larger text: See (Upadhyaya 2000).

⁴ For the broad impact and reception of the text, see this work: Richard H. Davis, *The Bhagavad Gita: A Biography* (Davis 2015).

⁵ While the epic has generated substantial literary studies, not much rhetorical analysis of the text exists; few existing works within the broad rhetorical field is limited to the *Gita* that mainly highlight on the nature of philosophy and argumentation. One notable reception of the epic in the field recently has been Iswari Pandey's book, *South Asian in the Mid-South: Migrations of Literacies* (Pandey 2015). Although the work is not entirely about the rhetoric in the *Mahabharat*, Pandey demonstrates how the literacy practices of recent Hindu immigrants to the United States from South Asia have used the stories from the epic as the heritage for their cultural preservation and identity formation.

⁶ (Doniger 2014).

⁷ Easwaran, "Introduction," *Gita*, 20.

part, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Rochona Majumdar demonstrate that Gandhi's pacifist interpretation of the *Gita* in itself was a strategic deployment of the text to counter its militant reception by some early twentieth-century Indian revolutionaries, such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Sri Aurobindo.⁸ Given the epic's grand and layered narrative, it is not surprising that the *Mahabharata* lends itself to multiple, often contradictory, interpretations, but the same complexity should not deter us from posing the question of whether the text has a more coherent view on the use of violence.

1. Foregrounding Vyas's Rhetorical Project

In this context, I argue that an analysis of the author's rhetoric can elucidate the mixed reception highlighted in the previous paragraph.⁹ The different opinions, I contend, emanate from the fact that the *Mahabharata* has two separate major arguments about war—those of Krishna and Vyas.¹⁰ Their difference arises from where they place the emotion in the hierarchy of significance. Characterizing emotions as fleeting and irrelevant phenomena in the cosmic scheme of things, Krishna downplays the value of commiseration or other human emotions, whether felt during or in the aftermath of the war. Krishna's argument is so sophisticated and comes with such prominence in the epic that he may appear to be the authorial mouthpiece, but the whole point of the *Mahabharat*, I argue, is to expose the devastating consequences of Krishna's logic and to restore the value of commiseration and non-violence. For that purpose, Vyas probes the rhetoric of 'just war' embedded in Krishna's oratory.

The doctrine of just war has multicultural, multi-religious, and secular roots and practices—a reason I am characterizing it as having a universal resonance.¹¹ Any war, whether it is carried out to expand one community's influence or resist their enemy, demands a justification because of the inherently problematic nature of violence. At the core of the 'just war' rhetoric rests the notion that a fair-minded humane culture or community should not go for war unless it is absolutely necessary, without any alternative course of action. In a way, the doctrine of just war sets limits within a culture or a country, instilling an anti-militant value system. However, as this paper discusses, the same value system is often used to initiate a war and mobilize people. While the rhetoric of just war found in different religious, national, and historical contexts may include context-specific content, they mostly have in common a reference to some lofty ideal, an explanation of the absence of other options, and the characterization of the other as evil. Just war rhetoric assigns appropriate reasons for war, eliciting war-supporting emotions among followers, believers, or citizens. Since there is not a non-discursive indicator to determine exactly when and whether the condition for the war has become an absolute necessity, the rhetoric of just war comes into play, depending on participants' motivations, power dynamics among the parties in conflict, and philosophical resources available to the rhetoricians making a case for or against the war.

As this article demonstrates, questioning the ideology of 'just war' imprinted in the collective human unconscious, something that is expressed through various religious and patriotic forms and fought for centuries after centuries, required the double eyes—the eyes that could feel the logical throbs of the charismatic leader like Krishna, and also could render the subtlest of human emotions with an artist's sensitivity. Vyas brings forth both of them by first creating the rhetoric of Krishna and then by laying bare its devastating consequences. Using the Rogerian rhetorical approach long

⁸ See (Chakrabarty and Majumdar 2010).

⁹ This article is not about Vyas the sage who plays different roles at various moments in the epic. The Vyas the author that this article discusses is the collective of those scribes and bards who churned this epic over many centuries and gave humanity one of the most powerful texts.

