

**MASTER'S DEGREE IN ENGLISH (MEG-15)
COMPARATIVE LITERATURE: THEORY AND PRACTICE
ASSIGNMENT**

Course Code: MEG-15

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Max. Marks: 100

Attempt any five of the following:

1. What do you understand by the term 'comparative literature'? (20)
2. How does inter-literariness affect our interpretation of texts? (20)
3. How does a film that has been adapted from a story/novel affect our understanding of the text through the shift of perspective? Illustrate. (20)
4. Choose any text written in the style of magical realism and explain what features qualify it to be placed in this category of writing. (20)
5. What do you understand by the term 'oral literature'? Illustrate. (20)
6. Explain with examples how *Andhayug* is relevant to our times. (20)

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M.E.G.-15

Comparative Literature : Theory and Practice

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Attempt all the questions.

Q. 1. What do you understand by the term ‘comparative literature’?

Ans. Since the 16th century, the Latin term ‘*comparativus*’ was in use. The term *litteratur ecomparée* came into vogue in France in the 19th century. Later Abel-François Villetain in Sorbonne used this combined term. In English, Matthew Arnold used ‘Comparative Literature’ for the first time in a private letter in 1848. In his Inaugural Lecture at Oxford in 1857, Arnold talked about the connections between literatures of various countries.

In 1827, German writer Goethe used the term *Weltliteratur* and observed that “Different nations acknowledge each other and their respective creations” and a universal world literature has existed for a long time. He also talked about “World Literature”.

Referring to Indian Aesthetics, Amiya Dev says “*Rasikas* of the active kind put their readings together into possible patterns. It is out of these patterns that a system may emerge.”

The system may be called comparative literature because the patterning is involved with more than one literature. Susan Bassnett, the British scholar and historian of comparative literature, says we do not start with comparative literature, but we may end up with it.

For example, when we read an English version of the *Ramayana*, we may be impelled to think of Valmiki’s epic in the original or Tulsidas’s *Ramch-aritmanas* or Kamban’s *Ramayana* in Tamil. Thus, Bassnett says when we start reading we move across frontiers, making associations and connections.

Comparative Literature as an Academic Discipline

Comparative literature got academic status when the chairs were for the subject established in universities in Europe and the US in the late 19th century. In the early 20th century, many European scholars moved to the US and tried to track motives, themes, types and other elements in various literatures.

Paul Van Tieghem, of the French school, differentiated between comparative literature and general literature. Comparative literature refers to the study of interrelations between two literatures while general literature is concerned with the movements and fashions which sweep through several literatures. Fernand Baldensperger, leader of the

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School, had no use for comparisons which did not involve “A real encounter’ that has ‘created a dependence”. The French insistence on two elements banned many prospective areas of comparison as “Exclusion Zones”. French and German authors can be compared, but not a Canadian and a Kenyan, for the latter two write in English.

Another problem that emerged from the French dogmatism is the reduction of comparison to a study of sources and influences, causes and effects, ignoring the totality of a work of art. Besides, the approach was author-centred and hence excluded oral literature, anonymous literature, folk literature and other types of literature.

This strict approach alongwith the tendency to dominate, led to what Wellek called the “*Crisis of Comparative Literature*” in 1959. In the 1960s, American school emerged as a more liberal school, pursuing the study of the relationship between literature and other areas of knowledge, arts and belief.

According to H.H. Remak, who led the school, the influence studies should focus on “What was *retained* and what was *rejected* and *why*; and *how* was the material absorbed and integrated”. The school focused thematic parallelism and not the historical and generic aspects. Thus, while the “Old World ‘comparative literature’” stressed on documenting sources of influences in terms of national consciousness, the “New World ‘comparative literature’” saw its task in “transnational terms”.

Since the 1970s, Comparative Literature has developed certain important theoretical concepts. Discovery of “Analog and parallel processes of literary evolution” helps to explain “Historical and social laws of universal validity”. Analogy, contrast, reception and influence are the nodal points of comparison in a systematic juxtaposition of phenomena from different literatures.

Claudio Guillen has talked of the possible confusion between influence and textual similarities, asking the comparatist to study how the transfer happens. Ulrich Weisstein has called for a nuanced study of “influence” and “reception” leading to “survival.”

