



Language as a Cultural Archive: An Analytical Study in Christopher C Doyle's *The Mahabharata Secret*

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Abstract

Language serves not only as a tool of communication but also as a living cultural archive. It preserves collective memory, belief systems, and indigenous knowledge traditions. In the Indian context, classical language function as repositories of myth, philosophy, and civilizational ethics. The paper examines Christopher C. Doyle's neo-mythological thriller *The Mahabharata Secret* to explore how language operates as a cultural archive within contemporary Indian fiction. The study analyses Doyle's concept of language to retrieve suppressed or marginalised knowledge systems rooted in the Mahabharata. The paper argues that linguistic competence in the novel becomes a gateway to highlight the consequences of linguistic neglect, linking language loss with culture and identity in the modern society. Through its fusion of myth and thriller conventions, *The Mahabharata Secret* reasserts language as a dynamic medium of cultural continuity, identity formation, and knowledge preservation. The paper emphasizes the role of language in sustaining cultural memory and national consciousness.

Keywords: Language, Cultural Archive, Neo-Mythology, Sanskrit, Cultural Memory

Language is the most powerful tool of communication. It helps a person to interact with the environment and to regulate his social behaviour. It is one of the most prized possessions of a man. "It acts as a repository of wisdom, a propeller for the advancement of knowledge and a telescope to view the vision of the future" (Mohan and Banerjee 1). Language is the primary medium of literature. It is not only a tool for communication, but also a creative, ideological, and cultural force. It shapes meaning, identity, and reality of the context. Literature exists through language, and language determines how stories are told, interpreted, and

remembered. However, the function of language is not free from ignorance, prejudice and superstition. But in Christopher C. Doyle's *The Mahabharata Secret*, language functions as more than a communicative tool. It becomes a carrier of civilizational memory. Doyle's narrative focuses on Sanskrit, ancient scripts, symbols, and coded inscriptions.

Language and culture are inter-related. Culture embodies moral, ethical and aesthetic values of a community. These values are carried by language from generation after generation. Ngugi rightly states:



Language as culture is the collective memory of people's experience in a history. Culture is almost indistinguishable from language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulations and indeed its communication from one generation to the next" (15)

Language signifies the role of authority to interpret history. Christopher C. Doyle's *The Mahabharata Secret* treats language not merely as a narrative medium but as a cultural archive. A cultural archive refers to the collection, preservation, and interpretation of cultural memories, texts, artefacts, narratives, and practices that shape a community's identity across time. It includes not only official historical documents but also myths, oral traditions, literature, rituals, digital records, and collective memories. In contemporary theory, the archive is not just a storage space. It serves a site of power, memory, and identity formation. It foregrounds the inseparable relationship among language, civilisational memory and cultural sustainability through its strategic use of mythic vocabulary, Sanskrit terminology and historical discourse. When the language becomes extinct or endangered, the identity and culture of the particular community is also lost. Even Article 29 of Indian Constitution deals with 'Protection of Language, Script and Culture'. According to which, "Any section of the citizens residing in the territory of India or any part there of having a distinct language, script or culture of its own shall have the right to conserve the same" (Laxmikanth 7.16). So, the role of language plays a predominant role in preserving the identity and culture. According to Article 51A, it shall be the duty of every citizen of India "to value and preserve the rich heritage of the country's composite culture" (Laxmikanth 9.2). Christopher C. Doyle has tried to do some justice for this through his narrative strategy.

Christopher C. Doyle is one among the prominent contemporary Indian writers. His works secure a significant position within the domain of neo-mythological, techno-mythological and thriller fiction in Indian English literature. His novels are the

amalgamation of mythology, archaeology, science and espionage through which he revisits the past of India. His novel *The Mahabharata Secret* (2013) reimagines the great Indian epic *The Mahabharata* not only as the repository of knowledge but also of ethical philosophy.

The study asserts that Christopher C. Doyle's *The Mahabharata Secret* positions English as a vehicle but not as a complete replacement for indigenous knowledge. Even though the novel is written in English, frequently it assimilates Indian terms such as dharma, karma, "Vimana Parva" (Doyle 70) without full Western translation. When Shukla explains the five truths of *The Bhagavad Gita*, he states as,

'Isvara (the Science of God), Jeevas (the constitutional nature of living entities), Prakriti (material nature), Samay (time) or the duration of existence of the entire universe or the manifestation of material nature and Karma (activities in our lives).' (Doyle 80)

He also makes use of terms such as *Sudarshana Chakra* (Doyle 246), gods or "devas" and weapons used by Arjuna, *Dhristadyumna*, *Dronacharya* respectively as "Brahmastra", "Mahendra", "Pramohana", and "Prajna" (Doyle 174-175). When Vijay's and Farooq's team reach Hazaribagh Town, they see inscriptions in Magadhi "Isvara, Jeevas, Prakriti, Samay, Karma, Dhukkha, Samudaya, Nirhodha, Marga" (Doyle 320). This ensures that cultural knowledge is preserved through continuity rather than substitution.

