

## Identity Through Illustration: How Art in *Jaya* Influences Indian Mythological Consciousness

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### **Abstract:**

In Devdutt Pattanaik's *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*, art is the most powerful agent in shaping collective and cultural identity by intermixing mythology with visual representation. The Mahabharata is not a story; it is a blueprint of Indian culture that reveals societal values, norms, and identities. The unique feature of Pattanaik's narration is the text-based narration, replete with vivid illustrations that infuse characters, events, and places with symbolic meaning. The visuals serve as a bridge, conveying the cultural identity presented in the Mahabharata in more easily comprehensible terms for readers. Pattanaik, through art, portrays the cultural significance of these iconic symbols, which are integrally connected to Indian identity, thereby preserving narratives of cultural continuity. It will also examine the role of art as a device to buttress collective identity within Indian culture and analyse Pattanaik's use of imagery, symbolism, and visual motifs and how these elements can interplay with the text to shape understandings of culture and consciousness. Art in *Jaya* is not only a mechanism for retelling the myth but also a visual space through which deeper philosophical themes associated with duty, justice, and fate resonate with diverse dimensions of Indian identity. This gap concerns how contemporary retellings of epic texts, such as the Mahabharata, represent the meeting ground of art and mythology. Although so much scholarly writing exists regarding the Mahabharata from a philosophical as well as literary point of view, how art fits into the storytelling in it and, especially in cases of modern renditions, like *Jaya*, remains little explored. This paper endeavors to bridge the gap by exploring how art shapes and conveys a vibrant collective identity in the contemporary socio-cultural terrain through the works of Pattanaik.

**Keywords:** Collective Consciousness, Identity, Visual, Art.

## Introduction

For many centuries, Indian mythology has been seen not only as a collection of age-old legends but also as an active force, a living force of the moral, spiritual, and cultural consciousness of the nation. From the many sacred texts, the *Mahabharata* is the most vital part of that force. It is far more than a story of war and family; it is an epic of human life, which maps the great complexities of human life —ethics, justice, duty, and identity. Unlike a history book, historical records are static; the *Mahabharata* continues to live on through multiple retellings, specifically to engage with the changing needs of each society. By engaging with this appropriation, Devdutt Pattanaik, in *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*, retells the *Mahabharata*, blending narrative and a pictorial mode of retelling, repositioning the epic to have a new contemporary interpretation, reinterpreting the act of storytelling as an artistic act, not only as a literary act but as a culturally engaged act. Pattanaik did not just retell the *Mahabharata*; he reconstructed a cultural life that also exists in the *Mahabharata* through illustrations that serve as vehicles of collective memory and identity. The interplay between word and image offers diverse avenues through which mythological consciousness exists. The interplay and representation allow ancient wisdom to resonate with contemporary understandings, albeit it still retains some ancient-ness.

*Jaya* is significant for several reasons. For one, *Jaya* displays the dual acts of processing the ancient time with the new; the written and the visual; the sacred and the profane. In the past, retellings of the *Mahabharata* (and the *Bhagavad Gita*) were primarily for linguistic and performative traditions. Pattanaik adds a dimension to all past retellings by including original illustrations that do not serve only as embellishment to the text, but develop an alternative narrative. The illustrations in *Jaya* serve as visual metaphors that capture difficult philosophical ideas through minimalist, at times poignant, images. Krishna, the charioteer driving Arjuna's

chariot, is not just an event in the *Bhagavad Gita*; it is a representation of divine inspiration when one faces moral dilemmas. The disrobing of Draupadi is neither violent nor graphic. However, by illustrating her sari in infinite length, it provides a visual metaphor for reinterpreting Draupadi's intervention through divine ambivalence, further underscoring the resilience of justice. The visual images in *Jaya* are more than adjacent to its text; they redefine it and offer myriad textual interpretations while evoking an emotional response as a thinker and reader.

