Research Article

The Wounded Children of Kurukshetra: Childhood Adversity and Adolescent Health in the Mahabharata

Mr. Tarun Sehrawat, PhD Scholar[1], Dr. Tanu Kashyap, Associate Professor[2]

[1]Amity Institute of English Studies and Research (AIESR), Amity University, Sector 125, Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India Email: tarunsehphd@gmail.com ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0006-5871-2790
[2]Amity Institute of English Studies and Research (AIESR), Amity University, Sector 125, Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India Email: tkashyap@amity.edu ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6747-5815

Abstract

The Mahabharata is usually read as the story of a war between cousins. This study reads it instead as a record of what happened to those cousins, and to the children around them, before the war began. Using the framework of adverse childhood experiences, it applies directed qualitative content analysis to Kisari Mohan Ganguli's translation of the epic, checked against the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute critical edition. Eight characters or groups with narrated childhoods or adolescence were coded against the ten categories of the original adverse childhood experiences study and three expanded categories: discrimination, poverty and exposure to collective violence. Seven of the eight had two or more coded adversities, parental loss or separation being the most frequent. Seven themes emerged, beginning with the concealed pregnancy of the unmarried girl Kunti, whose abandonment of her newborn became the first adversity of her son Karna. The text links early adversity with rage, revenge and fixed loyalty to whoever first offered acceptance, and traces one man's humiliation through three generations to a massacre of sleeping young men. Duryodhana, with a single coded category and one of the most destructive outcomes, shows that a count of adversities can understate the harm of parenting that sets no limits. The paper concludes that the epic offers a culturally familiar account of cumulative childhood adversity, and that its episodes can support trauma-informed education, counselling and teacher training for Indian adolescents when used as narratives for reflection rather than as clinical evidence.

Keywords: Mahabharata; adverse childhood experiences; adolescent health; pregnancy in adolescence; psychological trauma; resilience

1. Introduction

"Didst thou lose thyself first or me?"
~Draupadi, in the dice hall (*Mahabharata*, Sabha Parva, sec. 66)

Long before the armies meet at Kurukshetra, the Mahabharata has shown its reader an unmarried girl setting her newborn adrift on a river at night, a boy poisoned by his cousin and thrown into the Ganga, a child crying because rich boys have milk and he has none, and a tribal prince told by his teacher to cut off his own thumb. The war of the eighteenth book is fought by these children grown up. This study asks what a public-health reader sees when the epic is read as their case history.

The framework for that reading comes from the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. Surveying adult members of a health plan in California, Felitti and colleagues found a graded relationship between the number of categories of childhood abuse, neglect and household dysfunction a person reported and that person's risk of alcoholism, drug abuse, depression, suicide attempt and several leading causes of adult death (Felitti et al. 245). A later meta-analysis of 37 studies found the strongest associations of multiple ACEs with problematic drug use and with interpersonal and self-directed violence (Hughes et al. e356).

The original ten categories describe adversity inside the household. The World Health Organization's ACE International Questionnaire added peer, community and collective violence for use in low- and middle-income countries (World Health Organization), and the Philadelphia Urban ACE Survey added discrimination, neighbourhood violence and bullying (Cronholm et al. 354). These additions matter in India, where a national government study of more than 12,000 children reported that about two in three had experienced physical abuse and just over half one or more forms of sexual abuse (Kacker et al.). Adolescence is when the effects of such adversity begin to appear as risk behaviour, mental disorder and violence, and when schools and families can still change their course.

Indian adolescents rarely meet these ideas in clinical language; they meet them in stories. Sudhir Kakar argued that Hindu myths supply the shared images through which Indian families imagine parents, children and the self (Kakar). Irawati Karve's *Yuganta* read the epic's figures as people shaped by particular histories, not as moral

types (Karve). Clinicians have compared the Bhagavad Gita with contemporary psychotherapies (Bhatia et al. S315), and literary scholars have read single characters, such as Shakuni, through trauma theory and psychoanalysis (Karki and Paudel 70). No study we could find has applied a public-health framework of childhood adversity across the epic's children as a group, or asked what such a reading offers adolescent health.

This study addressed four questions: which ACE categories appear in the narrated childhoods and adolescence of major Mahabharata characters; how the text links these adversities with later behaviour; which relationships protect against them; and how the findings might be used in adolescent health education and trauma-informed care in India.

2. Methodology

Design

The study is a qualitative document analysis (Bowen 27) using directed content analysis, in which an existing theory supplies the first coding categories and new codes are added as the material requires (Hsieh and Shannon 1277). Reporting follows the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (O'Brien et al. 1245).

Text and Corpus

The primary text was Kisari Mohan Ganguli's complete English prose translation, published between 1883 and 1896 and now in the public domain (*Mahabharata*). Quotations are taken from it and cited by book (*parva*) and section. Each episode was checked against the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute critical edition (Sukthankar et al.) and Bibek Debroy's translation of that edition (Debroy). Material found only in later retellings, television serials or the *Harivamsha* was excluded; for this reason Krishna's childhood and the popular backstory of Shakuni were left out.