¹⁰ Indeed, the current trend of transforming Hinduism into an organized religion has inspired many religious activists to historicize Krishna, particularly to match the historical provenances of Buddhism and Christianity. It is possible that a historical figure might have inspired the creation of the Krishna character, but I'm treating him primarily as a character developed by the collective authorship of Vyas. And, for those who object to this characterization of Krishna, here is an idea: a powerful character (as all gods and goddesses are) can have more influence on reality-production than a historical person. For the complexity of establishing the historical authorship of the *Mahabharata*, see (Satchidanandan 2009).

¹¹ For the doctrine of just war in the Christian tradition, see (Johnson 1975).

before Carl Rogers hinted at it and communication scholars later theorized it, Vyas first portrays Krishna and his argument credibly, developing Krishna as the most admirable person of the epic.¹² Krishna gets represented as what their admirers would perceive any cherished war hero. So, instead of automatically slandering the idea that he was going to interrogate, Vyas gives Krishna and his views their due place, letting their strengths speak for themselves. Because of this strategy, readers get to see Krishna in a complete form with all his logical, personal, and divine manifestations. In this rhetorical maneuver, Vyas thus sets up Krishna to be loved by his readers in the way they would admire a captivating commander of any war.

However, the epic does not end there, and that is where Vyas' counter rhetoric comes into play. In *Stri Purva* and *Shanti Purva* (*Books of Women* and *Book of Peace*, respectively), Vyas zooms his narrative lens on the scenes in the aftermath of the war with such searing graphic detail that readers come to question the wisdom of the war. The wailing women and children, dismembered warriors, and widespread hopelessness pervade the atmosphere. In these books, which I am arguing we should accord the same significance allotted to the *Gita*, Vyas juxtaposes the catastrophic consequences of the war with the amazing ideology that encouraged it.

2. Krishna's War Rhetoric and Its Universal Resonance

Before analyzing how Vyas treats Krishna and his argument further, let us contextualize Krishna's argument first¹³. At the outset of the battle between the Pandav and Kaurav at Kurukshetra, Pandav Prince Arjun generates a sense of empathy for his cousins, uncles, and teachers, who have grouped to war against him.¹⁴ Seeing the futility of winning a war by slaying his relatives, he throws away his bow. Krishna, whom Arjun deeply respects, delivers the long discourse demonstrating how fighting—instead of being governed by commiseration and other flippant emotions—was the best course of action for a Kshatriya warrior like him.¹⁵ Besides reminding Arjun of his Kshatriya Dharma, Krishna also uses various philosophies dominant at the time to persuade Arjun back to the battle.¹⁶ However, when Arjun remains adamant in his resolve by questioning everything Krishna stated, he equips Arjun with a spiritual vision, where he reveals his divine selfhood and the operating mechanism of the cosmos.¹⁷

Through that vision, Krishna initiates Arjun to the cosmic vision said to have been experienced by deep meditators, a mystic experience that Krishna presents as pure ontology.¹⁸ In this vision, the differences among people and things appear as a phenomenal illusion; the deeper reality opens as an undifferentiated wavelike whole, with the Brahman spirit pervading the existence. All beings and things—as if there were a difference between them—are thus automatically the parts of that spirit, emanating from the same source and plunging back into the same eternal omnipresence. While the Atman migrates from one being to another in the transformative cosmic process, the phenomenal beings themselves are impermanent.¹⁹ Commenting on this vision, Barbara Stoler Miller writes, “the aspect of himself that Krishna reveals to Arjun on the battlefield embodies time's deadly destructiveness: a fearsome explosion of countless eyes, bellies, mouths, ornaments, and weapons—gleaming like

¹² For Rogerian argument, see (Ede 1984). Ede's article highlights the complexity of correspondence between Carl Rogers' psychological theories and its use in communication and writing studies. By characterizing Vyas' rhetoric as Rogerian, I'm emphasizing on his respectful representation of Krishna's argument.

¹³ Thapar (2009) argues that the *Mahabharata* represents the transitional moment of ancient Indian society from clan to caste system.

¹⁴ *Gita*, 1: 31–32.

¹⁵ *Gita*, 2: 31–37.

¹⁶ *Gita*, 2: 39–53.

¹⁷ *Gita*, 3:1; 4:4; 6: 33–34.

¹⁸ For the philosophical dimension of *Gita*, see (Stroud 2005). Also see (Maitra 2006).