Since the 1980s, expansion of literary theory into the larger theoretical realms of social sciences has happened. Scholars (most of them European exiles and emigrés in the US during the inter-war and post-war period) have called for periodical reports on the issue of ‘professional standards’: Harry Levin’s in 1965, Thomas Greene’s in 1975 and finally, Bernheimer’s in 1993.

Q. 2. How does interliterariness affect our interpretation of texts?

Ans. Interliterariness: In the post-colonial era, the issues on comparative literature have become more complex.

Post-colonialism asserted national identity as a counter to colonial domination, which erased the identity of a nation, a people, its culture by committing “Epistemic Violence” and helped a nation to place its own canonical works and alternative genres in opposition to European history and historiography. Postcolonial literature has some problems. The abstract concept of nation and national unity was unable to do justice to the concrete differences in terms of language, culture, literature, so obviously present in various regions. Hence, the need for a sensitive understanding of a postcolonial resistance to European comparative literature, with its model of genealogy, thematology, literary history, literary criticism, genetic studies, influence and reception studies and canon formation.

Marian Gálik talked about ‘interliterariness,’ as a comparative tool. ‘Literariness’, the basic quality of all literature, becomes ‘interliterariness’ when its features “Transcend the boundaries of individual literatures” in terms of “intensity, variability, mutual relations, or affinities”. *For examples*, the treatment of the epic women Helen, Sita and Draupadi. ‘Literariness’ concerns one region, its language; it becomes ‘interliterariness’ when it goes beyond zones, regions and other linguistic barriers.

For example, Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, both in northern and southern retellings, depicts Ahalya as languishing, living only on air (*vayupakshanirahara*) after being cursed for adultery by her sage husband; while another southern

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retelling (*Dharmalaya*) turns her into a stone (*silabhutva*). Kamban in Tamil also describes the curse similarly, drawing perhaps from ancient Sangam poetical versions of Ahalya's story.

Amiya Dev talks about "the notion of interliterary process and a **dialectical** view of literary interaction" as a way out of the impasse of abstractions like unity, diversity and national literature. Gurubhagat Singh's concept of "**Differential Multilogue**" denied the very idea of an Indian literature. However, Dev recognizes "*A sensus communis*" of a broadly cultural kind present wherein a comparatist must find his 'situs' or location of theory. He underscores the existence of an interliterary condition in India, long before "its manuscript or print culture".

Q. 4. Choose any text written in the style of magical realism and explain what features qualify it to be placed in this category of writing.

Ans. The features of magical realism as a narrative mode, recognized and collated by Zamora and Faris in their monumental work *Magical Realism Theory History Community*, are given below:

- (i) A magical realist text features an element of magic, which cannot be explained by the laws of the nature. These magical events cannot be explained in terms of cause and effect. Reactions to these events by ordinary people are familiar and disturbing, thus, serving as a critique of human nature.
- (ii) Realism refers to the concrete descriptions of the natural or real world. In Realistic detailing, a fictional world is created and that resembles the real one.
- (iii) Magical events are weaved together in a realistic narrative that creates the impression that the magic grows out of the real. It achieves a kind of defamiliarization.
- (iv) It presents contradictory understandings of events and one is not sure whether to interpret it as hallucination, magic or as allegory.
- (v) This narrative mode is suited to explore and transgress boundaries whether political, ontological, geographical or generic. Boundaries such as mind and body, spirit and matter, life and death, real and imaginary, self and other, male and female, fact and fiction, ordinary and magical are erased, transgressed, blurred or refashioned.
- (vi) The world of the ordinary or the mundane and the world of the magical are merged suggesting a plurality of worlds.
- (vii) Magical realist texts question ideas about time, space and identity mainly because of their non-linearity of the narrative, oral story-telling style, reliance on myths and folktales.
- (viii) Meta-fictional dimensions, metaphors that are literalized or textualized, intertextuality, verbal magic, repetition and mirroring of events and characters and a carnivalesque spirit in the extravagance of language, characters and events are some aspects of the narrative style that magical realism deals with.
- (ix) These texts resist and subvert basic assumptions of post-enlightenment rationalism and literary realism.
- (x) These texts also resist monologic political and cultural structures in their erasure of boundaries and thus, very useful to writers in postcolonial cultures and to women.
- (xi) Magical realism is Jungian and not Freudian. It reflects collective relatedness and not dreams or memories or visions.