When Shukla states *Vimana Parva*, Radha explains about the different parts of *The Mahabharata* which is termed as parva:

'The book which is summarised here is the *Vimana Parva*. The *Mahabharata* consists of books, each one narrating a section of the tale that is reflected in the title of the book; the *Karna Parva* is the story of Karna, the *Bheeshma Parva* is about Bheeshma Pitamah, and so on. But I've never come across the *Vimana Parva* in any version of the epic that I've read. As far as I know, it doesn't exist'... 'A vimana is a flying craft'... 'There are several references to vimanas in the epic'. (Doyle 155-156)



They make use of the references of the Sanskrit words such as 'vimana' and 'parva' which means 'flying machines' and 'division or part or book of a literary work' respectively.

Throughout the novel, Doyle's protagonists act as interpreters of language and decoder of symbols, inscriptions, and oral legends. This reinforces the idea that identity emerges through the act of reading the past. The novel constitutes Indian identity through a linguistic consciousness. Vikram Singh informs Farooq about the lost book of the Mahabharata, "the Vimana Parva which was never documented officially...Even if you knew Kharosthi...The texts are in the form of verses. Few people would be able to interpret their true meaning" (Doyle 237).

Epics preserve civilizational memory and mythic language sustains cultural continuity. Mythic language is a special kind of language used in myths, epics and neo-mythological narratives to express symbolic truth. In Indian epics and puranas it is tied with dharma, karma and cosmic balance. In the contemporary works, mythic language blends with science and technology and sacred symbols are recoded to reveal mystery. Roland Barthes argues that language already carries meaning but myth re-signifies it to provide cultural ideology through the use of language.

Mythic language theory explores how mythological thinking shapes ancient myths into modern vocabulary and expressions. According to Claude Levi Strauss argues that myth operates at a higher level of meaning than ordinary language. He states,

myth cannot simply be treated as language if its specific problems are to be solved; myth is language: to be known, myth has to be told; it is a part of human speech. In order to preserve its specificity we must be able to show that it is both the same thing as language, and also something different from it. (109)

Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* famously proposed myth acts as "a meta language" (143). He argues how modern culture preserves myth by making use of a language and restoring it according

to the need. The inscriptions quoted in mythic language leads Vijay and his to have dangerous journeys. In the novel *The Mahabharata Secret*, Doyle hints the usage of coded language and presents them in translation. One such inscription which is in the ball is a riddle in verse. It reads as: From the chambers that echo/As we lift our eyes to the south/To the harbinger of the Lord's birth...Hidden for Millenia/The Secret of the Nine (Doyle 205). Throughout the novel, the Sanskrit inscriptions are translated by Shukla, the linguist. Doyle also makes use of coded language. One of the mails of Vikram to Vijay is:

Everything isn't always the way it looks. Sometimes you need to look deeper within. Study, the Bhagavad Gita, it is the source of much knowledge. The subject of the Gita, though mixed up, is a mark upon us for our future lives and will lead you through the door to knowledge, which you much unlock. In an ocean of maya, there is always an island of satya. (Doyle 2)

In *The Mahabharata Secret*, Doyle has made use of both translation and transliteration. Translation is the process of converting a text from one language into another without changing its meaning, tone, and context whereas transliteration is the process of converting text from one script into another script without changing the original language. It represents pronunciation using a different alphabet.

Mythic language links contemporary characters to epic ancestry. In the novel, the author mentions not about Sanskrit but also Indian languages such as Magadhi, Pali, Prakrit, Kharosthi and Brahmi. The author made the references of these languages and some of these languages were extinct. Being a linguist, it is Shukla who deciphered the meaning of those. Even Western-trained archaeologists and institutions and even the natives of the current generation fail to decode these knowledge systems. They are in need of support to decipher the meaning of it. When a language became extinct or when the usage of a particular language gets restricted or limited, there is a danger that the particular language would be endangered. This indirectly would reflect the loss of identity of the particular culture. Thus,



linguistic heritage becomes inseparable from cultural identity. For instance, Vijay who is born Indian is sent to America by his uncle Vikram Singh. Though his uncle is a nuclear scientist, he is interested in ancient history and ancient languages. But Vijay is not aware of that. He does not know any ancient Indian languages. So, he is always in need of the help of Dr. Shukla, who is a linguist.

Doyle's use of English in neo-mythology ensures that Indian cultural narratives are globally accessible. Neo-mythology refers to recreation and reinterpretation of ancient myths within the contemporary contexts such as science, technology, history, politics, nationalism and popular culture. But it does not retell ancient myths. According to the concept of neo-mythology, myths are questioned and reinvestigated. "The term "neo-mythology" defines the modern tendency to extract symbols and religious and figures of world history from their natural context or religion and reinterpret, thus "constructing" a new myth" (Xidakis 536). Neo-mythology refers to the modern reinterpretation, reconstruction or reactivation of traditional myths within contemporary cultural, literary and political contexts. It transforms myth from sacred narrative into a dynamic cultural discourse.

