



Book Review

Brian Black. (2021). *In Dialogue with the Mahābhārata*. Oxon and New York: Routledge. Pp. 228. Price: €51.99. ISBN: 9780367547271

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It should come as no surprise that a monograph entitled *In Dialogue with the Mahābhārata* would examine verbal exchanges between characters in Vyasa's Mahabharata. And why shouldn't it? Dialogues distinguish Vyasa's Mahabharata from its contemporaneous counterpart, Valmiki's Ramayana, as well as from earlier Brahmanical texts, such as the Upanishads. It is not that other texts are devoid of dialogues. Rather, it is the extraordinary degree to which Vyasa's Mahabharata employs dialogues—verbal exchanges that debate philosophical concepts, structure the epic through frame stories and sub-tales, and model a method for interpreting speech (p.4)—that marks Vyasa's Mahabharata as distinct. As such, Black's *In Dialogue* explores what philosophical dialogues tell us about the Mahabharata, and what the Mahabharata tells us in turn about philosophical dialogues.

Each of the five chapters in the book explores how a particular philosophical concept is examined through different dialogues that punctuate the plotline of Vyasa's Mahabharata (pp. 5-8). For instance, chapter 5 explores dialogues that examine Krishna's divinity. In the Bhagavadgita, Arjuna's questions prompt a point-by-point examination of Krishna's ontology. Arjuna's questions and doubts allow for Krishna's divinity to be fully examined for the first time in the Mahabharata. In contrast, the silence that befalls both characters when Krishna reveals his all-pervasive form conveys the idea that divinity exceeds the limits of logical argumentation. In addition, whereas Arjuna's dialogue with Krishna on the eve of war examines, justifies, and glorifies Krishna's divinity, later dialogues downplay, complicate, and challenge it. Notably, when Gandhari asks why Krishna did not act when he had the power to stop the war, Krishna absolves himself of all responsibility by crudely blaming Gandhari for poor parenting. Krishna neither bothers to engage Gandhari in theological questions nor admits the limits of his divine powers to her in the way that he willingly does with his male interlocutors.

Key to Black's methodology, then, is an examination of each dialogue on its own terms before examining the intramural relations among the subsequent dialogues as they unfold in the *Mahabharata*. In each verbal encounter, Black traces the intersection between the philosophical content of arguments, the method of argumentation, and the characterization of the speakers (their perspectives, affective responses, and their gendered and social statuses). He then reads multiple dialogues together. This second-level reading brings into stark relief the ways in which the content and method of philosophical dialogue change according to the identity of the speakers and their relation to their interlocutors. Black's unique method yields new insights into the Mahabharata's philosophical import and its use of dialogues. In terms of philosophical import, Black's reading reveals the situatedness of possibly the most contentious discourse in the Mahabharata: *dharma*. Dialogues in Vyasa's Mahabharata "root otherwise abstract philosophical doctrines as arguments of specific individuals in concrete situations" (pp. 10-11). This reading challenges earlier scholarship that reads essentialist or universalist interpretations of *dharma* into the Mahabharata. Black takes seriously what the characters themselves have to say about *dharma* and about how characters tell us that singular, abstract philosophical concepts do not exist. *Dharma* is defined and redefined, often without resolution,

through the situations, embodiments, and relationships that characters find themselves in. The understanding that philosophical concepts are embedded in situated dialogues likewise demonstrates the role that dialogues play in the Mahabharata. In Black's words, dialogues "develop" *dharma* (p. 21). They show rather than tell *dharma*. This is because an essential aspect of understanding *dharma* consists of a method through which it is examined: dialogues. Dialogues operate as dynamic, on-going sites of debate through which characters navigate their understanding of *dharma* with one-another through events that they experience in the storyline. Black's re-reading complicates the claim that dialogues in the *Mahabharata* are "didactic" sites of moral pedantry that are inferior to other literary sites such as plot and character (p. 13). Instead, he centres dialogues as an indispensable site for the understanding of literary construction and the philosophical content of Vyasa's Mahabharata.