In magical realism, magical events are presented realistically with a realistic narrative. For example, a description in the novel of a priest who can levitate after drinking chocolate: "...he wiped his lips with a handkerchief that he drew from his sleeve extended his arms and closed his eyes. There upon Father Nicanor rose six inches above the level of the ground." He also includes historical tragedies like civil wars, the rule of a dictator or army brutalities. In such narratives, he uses magical realism as a tool to present how truth is manipulated by the powerful. It does not

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mean that novels and stories that have been written in magical realism are only for children. All types of readers can enjoy such works.

Folk tales use magical realism as they involve situations and events that defy logic. They have strangeness. They also have historic context and societal concerns. Characters in folk tales also move backward, leap forward or zigzag between the past and the future. Animals without wings fly or disappear magically happen in folk tales. Folk tales portray fantastical events in an otherwise realistic tone. Fantasy traits given to characters, such as levitation, telepathy and telekinesis, help to encompass modern political realities that can be phantasmagorical. Writers do not invent new worlds but reveal the magical in this world, as was done by Gabriel García Márquez who wrote the seminal work of the style, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. In the world of magical realism, the supernatural realm blends with the natural, familiar world.

In *Don Quixote*, the writer incorporates elements of chivalry, magical realism: sorcerers, magic potions, damsels in distress, knights-errant, etc. The nobles have time to play at being shepherds, which they see as a romantic fantasy. Cervantes includes several Moorish characters in the original version of the novel. Like the picaresque novel, *Don Quixote* is episodic, it portrays real geography and it has characters who are deeply human and who often show us a view of society from the bottom up. *Don Quixote* is the uncommon man, the irrational dreamer who has not one iota of common sense despite his position in society.

Q. 5. What do you understand by the term ‘oral literature’? Illustrate.

Ans. Oral literature existed many centuries before the utterances were assigned ‘symbols’ or letters. Oral literature has been much discussed with regard to indigenous cultures in Africa, the Americas, India, China and wherever indigenous people have maintained their unique culture and traditions. In this chapter, we will discuss how oral literature is different from written literature. Oral literature has influenced written literature and there are numerous examples from Africa, India, North and South America and Europe on that.

Oral Literature

Oral Literature is a ‘verbal art’, which is delivered orally and transmitted orally from person to person, generation to generation, region to region. Oral Literature, also known as folk lore, is a traditional form of entertainment. Epic poems, folk tales, folk songs, myths, legends, ballads of people and events come under oral literature.

We will discuss more about oral literature for better understanding of the concept.

Background

Oral literature relates to story telling which has an old and long history. Even today in many cultures, the oral tradition plays a vital role. *For example*, the Caribbean culture is largely oral and this is also true of many cultures across the world. Folklore is another form of ‘oral literature.’ It is the traditional beliefs and customs of people which passes from grandparents to children. Changes happen in the stories from generation to generation and new elements get thrown into the story.

‘Literature’ in Oral

The term ‘Oral Literature’ is self-contradictory since ‘literature,’ strictly speaking is that which is ‘written’ down. We will discuss further to under it.

Divergences and Convergences Between Oral and Written Literature

Some of the features of Oral Literature and Written Literature overlap.

Sound (Voice) vs. Symbol (Print)

Literature implies a written art work and folklore is an oral art. Folksingers, minstrels, bards, traditional folk theatre artists, community storytellers, etc., are considered unlettered and untouched by the print form.

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Voice is the only medium through which they express their art and through which they get their art from the mouths of others like them. Many folksingers and storytellers today are literate and sometimes incorporate what they read into their songs and tales.

Fluid vs. Fixed

Folktales and songs are fluid and change with each performance, though the essence or the main theme or storyline remains the same. The singer or storyteller may change the narrative, add something new, embellish the story with more detail, stop the song midway and narrate an anecdote, etc.

For example, in Yakshagana, performers perform only with the bare outline of the story. The dialogues are provided by the 'bhagavata' or singer, who sings each separate portion and then the performers take over. There are instances where famous artistes playing adversarial roles try to outwit each other through the sheer power of their dialogues and wit. And these dialogues are never written down. On the other hand, a written work never changes once it is printed. The book will remain the same as long as the book exists and people care to read it.

Simplicity vs. Complexity

Folk art is simpler than literature. The folktale, the ballad and the oral epic have arisen from innocent impulses and lack the complexity that we find in literature. Folk art is the product of simple minds not capable of deep thought while reflective literature, which aims to imitate reality, is the product of sophisticated civilized minds.

