

## **Adaptation of the *Mahabharata*, the Myth and Metaphor, into Animation for Children**

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### **Abstract**

Animation provides a unique window for children through which they could absorb the culturally superior Hindu epic in existence, the *Mahabharata*, the greatest myth and metaphor of life, and seek wisdom while entertaining themselves simultaneously. Concocting elements of fiction into the great myth in the form of animation gives a completely different perspective to children and show them a world of their own. The main motivation is to introduce them with the great heritage of India, the *Mahabharata*, in a lighter way through animation.

**Keywords-** *Mahabharata*, Animation, Myth, Metaphor, Adaptation, Cartoons, Fiction

Myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation... (Joseph Campbell 1). *Mahabharata*, the allegory of family values, reveals hidden meanings through its metaphors, typically moral ones. *Mahabharata* is itself a spiritual journey. *Mahabharata* is an archetype present in the collective unconscious of all human beings, and it relates to any culture in purest form in

every story. Every tale or story, no matter how magnificent or how irrelevant, is derived from the great epic. Every tale in the world follows the pattern of the *Mahabharata*—the prominent “time” will lead one there in every story. *Mahabharata* follows one in every life event, eventually changing from one person to another. In Varieties of interpretation, Joseph Anthony Mazzeo writes that the myth has its roots in history, to be sure, but it is the history of the individual, projected onto a cosmic plane and shaped by the wishes and fears universally experienced by mankind in the developmental process (Mazzeo 91). Myth brings harmony to man introducing him to his soul, though experiences might be different for everyone. We can hide from conscious, but not from unconscious—that is the nature of myth. Every culturally significant text requires interpretation and for each mind it is different, we should never confuse one from other. Sacred texts such as the *Mahabharata* demands careful attention and intellectual effort as it serves as the cultural, ethical and moral guide for the people. To reinterpret it for children, one should lightly tread without losing its essence, as it is meant to change the thought process of a child. One should always remember children are sensitive and they react to everything quickly, so it is moral duties of animators to consider their point of view and make the cartoons appealing to them—help them understand fear without making them timid. Animators should preserve the past, but do not diminish the present for children—put specific attention to what necessary has to be served.

The great myth of the *Mahabharata* in animated forms would be preserved only if it entertains, educate and imparts wisdom to children in the process—they should laugh, they should learn and they should be able to make wise decisions for themselves. In *Understanding animation*, Paul Wells writes about the role and function of a cartoon

character taking various theories of Norman Klein, Jenkins and Freud. One is the Controller (Clown/Id) who is indestructible or undefeated in the animation; second is the Over-reactor (Killjoy/Super Ego) tries to gain control but fails most of the time; and, the third one is the Nuisance (Counterfeit/Ego) who usually starts off the cartoon by annoying the over-reactor and refuses to obey and balance tension between Id and Super-ego. As stated, the Controller, the Over-reactor and the Nuisance belongs to the Norman Klein Theory. The Clown, the Killjoy and the Counterfeit belongs to Jenkins Theory. Id, Super-ego and Ego belong to Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory (152-156). There is always a tension between sense and nonsense, logic and counter-logic, and rationality and absurdity in animated films. Basically, the humour is the main ingredient for the world of cartoons for children—they learn while they laugh. There is also a certain pattern of every cartoon to do certain things and that is what clicks with the children. They believe in their cartoons. *Mahabharata* is nostalgic culture and children relate to it, and because animation could be as innocent as children an animator takes creative liberties for the purpose of representation for children. Animation must never forget fun and entertainment, for children longs for it and in turn absorbs what is being served. They look for a figure to follow in an animated character—if a character is saving people from evil forces, they believe in that invincible good. The hopes of children reside in those animated figures who carry out the tasks giving positive messages without being forceful. The meanings are implied, not explicit, so the *Mahabharata* which is itself the greatest metaphor of life could be understood in a way one wants to. Metaphors create images in mind so proper that it become synonymous to the word attached to it—such is the power of metaphor. Metaphor is an experience.

Paul Wells writes in *Understanding Animation*, “‘Male’ characters are defined by what they are, and how they behave, while ‘female’ characters are essentially understood by what they look like and through a vocabulary of stereotypical mannerisms (204). This has been a trend for ages in main stream motion pictures, which must change, but for animation the children react to what the characters do rather than what they look like. But an animation needs to represent something concrete, worthy of being in a real world, for misrepresentation clouds judgement especially of children; and, it is the ethical duty of an animator to make animation as powerful yet morally sound for children—the animated characters not siding with a particular gender but with a living being. Animation should be amusing but it should lead by example.