To understand the cultural and epistemological implications of *Jaya*, it is necessary to work through normative theories that analyse the role of myth in society. A strong starting point is Émile Durkheim's notion of *collective consciousness*, the constellation of beliefs and feelings that unite a group in a community. In Durkheim's thinking, myths are more than stories; they are social institutions that maintain moral and ethical norms that promote social unity in a community. *The Mahabharata* is more than an epic; it is a cultural archetype—the characters and trials of the *Mahabharata* manifest in contemporary life and civic morals. Pattanaik's pictorial retelling of the epic enhances this collective consciousness by visualising these archetypes and offering ways to relate them to the present era. The graphic illustrations serve to remind the reader of the concepts ingrained in more abstract philosophical contexts by supporting conceptual imagination through visual images. It allows the lessons of the epic to persist in public-sphere memory.

Maurice Halbwachs builds on Durkheim's ideas, using the term "collective memory" to suggest that remembrance is not an individual phenomenon but is always socially and culturally constructed, endlessly negotiated, and mediated by a multiplicity of symbols, rituals, images, and narratives. In the long history of memory work related to the *Mahabharata*, for example, it has not even been preserved as a written text but rather in a visual, kinetic, embodied form temple sculpture, classical dance-drama, and folk painting to even

contemporary graphic novels. The illustrations in *Jaya*, for example, by Pattanaik, may be understood as the latest forms of mnemonic devices in a long tradition of storytelling. In *Jaya*, a simple line drawing captioned 'Bhishma lying on a bed of arrows' conjures the tragic magnificence of the patriarch's vow in a single complex image, and they effectively compress a world of thematic depth into a hand-drawn image that is itself memorable in its moral resonance. As an essential mnemonic device, the visual symbols convey the genre's moral imperatives, whether the child remembers the story verbatim.

Roland Barthes' semiotic theory adds another level of understanding to the way Pattanaik's illustrations function as *visual myths*. Barthes defines myth as a particular kind of speech, a system of signs in which meanings are constantly constructed and reconstructed. In *Jaya*, the illustrations represent secondary-order signifiers; they do not simply depict events but carry cultural and ideological meanings. For example, activity with the wheel of dharma (*chakra*) is a common thread throughout Pattanaik's illustrations. When Krishna is depicted holding the Sudarshana Chakra, the image does not just signify a weapon; it signifies notions of cosmic order (*dharma*), cyclical time (*kala*), and justice for the past and present. The images of Karna holding his armor covering his face signify the nature of concealed identity, limiting identity from society, and the tragic consequences of being 'outside' of caste and its prejudicial expressions. These are mythic images in the sense Barthes uses—that is, they transfer the abstractions of history and philosophy into a naturalised, consumable visual narrative.

W. J. T. Mitchell's exploration of *visual culture* further highlights the active role that images engage in when shaping social consciousness. He contends that images are not passive reflections of culture, but instead, active agents that both construct and contest meaning. In *Jaya*, images do not merely illustrate the text; they interrogate and reinterpret it. For instance, when Ekalavya, the tribal archer, is forced to cut off his thumb as *guru dakshina*, Pattanaik's drawing highlights the oppressive presence of Dronacharya, visually interrogating the

Brahmanical form of hegemony in the original story. This form of *visual culture* aligns with Mitchell in that images can challenge ideology and produce counter-narratives and interpretations that remake social consciousness.

In the end, *Jaya* represents a crucial intervention in the engagement and consumption of Indian mythology in the present era. By combining the textual and the visual, Pattanaik makes an inquiry into what the *Mahabharata* might look like, feel like, and be understood in an increasingly visually literate generation. Importantly, his images illustrate both preservation and change—the traditional symbolism of the epic remains. However, Pattanaik's representation serves to recreate and reclaim the epic for an audience for whom the work will likely be new. This accomplishes two things: first, it underscores that the *Mahabharata* is not dying but changing and evolving, making the work relevant to its audience; and second, it demonstrates that mythology is not a relic but a fluid repository of identity, ethics, and cultural memory. Through its art, *Jaya* does not merely tell a story of a tradition. However, she opens pathways to see, feel, and re-engage the epic as we remember it, thereby ensuring that the *Mahabharata* remains a dynamic part of India's memory.