Oral art is simpler than literature because it represents an earlier stage in the development of civilization. However, some ballad form which is a very popular genre in oral literature is now used extensively in written literature. The literary ballads of Wordsworth are seem simple in comparison with King Lear and both are 'Written Literature.'

Style and Structure

Oral Literature is different from Written Literature in style and structure. Oral Literature has features like repetition, stock epithets, stock characters, a marked preference for fantasy over reality and an emphasis on action. Such features varies greatly and may depend on the tastes and talents of the tellers. These features are also found in written literature, right from Shakespeare to all the thrillers, mysteries, romances and detective novels.

Authorship

Written Literature is the creation of a single individual and that folksongs and stories have no particular author. Folklore can be said as communal compositions, arising collectively from the community. Certain folk artists are recognized as the owners of certain tales and some folk artists generally respect the superior ability of a folk artist to tell a certain tale.

Audience

Oral narrative cannot exist without an audience, but written literature can be written in isolation for an imagined audience, an audience which might never read the written work of art. For the folksinger or storyteller, the audience determines which story the narrator should tell, how long it is going to be and whether the narrator can finish the story at all. The story should please everyone, the tale should be comprehensible to all and the story must be readily recognized and shared by everyone who hears it. The folk artiste cannot distance themselves from the audience, but a writer can afford to do. The writer has no visible audience and his audience is not an active participant in his performance. The writer writes stories which are read only by isolated individuals.

Q. 6. Explain with examples how Andhayug is relevant to our times.

Ans. In the brief Prefatory Note, the author talks the reasons which made him write this play. "Andhayug would never have been written if it had been in my power not to write it!" It is, as if, some power beyond his control forced

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him to pen it. At the time of Independence, India plunged into the violent chaos and in the violent chaos, he saw a glimmer of hope that something could still be retrieved. To discover some strand of goodness that offers hope for redemption, we have to confront the beast that resides within us. This ray of hope in the midst of despair is what Bharati wishes to share with his audiences/readers. The main plot is well known and “only a few events have been invented – a few characters and a few incidents.”

Prologue : Darkness and Light

The Prologue starts with an Invocation or a salutation to God in which the author seeks the blessings of the Divine. It is like Homer starting his epics Iliad and Odyssey and Milton his Paradise Lost with invocation of the poetic Muse. The Proclamation interspersed with Sanskrit hymns follows the invocation. When the Proclamation is made, a dancer conveys the meaning of the proclamation through his dance, thus establishes the importance of action in the play. The Proclamation implies that the play is concerned about the age of darkness which followed the end of the great war of *Mahabharata*. In Vishnu Purana, this age of darkness is described as a period when all values will be *topsy-turvy*.

Dharma will decline, the rulers will be greedy and thoughts and actions of men will be evil. Deceit and cunning will flourish. Full of fear, common people will seek refuge either in some caves or they will withdraw into the deepest caverns of their own selves. The good and evil will be so inextricably intertwined that only Lord Krishna will be able to unravel them. The Prologue ends with these lines: This is the story of the blind – or of enlightenment through the life of the blind.

The last lines indicate the intention of the poet. He is looking for hope in the midst of despair. *The Prologue* tries to establish Lord Krishna as the moral centre of the play. However, as we go through the play, we will scrutinize the veracity of this claim.

ACT I: The Kaurava Kingdom

Act I shows the misery, death, decay, corruption and the bottomless pits of savagery during the war. In the Battle of Kurukshetra, the Pandavas have won and the Kauravas were defeated. However, the bloodshed on both sides made it indistinguishable who were the victors and who were the vanquished. There was fear and gloom all over. The Narrator who, along with the Chorus and two Guards in the play, tells us how the war was conducted and both the sides violated the code of honour. The narrator tells us that both sides are doomed to fail and makes a telling comment on the beginning of the age of darkness.

After the Narrator comments, two Guards enter the stage. They know the outcome of the war and in the “desolate corridors” of the devastated Kaurava kingdom, their life has lost all meaning. They speculate on the rule of the blind Kaurava King Dhritarashtra. Suddenly they hear the sound of an approaching thunderstorm but soon realize that it is not a storm but thousands of vultures flapping their wings in the sky. Dhritarashtra and Gandhari wait for Sanjaya to get the news of the battlefield.