Particularly insightful are the two chapters on Draupadi: chapter 2 called *Draupadī's Marriage* and chapter 4 called *Draupadī's Questions*. As with all chapters in *In Dialogue*, chapters 2 and 4 demonstrate how characters develop their understanding of *dharma* through their ongoing conversations with one another. But what makes chapters 2 and 4 valuable is that they best exemplify Black's second argument about dialogue that explores ethical relationships between interlocutors (p. 9, p. 11). For example, dialogues about Draupadi's polyandry lay bare the fraternal tension between Arjuna who wins Draupadi, and his elder brother Yudhishtira, who falls in love with Draupadi and ought to be married first according to *dharma*. In addition, dialogues about Draupadi's polyandry reveal the gendered relationships between Kunti as a mother who unknowingly tells her sons to share Draupadi, and her five sons who, in desiring Draupadi, do not let their mother go back on her words in the way that male characters can and do. Finally, such dialogues outline the political and moral relationships between King Drupada, Draupadi's father, who doubts the validity of polyandry and figures who are authoritative in matters of *dharma*, such as Vyasa, the author of the Mahabharata who reveals Draupadi's divine identity, and Yudhishtira, the embodiment of *dharma* who has been crowned prince regent. Each of these dialogues betrays the ethical boundaries that structure familial, political, and cosmological relationships among the interlocutors. We could say that dialogues about Draupadi ironically decentre Draupadi, the silent object of discussion, to define the relationship between interlocutors instead.

Chapter 4 dovetails chapter 2. If chapter 2 shows how the Mahabharata decentres Draupadi's perspective in favour of those of primarily male characters, then chapter 4 (*Draupadī's Questions*) shows how the Mahabharata centres Draupadi's voice amidst the silence of those same men who previously talked about her. Draupadi develops her own claims about *dharma* after she is staked and lost by Yudhishtira in the dice match. Her arguments progress through a set of dialogues with different characters. Draupadi addresses the logical procedure of the dice match with the messenger before defending her social status and virtues as a wife in front of the court. What differentiates Draupadi's dialogues from those of the male characters is that her arguments work harmoniously with one another offering consistent refutations of the inconsistent patriarchal interpretations of *dharma*. Chapter 4 therefore demonstrates how depictions of *dharma* change when female perspectives are centred. Taken together, chapters 2 and 4 complement each other. In the first case, they work together to reject the claim that women are passive onlookers of philosophy. Black showcases female characters as active interlocutors who expose not only the ambiguous experiences of women in a world defined by men but also vice versa, who expose the limits of reasoning that men impose onto women. In the second case, these chapters challenge the claim that philosophical debate can be distinguished from the gendered relationships in which interlocutors are embedded. With these two implications, chapters 2 and 4 build upon long-standing scholarly debate about Draupadi in the Mahabharata, while speaking to nascent discussions regarding the representation of women in philosophical dialogues.

Where *In Dialogue* falls short is in its discussion of the relationship between Vyasa's Mahabharata and the Upanishads. While the book is framed by the suggestion that some features of dialogue in Vyasa's text may have emerged from dialogues found in the Upanishads (pp. 2-3, p. 178), such parallels are so infrequently and tenuously discussed in the body of the chapters that they do not constitute sufficient evidence to establish a clear connection between the Mahabharata and the Upanishads. This is not to say that Black's suggestion is wrong. But rather that such claims would be better explored outside this monograph. Or better still, perhaps such connections could be left to the reader to explore themselves, especially for those who have already read Black's scholarship on the Upanishads. Just as Vyasa encourages his readers to engage in dialogue with his epic and reflects on the relationship between his Mahabharata and earlier texts, so too might have Black left his readers, such as students of Indian philosophy, to put *In Dialogue* into conversation with his first monograph, *The Character of the Self in Ancient India* (2007), wherein Upanishadic dialogues are explored. Certainly, Black's discussion of Draupadi (pp. 115-147) provokes substantial claims about intertextual relations when read alongside Black's earlier discussion on female speakers in the Upanishads (2007: 133-168).

My point is nevertheless only a suggestion. *In Dialogue* is successful because it recuperates dialogues as a valuable site for meaning-making in Vyasa's Mahabharata. It demonstrates that dialogues should not be divorced from the identity of characters who voice them in particular situations. As a result, philosophical concepts are revealed through dialogical presentation to emerge as multi-vocal, dynamic, and relative to the context of the character. In making these points, *In Dialogue* is a valuable contribution to readers and students interested in Epic literature, and the intersection between narrative and philosophy.

References

Black B., (2007). *The Character of the Self in Ancient India: Priests, Kings, and Women in the Early Upanisads*. Albany: SUNY Press