¹⁹ Krishna's ontological vision may have some parallel with modern quantum physics. See (Capra 1975).

the fiery sun that illuminates the world.”²⁰ Using the terms of modern science, Krishna presents his understanding of the time-space puzzle of the universe in its most churning physiological dimension.²¹

In this cosmic context—Krishna continues—Arjun should not let his feelings debilitate his resolution for action. The people, for whose sake he wants to abandon his Kshatriya Dharma, existed in the current form momentarily. The truth is he could neither kill them nor could bring them back to human forms.²² Since their death was merely a small part in the transformative cycle of the world, he should internalize this cosmic picture, and thus not permit his momentary emotion to cloud his judgment. Abandoning his duty would not save his relatives as they were destined to die whether or not Arjun becomes a vehicle in the process. The argument continues like this: If Arjun could do anything meaningful and dignified in this context, it would be combatting the evil for the restoration of righteousness.

This explanation of how the world operates dissociates Arjun from his “consubstantiality” with his Kaurav cousins. As rhetorician Kenneth Burke has defined, consubstantiality is that fabric of connection between two distinct people, where one identifies another as made up of the same substance, promoting confidence and desire for mutual protection.²³ Theorized in the context of World War II, the notion of consubstantiality helped Burke understand why in the chaos of the war Allies and Axis powers placed all their energy to obliterate one another while keeping the cohesion of disparate forces within them intact. In this theorization, consubstantiality—or its absence thereof—determines who commiserates with whom.

In the case of Arjun, he indeed has trained his whole life to build a war-appropriate body and mind so that no enfeebling emotions would perturb him during the war. However, when faced with the prospect of the death of his cousins and teachers in his hand, the fundamental human desire for connection intervenes into his trained temperament, failing him to maintain his composure. He feels a human connection with them; at that moment he could not visualize them as an abstract embodiment of evil as theorized by Krishna; they remain standing before him as the flesh-and-blood people with whom he has grown. This experience disrupts his mental disposition that is essential to a fighter governed by the Kshatriya code.

In that context, it becomes Krishna’s challenge to unsettle that connection so that Arjun could restart seeing his relationships using the same abstract values such as good and evil prevailing in the warrior’s code. But, as stated above, the problem is that Kshatriya Dharma or the duty recognized by the tradition alone does not suffice to persuade Arjun. Krishna thus has to show “the ultimate truth” of the existence, a vision that asks him to see his enemies in theoretical terms as chemical/biological compositions that transform continuously from one state to another. In this formulation, attaching emotional connection with momentarily living bodies would mean falling under the spell of Maya—not knowing the law that governs the universe. So, Krishna asks Arjun to see how the human relationship formed between himself and his enemies was merely a small incidence in the eternity of time, and thus not worthy of a warrior’s emotional investment. Therefore, as Krishna explains, Arjun is required to detach himself emotionally from his relatives so that he could contribute to Krishna’s campaign of restoring justice and righteousness in the world.

This kind of rhetoric of ‘just wars’ has a universal resonance. War leaders use it as a rhetorical ploy as contemporaneously now as Krishna deployed it in the *Mahabharat* time. They justify wars with abstract noble ideas. This kind of war narratives portray the deaths of ordinary people, including soldiers, as a necessary sacrifice for achieving or maintaining a larger common good. This line of

²⁰ (Miller 1986).

²¹ I write this note in the afternoon of April 10, 2019, the day when scientists have revealed a new picture of the black hole. The picture reminds me of the mouth that Krishna describes in the *Gita*. The mouth as he says is the all-powerful physical phenomenon that engulfs planets and other heavenly bodies.

²² *Gita*, 2: 12.

²³ See (Burke 1969).

Manichean argumentation characterizes the enemy—sometimes justifiably—as evil time and again. It is not problematic that evil is spotted and fought; what is concerning is that this kind of rhetoric does not value common lives in and for themselves.²⁴ What loses in this process is the significance of emotional fabrics, connections, and joys of common life—the extraordinary traits of humanity.