Dhritarashtra tells Vidura that his mind is full of fear for the first time in his life. Vidura reminds him that Bhishma, Dronacharya and Krishna had warned him that if the Kauravas violated the code of honour, they would come to grief, Dhritarashtra confesses that his blindness did not let him see the world as it is and he could not understand its social and moral codes. He confesses that his “senses were limited by my blindness”. The dreadful defeat of his sons now made him realize that “there is truth/that lies beyond the boundaries/of my selfhood”. The king now realizes that truth lies beyond the boundaries of his self.

The author has used the blindness in a figurative sense. Dhritarashtra’s wife Gandhari grieves over the death of her sons which made her cynical and bitter. Vidura reminds her that she had herself told Duryodhana that victory

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was on the side of dharma, to which she agrees that she had done so only to realize later that “there was no dharma on either side. Each was inspired by blind self-interest”. She blames Krishna for violating the code of honour and calls him “a fraud”.

Gandhari has biased perspective on Lord Krishna. The Kauravas employed all kinds of evil means to dispossess the Pandavas of their rightful inheritance. The Pandavas also employed evil stratagems to defeat evil.

The play suggests that evil destroys all that is good. It is like Shakespeare’s great tragedies such as Macbeth and Julius Caesar. In Macbeth, General Macbeth takes the help from evil forces represented by the three Witches and destroys virtue by killing King Duncan. Chaotic evil forces become utterly uncontrollable once they are let loose.

Vidura, Gandhari and Dhritarashtra debate the issues of honour, virtue and right conduct. A mendicant who claims to be “an astrologer from a distant land” enters the stage. He knows that his prophecies have not come true and blindfolded Gandhari has been deluding herself with false dreams.

Act II: The Making of a Beast

Act II mostly shows the change of Ashwatthama into a blood-thirsty beast. Sanjaya worries about how to give the news of Duryodhana’s defeat to Dhritirashtra. He wishes that he had been killed by Satyaki as only his death would have saved him from narrating the bitter truth of the defeat of the Kauravas to Dhritirashtra and Gandhari. Meanwhile, Kripacharya, looking for Ashwatthama, comes across Kritavarma and tells him that all except the two of them and Ashwatthama have perished in the war. Unable to bear the sight of Duryodhana accepting his defeat, Ashwatthama broke his bow and ran away screaming. Soon he repents breaking his bow because he wonders how without his weapons he would be able to avenge his father Guru Dronacharya’s murder. He recalls how his father was killed through deceit. Yudhishtira lied to his father that Ashwatthama had died in the battle. Taking this lie to be true, his father threw his weapons down and was slain by Drishtadyumna. Ashwatthama claims that when he saw his father being murdered in this way, all that was good in him died and he decided to turn himself into a beast. He decided to “Kill, kill, kill/and kill again!”. Mistaking Sanjaya to be a Pandava soldier he attacks him and tries to strangle him. Sanjaya is saved by Kritavarma and Kripacharya. Ashwatthama decides to commit suicide but Kritavarma tells him that Duryodhana is still alive. Sanjaya discloses that with his extraordinary powers Duryodhana was able to still the waters of the lake on whose floor he was lying quietly. They all proceed towards the lake to seek directions from Duryodhana about the future conduct of the war. As they leave for the lake, the Mendicant who had predicted victory for the Kauravas enters the stage, makes a very profound statement that: Truth resides in the acts we perform. What man does at each moment becomes his future for ages and ages. Mad with rage, Ashwatthama runs after the mendicant calling him a false prophet and strangles him. The Chorus comments on the night that was the night of intoxication for the victorious Pandavas but of shame and concealment for the Kauravas.

ACT III: The Half-truth of Ashwatthama

After knowing about Duryodhana’s defeat from Sanjaya, Gandhari and Dhritarashtra are petrified. Lots of commotion and panic prevailed in the city as people believe that along with the defeated Kaurava soldiers, a giant enemy soldier who was a sorcerer and could change his form at will, had slipped into the city and was going to ransack people’s homes.

The feared enemy soldier is Dhritarashtra’s son Yuyutsu, who had taken the side of the Pandavas against his own brothers because of his commitment to truth. He is considered as an enemy and the object of fear and revulsion. On people loathing for Yuyutsu, Vidura makes a comment on how simple-minded people always treat with contempt anyone who “turns away from well-worn traditions”.

When Gandhari spurns him and pours scorn on him, Vidura’s worst fears come true.