### **Material and Methods**

Devdutt Pattanaik's *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* rethinks the ancient epic within an unparalleled matrix of academic integrity and artistic originality. Unlike the translation of the original (or abridged versions, for that matter), Pattanaik views the Mahabharata as a living tradition, constantly transformed by cultural retellings. By designating the piece as an *illustrated retelling*, Pattanaik suggests something deeper: the word 'retelling' is a synonym for translation, in the sense that it allows for the reinvention of the original narrative while returning storytelling to a cultural activity. Pattanaik's work is theoretically

admissible, and his practice is informed by the research and references he consults. He draws on the Sanskrit Mahabharata, including regional and folk versions. He writes:

*Inspired by both the Sanskrit classic as well as its regional and folk variants, it is firmly placed in the context of the Puranic worldview (Pattanaik 12)*

This more expansive interpretation of the original Sanskrit epic recognizes the malleability of the text since so many narratives exist at once, and there is no original ‘authentic’ version. Certainly, this reflects a certain zeitgeist regarding the performance of epics over time and space.

Jaya's originality stems from the integration of text and visuals. Each chapter of Jaya features simple, black-and-white line drawings that are minimalistic in style but complex, loaded with many layers of meaning. For example, Krishna always holds a peacock feather and a flute (see Fig. 1), allowing readers to instantaneously envision a divine Krishna, unlike the peacock from the previous chapter. Drawing on these images is not merely decorative. It functions like a *visual exegesis*, providing new meanings, reinforcing specific readings, and sometimes resisting traditional readings of the epic.



Fig. 1: Krishna with peacock feather and flute, symbolising his divine and pastoral identity.

*[Fig. 1: Krishna with peacock feather and flute (Pattanaik 154).]*

The representation of Arjuna stringing the bow at Draupadi's swayamvara (Fig. 2) is an example of a moment of victory for Arjuna while simultaneously demonstrating that Karna was excluded from participating, providing visual commentary on caste and fate. Not only does Pattanaik's art assist in processing complex emotions and ideas in philosophy, but it also presents them as accessible, contemporary images. The two-dimensional images draw readers in from the mythical experience to examining it using their own experiences.

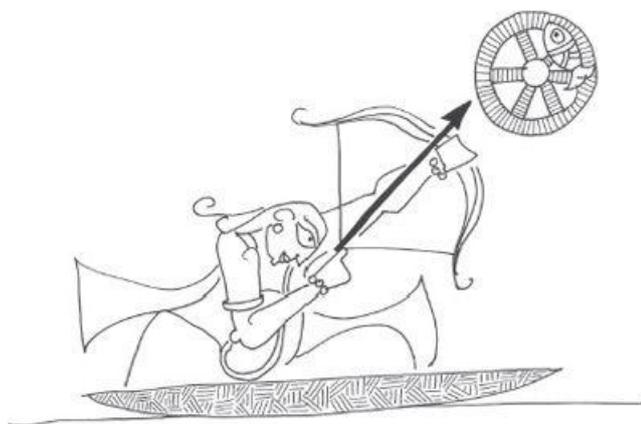


Fig. 2: Arjuna strings the bow at Draupadi's swayamvara, a pivotal moment of triumph and tension.

[Fig. 2: *Arjuna at the swayamvara* (Pattanaik 141).]

Pattanaik's style reflects the *Mahabharata* oral tradition, presented as a conversation between King Janamejaya and the sage Vaisampayana (23–24). The approach implies that we ought to consider every retelling of the *Mahabharata* a performance historically and culturally situated. The writing is conversational but also complex, embodying an ambiguity without any moralism, a way of approaching the text (which retains sexually explicit tales and supernatural elements), and advising parents to read it with younger audiences (12). His decision to be unfiltered and not sanitise the grotesqueness of the epic retains the *Mahabharata*'s traditional purpose as a reflection of what it is to be human, where dharma (duty) and adharma (chaos) can be fully teased out. Footnotes and annotations, for example, discussion of *varna-dharma* within the Ekalavya episode (106) (footnote mentions the *model satyagraha apprentice*), both

provide scholarly foundations and do not interrupt the narrative or promise while offering more information and knowledge for the inquisitive reader.

