

On Myth and Reality

(From *The Game*, 2012)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9OtFUPEeiWg>

In a world on fire with war, disaster and apocalyptic aggressions, we hunger for tales of hope and redemption, for the comfort of myths. Through them, we can perhaps hope that dire outcomes may yet be averted, and that there is a reason and order to our callously unpredictable universe.

“The airbags actually worked. The cheque did not bounce. The prescription drug company was not lying. The shark nudged the sailor’s naked, bleeding leg, then turned away.”

Margaret Atwood, ‘But It Could Still’ in *The Tent*

We do not think to fool ourselves. Reality is too disillusioning for that. But in all cultures, be they ever so sophisticated, there is a need for myth, an urge to have faith in something, a longing for transcendence; and human beings have always been mythmakers. We have myths of nationalism, of religion and ritual, of heroism and immortality. Mythology is also a truth reserved for the greatest extremity, when events pass our understanding or cannot be borne. Like poetry or music, myth awakes a sense of rapture, even in the face of death or despair. “Myths are universal and timeless stories that reflect and shape our lives – they mirror our desires, our fears, our longings, and provide narratives that attempt to help us make sense of the world.” (Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth*)

But we also commonly use the word ‘myth’ to imply an untruth, a false narrative. It’s propaganda. False news. Disinformation. It’s insulation against the darkest parts of our experience. Reality obscures the greatest of myths, but myth conceals the grimmest reality.

“You don’t have to think of us as real girls, real flesh and blood, real pain, real injustice. That might be too upsetting. Just discard the sordid part. Consider us pure symbol. We’re no more real than money.”

Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad*

Indian dance revolves around myth, heroic epic and religious symbolism. Contemporary thought, however, has a tendency to question; and *The Game*, a reworking of Manohar’s 2006 original, nudges at its shaping myth, the *Mahabharata*, but does not turn away. A vast heroic narrative of a fratricidal struggle between two branches of a royal family, the story of the *Mahabharata* as it has come down to us vacillates between magical tale and philosophic discourse, between a world of realistic tribal strife and a dream world of mythic collusion between gods and man.

At over 18,000 verses, ten times longer than the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* combined, the *Mahabharata* is perhaps the world’s greatest epic. It is a tapestry of stories and philosophies, containing within it both scripture and parable, as well as the secular world of politics and chivalry in an India of the early epoch

of civilization. Most historians estimate the date of the *Mahabharata* to be the 10th century BCE, during India's early Iron Age, and artefacts believed to date back to the events described in the epic have been found near modern day Delhi. Attributed to the poet-saint Vyasa, the epic originally existed in oral tradition, and was written down in fragments centuries after it was said to have been composed. Much was later interpolated; the text as we now know it was assembled around 400 CE, with the addition of glosses, secular stories and sacred passages. Most famous of these is the Bhagavad Gita, which is of a later date than the major parts of the *Mahabharata*, and was probably composed in the 1st or 2nd century CE.

The core story of the *Mahabharata* epic is one of inevitable conflict: a dynastic struggle for the throne of an empire ruled by the aged, blind king Dhritarashtra. The two collateral branches of the family who aspire to the throne are the Kaurava clan and their cousins the Pandavas. Duryodhana, the eldest Kaurava and son of the blind king is younger than Yudhishtira, the eldest Pandava; both thus claim to be first in line to inherit the throne. The king attempts to pacify the rival princes by dividing the kingdom in two, but neither is satisfied. So the Kauravas invite Yudhishtira to play a game of dice – a popular pastime of royals and nobles. Master gambler Sakuni plays as Duryodhana's proxy. Yudhishtira loses his wealth, his lands, then his title to the crown. He gambles himself and his brothers into servitude; and finally stakes their common wife Draupadi. When he loses, Draupadi is dragged into the court. What ensues in that courtroom is the pivotal scene of the *Mahabharata* epic. It has entered myth and religion as the miracle of the cloth – even as the Kauravas maliciously try to disrobe Draupadi, her honour is saved by God, in Lord Krishna endlessly lengthening her sari. Nonetheless, she vows a bloody revenge. She and the Pandavas are exiled from the empire. In the end, both the quest for vengeance and the dynastic power struggle are decided in a climactic battle on the field of Kurukshetra, where the Pandavas ultimately emerge victorious. The battle lasts eighteen terrible days. It devolves from chivalric nobility into treachery and carnage, and is retold in the *Mahabharata* as a microcosm of the fall of man.

There may be a historical *Mahabharata*, its players lost in the mists of time. There is a *Mahabharata* of faith. And there is a mythic *Mahabharata*, full of dark metaphor and almost unbearable emotion. The epic has been translated numerous times, each translation capturing a slightly different image of the original as our needs for its myths change.

What do we need from myth? A heroic ideal? An escape from the cruel laws of physics or human psychology? A greater truth that transcends reality? Can we have all of these, and still reach the hearts of the flesh-and-blood characters that populate both our stories and our desperate world?