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His mother's rebuff leaves him wondering if he had done the right thing and realizes that "In the final analysis/ whether you uphold truth/or untruth/you are damned". He claims that it is not possible to know "where righteousness ends/and falsehood begins" and then with a very appropriate simile he explains: Everyone has lost his bearings today. The axle is broken and the wheel spins without a centre. The image establishes a parallel with W. B. Yeats's poem "The Second Coming", which was written in 1919, after the First World War.

Chaos prevailed in the city when Sanjaya brings the news of Duryodhana's defeat. Ashwatthama believes that Duryodhana was killed by Bhima's treachery. Balarama and Lord Krishna talk about the war. Balarama is not happy with the conduct of the Pandavas and chides Krishna for his partisan role. Balarama is angry with Krishna for not allowing him confront Bhima who had killed Duryodhana. He calls Krishna "an unprincipled rogue" and warns him that he would not be able to save the Pandavas from being "destroyed by adharma".

After Balarama predicts that the Pandavas will be destroyed by adharma, Ashwatthama vows to kill the Pandavas. Kripacharya and Kritavarma tell him that they also want revenge but not through treachery. But when Ashwatthama reveals how Bhima killed Duryodhana, they back Ashwatthama saying that perhaps the way of treachery is the only way left to them.

Ashwatthama and Kripacharya go to Duryodhana so that he could proclaim Ashwatthama as the commander of the Kaurava army. After his anointment as the army commander, Ashwatthama tells Kripacharya and Kritavarma that he would direct them the next day about what they would have to do.

The darkness of the night descends on the stage. Two dancers masked as owl and crow enter the stage and the owl attacks the crow. They fight ferociously and the owl kills the crow. When the lights come on, Ashwatthama performs the tandava dance of death and laughs like a mad man. From the owl attacking the unsuspecting, sleeping crow, Ashwatthama takes a clue as to how he should attack the sleeping Pandavas when there would be no Krishna to defend them. He orders Kritavarma and Kripacharya to come with him as he was determined to kill Drishtadyumna and Uttara who was carrying Abhimanyu's son. Kripacharya refuses to go with him but Kritavarma follows him meekly. At the end of Act III, Kripacharya follows Ashwatthama and tries to stop him.

Interlude: Feathers, Wheels and Bandages What follows

Act III is a brief Interlude. A dramatic practice quite prevalent in medieval and Renaissance drama, interlude refers to a short, comic dialogue performed during the interval between two acts of a full length play. The Interlude offers a chance to understand the psychological motives of Vidura, Sanjaya and Yuyutsu, the three characters who dither in their support to the Kauravas and who raise serious questions about the conduct of war.

The Interlude unfolds on a "ghostly lit" stage. The spectre of the old Mendicant who was killed by Ashwatthama walks on the stage and compares life as a "dark and tormented ocean/that seethes and surges/like a pit of snakes".

He raises the spectres of Yuyutsu, Sanjaya and Vidura with his visionary power so as to "rip them open/and understand/their inner contradictions". In brief speeches, they invoke the image of the axle and wheel and talk about the futility of their existence. Vidura, a righteous follower of Lord Krishna, confesses that his simple faith has been shattered and he likens Lord Krishna to a "useless axle/which has lost its wheels".

The Mendicant hears the sound of Krishna's chariot, and a peacock feather, which has obviously fallen from Krishna's crown, floats across the stage. The Mendicant, who had succeeded in stopping the flow of the narrative, expresses his inability to stop Krishna's chariot. The sound of Ashwatthama's chariot too is heard. The Mendicant expresses his inability to stop Ashwatthama's chariot also. He wonders if Ashwatthama's "unappeasable hatred" which is like the "blood soaked feather/of a black crow" can be defeated by a "small peacock feather". He reports that Ashwatthama's chariot has reached the Pandava camp only to be confronted and challenged by a "giant-like

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being/standing in the dark/like a wall of black granite". The Interlude comes to an end with a terrifying roar off stage and the mendicant covering his eyes in fear.

ACT IV: Gandhari's Curse

According to the chorus, the "giant-like being" obstructing Ashwatthama from attacking the sleeping Pandavas is Lord Shankara who challenges Ashwatthama to defeat him before killing the Pandavas. Ashwatthama fights with him with all his might but face the defeat and begs the Lord for blessing. Shankara blesses Ashwatthama by saying that he would be victorious. Sanjaya discloses that Ashwatthama kills Drishtadyumna, Shatanik and Shikhandi. Kritavarma and Kripacharya were waiting outside and killed children, old men and servants.