3. Vyas's Rhetorical Design: The Double Eyes Representing and Critiquing Krishna

Given the universal resonance of the rhetoric of just war, the questions then become these: How does Vyas confront Krishna's rhetoric? What exactly does he do? What does his rhetoric have to do with the fundamental human attributes such as commiseration and empathy? Vyas uses a two-part strategy to expose the consequences of the rhetoric of the just war. The first part of his rhetorical approach represents Krishna's rhetoric—particularly the Kshatriya war code—authentically, so that all of its valid points and shining observations on existence receive due credit. The discussion up to this point in this article has largely covered the first part of Vyas' rhetorical process. In his second part of the strategy, he shows the devastating impact of that ideology by focusing his attention on the conditions of people in the aftermath of the war, when the Kshatriya war code has unfolded in its full intensity. He does that particularly by highlighting the condition of women in the *Book of Women* and Yudhishtira's state of mind in the *Book of Peace*. What emerges from these two books is Vyas's denunciation of Krishna's indifferent view about human emotion, a forceful revelation that empathy and commiseration are not human limitations standing on the road to Dharma as Krishna argues, but the soul of it.²⁵

In *Stri Parva (Book of Women)*, Vyas critiques Krishna's rhetoric graphically. Instead of weaving his counterargument with a different set of reasoning, he concentrates his narrative lens on the shattered landscape strewn with dismembered corpses, the disfigured rivers deluged with fresh blood, and the frightening silence reigned by a cruel death.²⁶ In place of Krishna's transcendental cosmic vision abstracted from daily human reality, Vyas paints a catastrophe picture for the mortals to see and contemplate. At the end of the war, in suffering and death, both sides lose the sense of their difference. In this picture of stunning unison, all the talks of bravery, duty, and enlightenment that led to the devastation of common lives sound preposterously chilling. The scene is that of death, wailing, and human senselessness. Following is a passage from that context for your perusal:

At that time a loud wail of woe arose from every Kuru house. The whole city, including the very children, became exceedingly afflicted with grief. Those ladies that had not before this been seen by gods were now helpless . . . Seizing each other by the hand, they uttered loud wails after their sons and brothers and sires. They seemed to exhibit the scene that takes place on the occasion of the universal destruction at the end of a Yuga. Weeping and crying and running hither and thither, and deprived of their senses by grief, they knew not what to do. Those ladies who formally felt the blush of modesty in the presence of even companions of their own sex, now felt no blush of shame though scantily clad, in appearing before their mothers-in-law. Formally, they used to comfort each other while afflicted with even slight causes of woe. Stupefied by grief, they now, O king, refrained from even casting their eyes upon each other.²⁷

²⁴ Sometimes, the way evil is framed/defined can be problematic.

²⁵ There are many translations of the *Mahabharata*. This paper uses [Vyasa \(1883\)](#). The citations of the *Mahabharata* in this paper are from the web link included above. Since the web link does not state specific pages effectively, I will refer to the Parva (the book) and will include URLs to locate the source.

²⁶ Indeed, Kurukshetra has surviving intellectuals such as Bidur still propagating the dominant ideology that justified the war even now in the aftermath. However, those statements that inspired lofty passions before and during the war are so out of the place now that they look absurdly hypocritical among the corpses and bereaving souls.

²⁷ *Mahabharata*, Book of Women. (<http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/m11/m11010.htm>).

This description, read in connection with the larger context of the epic, particularly in juxtaposition to Krishna's teaching in the *Bhagavad Gita*, inverts the essence of Dharma. As Krishna expounded, treading on the path of Dharma (the dominant ideology of the Kshatriya Caste) required Arjun to detach his "true self" from his emotions, so that he could follow the Dharma and participate in the righteous war. Since the fight is internal as much as the one fought on the external physical realm, his suppression of emotion would transform the flesh-and-blood human enemies that were antithetical to the religious order into abstracted objectified others. In this description, stunned by the calamity of the war, the mass of women and children has lost their ability to feel the basic emotions. Also missing is their ability to maintain social dignity, the common Dharma expected of them by their customs and culture, including the habit of caring for each other during the difficult moments of life. It is ironic that Krishna's call for the detachment from one's emotions for the sake of a higher duty of justice results in shock and terror among the most vulnerable sections of society.

