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Echoes of the Disempowered: Representations of the Subaltern in M. T. Vasudevan Nair's *Bhima: Lone Warrior*

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Abstract

Aim: This article examines *Bhima: Lone Warrior*, Gita Krishnankutty's English translation of M. T. Vasudevan Nair's Malayalam novel *Randamoozham*, through Subaltern Studies, deconstruction, postcolonial hermeneutics, myth criticism, and translation theory. It argues that Nair's retelling of the Mahabharata re-centres marginalised figures—Bhima, Karna, and Ghatotkacha—long silenced within Brahmanical–Kshatriya epic discourse. By engaging caste, lineage, tribal identity, emotional marginality, and constructions of dharma, the novel functions as a counter-epic.

Methodology and Approaches: The study employs a multidisciplinary approach. Subaltern critique draws on Gramsci, Guha, and Spivak; Derridean deconstruction unsettles epic binaries; Barthes informs myth criticism; and Venuti and Bassnett frame translation as a cultural and political practice. Close textual reading with theoretical analysis reveals how narrative voice reconfigures power structures in myth.

Outcome: Findings show that the novel disrupts epic hegemony through narrative re-centring. Bhima's emotional marginality, Karna's caste humiliation, and Ghatotkacha's expendable tribal identity emerge as sites of ideological resistance. The English translation preserves cultural specificity while enhancing global accessibility.

Conclusion and Suggestions: The novel marks a significant moment in Indian mythic retellings, dismantling epic normativity and restoring dignity to silenced figures. Myth emerges as an ideological battleground open to ethical reinterpretation. Future research may pursue comparative retellings or examine translation's role in mediating subaltern narratives.

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Myths travel across time not as neutral cultural artifacts but as ideological systems. Roland Barthes famously declares that myth “transforms history into nature,” naturalising cultural hierarchies under the guise of divine inevitability. Indian epics such as the *Mahabharata* serve not merely as literary inheritances but as ideological blueprints that have shaped caste, gender, and ethical norms for millennia. As Nietzsche observes:

Myths were not merely stories told to entertain; they were the very frameworks through which a people interpreted themselves, their world, and their moral universe. To control myth is to control the consciousness of a culture; to reinterpret myth is to liberate it. (Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morality*)

This emphasis on reinterpretation forms the foundation of M. T. Vasudevan Nair’s *Randamoozham* (1984) and its widely acclaimed English translation *Bhima: Lone Warrior* by Gita Krishnankutty. Nair’s narrative is not a mere retelling but a bold counter-discourse that lifts subaltern voices previously muted by the dominant epic. Translation plays an essential role in this reconfiguration. Lawrence Venuti’s concept of “foreignization” is crucial here: translation can resist homogenising tendencies of dominant cultures and retain cultural specificity, making subaltern narratives accessible without erasing their identity. Through translation, Nair’s re-voicing of marginal characters moves from Malayalam literary space into global scholarly circulation.

Translation is not mere linguistic transfer. As Susan Bassnett argues, it is an act of cultural negotiation. Krishnankutty’s translation preserves the emotional cadence and cultural specificity of Nair’s Malayalam prose while making its subaltern politics accessible to a wider audience. Venuti’s assertion that translators must resist invisibility resonates strongly here. Krishnankutty’s translation does not domesticate or dilute Kerala’s cultural context but retains its distinctiveness, enabling international readers to engage meaningfully with the text.

This study analyses M. T. Vasudevan Nair’s *Bhima: Lone Warrior* and its English translation by Gita Krishnankutty through the lenses of Subaltern Studies, postcolonial hermeneutics, deconstruction, myth criticism, and translation theory. The primary aim is to investigate how Nair re-centres marginalised voices—

particularly Bhima, Karna, and Ghatotkacha—who remain structurally silenced within the canonical Mahabharata and how translation extends this subaltern reclamation to global readership. Antonio Gramsci’s formulation of the subaltern situates them as groups excluded from structures of power. Ranajit Guha’s *Subaltern Studies* redefines the term for the Indian context, arguing that elite historiographies systematically silence non-elite experiences. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak deepens this critique in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* stating: “The subaltern cannot speak; not because she lacks a voice, but because structures of power refuse to hear her. Her speech returns only as echo, distorted by those who mediate it.”

The *Mahabharata*—though ancient—exhibits similar patterns of elite mediation. Characters such as Bhima, Karna, and Ghatotkacha appear only at the margins of the canonical narrative. Their inner lives, moral dilemmas, psychological experiences, and emotional trajectories remain unexplored or flattened into supporting roles for more celebrated figures. The novel directly confronts this structural erasure, granting narrative authority to those denied it. Barthes insists that myth operates as a “second-order semiotic system” that naturalises social hierarchies. In the *Mahabharata*, divine birth legitimises authority, caste determines virtue, and elite knowledge shapes normative ethics. Myth reinforces the idea that the Kshatriya is inherently noble, the Brahmin inherently wise, and the tribal inherently inferior. The author challenges this narrative by revealing the humanity of characters traditionally dismissed or simplified. Bhima’s vulnerabilities, Karna’s anguish, and Ghatotkacha’s alienation dismantle myth’s tendency to privilege certain voices as legitimate and others as disposable.