Vidura feels nauseated over the atrocities, but Gandhari revels in all the gory details and wants to see her Ashwatthama in his full glory. Sanjaya says Ashwatthama is cruel, horrible and dreadful sight. Gandhari thinks he is heroic because he had achieved what her hundred sons, Drona and Bhishma could not. She believes that Krishna would kill Ashwatthama and wants to see him before he dies.

The tragedy of Dhritirashtra and Gandhari has links with the 19th century German thinker Arthur Schopenhauer's ideas on tragedy. This is the tragedy of their Will. Their desire to see their son Duryodhana rule over Hastinapur makes them blind to everything. According to Schopenhauer, it is our will which transforms the reality for us. Dhritirashtra just wills the world to be what it is not and cannot be. He is blind to the many faults of his sons but wants them to be the rulers. According to Schopenhauer, all suffering happens because of willing. Dhritirashtra and Gandhari do not practice any denial of their will and hence they cannot arrive at a better understanding of either their own selves or that of the world around them. Gandhari's act of blindfolding herself is more an act of submission of a wife to the will of her husband in a patriarchal society than an act of asceticism.

Then the scene shifts to the lake in which Duryodhana is lying still. Kripacharya tells Duryodhana that Ashwatthama has destroyed the Pandava camp and has gone to procure his Brahmastra and talisman. Ashwatthama appears and regrets that he could not kill Bhima and blast Uttara's womb. Soon everybody realizes that Duryodhana is no more. Sanjaya loses his visionary powers and grieves over their loss. Vidura says all of them should leave Hastinapur and perform the holy rites of the dead kin.

The Chorus talks about the desolation of the city. Arjuna and Ashwatthama fight. After being hit in the neck, Ashwatthama fires the Brahmastra which invites Vyasa's ire. Arjuna also fires his Brahmastra. Calling Ashwatthama a vile monster, Vyasa asks him to recall the weapon but Ashwatthama expresses his inability to do so since his father had never taught him how to recall it.

Ashwatthama's Brahmastra blasts Uttara's womb. Sanjaya fears that Krishna will kill Ashwatthama, Ashwatthama is spared. He gets a curse of immortality which is worse than death; his wounds will fester forever and he will be a living abomination.

In anger, Gandhari curses Krishna that his kinsmen will attack and kill each other and many years later, he himself will be killed "like a wild animal/by an ordinary hunter". Krishna accepts the curse with grace and says that in the eighteen days war, he is the only one who died a million times. Gandhari laments over what she has done and tells Krishna that he could have bounced the curse but Krishna says that he may be omnipotent as a god but he is Gandhari's son too. Act IV ends with a Chorus describing that after Krishna accepted the curse, the stars started growing dim and Gandhari's curse spread from age to age and impacts every one.

ACT V: Victory and Death

ACT V has accelerated action. After many years, the scorched earth has become green but the Pandavas have not become bad rulers. Bhima has become arrogant, Arjuna grown weary, Nakula is ignorant and Sahadeva is retarded.

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Yudhishtira is aware of the consequences of the battlefield. Yuyutsu lives in misery. Bhima insults him and children abuse him and throw stones at him. Unable to bear this insult, he commits suicide. Dhritarashtra, Kunti and Gandhari dies in a jungle fire.

Epilogue: Death of the Lord

The Epilogue describes the death of Lord Krishna and the starting of the age of darkness. The old Mendicant who was murdered by Ashwatthama appears as an old hunter, Jara, and shoots his arrow mistaking Krishna's foot for a deer. Darkness covers the earth and Kali yug begins.

It presents Lord Krishna's death as a sacrifice which he made to atone for the sins of the mankind. Lord Krishna urged the Mendicant to fulfil Gandhari's curse. Lord Krishna tells Mendicant that "Death is only a transition/from one state to another".

The death of the Lord Krishna has an opposite effect on Ashwatthama, Yuyutsu and Sanjaya. Yuyutsu feels that while Krishna was alive, he had failed "to kindle faith in us". Sanjaya also says that faith was false. Ashwatthama realizes that when he was on a killing spree, the blindness of the Age was flowing through his veins. Krishna's sacrifice kindles his faith because Krishna has freed him by taking the sins of the likes of Ashwatthama upon his shoulders. Ashwatthama sees a peaceful radiance spread over Krishna's face when he is dying. The Mendicant claims that whenever you like you can make him a radiant presence in your life. ■ ■

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