Vyas's interrogation of Krishna's war rhetoric continues in the *Book of Peace (Shanti Purva)*, as the narrator places his attention on the mental state of the victors. Unlike in the previous book—the *Book of Women*—the critique now is more discourse driven. In this book, Vyas makes a strategic rhetorical decision by choosing to tell the story from Yudhishtira's perspective, because Yudhishtira's high reputation for his adherence to justice and righteousness is of paramount significance for Vyas' rhetorical project. Yudhishtira may speak from within the dominant intellectual and cultural framework that justified the war, yet his cultural capital provides Vyas a character with a unique upright ethos for the final assessment of the war ideology. That the war has come to an end, and all of its impacts have been laid bare before eyes, Yudhishtira's discourse now must include his reflection on the facts from the ground instead of merely repeating the lofty words from the ideology of just war. The book presents the new king Yudhishtira finding his victory pointless as he questions the arguments and interests that supported the war in the context of death and destruction surrounding him.

In this book, Yudhishtira condemns the fundamental attributes of Kshatriya Dharma: "fie on the usages of Kshatriyas, fie on might and valor, and fie on wrath, since through these such a calamity hath overtaken us."²⁸ He realizes that the esteemed qualities such as might, bravery, and wrath had failed the warriors to recognize the thin fabrics of empathy and commiseration. Now, with the consequences of the war with them, the otherwise prized assets emerge merely as pretexts used by them to fulfill a subliminal human urge for blood. He states, "like a pack of dogs fighting one another for a piece of meat, a great disaster has overtaken us! That piece of meat is no longer dear to us."²⁹ With a cruel revelation, an intuitive understanding dawns onto Yudhishtira that what they had fought for was not a clean and sophisticated ideal but an enactment of the brutish impulse lodged in them.

The idea of commiseration runs deep in Yudhishtira's lamentation. For instance, he states how an ordinary beggar's life would have been preferable for him now to the king's wealth and power. He says to Arjun, "if, O Arjun, we had led a life of mendicancy in the cities of the Vrishnis and the Andhakas, then this miserable end would not have been ours in consequence of having exterminated our kinsmen."³⁰ Not only is such a state emotionally deranging, but Yudhishtira also finds it morally disturbing as well. He continues, "our foes, the Kurus, have gained prosperity, while we have become divested of all the objects of life, for what fruits of righteousness can be ours when we have guilty of self-slaughter?"³¹ As Yudhishtira starts making sense of what had just happened for the last 18 days of the war, the guilt of not acting on finer emotions overwhelms him.

Another recurrent theme in Yudhishtira's discourse is war's emotional toll on participants, including the victors themselves. As his state of mind suggests, the unbearable loss of friends and relatives, many of them in the prime of their youth, deprives the survivors a general joy of life.

²⁸ *Mahabharata*, Book of Peace, Section VII. (<https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/m12/m12a007.htm>).

²⁹ *Mahabharata*, Book of Peace, Section VII. (<https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/m12/m12a007.htm>).

³⁰ *Mahabharata*, Book of Peace, Section VII. (<https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/m12/m12a007.htm>).

³¹ *Mahabharata*, Book of Peace, Section VII. (<https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/m12/m12a007.htm>).

Yudhishtira captures the irony of the situation: “alas, having slain, for the sake of the earth, such lords of the earth as deserved not to be slain by us, we are bearing the weight of existence, deprived of friends and bereft of the very objects of life.”³² Going to the war, they had aimed for a slice of earth, but they have returned with the unbearable “weight of the existence” and “bereft of the very objects of life.”

To understand the futility of the war suggested in Yudhishtira’s lamentation, we have to attend to the phrase “object of life” that he uses repetitively in the book. Examining his past and present contexts, he feels and states how the whole discourse of ‘just war’ misunderstood and misrepresented proper “object of life.” As Krishna presented in the *Gita*, the dominant ideology of the time interpreted the attainment of selfhood liberated from the shackles of worldly connections as the true “object of life.” The object of life, the argument continues, should be the realization of pure rational spirituality so that the self could unite with the elemental cosmic essence. Not attaining that union is a sheer waste of precious human life and its high cognitive capacity. For that union, as Krishna frames, a Karma Yogi like Arjun, who has followed the path of action for spiritual liberation, is not required to renounce social obligations, as practiced by other traditional seekers of that essence, but could realize it by observing their responsibilities, particularly by disengaging themselves emotionally from the results of their action.

