

Shakuni and the Reconfiguration of Strength: Exploring Disability and Power in Indian Knowledge Systems

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Abstract

This paper examines Anand Neelakantan's retelling of the *Mahabharata* in his novel *Roll of the Dice*, which offers a reimagined portrayal of Shakuni, the cunning Gandhara prince, and the pivotal dice game that shifts the course of the epic. Neelakantan provides a fresh perspective on the Kauravas, focusing particularly on Shakuni's disability and its profound influence on the narrative. His portrayal of Shakuni's crippled leg and his tragic past reveals a deeper psychological complexity, presenting him not simply as a villain, but as a tragic figure whose disability symbolizes both his emotional torment and moral suffering. This suffering drives Shakuni to become a master strategist, motivated by revenge. By reframing Shakuni's disability as a source of empowerment and agency, Neelakantan challenges conventional views of disability in the Indian context. The novel encourages a reconsideration of strength in Indian knowledge systems, where mental resilience can transcend physical limitations, and strategic intelligence becomes a form of power. This analysis of Neelakantan's work offers a nuanced exploration of disability, revenge, and moral dilemmas, shedding light on how Indian knowledge systems have historically engaged with the complexities of human nature, destiny, and agency. The paper contributes to the broader discourse on disability in Indian narratives, demonstrating how disability can serve both as a metaphor for suffering and a tool for agency in shaping the course of history.

Keywords: Indian narratives, disability, Indian knowledge systems, etc...

Introduction

The *Mahabharata* is not merely an epic of familial conflict, heroism, and tragedy; it is a profound repository of philosophical insights that delve into the depths of human nature, ethics, and the cosmic order. Often described as the fifth Veda, the *Mahabharata* serves as a quintessential source of Indian knowledge systems, encapsulating the philosophical, ethical, political, and spiritual dimensions of Indian civilization. Its rich tapestry of stories, dialogues, and moral dilemmas provides timeless wisdom that addresses universal human concerns. By synthesizing multiple streams of Indian thought—including Vedic traditions, Upanishadic philosophy, and folk narratives, the *Mahabharata* emerges as a comprehensive repository of wisdom. It stands as a timeless guide to understand the interplay of individual and collective existence, blending the moral and the metaphysical with the practical and the political.

Among the myriad memorable characters in the *Mahabharata*, Shakuni, the cunning prince of Gandhara, stands out as one of the most enigmatic and controversial figures. Traditionally portrayed as the devious villain, Shakuni's role in orchestrating the famous dice game and his manipulative strategies to pit the Kauravas against the Pandavas have earned him an infamous reputation. His character is often seen as the personification of deceit, cunning, and moral corruption. However, Anand Neelakantan's retelling of the *Mahabharata* in *Roll of the Dice*, the first book of his *Ajaya* series, offers a refreshing and nuanced perspective on Shakuni. Neelakantan delves beyond the surface of the epic's canonical narrative to explore the psychological and moral complexities of Shakuni's character. By focusing on Shakuni's

disability and tragic backstory, the novel reframes his actions and motivations, presenting him not merely as a villain but as a deeply human figure shaped by his circumstances and suffering.

This paper argues that Neelakantan's portrayal of Shakuni in *Roll of the Dice* reframes his disability as a source of strength and agency, challenging traditional representations of disability in Indian narratives. By examining Shakuni's psychological depth, strategic intelligence, and the cultural symbolism of disability, this paper situates Neelakantan's work within the broader discourse of Indian knowledge systems, which emphasize mental resilience over physical prowess.

Reimagining Shakuni

In traditional narratives, Shakuni's actions are often attributed to his malevolent nature. Neelakantan's *Roll of the Dice* disrupts this perception, presenting Shakuni as a tragic figure shaped by his painful past and physical disability. His crippled leg, a constant reminder of his family's annihilation at the hands of the Kuru dynasty, becomes both a physical limitation and a symbol of his resilience. "Every step he took was a reminder of his pain, but also of his purpose" (Neelakantan 87).

Neelakantan delves into the origins of Shakuni's enmity toward the Kuru dynasty. Born as the prince of Gandhara, Shakuni's early life is marked by prosperity and peace. However, the political marriage of his sister, Gandhari, to the blind Kuru prince Dhritarashtra sets the stage for his future vendetta. Gandhari's forced union is seen as a humiliation by Shakuni and his family, particularly when it is revealed that she was kept in the dark about Dhritarashtra's blindness until after the wedding. Adding to this insult, the Gandhara kingdom is subjugated under the might of

the Kuru empire. Shakuni's father, King Subala, and his brothers are imprisoned and systematically starved to death by the Kuru rulers in a ruthless display of power. Shakuni, the sole survivor of this atrocity, vows to avenge the destruction of his family and the dishonor inflicted upon Gandhara. This tragic backstory serves as the foundation for his transformation into a master manipulator, bent on dismantling the Kuru dynasty from within.