The text-image Interplay in *Jaya* also support the democratization of the epic; diverse audience members can be reached. Some of Pattanaik's artworks often illustrate frameworks from a marginal perspective, as exemplified by Ekalavya's severed thumb (Fig. 3), a powerful image that critiques caste-based oppression and social discrimination. Draupadi's disrobing is portrayed merely as a disappearance, when it could stand as a record of testimony of the horror of Draupadi's disrobing or humiliation. It can also provoke a range of thoughts about gender and power. The visual storytelling of the one (Pattanaik) with the textual storytelling of the other (an author) enables the Mahabharata's lessons to engage audiences, regardless of their language and culture, on emotional and intellectual levels.



Fig. 3: Ekalavya's severed thumb, a symbol of caste injustice and sacrificed potential.

*Fig. 3: Ekalavya's thumb (Pattanaik 106).*

At the end of the day, *Jaya* is not just a book, but a cultural experience in rejuvenating the Mahabharata for a new era. Pattanaik's combination of research, art, and story-making brings the ancient tale to life, enabling readers to become active participants rather than passive audiences. Pattanaik's illustrations and annotations allow us to re-examine the Mahabharata as we understand the story at new levels. In doing so, *Jaya* recognises the ever-present spirit of the epic while remaining an engaging text in a continually evolving world. As Pattanaik writes,

“Within infinite myths lies the Eternal Truth.” (12) Pattanaik's retelling of the Mahabharata demonstrates, yet again, the continuing potency of storytelling to show one that truth.

### **Illustration as Cultural Semiotics: Decoding Symbolism**

Devdutt Pattanaik's *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* disrupts the act of reading as a relatively uncomplicated engagement with visual storytelling, and presents a complex semiotic language of culture, with the illustrations as constitutive visual codes derived from the text's narrative. The interplay of imagery and text marks out a richer textural response to the narrative, just as perception spawned the images arranged in imagery. Each image serves as a visual metaphor that conveys important cultural and philosophical constructs, providing additional print depth, as well as the encoded complexity of the invented visual referents. When we look at the illustration of Draupadi in the *vastraharan* scene, the effect is not just streamlining God's intervention into a moment of concern and crisis that evokes faith in God, but also producing a remarkable visual signifier of feminine emancipation, resistance, and a sense of strength. In crystallizing a moment into an everlasting icon or symbol of spiritual resistance to patriarchalism, this representation leverages Roland Barthes' observation that.

*Myth is a mode of signification that transforms history into nature (Barthes 129)*

Similarly, the motif of the *chakra* signifies concepts or ideas at different levels of signification when Krishna holds the *Sudarshana Chakra*. At the same time, the spokes within which very small human figures (Faust, et al, exhibited a unique relationship with scale using exquisitely small figurines depicting intellectually problematic characters from the Mahabharata story) are infinite in its relationship to *samsara* (cycle of existence) and signally *dharma* (cosmic order established by God), this illustrative construct captures Krishna's construction as protector and actor divine, while simultaneously defining temporal constructs of human destiny. This rich visual semiotics produces what Barthes would term a “second-

order semiological system” (114), in which literal image and cultural connotations are fused to yield a mythic meaning that seems predetermined.

Pattanaik's illustrations, particularly in the handling of social hierarchies, are at their best in the image of Ekalavya's severed thumb nestling at Drona's feet like a perverse *dakshina* (ritual offering). The simplicity of the image rejects the textual rationale that this sacrifice was *necessary for the sake of social stability* (Pattanaik 106), uncovering it as systemic violence that normalises caste oppression and providing visual evidence of Barthes' theory of myth as a depoliticised speech that preserves the system of power (143). The depiction of Bhishma does similar work to the textual narrative: his figure, alone, standing rigid as he averts his gaze from Satyawati and her daughters-in-law, visually represents the emotional sterility of his promised vow of celibacy, celebrated in the text. The section appears to hum sound as a “glorification of the son who sacrifices his own happiness for the sake of his father.” (62); the image brings in an affective sensibility complicating that glorification. It is through this complex interplay of text and image that Pattanaik's illustrations actively interpret the epic and allow direct engagement with the Mahabharata's complex themes of power, justice, and human fragility. Pattanaik asserts, “The Eternal True lies in infinite myths” (12); his visual semiotics offer an important means of quoting those eternal truths in a way culturally meaningful to contemporary audiences, making *Jaya* not just a retelling but a remaking of cultural memory through art.