Embedded within this thought tradition, Yudhishtira lacks the intellectual resources or courage to deconstruct the logical sophistication of Krishna’s rhetoric.³³ Therefore, the book does not contain comparably developed counter-rhetoric in Yudhishtira on the “object of life”. However, that deficiency does not stop Yudhishtira from making the case of a thorough reevaluation of the dominant ideology of Kshatriya Dharma, because he finds a misalignment between the ideology and the proper “object of life.” It is in this connection, the chaos and collapse of the war remind him of the maternal instinct and their nurturing efforts: “by fasts and sacrifices and sacred rites and auspicious ceremonies mothers conceive.”³⁴ However, what the war has done to their sons must make us think of the “object of life” in a different fashion: “alas, since their sons, youth in years and resplendent with ear-rings, have been slain, therefore, those expectations of theirs rendered fruitless, have been abandoned by them.”³⁵ For him, this becomes the question: should not the good feelings and simple joys amidst the beauty of nature be the “objects of life?” Framing the debate in this way, Vyas contrasts his views on the significance of human commiseration from Krishna’s teaching. From Krishna’s perspective, human lives—no matter how refined within the biological system—ultimately vanish in the biochemical drama of the physical world. Little human lives and their emotions do not factor substantially in the larger ontological stratum, a position that does not depart vastly from our prevailing scientific worldview, consisting of the ever-expanding universe as a journey between the big bang and the singularity crunch.³⁶ For Krishna, the mantra becomes “follow the current warrior code”. Krishna’s encounter with Gandhari for the first time after the war further illustrates this point. When asked why he let the bloodshed happen by this blind-folded bereaving mother, Krishna smiles back at her, instead of sympathizing with her grief. He is indifferent, almost absurdist about human emotion.³⁷ For him,

³² *Mahabharata*, Book of Peace, Section VII. (<https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/m12/m12a007.htm>).

³³ I’m using the word rhetoric in the broadest sense of the term. Rhetoric, as used here, is a totality of discourse incorporating the elements far beyond argumentation and delivery.

³⁴ *Mahabharata*, Book of Peace, Section VII. (<https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/m12/m12a007.htm>).

³⁵ *Mahabharata*, Book of Peace, Section VII. (<https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/m12/m12a007.htm>).

³⁶ Easwaran, *Gita*, 164.

³⁷ The use of the term “absurd” to interpret the *Gita* may elicit an opposition, especially in light of how the twentieth-century European absurdist movement defines the word that negates the existence of anything supreme beyond human consciousness and thus the possibility of any providential meaning of human life. The *Gita* is a paramount spiritual text that emphasizes the presence of the supreme consciousness and unique human capacity to enlightenment in contact with that Supreme Being. While the *Gita* firmly establishes the god’s existence, it also presents the human life more from an elemental scientific view that characterizes human emotions as the products myopic human perspective without much consequences on the broader world. Thus, human emotions, while significant for human beings themselves, do not appear to be of any effect in the cosmic ontology envisioned in Krishna’s teaching.

battle and death are insignificant in the grand scheme of things. From his perspective, Gandhari's emotions—while deep and devastating in themselves—are merely the transitory outpouring from a mother without an intellectual capacity to distinguish between the worldly attachment and the true spirit of the existence. In the transformative wheel of the universe, deliberate human actions do not make a significant difference; while the attainment of spiritual liberation would place a person closer with the ultimate reality, even that achievement does not make much of a difference in the totality of the essence. In this context, it is important to note that while Krishna offers the soaring rhetoric persuading Arjun to take up his arms again, an examination of his actions and expressions suggests that a particular result, or even whether the war takes place, does not make much of a difference for him. That Krishna gives his army to Duryodhana, although he is counseling Arjun, suggests that the charismatic master is not totally for one side; he could maintain an equanimity irrespective of the battle. As he states, when Krishna is the cosmos himself, nothing remains to be gained or lost at the battlefield at Kurukshetra. Krishna's response to Gandhari should therefore be placed within the larger theory of detachment that he transmitted to Arjun earlier.

Unquestionably, detachment and equanimity are central characteristics cultivated by seasoned mystics and meditators, which help them rise above the temporary sensory fluctuations. The attainment of these characteristics means that one has developed the witnessing selfhood, free from a normal moment-to-moment response-prone human disposition. Of course, these characteristics are also esteemed as the mark of objectivity in the Western Enlightenment tradition. However, the whole point of this analysis is that when placed in the furnace of rigorous rhetorical scrutiny, Vyas finds these prized qualities fail to serve humanity well.