Postcolonial theory examines how cultural histories are overwritten by dominant voices. Dipesh Chakrabarty’s concept of “provincialising” dominant epistemologies applies here: the Sanskrit, Brahmanical reading of the *Mahabharata* must be provincialised to reveal suppressed indigenous and subaltern readings. The author inserts modern political consciousness into an ancient text. His narrative functions as a postcolonial reclamation of the epic, reinscribing dignity into characters whose stories were systematically muted. Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction interrogates the hierarchies embedded in textual structures. The *Mahabharata* creates binary oppositions such as: hero /

other, divine / mortal, pure / impure, Kshatriya / tribal. The author dismantles these binaries. By centering Bhima's consciousness, he reverses the epic's metaphysics of presence. The narrative's authority—traditionally located in Vyasa, the divine narrator—shifts to a silenced figure whose retelling exposes the epic's ideological gaps. The protagonist Bhima is a man of profound emotional depth, grappling with neglect, internal conflict, and identity crisis. Far from the caricature of brute strength, he emerges as a person shaped by wounds inflicted by family, society, and the hierarchical epic itself. His mother Kunti's discrimination is one of the earliest forms of silencing he experiences. When Bhima chooses *Bahuyuddham*, she reprimands him: *Bahuyuddham* is for low-caste people. Kshatriyas may learn it, of course, but it does not suit those born into royal lineage. Do not let the world say you bring dishonour or ill-repute to this clan. (*Bhima: Lone Warrior* -32).

The passage reveals Kunti's unconscious social conditioning. Nair uses her tone to expose the caste-based prejudice even within the Pandava household. Bhima internalises these wounds, shaping his sense of exclusion. Another moment of painful marginalisation arises when Bhima kills his first boar. Instead of acknowledgment, Yudhishtira reprimands him: "You blockhead, what a foolish thing to have done! Do not let mother know of this. There is no reason for celebration here, for you have not yet earned the merit required to honour the gods." (43).

The absence of validation becomes the emotional fabric of Bhima's life. His relationships further reinforce this silencing. His love for Draupadi remains overshadowed by her devotion to Arjuna. His bond with Hidimbi, deeply fulfilling, is denied legitimacy because she is a tribal woman. Bhima's heroism lies not in physical might but in emotional resilience—a subaltern's fight for dignity in a narrative designed to erase him.

Karna, the abandoned son of Kunti, represents one of the most powerful explorations of caste subalternity in Indian literature. Nair deepens this portrayal by emphasising Karna's lifelong exclusion. His humiliation at the archery exhibition is perhaps the most iconic moment of caste-based denial. When he challenges Arjuna, Kripacharya demands that he reveal his lineage: "Tell us your father's name, for only a Kshatriya-born may compete with princes. If you are a charioteer's son, your place is not here on the ground where kings and warriors

stand.”(73). The extended quote exposes the brutality of caste ideology. Arjuna’s fear, the court’s silence, and Karna’s humiliation reveal the epic’s complicity in sustaining caste oppression. Karna’s role in Draupadi’s humiliation later in the epic emerges from this lifelong bitterness. His moral contradictions are inseparable from the structural violence inflicted upon him.

Ghatotkacha’s portrayal is unique in Nair’s novel. His tribal heritage renders him simultaneously powerful and vulnerable. On one hand, he is the Pandavas’ saviour in times of crisis; on the other, he is never accepted fully into their fold. Yudhishtira’s casual dismissal of him reveals entrenched elite prejudice, “There are tribals everywhere ready to give us trouble. Who knows what this fellow will become when he grows up?”(216). Such statements illuminate how tribal identity is viewed with suspicion, even when the tribal figure is devoted, capable, and loyal. The cruelty reaches its zenith when Krishna celebrates his death: “Why do you grieve? Karna has spent the weapon he saved for Arjuna. Ghatotkacha’s fall ensures Arjuna’s life. This is a time not for lamentation but for celebration in the Pandava camp.”(312).

Krishna’s remarks reveal the expendability of tribal bodies within epic warfare. Ghatotkacha becomes a sacrificial figure, his death valued only as a strategic advantage. Nair’s text interrogates dharma as an ideological construct rather than a moral truth. Yudhishtira’s “righteousness” often emerges as indecision, passivity, or self-righteousness. Bhima, in contrast, embodies ethical clarity based on human empathy rather than divine decree. Karna’s moral ambiguity and Ghatotkacha’s sacrificial death show that dharma operates unevenly, favouring the privileged. Dharma in the novel is not an eternal principle but a political tool, enabling the powerful to justify their actions while silencing others.

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