### **The Interplay Between Word and Image: Dual Narratives of Identity**

In *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*, Devdutt Pattanaik expertly combines texts and pictures to create what W.J.T. Mitchell refers to as “double consciousness”, in which meaning arises through the interrelated negotiation of the verbal and visual texts (Mitchell 47). Moving the epic from a static ‘text’ to an active tradition, Pattanaik develops a contemporary response to India's multiple religious and cultural identities, because the images

complicate or even contradict the text, inviting multiple perspectives on important moral and philosophical issues. In his representations of Bhishma's vow, Pattanaik's text praises Bhishma for his honourable resignation and dedication to celibacy; his images depict a more ambivalent Bhishma, capturing Bhishma's own compromised identity reconstructed through images of his half-shadowed face and arrows strewn about him, which do not suggest just honour but also violence, loss, and emotional stasis. The image of Bhishma not only engages with the glorified text but also activates a conception of reading Bhishma that explores moral relativism regarding social duties. This duality of representations reflects India's ongoing negotiations of cultural identity and traditional ideals of duty through its discussions of the Mahabharata. Also, in the case of Ekalavya's severed thumb, the text's reasoning that Drona's action was justifiable for the sake of social order is in stark contrast with the image, which illustrates the horrific caste oppression inherent within the image of the mutilated hand. Draupadi's disrobing provides another potent instance. In *Jaya*, the visual narrative has shifted the focus from descriptions of humiliation to depict Draupadi's defiant pose and the miraculous protection of her never-ending sari, developing the episode not as one of victimisation but as one of perseverance and divine intervention. In this complexity, Pattanaik opens an ambivalent interpretive space that is inclusive of the polyphonic meanings that bespeak India's consciousness. Pattanaik's ideological structure includes a comparison of text and image, sometimes in symphonic harmony, sometimes in contradiction, as the action of inviting the audience to participate in the continuous conversation about the relevance of the Mahabharata today. Pattanaik writes, "The Eternal Truth is hidden in infinite myths" (12); and his retelling demonstrates that this truth is not a single doctrine of understanding but rather a multiplicity of understanding enabled by the creative tension of each form of storytelling.

### **Visual Art as a Continuum of Oral Tradition**

Pattanaik's work, *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*, is also a contemporary and visual revitalisation of the oral tradition of epic storytelling and demonstrates that art can serve as a link between oral and visual forms of storytelling. The *Mahabharata*, as a story, has always been a tale preserved by generations of storytellers who memorised the epic's verses and narrated them in particular contexts, articulating its philosophic truths within a prescriptive interpretation. The epic will always have a core philosophy that an oral storyteller can apply to any narrative context. Pattanaik's illustrations embody the same living quality of the oral form by signalling a relationship between the text and images in a book that concerns the visual form and will resonate as a dynamic textual compulsion that accompanies oral storytelling. For instance, Pattanaik's line drawings solicit emotional complexity as jarring visual mantras, simplified visual formulations that contain philosophic truths as sacred verbal formulations like mantras through their simplicity. This methodology is evident in a pedagogical approach to art making, as Stella Kramrisch, an art historian, contended that Indian art is not merely aesthetic or purely pleasurable, but also serves as a channel for spiritual communication (Kramrisch 24). In this regard, Pattanaik's images reduce the epic's density with engaging, concentrated images, and importantly, retains the visual and kinetic mnemonic quality visual storytelling entails and allows the images and technology of paper to elicit visual anchors to break through conscious, engaged, and continually interpretative practice of the Mahabharata as lived narrativity inspired from the poetically dense, oral form of Mahabharata.