This analysis demands a note on the difference between the rhetorical styles of Krishna and Vyas.³⁸ Krishna's rhetorical style is direct: as he tries to dissuade Arjun from running away from the impending war, Krishna openly addresses Arjun, using his knowledge, experience, and ethos that comprised the dominant belief system of the time. Composed by Vyas, Krishna's discourse, indeed, is one of the best expressions of human eloquence, which blends a complex system of ideas, from ethics to metaphysics. Because of this rhetoric created in the epic, Krishna subsequently emerges as one of the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu in the Hindu Pantheon. Vyas's rhetoric, on the other hand, is more nuanced, both because it includes Krishna's discourse and also counteracts to the persuasive prowess built-in Krishna's rhetoric. Vyas needed to represent Krishna authentically if his rhetorical enterprise were to be up to the mark of his design. Not portraying the object of his analysis precisely with all its beauty and power would not have allowed him to dissect it. After all, he was aiming at exposing something that was considered to be beautifully almost universally.

In a sense, through this complex rhetorical design, Vyas attends to the fault line between the philosophical and theological preference for logos and ethos and the cost of human pathos entailed in such preference. While logos, ethos, and pathos are not always strictly separable, the dominant philosophical tendency has been its preference for logos. Plato's call for the banishment of poets from his republic and his insistence on the installation of the philosopher-king at the throne therein represents a prime anecdote of this tendency. Ethos is the backbone of major religions, where speakers establish the integrity of their teaching either by claiming themselves godheads or by presenting themselves as the true spokespersons of the god. Indubitably, philosophies and theologies also evoke certain emotions, but they do this by giving short shrift to the fundamental human pathos. For instance, Krishna criticizes artists and the people engrossed in the beauty and power of the world in a very Platonic tone. He states, "There are ignorant people who speak flowery words . . . Their hearts are full of selfish desires, Arjun. Their idea of heaven is their own enjoyment, and the aim of all their activities

³⁸ Krishna's rhetoric itself is created by Vyas the author. My argument is that Krishna's argument was the dominant ideology of the time, and the genius of the author lies not only representing this ideology so eloquently but also in exposing its devastating consequences when it is used to support wars.

is pleasure and power. The fruit of their actions is a continual rebirth.”³⁹ In this statement, Krishna is not denouncing hedonism: he finds fault in people’s preoccupation with common human emotions. For him, if there is anything worth doing as a human, it is the transcendence from the cycle of births and rebirths. In the epic, Vyas—I am arguing—presents his artist’s take on this transcendence-seeking charismatic war leader. As analyzed throughout this paper, whether to value and act upon finer human emotions such as commiseration is the main difference between these two rhetorical projects.

To appreciate the monumentality of Vyasa’s rhetorical project, we have to comprehend the idea that Krishna’s teaching was not radical within the historical and cultural context of the epic. Krishna represented the dominant ideology of the time eloquently, because of which he garnered widespread admiration across the spectrum of warriors from Bhishma to Duryodhana. He embodies the basic creed governing the faith system of the time. What distinguishes Krishna from other major figures of the epic is not the idea that he propagates, but his ability to embody and explain that ideology in its radically pure form.

An ideology serves as a fabric of life and is sustained through individual performances.⁴⁰ While it may harm certain or sometimes all people participating in the system of its operation, requiring them to conform to its restricting norms, an ideology works as a way of life, mostly explaining the societally and ethically sound course of action for someone in crisis. Ideology also serves as a ready-made handbook for its inhabitants’ daily operation. Opposing an ideology is therefore an enormous mission, not only because it is difficult for someone to see through the cracks of ideology, but also because some of the best intellectual and cultural resources within the territory of the ideology’s influence are used to bolster it.

