

Sleep, Death, and Epic Dissent: A Psychological Rewriting of the *Mahabharata* in P. K. Balakrishnan's *Now Let Me Sleep*

Dr Sunal Sharma

Assistant Professor (English)

Govt. SPMR College of Commerce, Jammu

Abstract

P. K. Balakrishnan's *Now Let Me Sleep* stands as a landmark modern Malayalam novel that radically reinterprets the *Mahabharata* through the tragic consciousness of Karna. Departing from conventional epic heroism, the novel employs psychological introspection and stream-of-consciousness narration to interrogate caste hierarchy, fate, and the moral absolutism of epic dharma. This paper examines how the metaphor of "sleep" operates as both a symbol of death and a release from historical injustice, while also functioning as an act of resistance against dominant epic ideology. By foregrounding Karna's silenced subjectivity, Balakrishnan transforms the epic into a site of ethical questioning and human suffering. The study argues that *Now Let Me Sleep* is not merely a retelling but a profound counter-epic that destabilizes mythic authority and recasts Karna as a subaltern tragic hero.

Keywords: P. K. Balakrishnan, *Now Let Me Sleep*, Karna, myth revision, psychological novel, counter-epic

Indian epics have traditionally functioned as moral and cultural touchstones, shaping collective ideas of heroism, duty, and righteousness. However, their narratives often marginalize or vilify characters who do not conform to the rigid structures of caste and lineage. Karna, despite his unparalleled generosity and martial skill, has remained one of the most tragic figures of the *Mahabharata*, condemned largely due to the circumstances of his birth.

P. K. Balakrishnan's *Now Let Me Sleep* marks a decisive shift from epic narration to psychological realism. Written in Malayalam and later translated into English, the novel reconstructs the epic from Karna's perspective during the final night before his death. This paper explores how Balakrishnan dismantles epic grandeur and replaces it with introspective suffering, thereby offering a dissenting voice within the epic tradition.

Modern Indian literature has witnessed a sustained engagement with myth revision, particularly as a means of interrogating social hierarchies. While writers such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Kavita Kane focus on feminist recuperations, Balakrishnan's project is distinct in its subaltern and psychological orientation.

Critical discussions of *Now Let Me Sleep* emphasize its existential depth and philosophical critique of dharma. Scholars have noted the novel's affinity with modernist techniques, particularly its interior monologue and fragmented temporality. However, there remains scope for a focused analysis of how the metaphor of sleep structures the novel's ethical and narrative vision, a gap this paper seeks to address. This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework drawing on myth criticism, subaltern studies, and psychological literary theory to analyze *Now Let Me Sleep* as a counter-epic narrative.

Myth criticism enables an understanding of how canonical narratives are not fixed but continually reshaped by cultural power structures. As Marina Warner observes, myths survive because they are repeatedly retold, often reinforcing dominant ideologies unless consciously revised (Warner 1995). P. K. Balakrishnan's novel participates in what Adrienne Rich terms "re-vision", the act of seeing old texts from new critical directions in order to expose silences and exclusions (Rich 1972). Rather than rejecting the *Mahabharata*, Balakrishnan interrogates its moral foundations by shifting narrative authority to a marginalized figure.

Subaltern studies offer a crucial lens for interpreting Karna's historical and symbolic marginalization. Ranajit Guha defines the subaltern as one whose voice is structurally excluded from hegemonic discourse (Guha 1982). In the epic tradition, Karna's virtues are consistently overshadowed by his perceived low birth, rendering him morally admirable yet socially illegitimate. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?", resonates powerfully here (Spivak 1988). *Now Let Me Sleep* can be read as an imaginative answer to this question, granting Karna narrative voice at the moment when epic tradition silences him through death.

Psychological literary theory, particularly the study of stream-of-consciousness narration, illuminates Balakrishnan's narrative technique. Robert Humphrey notes that stream of consciousness seeks to represent the "pre-speech levels of consciousness" where memory, emotion, and perception merge (Humphrey 1954). By situating the entire novel within Karna's final night, Balakrishnan replaces epic action with psychological duration, privileging interior truth over external event.

In contrast to the *Mahabharata*, where Karna appears primarily through episodic actions and heroic confrontations, Balakrishnan's Karna is rendered as a deeply introspective consciousness. The novel unfolds through recollection, remorse, resentment, and longing, transforming Karna from a static epic figure into a psychologically complex individual.

Balakrishnan foregrounds the trauma of caste humiliation, depicting how repeated acts of exclusion shape Karna's inner life. His denial at the tournament, his insult by Draupadi, and his perpetual need to prove worth are internalized as psychic wounds. These experiences align with Ambedkar's critique of caste as a system that produces not only social inequality but profound psychological alienation (Ambedkar 1936).

Karna's loyalty to Duryodhana is reinterpreted not as ethical failure but as a response to recognition and dignity. Unlike the Pandavas, who inherit legitimacy by birth, Karna must negotiate identity through gratitude and allegiance. This moral positioning complicates epic binaries of good and evil, reinforcing the novel's subaltern perspective.

The title *Now Let Me Sleep* encapsulates the novel's central symbolic structure. Sleep functions as a metaphor for death, but unlike epic martyrdom, it is stripped of heroism and spectacle. Death is imagined as rest, silence, and release from a world governed by injustice.