The corpus comprised the Adi Parva (book 1), which narrates the births and childhoods of the Kuru princes; the account of Karna's birth in the Vana Parva (book 3); the dice-game sections of the Sabha Parva (book 2); and the passages of the Udyoga, Drona and Sauptika Parvas (books 5, 7 and 10) in which the same characters reach the outcomes analysed.

Selection of Characters

A character was included if the text narrates at least one event in their childhood or adolescence and follows them into adulthood. Eight units met this criterion: Kunti, Karna, Ekalavya, Ashwatthama, Duryodhana, the Pandava brothers (one unit, with Bhima's poisoning coded separately), Abhimanyu and Draupadi. Draupadi has no narrated childhood, because the epic describes her as born grown from a sacrificial fire. She was kept as a boundary case for gendered violence at the threshold of adulthood.

Codebook

The first codebook (table 1) held the ten categories of the original ACE Study (Felitti et al. 245) and three categories from the expanded instruments: discrimination, poverty and exposure to collective violence (World Health Organization; Cronholm et al. 354). Because the epic's gurus stand in a quasi-parental relationship to their pupils, harm by a guru was coded under abuse and flagged. Codes for outcomes (such as rage, revenge, secrecy and fixed loyalty) and for protective relationships were developed during reading. Codes resting on interpretation rather than explicit narration were marked as such.

Table 1. *Codebook of Adverse Childhood Experience Categories Used in the Analysis*

Domain	Category	Indicator in the text
Abuse	Emotional abuse	Humiliation, contempt or threat by a caregiver, guru or household member
Abuse	Physical abuse	Physical harm or attempted killing by a household member or guru
Abuse	Sexual abuse	Sexual coercion, assault or forced public exposure
Neglect	Emotional neglect	Absence of protection, limit-setting or affection from parents
Neglect	Physical neglect	Unmet need for food, shelter or care
Household dysfunction	Parental loss or separation	Death, abandonment, giving away or long absence of a parent

Household dysfunction	Violence in the household	Violence between members of the household
Household dysfunction	Substance misuse or compulsion	Intoxication or compulsive gambling by a household member
Household dysfunction	Mental illness in the household	Narrated mental disturbance in a parent (explicit only)
Household dysfunction	Incarceration	Imprisonment of a household member
Expanded	Discrimination	Exclusion or insult based on birth, caste or tribe
Expanded	Poverty	Material deprivation narrated as such
Expanded	Collective violence	Exposure to war or massacre before adulthood

Source: Adapted from Felitti et al.; World Health Organization; Cronholm et al.

Analysis

All passages about each character before marriage or entry into war were extracted and coded against table 1. Later passages were then coded for outcomes and for relationships that protected or harmed. Codes were compared across characters and grouped into themes following the six phases set out by Braun and Clarke (87).

Rigour

The first author coded the full corpus. A second author independently coded a 20% sample of passages; disagreements were resolved by discussion and the codebook revised. An audit trail of coding decisions was kept, and credibility and dependability were assessed against the criteria of Lincoln and Guba. Both authors grew up hearing the epic recited, and acknowledge that this familiarity may favour sympathetic readings of some characters.

Ethics

The study analysed a published, public-domain text and involved no human participants, so approval from a Research Ethics Committee was not required.

3. Results

Parental loss or separation was coded for four units (Kunti, Karna, the Pandavas and Abhimanyu) and emotional abuse for three (Karna, Ekalavya and Draupadi). Sexual abuse, physical abuse and discrimination were coded for two units each. No unit was coded for parental substance misuse, mental illness or incarceration. Table 2 summarises the coding; the seven themes developed from it are presented below.

Table 2. *Coded Adverse Childhood Experiences, Outcomes and Protective Relationships by Character*

Character	Coded adversities	Core / expanded	Later outcome in the text	Protective relationship
Kunti	Given away by her father as a child; coerced conception as an unmarried girl (interpretive)	2 / 0	Concealed pregnancy; abandonment of her newborn; lifelong secrecy	A nurse who keeps her secret
Karna	Abandoned at birth; maternal rejection; public insult over birth	3 / 1	Fixed loyalty to Duryodhana; enmity toward Arjuna	Foster parents Adhiratha and Radha
Ekalavya	Refused by a guru; mutilation demanded by the guru	2 / 1	Loss of skill; silent compliance	None narrated
Ashwatthama	Food deprivation; family poverty	1 / 1	Night massacre of sleeping young men	Father's attention (also favouritism)
Pandavas	Deaths of Pandu and Madri; poisoning and arson by cousins	3 / 0	Bhima's rage; Yudhishthira's compulsive gambling	Kunti; Vidura's warnings
Abhimanyu	Father's long absence; sent into battle while young	1 / 1	Death in battle	Mother's kin

Duryodhana	Parents who set no limits (interpretive)	1 / 0	Envy; repeated attempts to kill his cousins; war	Friendship with Karna
Draupadi (boundary case)	Public sexual humiliation; insult as a slave	2 / 0	Sustained demand for vengeance	Vikarna's protest

Source: Authors' coding of the Ganguli translation (*Mahabharata*).