To confront the dominant ideology of his time, Vyas creates Krishna as an admirable character. If Vyas’s purpose were to create a ridiculous, questionable character, the author could have created Krishna in whatever form he wanted—maybe someone full of flaws. Indeed, there are such characters in the *Mahabharata*—full of intelligence but filled with malice and revenge—whom readers automatically disapprove of, and the author does not have much to expose of them. Vyas is undertaking a bigger rhetorical task: demonstrating the destructive capacity of a commendable leader through the character of Krishna. Thus, Krishna is a celebrated, charismatic leader. The most effective war leaders are like that, and thus converting Krishna into something negative would not have served the author’s purpose of countering the major war ideology of the *Mahabharat*. For that purpose, the *Mahabharat* has Duryodhana, the anti-hero—the blood-thirsty warmonger without any limits to his greed. That kind of figure and tendency has already been shamed and thus does not inspire idealistic masculine wishes. For Vyas, the problem does not lie in the Duryodhana- figure and tendency because they are treated as abhorrent within the dominant ideological imagination; the problem rests on the veneer of virtuosity represented by the Krishna-figure and its ability to inspire self-righteous proclamations. Lodged within human racial memory, this archetypal war hero is conceived fundamentally as a lover of peace, who must wage war only as the last recourse in the absence of other alternatives. So, if this dominant archetypal figure were to be questioned effectively, Vyas had to present it in its ideal form without compromising its authenticity.

4. Vyas’ Interrogation of the War Rhetoric and Its Contemporary Relevance

What is the relevance of this analysis? What can we gain by foregrounding an artist’s exposure of a celebrated divine figure, especially at a time when the wars described in the ancient epics look old-fashioned without much resemblance to the wars fought in our time? While it is true that some forms of wars have become antiquated with the ever-expanding use of new technology, what has not become outdated is the persistence of the rhetoric of ‘required and just war’. This form of rhetoric

³⁹ *Gita*, 2: 42–43.

⁴⁰ My understanding of ideology primarily comes from Marxist theorists such as (Althusser 1978). (Laclau 1977).

presents wars at the last recourse by associating them with some noble ideas, in which the human cost of such wars is touted as a necessary sacrifice for the restoration of order and normalcy. At the core of this 'required and just war' rhetoric lies the idea that fighters should detach themselves from their feelings so that they can kill their fellow human beings robotically, without themselves being harmed emotionally by the experience in the process.⁴¹

As Arjun's emotional outburst at the beginning of the war suggests, killing ruthlessly in an organized fashion is challenging for a human. However, that is what war machines need from fighters—a reason countries set up an arduous training process for soldiers to develop their mental and physical habits for decimating foes mechanically. In a sense, Arjun's eruption of commiseration at the battlefield represents the failure of that training from Krishna's perspective. From Vyas's perspective, however, Arjun's empathy stands for the fundamental human desire for connection with fellow human beings. What Vyas shows is that even the rigorous Kshatriya war code that structured the worldview of warriors such as Arjun could not function in absolute terms in the presence of people before him. In such an occurrence, the whole theory of detachment and associated penances and training lose their command.

The nature of war has changed dramatically in the centuries following the composition of the *Mahabharata* and other similar epics, such as the *Iliad*. Unlike in the ancient epics, the leaders making the war decisions do not directly participate in most twenty-first-century wars, a condition that automatically detaches them from the messiness and emotional turmoil of their battles. For them, war therefore becomes a political calculus, sanitized from the muddle of death and destruction. Detachment defines their state of mind. Interpreted in this context, the idea of detachment as expressed in the *Gita*—while important from a particular spiritual perspective—can have devastating consequences. The concept of detachment not only dehumanizes and objectifies a warrior by turning them into battling robots, but it also makes them oblivious to the suffering of their enemies brought about by their actions. The ideology of Kshatriya Dharma and its modern descendants may celebrate the bravery of such detached work, but such heroism comes at the cost of humanity. Humanity should entail the cultivation of more delicate feelings and the enhancement of more in-depth relationships among human beings, if not upholding of the value of biosphere by expanding one's sense of care into the realms of animals, insects, and plants.

With his counter-rhetoric, specifically by the inclusion of the *Stri Purva* (the *Book of Women*) and *Shanti Parva* (the *Book of Peace*) in the *Mahabharata*, Vyas directs us to expand our horizons in that direction. His rhetoric certainly challenges the prevailing war ideology of his time, which asked the most intelligent members of his society to detach themselves from their bodies and fellow humanity for the sake of abstract notions of justice and righteousness. However, the logic of his monumental work transcends his context, as the *Mahabharat*—when analyzed in its totality as a sophisticated rhetorical undertaking—asks us to see through the rhetoric of 'required and just wars'.

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⁴¹ As recent statistics and national conversation demonstrate, war veterans suffer significant post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) because their experience in wars is unhealthy from the normal human psychological structure.

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