In *The Mahabharata Secret*, the author focuses on the flying machines and the Brotherhood of Nine. In the base epic, *The Mahabharata*, *Vimana Parva* is not there. But in *The Mahabharata Secret* it is considered as the lost book. One group wants to decode the secret in which Indian and foreign people are involved. The characters in the novel are not only from India but also from Pakistan, America and Australia. Vijay, Vikram, Shukla, Bheem Singh are from India whereas Farooq is from Pakistan, Van Kleuck is from Australia, Murphy, Cooper and Colin are from America. The places that are mentioned in the novel also describes the location of various places namely, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. But the old name of most of the locations are changed in the modern times. "In Ptolmey's time there was an ancient sea port called Soupara, which was a commercial centre. It's ancient name was Supparaka. Today, according to this map and your research, it is

known as Sopara" (Doyle 103). The common link language for them is English but they all are in a task to decode Sanskrit inscriptions. Thus, the novel also acts as a tool cultural nationalism, where language becomes a tool for sustaining civilisational identity in a transnational literary market. English dominates the surface narrative. But it is constantly disrupted by untranslated terms, Sanskrit slokas, and culturally embedded expressions. This linguistic hybridity functions as narrative resistance.

The focus on Sanskrit in the novel symbolizes continuity and sustainability of knowledge. Sanskrit is one among the three ancient languages. In recent years, there is a growing recognition of the importance of Sanskrit. Most of the Classical Literature in India is written in Sanskrit. It is not treated as a dead classical language but as a living archive embedded in temples, rituals, and mythic memory. During the course of discussion, the characters Greg White and Bheem Singh, they discuss about Bruno Beger, who has conducted his research in Tibet. In his diary he has mentioned about "the Temple of the Tooth... Discovered ancient documents from India... The documents are in Sanskrit...Need to get it translated by Professor Wust" (Doyle 17-18).

Doyle draws his ideas from classical texts and he foregrounds cryptic verses. This suggests that cultural sustainability depends on the preservation and reinterpretation of linguistic traditions rather than their museumization. In *The Mahabharata Secret*, his idea drawn from the epic *The Mahabharata* and his tale is not the retelling of it. He has tried something new.

The concept aligns with postcolonial theorist Ngugi wa Thiong'o. He argues that language is central to cultural survival. According to him, language as culture has three important aspects.

Culture is the product of the history...forming images and pictures of the world of nature and nurture...culture is an image-forming agent...through a specific language...Thus a specific culture is not transmitted through language in its universality but in its particularity as the language of a specific community with a specific history. (14)



In *The Mahabharata Secret*, reclaiming ancient linguistic codes becomes an act of reclaiming intellectual sovereignty and cultural memory.

Language functions also as a site of cultural negotiation, where identity is continuously reconstructed through myth, history, and modern discourse. The novel suggests that cultural survival in contemporary India depends not on rejecting modernity, but on reclaiming language as a repository of indigenous knowledge and identity. The narrative treats Sanskrit inscriptions as a living cultural vault.

Cultural sustainability refers to practices that preserve cultural heritage, traditions and identities across generations while adapting to modern contexts. In *The Mahabharata Secret* is ensured through storytelling itself. Myths, legends, and linguistic symbols are passed down through adaptive narratives. The transformation of epic language into the idiom of a techno-thriller demonstrates how traditional cultural forms can survive by evolving. Language becomes a bridge between past and present, enabling cultural continuity in a globalized world.

Doyle links language with national identity and collective memory. Sacred words, place names, and inscriptions encode historical and cultural consciousness. It resists erasure. The novel suggests that if a linguistic heritage is lost, it leads to the loss to access to alternative histories. Among all, it particularly loses the history, identity and culture of those marginalized by colonial narratives. Therefore, language sustains culture by securing identity to place, memory, and mythology. It reinforces the idea that nationhood should also be narrated.

In today's context of language endangerment and cultural amalgamation, *The Mahabharata Secret* advocates a revivalist and a critical engagement with indigenous languages. Cultural sustainability does

not mean to return to the past but to reclaim linguistic heritage as a living, evolving force within modern discourse. The process of globalization leads to endangerment of a particular language. But in the current era one can revive an endangered language through digital platforms. Literature and media play a vital role to perform that role for modern readers and audiences. Thus, cultural sustainability depends on adaptive preservation.

In *The Mahabharata Secret*, language functions the role of identity, resistance, and survival. By embedding ancient linguistic systems within a modern espionage narrative, Doyle demonstrates that cultural sustainability is possible only when language is preserved, respected, and reimagined. The novel ultimately argues that reclaiming language is an act of reclaiming history, power, and the future.

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