In this retelling, Shakuni emerges as a tragic anti-hero - a man caught between the pursuit of revenge and the moral dilemmas it entails. His actions, while often destructive, are rooted in a deeply personal sense of justice, highlighting the thin line between villainy and heroism. Neelakantan compels readers to reconsider Shakuni not as a one-dimensional antagonist but as a multifaceted character whose actions, though morally questionable, are deeply human and relatable. Neelakantan attributes Shakuni's cunningness to his lived experience of suffering, which imbues him with a sense of psychological complexity. His limp is not merely a sign of weakness but a constant motivator driving his quest for revenge. Shakuni's portrayal resonates with other disabled characters in the *Mahabharata*, such as Dhritarashtra, whose blindness symbolizes his inability to see beyond familial attachments. However, while Dhritarashtra's disability underscores his limitations, Shakuni's physical impairment is reimagined as a tool for empowerment.

Disability as Empowerment

Shakuni's strategic brilliance, as depicted in *Roll of the Dice*, underscores a recurring theme in Indian knowledge systems: the triumph of intellect over physical might. His ability to outwit his opponents compensates for his physical limitations, allowing him to exert influence over the course of the epic. "A cripple could never lead an army, but he could destroy one with a

roll of the dice” (Neelakantan 155). This theme finds parallels in classical Indian texts such as the *Arthashastra*, where cunning and strategy are celebrated as vital forms of power.

Neelakantan aligns Shakuni’s intellect with these ideals, reframing him as a figure that channels his suffering into agency and mastery. Shakuni’s strategic manipulation of the dice game is a testament to his ability to weaponize his intellect. By leveraging his skills, he turns the Kauravas into unwitting pawns in his plan for vengeance, demonstrating how mental resilience can transcend physical limitations.

Neelakantan’s portrayal underscores the idea that Shakuni’s disability is not a limitation but a source of empowerment. Unable to confront his enemies physically, he becomes a master strategist, turning his intellect into his primary tool of resistance. This reconfiguration of strength challenges conventional notions of power in the Indian context, suggesting that mental resilience and strategic intelligence can transcend physical limitations.

Disability as a Dual Symbol

Neelakantan’s portrayal of Shakuni also underscores the dual symbolism of disability - Suffering and Agency. On one hand, his crippled leg serves as a metaphor for his emotional and moral suffering, a constant reminder of the injustices he has endured. On the other hand, it becomes a tool for agency, driving him to challenge the powerful Kuru dynasty. “Revenge was his religion, and pain was his prayer” (Neelakantan 202). The intersection of suffering and agency reflects broader cultural attitudes toward disability in Indian narratives. As G. N. Devy notes, “Indian epistemology often acknowledges the coexistence of vulnerability and strength, viewing disability not merely as a deficit but as an avenue for transformation” (Devy 102). This perspective is evident in Shakuni’s evolution from a victim to a master strategist.

The reconfiguration of Shakuni's character aligns with the philosophical underpinnings of Indian knowledge systems. Concepts such as *dharma* (duty) and *karma* (action) emphasize the interplay between individual agency and destiny. Shakuni's actions, while morally ambiguous, reflect his attempt to assert control over a destiny shaped by suffering. Theoretical insights from Disability Studies further enrich this analysis. Meena Dhanda's work on disability in Indian epics highlights how physical impairments often serve as metaphors for broader human struggles. Neelakantan subverts this trope by portraying Shakuni's disability as a source of power, challenging traditional representations of strength. Shakuni's character serves as a powerful reminder of the complexities of human nature, demonstrating how suffering can be a source of agency and transformation. This reinterpretation enriches our understanding of disability in Indian storytelling, offering valuable insights into the philosophical foundations of Indian knowledge systems.

Conclusion

One of the most striking elements of Shakuni's character in Neelakantan's retelling is his physical disability, a limp resulting from an injury he sustained during his captivity. This impairment becomes a defining feature of his identity, not just physically but also symbolically. Shakuni's limp is a constant reminder of the suffering inflicted upon him and his family. It is both a mark of his vulnerability and a symbol of his resilience. Rather than being diminished by his disability, Shakuni channels his pain into strategic brilliance. His physical limitation forces him to rely on his intellect, making him a formidable force in the power dynamics of the Kuru court.

Through a nuanced depiction of Shakuni's character, the novel *Roll of the Dice* enriches the discourse on disability, agency, and moral complexity in Indian narratives. It demonstrates how disability, far from being a passive condition, can serve as a catalyst for transformation and a means of asserting agency in shaping history. By reimagining Shakuni in this light, Neelakantan not only revisits an iconic character but also broadens the interpretative possibilities of the *Mahabharata* itself, making it resonate with contemporary concerns about identity, power, and resilience.

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