Andrei Khrzhanovsky, animator and former Soviet poet laureate suggests, “Animated films should be instrumental in the recovery of cultural coherence because diversity of works in animation represents the historical continuity of art and culture in spite of social and political change (Wells 221).” *Mahabharata* is the greatest cultural history of India and the way it is presented, devoid of any form, affects the great psyche of people, so the careful interpretation, representation and adaptation is in the hands of one taking charge, be it author, filmmaker, or a common man. The line is too subtle for errors, as one wrong judgement could hurts sentiments of many.

According to the discourse theory of Althusser and Barthes, theorists essentially determined the audience as a subject, and not as a set of undifferentiated individuals and, thus, engaged with the idea of cinemas an ideological apparatus... (Wells 222). If such a theory has to be believed then all the children as a collective audience would certain believe in the animation they are watching and the *Mahabharata* is an ideal scenario for every

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species on earth to calculate pluses and minuses of a character. *Mahabharata* is a culturally empowering book which if turned into animation the right way, contextually and accommodating to concurrent times, would appeal to the great mass of children, young adults or adults, though the animation suits better for certain ages—the medium a child understands better than any other. *Mahabharata* helps children identify with the culture of the great country of India. Children see cartoons as their friends, guide and mentor and they listen to them, imitate their actions and follow them without much second thoughts. Animation has enormous effect on the psyche of children. Though animation is mostly fantasy and fiction, it has a calming effect on the minds of children and the memory remains with them forever. They identify, sympathize and empathize with the cartoons they like. Animation offers something different and distinctive for everyone, especially children, and they participate in the experience while watching cartoons doing amusing things. They feel satisfied and joyful when their favourite cartoon character wins a battle. Innocent children take from the animation what they need to, and they interpret everything differently than an adult—it might have therapeutic effect on children.

Northrop Frye, in *Anatomy of Criticism*, writes, “Every civilization has, in its stock of traditional myths, a particular group which is thought of as more serious, more authoritative, more educational and closer to the fact and truth than the rest (54).” It is true for the *Mahabharata* which have a universal appeal; though it is a religious text of Hindus, it has everything every household in the world could relate to. The story of *Mahabharata* has a canonical position for writers in Hindu tradition whether they believe in its historicity or not. *Mahabharata* has the greatest possible metaphors compared to all the great cultures of

the world, and though it belongs to Hindu tradition and culture, it is agreeable and relates to every culture of the world. *Mahabharata* is the greatest myth of all because all the characters are super human beings who do things not possible in real life. Every character, even the blind Dhritrashtra is a demi-god. Hindus believe in their myths and consider them sacred—every character and event is sacred in *Mahabharata*. Myth opens up passages of that sacred great time (mythical time) and through animation for children it makes them aware of the great time their ancestor belonged to. A culturally themed animation makes the children more culturally aware and newly adapting thinkers, for they believe in cartoons more than they believe in the real-world characters. It is similar to that a politician politicizes everything, a wealthy thinks wealth is real, a scholar reads his books, and a child goes wild in his/her imagination. Animation helps children to interpret things in their own way.

In the great epic *Mahabharata*, the story plot is simple yet complicated, characters are mostly greyish yet some are pure black and white ones, settings are numerous surroundings of time, themes are universal and appealing, narration shifts from a point of view of person to person—whether it is Lord the omnipresent Krishna or Mr Rulebook Yudhishtra or the blind, greedy Dhritrashtra or unsettling, cunning Duryodhana or the great proud Draupadi, without her no *Mahabharata* would ever be possible. In the end, it is always the style, the way a story is told, that matters. In *Mahabharata*, every character could be considered a victim of circumstances if the storyteller favours the character being narrated. In animation of the *Mahabharata*, every filmmaker had and will have a different approach, but the basics should never change—an Arjuna cannot be bulkier than a Bhima or a Duryodhana cannot be shown as an unselfish

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person and a Krishna cannot be bitter at any time. Karna will always be deemed greater archer than Arjuna, but Arjuna won only because God was on his side. Such was the ever-travelling myth and everybody believes it. The great sage Veda Vyasa had written such a great epic where a person can seek himself/herself in every other character. But animation definitely requires different, less concentrated approach to make the great epic a fantastic ride for children where the characters would not lose their authenticity and the fight would always be good vs evil, and a two-year old can watch it effortlessly. An animation should always tell a tale to entertain and make things happen. Animation invites interpretation for children which is open, yet harmless. Every film invites interpretation—denotations and connotations—and symbolises meaning to its canvas. Five Pandavas are the five warriors of truth, they followed Dharma, while the hundred Kauravas are the warriors of sins, so they followed Adharma. Pandavas are the metaphors for good and Kauravas are the metaphors for evil. Even children need to know the answers of these questions, and they need to know what is *Mahabharata*—not just for the sake of it, but to preserve the culture and to understand the universal appealing themes which apply to our whole lives. And animation is the best friend for them who let them understand with play and pride. Visualisation is an important aspect of animation—a director needs to think beyond real but not unreal. A director is a person who could make chalk a gun and everyone is going to believe his vision if it has conviction in it, and to do it inside an animated world it is a piece of pie. So, showing the great warriors of the *Mahabharata* in a different light yet keeping their properties intact in an animated film could be a difficult task, but once it has been achieved it will provide great insight to the audience—the children of today. All the *Mahabharata* characters are surreal, demi god