The visual language of *Jaya* draws unabashedly on India's long legacy of narrative art forms, such as temple sculptures, *Madhubani* paintings, and *Pattachitra* scrolls, all of which illustrate mythological narratives through intricate images. These art forms serve rich purposes; they are never merely decorative; they are vital pedagogical forms of communication that allow cultures to pass on spiritual and moral knowledge to future generations. Pattanaik's illustrations

(despite his minimalist, modern style) share this same pedagogical imperative. For instance, his illustration of Krishna with a peacock feather and flute (Pattanaik 148) conveys who the former is and, more, what this deity represents through iconography relevant only to temple art. Moreover, his illustration of Arjuna straining his bow during Draupadi's *swayamvara* (141) creates a sense of drama and compositional imagery that evokes past blends drawn from classical Indian narrative art. Through visual vocabulary, *Jaya* defines itself in relation to Indian storytelling—indeed, *Jaya* can articulate visual contributions to storytelling in which intermediaries can blur the lines between text and image into a more powerful and holistic whole, not unlike the coalescing elements of verse, music, and gesture in oral storytelling and performance.

Above all, Pattanaik's drawings exemplify the oral tradition's embrace of improvisation and reinterpretation. Just as every oral version of the *Mahabharata* is a product of contextual adaptation and adjustment, highlighting certain aspects of robustness or local flavour, Pattanaik's images provide new senses of familiar episodes. For example, Bhishma's vow (62) calls into question the textual illustration of his sacrifice through showing him half in shadow and surrounded by broken arrows. Was he really so righteous? Was his vow really so pure? Similarly, Ekalavya's severed thumb (106) illustrates how the anguish of caste oppression cannot be justified as the text does with a flimsy and irrelevant but comfortable 'difference'. These images stand as visual *vyakhyas* (commentaries) with emotionally and historically loaded meanings that would be difficult to pry from narrative retellings alone. Moreover, the illustrations, like oral performance, encourage readers to be tough with the ambiguities of the epic, as every storyteller adapts and emphasises sections based on the available audience (who are engaged with subjective orientations of significance valued) and current histories and contexts.

In this way, *Jaya* reconceives the book as a modern space for philosophical and spiritual speculation, a digital-age shrine with images that act as *darshanic* portals. The illustrations, like temple images or icons, do not merely serve as depictions; they act as conduits for contemplation, inviting readers to pause and reflect on the questions the epic raises. What Pattanaik's work demonstrates is that he pays tribute to the oral origins of *the Mahabharata* and alters it for the visual culture. As he explains, "The Eternal Truth resides in limitless myths" (12), and the illustrations become portals into that truth, demonstrating that its wisdom is still meaningful when expressed through the collaborative power of line and word. Together with the other media available for storytelling, *Jaya* embodies a hybridization of oral and visual stories, assuring the *Mahabharata* becomes a sense of cultural heritage, or heritage in lived philosophy.

### **Reimagining Characters and Mythology Through Visual Storytelling in *Jaya***

Through powerful illustrations that do not merely depict stories but transform mythic figures into psychological and philosophical archetypal experiences, Devdutt Pattanaik's *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* reinvents the ancient epic. The images do not merely accompany the text but alter how readers engage with some of these time-tested figures, connecting their struggles and moral virtues to present-day experience. Karna, the tragic hero, is shown in heavy armour with a helmet that covers all but a small portion of his face (Pattanaik 112). This image, as a metaphor, alludes to his hidden identity and identity struggles regarding where he belongs. This can be compared to the discussions in India that persist today on caste, fate, and self, and encompasses elements of Karna's position in-between: neither the male Kuru princes fully accept him (because of his caste), yet he also does not fully have a place with his adoptive family. "Pattanaik describes the outsider who could never find his place" (113). This shows how visuals can condense layered emotional and social tensions into a single image.

Krishna is portrayed in a very contrasting style, with very calm and composed postures at the very peak of war activity (148). It is rather consistent with Indian iconography in portraying Vishnu's avatars as balancing forces of the universe rather than brute strength. Pattanaik insists that *Krishna's power lies not in weapons but in wisdom* (150), and the illustrations refrain from depicting him in warlike violence. Instead, he stands in calm during moments of great events, such as the discourse of the Bhagavad Gita, thus acting not as a warrior but as a spiritual guide. Draupadi is yet another one of the glorious personalities who play multiple roles: one as a glorious queen, another as a wronged woman, yet all coming with symbolic features of her endurance from across her long sari that stretches on its own during the disrobing scene (110), a visual metaphor of the spirit of her unyielding self, typical of how Pattanaik's minimalist line drawings leave the bulk of meanings in suggestion rather than explicit detail.