This conception challenges the epic valorization of sacrifice. Karna does not yearn for glory or posthumous recognition; instead, he desires cessation. In this sense, sleep becomes a form of resistance, a refusal to continue participating in an ethical order that has consistently denied him justice. Albert Camus' notion of rebellion as refusal without illusion is relevant here, as Karna's longing for sleep signals withdrawal from a morally absurd universe (Camus 1955)

The metaphor also underscores the novel's humanism. Death is not transcendence but relief, aligning the text with modern existential sensibilities rather than mythic triumphalism.

One of the most radical aspects of *Now Let Me Sleep* is its interrogation of dharma. In the epic tradition, dharma is often presented as universal and absolute. Balakrishnan exposes it as selective, operating differently across caste and power hierarchies. Krishna, revered as divine strategist, is portrayed with moral ambiguity. His manipulation of events, while justified in epic terms, appears ethically troubling when viewed from Karna's perspective. The novel thus desacralises divine authority, revealing how dharma often aligns with the interests of the victorious. This critique echoes Ambedkar's argument that religious morality in India has historically functioned to legitimize caste privilege (Ambedkar 1936). By allowing Karna to question divine justice, Balakrishnan transforms the epic into a space of ethical debate rather than moral certainty.

Balakrishnan's narrative strategy aligns *Now Let Me Sleep* with modernist fiction. Linear epic time dissolves into psychological time, where memory collapses chronology. The past intrudes upon the present, and the future exists only as anticipation of death.

Georg Lukács argues that the modern novel emerges from a condition of "transcendental homelessness," where individuals struggle to find meaning in fragmented moral worlds (Lukács 1971). Karna embodies this condition: excluded from lineage, denied belonging, and abandoned by both mother and gods. By employing modernist form, Balakrishnan bridges ancient myth and modern ethical consciousness, demonstrating that epics must be reinterpreted to remain morally relevant.

P. K. Balakrishnan's *Now Let Me Sleep* may be productively read alongside contemporary myth revisions by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kavita Kane, and Madeline Miller, all of whom reimagine classical narratives by foregrounding marginalized voices. However, Balakrishnan's intervention remains distinct in its psychological intensity, caste critique, and counter-epic dissent.

Divakaruni's novels such as *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments* employ feminist revisionism to retell the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* from women's perspectives. Draupadi and Sita are granted narrative agency, emotional depth, and moral reflection. While Divakaruni critiques patriarchal silencing, her narratives largely retain the epic's ethical framework. By contrast, Balakrishnan does not seek inclusion within epic morality but questions its very foundations. Karna's lament, "If dharma has a mother, she never knew me" (Balakrishnan), articulates a more radical dissent than Divakaruni's reformist feminism.

Similarly, Kavita Kane's works, *Karna's Wife*, *Sita's Sister*, *Menaka's Choice*, focus on the inner lives of women attached to epic heroes, highlighting emotional neglect, sacrifice, and resilience. Kane humanizes myth without dismantling it. Her Karna remains a noble tragic hero, whereas Balakrishnan's Karna is a psychologically fractured subject whose tragedy exposes the structural violence of caste. Kane seeks empathy; Balakrishnan demands ethical reckoning.

Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe* offer modern re-tellings of Greek myths through lyric intimacy and emotional subjectivity. Like Balakrishnan, Miller rejects heroic grandeur and privileges interior consciousness. However, Miller's protagonists

negotiate exclusion through personal transformation and self-acceptance. Balakrishnan's Karna, constrained by caste and fate, finds no such resolution. His desire for sleep signifies not self-realization but a refusal of mythic justice itself.

Thus, while Divakaruni, Kane, and Miller rewrite myth to recover silenced voices, Balakrishnan transforms myth into a site of resistance. His novel operates not as a parallel retelling but as a counter-epic that interrogates the ethical legitimacy of epic tradition.

P. K. Balakrishnan's *Now Let Me Sleep* represents one of the most powerful modern rewritings of the Mahabharata. Through psychological depth, symbolic use of sleep, and subaltern critique, the novel dismantles epic moral certainty and replaces it with ethical ambiguity and human suffering. When read alongside Divakaruni, Kane, and Miller, Balakrishnan's work emerges as uniquely radical in its challenge to mythic authority. By allowing Karna to speak in his final moments, the novel compels readers to confront the violence embedded in cultural ideals of dharma, heroism, and destiny.

Works Cited:

Balakrishnan, P. K. *Now Let Me Sleep*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2001.

Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Palace of Illusions*. New York: Anchor Books, 2008.

Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Forest of Enchantments*. New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2019.

Kane, Kavita. *Karna's Wife: The Outcast Queen*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2013.

Kane, Kavita. *Sita's Sister*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2014.

Kane, Kavita. *Menaka's Choice*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2015.

Miller, Madeline. *The Song of Achilles*. New York: Ecco, 2011.

Miller, Madeline. *Circe*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2018.

Eliade, Mircea. *Myth and Reality*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. New York: Harper & Row, 1963.

Guha, Ranajit, ed. *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 271–313. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

Lukács, Georg. *The Theory of the Novel*. Trans. Anna Bostock. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971.

Woolf, Virginia. "Modern Fiction." In *The Common Reader*. London: Hogarth Press, 1925.

James, William. *The Principles of Psychology*. New York: Henry Holt, 1890.

Ambedkar, B. R. *Annihilation of Caste*. Bombay: Self-published, 1936.

Nandy, Ashis. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983.

Rich, Adrienne. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision." *College English* 34, no. 1 (1972): 18–30.

Valmiki. *The Ramayana*. Trans. R. K. Narayan. New Delhi: Penguin Classics, 2006.

Vyasa. *The Mahabharata*. Trans. Kisari Mohan Ganguli. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2006.