characters, but for children they are heroes who believe they could be one of them, especially five Pandavas—Yudhishtra had a balanced head; Bheema, the inner strength; Arjuna, the focussed one; Nakula, the handsome horse trainer; and, Sahadeva, the physician and swordsman.

Another important aspect of animation is sound which plays an important role as it creates mood and atmosphere. For example, a sound of ‘dishoom’ when a robust animated Bhima punches the antagonist or a sound of ‘dhadam’ when an antagonist lands on the ground severely will create a greater effect on children rather than the plain visuals. Sound creates a vocabulary which are unseen to the eyes yet perceived by the mind, but it should always be in tandem with dialogues and actions of the character. If a song is to be introduced for a character in an animated film for children, the song cannot be as heavy as it sounds in a live-action film. A kid needs to be relaxed while knowing his characters; he should be surprised but not afraid by the music given to his characters. Voiceovers play a very important part in a film. A character like Bhima needs a strong, heavy, and angry voice; Lord Krishna needs a gentle, soothing voice; Duryodhana needs an adamant, assertive voice; a Shakuni would need a crooked, manipulative voice; Yudhishtra would need a reliable, honest voice; and, an Arjuna would need a performing, convincing voice. A voice creates an atmosphere around its audience. A seven feet body builder would not look good in a timid tone—it will never suit his personality. Their movements and postures also need to be built properly. When a Bheema walks heavily in an animation, the earth would have to shake for effectiveness. When a Krishna engages in his flute, his position should be appealing and worth watching or when an Arjuna hits his target while practising with his bow and arrow, his head and body need to be steady. Through

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movement and postures and how a character functions in an animation is another way of understanding people. Hodgeson and Dunlop suggest, "Understanding movements and their functions can be a means of understanding people (Wells 112)." A cartoon should make children forget their own worlds and mesmerise them.

To give wisdom to the whole world of children, *Mahabharata* needs to be interpreted differently in animated films. Readers, listeners and viewers relate to the stories differently—everyone is looking for some meaning where they could empathize, children too. An empathetic understanding is needed and to believe that somebody from the great story could be like me is a great assertion for children. There is a touchstone for everything, the benchmark: Choosing the best from the great *Mahabharata* is our choice—what character do one relates to or what character had one have become over the time or what characters one might have been in certain circumstances. There are numerous adaptation and there are numerous to choose from, but the choice changes jumping from one character to another. Sometimes one becomes Arjuna, right on target; sometimes one is Yudhishtra, in the path of morality; and, we could be Duryodhana, forcefully taking what is not ours and, in the process, applying Sama, Dama, Danda and Bheda to it. Nobody is the one single character of *Mahabharata*; everybody is amalgamation of many. Filmmakers while animating *Mahabharata* should showcase more good qualities than bad ones of the epical characters where good defeats evil ultimately. Whatever have been our history, which is always glorified or changed to relevant circumstances for the sake of the sacrosanct characters, presumed to be our history, which might be fiction but has become the gods of today, and in a way it is great to have a good god-like creatures or god itself so that human should not become a beast

without actually having to look up to someone or something. Duryodhana might not be a devil more than Arjuna when they were children, but slowly and gradually they became what they ought to be. But what would have happened if they have properly fed with correct animation—the light process of showing children what they would be interested in rather than only preaching of the great sages. Children brains adapt to friendly cartoons more attentively rather than anything else. But to be good, there must be bad. In Children cartoons, the bad are the lesser good and the good are the lesser bad. No cartoon should be shown so aggressively to frighten the children.