In addition to the character recalibration, *Jaya* connects an ancient mythological culture with a modern readership through the immediacy of the visual storytelling format and its emotional capabilities. Textual narratives, which remain ignored as common forms of modern storytelling, often struggle to captivate audiences in the digital age; instead, Pattanaik's illustrations put contemporary readers in a cultural context as visual readers looking for new forms of cultural anchorage (Pattanaik 6-12). In this sense, there is a close connection to Arjun Appadurai's [1986] notion of the '*production of locality*' in which the re-mapping of cultural symbols is linked to the construction of local place through the feeling of cultural belonging. By presenting the *Mahabharata* in graphic form, Pattanaik allows readers to make the myth their own, as essential identity material, both individually and collectively. The illustrations serve as a secular entry point for reading a sacred text—the secular are not subject to the ritual specificity of images and symbols. The *Mahabharata* is therefore immediately accessible for a

range of audiences, Hindus and non-Hindus both, who want to ponder its theoretical and philosophical content without worrying about any possible doctrinal issues (Pattanaik 18-24).

In *Jaya*, the art accompanies philosophical discourse and embodies the visual expression of abstract ideas like *dharma*, *karma*, and *moksha*. An illustration of Yudhishtira ascending a jagged mountain accompanied only by a stray dog (Pattanaik 92) depicts the arduous journey of the soul toward liberation. While the text elaborates on his final test, the image speaks directly about the renunciation and transcendence expressed by what Ananda Coomaraswamy has called the *visual metaphysics* of Indian art; the images are but doorways to deeper truth (Coomaraswamy 89). In addition, *Jaya* also revives ancient narrative modes like *Kavad* art and *Harikatha*, which have historically favoured the integration of visual and oral modes to stimulate community engagement (Pattanaik 140-144). By that, *Jaya* preserves culture, but along the way, it helps to forge bonds between fragmented modern identities and a common mythological past. The illustrations fortify the narrative by adding layers of meaning, keeping the *Mahabharata* a living tradition, adaptive yet grounded, much like the cyclical nature of *dharma* itself. Thus, the art-and-text interface in *Jaya* upholds the timely relevance of the epic, affirming that, when reinterpreted visually, mythology can thrust itself into the consciousness of generations.

## Results and Discussion

Devdutt Pattanaik's *Jaya* is revolutionary in its retelling of myth and in showing how illustration and visuality can serve as important pathways for cultural memory and identity. Through his spare but extraordinarily powerful line drawings, Pattanaik does not just retell the *Mahabharata*, he re-enlivens it, helping us access its ancient philosophical and ethical dilemmas in full colour, and in forms that resonate with contemporary sensibilities, while also respecting this original context; he uses visual mantras, schematic, potent, and open to layering and

interpreting, much like oral storytelling kept the epic alive for thousands of years. Pattanaik creates stark, symbolic images that can convey some of the stories' more complex characters and themes; they can pull us back to re-reading the epic's antiquated language from a modern mindset, helping us come to terms with the book's relevant messages and teachings on dharma, justice, and human being, through reasoned contemplation and preparedness to embrace our (intuitive) knowledge through visuals. The visual of Karna, with his face partially covered by armour (Pattanaik 112), shot through the narrator's perspective and through the visual medium, reaches beyond the textual to express and explore his existential angst, his sense of identity, faithfulness, and ostracization, in a deeply unsettling graphic that speaks to India's continuing conversation on caste and belonging. His serene repose even amidst the battle (148) only solidifies Krishna's divine rather than martial position: his iconography here follows precedent while offering fresh philosophical insights into nonviolence and statesmanship. Such artistic choices do not simply illustrate a story but reinterpret it, offering visual commentary that sometimes contradicts obvious moral certainties that the text would impose, as is the case with the ambivalence surrounding the depiction of Bhishma's vow (62), in which shadow and broken arrows challenge the valorisation of sacrifice within the narrative.