Animated forms need imagination and intellect of a whole group of people who are members of different backgrounds—rural, semi-urban, urban and elite; illiterate, literate and learned; and such mix of many—contribute to a common understanding for the epic or then animators could make better cartoons for Children. Research is the better word. Technology transforms the world, and hence the minds, so via animation, which is relatively new technology than any other forms, trained professionals create a new world for children with which they relate and live up to their expectation. Children believe in fairy tales and animation confirms their faith where they could see their hero Krishna jumping like spring and beating goons without much effort, or the mighty Bheema eats a ton of laddus without getting constipation or the Arjuna, the warrior prince pierces the fish's eye without even looking at it. Such is the magic of animation—children believe it so readily and imitate the actions, be it good or bad. So, it is necessary that evil should be beaten in the end in every situation—children should be convinced that to believe in truth is a good thing and being courageous enough to carry on in life is important no matter how many skies are fallen on them. A make-believe world has to be



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created, an entertaining one. An animator should know what to keep and what to leave while making films for children. Their minds are fickle—children would worship one and end relationship with another in a moment of time. Matters of loyalty and disloyalty frequently changes among children—they are novice creatures. The role of an animator is to make a child understand how marvellous a world could be if he/she follows the good guys. An animation should provide wisdom to a child which comes from experience, so an animator should make sure that the end should belong to a hero—even if it is a one-minute animation. Children below ten years would certainly do not react to adult animation the same way as an adult does, so children's animation should not be disgusting, it should be pleasing to the senses. The animated *Mahabharata* or the animated characters from the *Mahabharata*, no matter how much fiction is added to it, must possess meaning enough to delve deep into the psyche of a child to create mystery so they could think of their own about what that is all about. Any character a child loves will become his myth, legend and god.

Why is the *Mahabharata* still relevant? It is already in our subconscious mind since we were born. Though the *Mahabharata* is centuries old, it always takes new forms in one way or the other—maybe it gets twisted in between, but the essence remains throughout—such is the magnificence and greatness of the epic. For new generation, there might be six packs abs Bhima and Arjuna, but their attributes would never differ from the chubby, sagacious yesteryears Pandavas. Every time we put *Mahabharata* in a new packet, it gives a fresh vigour to new generation—such is the power of a story which remained immortal throughout. There should be a vision and a story well told for a new generation to understand the *Mahabharata* in a better and never forgetting way. Either it is the epic book or its screen

adaptation, the metaphor needs to be intact, though treatment could be different. There should be freshness and energy in book adaptations. There are films which are complete adaptations and then there are inspiration for the film. An adaptation should be faithful to the book regardless of the settings. In a book, there are words and words—for everything there is a word, rest doesn't matter and interpretation happens in our minds. But in a film, everything changes, there are actors, location, settings, lights, camera, properties, music, dialogue delivery and much more and it costs much, much more than a book—you can imagine profusely, but you have to bring it down to real conditions within the limits of your resources. An animator has to create everything in reality, though his/her world is an imaginative cartoon.

Czech surrealist animator, Jan Svankmajer quotes, "Animation enables me to give magical powers to things (Wells 11)." (Quoted in *The Magic Art of Magic* Svankmajer, BBC Broadcast, 1992.) Animation gives the animators wings to create magic—they do not need to be very subtle, for they have immense freedom while animating; if they make characters of the *Mahabharata* fly for the sake of conviction that the children—their target audience—would explore more if this way it is presented. An animator could give a new dimension to its every character, a change not possible in live-action film. Animation defies the laws of gravity and give the characters the ideal conditions they need; animators have different views of space and time and could give a lifeless thing the most dynamic and vibrant properties. Hyperreality is common in animation—generally the fantasy. In hyper reality conditions, the characters and things drop differently, body can be contorted abnormally in relaxed conditions and the sound plays major role inside the alternate reality. Logic seldom matters in animation, but

children understand the illogical language which really makes sense in their world. A children's world of animation could not be harsh in tone and vocabulary is different than real world of logic. Animation for children uses the language of magic realism—magic is pretty normal in animation—but even the standards should be there which complies to a child standard. Today animation has gone to different level, i.e., use of 3D technology (Computer Generated Imagery) where a lot of VFX (visual effects) are shown, as to earlier simpler Cel Animation or Traditional Animation where an artist has to draw thousands of images on special paper and have them photographed, frame by frame.

British based animators, John Hales and Joy Batchelor, posit the view that, “if it is the live-action film's job to present physical reality, animated film is concerned with metaphysical reality—not how things look, but what they mean (Hoffer 3).” Metaphysical Animation is animation beyond physical nature—it goes beyond the physical world of the senses and there are no rules to it. It can be spiritual. There has always been a particular fascination towards the characters of the *Mahabharata*, which are so detailed that delves deeper into everybody's imagination. And the mythical characters feel more alive in today's world, so children need to know more about it, via animation, the wonderful language they understand without hiccups. They see different people in cartoons, and it is an opportunity in disguise to make the younger mass understand through the lenses of the *Mahabharata* and what it provides—the grand way of life. The epic narrates the cultural memory of India—the maintenance of the ethics and the morals at the most appropriate times. Through animation, a medium they accept whole-heartedly, it is easy to propagate the myth for the newer generation. Myth goes far, though it changes medium to

convey itself. As Joan D. Vinge quotes, “myth is, after all, the never-ending story.”

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