Pattanaik's project sits at the intersection of sacred art and vernacular storytelling, drawing on India's diverse traditions of temple sculpture, miniature painting, and folk representations such as *Pattachitra* and *Madhubani*, which have historically served both as devotional objects and representational forms. He is asking us to consider the illustrated book with a narrative as a holding and transfer device that imbues it with this dual function, making the book a portable temple (as art historian Stella Kramrisch would recognise, Kramrisch 24). Here, myth emerges from the illustrative space and into our participatory, tactile bodies. The illustrations of Draupadi are meant to ask us to feel something and do something; each time she performs a regal act of majesty or, as in one instance, her disrobing (110), it is meant to

evoke feelings and conditions that place the viewer/witness/interpreter into a relationship with her. While this line between narrative, allegory, and feeling is tenuous, Pattanaik is trying to help us reactivate what he calls '*mythological consciousness*' (12). In particular, an Indian way of seeing the world that embodies a symbolic cyclical time, and shows it to us in an immediacy of vision that revives us to the felt escape from history. If Krishna has a peacock feather (be it a representation or an illustration), you immediately connect it to the meaning, not just the event from your cultural memory. That connection to divine play (*lila*) is both contemporary in design and clearly allows the epic to speak to at least two generations, raising its plurality from villagers on stage to urban dwellers of the graphic novel who often wish to reimagine the character. Myth's strength lies not in its meaning, but in how effectively it works across different spaces and mindsets.

The significance of *Jaya* extends well beyond its literary scholarship into the idea of cultural preservation and reinvention. At a time when quickly attained and easily forgotten digital media and the fracturing of attention are ubiquitous, Pattanaik's work is an example of how ancient knowledges can live and thrive by mixing short descriptive letters with strong visual imagery. He makes clear that India's mythic past is not singular and fixed in time. Each phenomenon changes over time, whether performed in village squares or temple courtyards, and increasingly so today in images on printed pages and digital screens. The illustrations in the book are much like traditional performance art forms in how they suggest an ability to add, modify and elaborate in each instance; a drawing of Arjuna's pained and conflicted face just before he goes into battle (141) evokes endless potential conversations and debates about duty and morality, similarly to a Kathakali dancer's gestured expression. Thus, *Jaya* is not simply a retelling but a living conversation, in which the fluidity of what the reader sees also fills out the meaning contained in the artwork. The minimalist approach, without elaborate details or embellishments, has oddly created maximal opportunities for involvement; the viewer can 'see'

themselves in Ekalavya (106) and as such, what this might mean to have the finger severed off to create a bond to common meaning that denotes potential that lay wasted and lost.

Ultimately, Jaya demonstrates how art can function as both a mirror and a lamp, reflecting cultural identity while illuminating a way forward. By merging the verbal and visual so intimately, Pattanaik respects the oral nature of the Mahabharata's initial telling, while also catapulting it into the future. The book serves as what the scholar A.K. Ramanujan referred to as an "ecosystem of stories" (Ramanujan 45), where text and image, tradition and innovation, sacred and secular coexist in a lively equilibrium. Within this ecosystem, one image, in the context of the entire epic, of Krishna smiling peacefully amid the chaos of Kurukshetra, could embody the lesson of acting without attachment, proving that some truths cannot be expressed as accurately in words. As India navigates an ecology of globalization on the one hand and an increasingly tenuous position of cultural identity and cultural capitalism on the other hand, Jaya, and others like it, can provide legitimation for how mythology can become relevant not by holding onto it rigidly or by protecting the past, rather through reinterpretation, innovation, and respectful retelling, which are aware of the past but which also speak to the present. Pattanaik's success lies in demonstrating that the power of the Mahabharata is not constantly challenged by retellings but is invariably reinforced by them, and that every generation needs to articulate a visual language that allows it to engage in a new dialogue with the tradition. In this respect, Jaya is not simply a book but a yajna (sacrifice) of form and meaning so that the act of reading can be an offering to the eternal fire of storytelling.

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