A Girl's Secret: Kunti and the Concealed Pregnancy

The chain of adversity in the epic starts with an adolescent pregnancy. Kunti was given away as a child by her father to his childless cousin Kuntibhoja, whose name she took (Adi Parva). As an unmarried girl in his house she tests a mantra given to her by a sage, and the sun god appears; the Vana Parva describes her pleading with him to leave and yielding under the threat of a curse on her family, which this study coded, with caution, as coercion. What follows is narrated as concealment: she "from fear of her friends, concealed her conception, so that no one knew her condition" (*Mahabharata*, Vana Parva, sec. 306). Only a nurse knows. After the birth she seals the baby in a basket, and the narrator is explicit about the conflict between shame and attachment: "although she knew it to be improper for an unmarried girl to bear offspring, yet from parental affection . . . she wept piteously" (sec. 306). The basket is set on the river Aswa at night. Kunti's adversity becomes her son's: the first coded event in Karna's life is her act of abandonment.

Stigma and the Search for Belonging: Karna and Ekalavya

Karna, raised by a charioteer and his wife, enters the tournament of the Kuru princes as a young man and is shamed for his birth. Bhima taunts him: "O son of a charioteer, thou dost not deserve death in fight at the hands of Partha. As befits thy race take thou anon the whip" (*Mahabharata*, Adi Parva, sec. 139). The text records the insult in his body: he "with slightly quivering lips fetched a deep sigh" and looked at the sun, his unacknowledged father (sec. 139). Duryodhana defends him and makes him king of Anga on the spot. When Kunti finally reveals his birth on the eve of war, Karna reproaches her for casting him away and refuses to change sides (Udyoga Parva). His loyalty to the first person who accepted him holds until his death.

Ekalavya, a Nishada prince, is refused instruction by Drona because of his birth and teaches himself before a clay image of the teacher. When his skill threatens Drona's promise that no pupil will equal Arjuna, Drona names his fee: "I should like then to have the thumb of thy right hand" (Adi Parva, sec. 134). The narrator calls these "cruel words." Ekalavya complies at once, and afterwards finds he has "lost his former lightness of hand" (sec. 134). The epic gives him no protector and no word of protest.

Hunger and Humiliation: Ashwatthama and the Chain of Revenge

Ashwatthama's childhood is told by his father. Drona recalls that the boy, "observing some rich men's sons drink milk, began to cry"; his playmates then gave him water mixed with rice powder, and he danced, believing he had drunk milk (*Mahabharata*, Adi Parva, sec. 133). Drona's account dwells on his own shame. It sets off a chain of revenge that crosses three generations and ends in the massacre of the Sauptika Parva (fig. 1).



Figure 1. The chain of revenge that begins with Ashwatthama's hunger. Each step answers the humiliation before it, and the last falls on young men born after the first insult. Source: authors' reading of the *Mahabharata* (Adi, Drona and Sauptika Parvas).

Violence under One Roof: The Pandavas

The Pandavas lose their father, Pandu, in childhood; Madri, mother of the twins, dies on his funeral pyre. The boys are brought to Hastinapura and raised beside their cousins. Duryodhana decides, "I shall have to destroy him by artifice," poisons Bhima's food and, when Bhima collapses, "bound him with chords of shrubs, and threw him into the water" (*Mahabharata*, Adi Parva, sec. 128). A later plot to burn the brothers and their mother alive in a house of lac fails only because their uncle Vidura warns them (Adi Parva, Jatugriha Parva). In adulthood Bhima is the brother most given to rage, and Yudhishthira stakes his kingdom, his brothers, himself and his wife at dice.

Neglect amid Privilege: Duryodhana

Duryodhana is the eldest son of the king and lacks nothing material. The only category coded for him was emotional neglect, and even that is interpretive. His father, Dhritarashtra, is blind; his mother, Gandhari, blindfolds herself for life on marriage, so the boy grows up with two parents who cannot see him. The text repeatedly shows Dhritarashtra failing to restrain his son despite warnings from Vidura and Bhishma. Duryodhana "began to conceive hostility" towards Bhima in boyhood (sec. 128), and his attempts at murder meet no consequence. One coded category was linked to one of the most destructive outcomes in the epic.

Adolescents in War and Gendered Violence: Abhimanyu and Draupadi

Abhimanyu, Arjuna's son, grows up largely apart from his exiled father and is sent into battle while still young. He breaks into the circular formation of the Kaurava army knowing how to enter but not how to leave, and is surrounded and killed by several adult warriors together (*Mahabharata*, Drona Parva).

Draupadi, the boundary case, is dragged into the assembly after Yudhishthira loses her at dice. "Thou draggest me who am in my season before these Kuru heroes," she protests (Sabha Parva, sec. 66). Her question to the hall, whether her husband lost himself before he staked her, receives no answer from the elders. Only Vikarna, a young son of Dhritarashtra, speaks against the assault.

Protective Relationships

The text also records bonds that soften adversity. At the tournament, Karna's foster father enters the arena, "embraced Karna and from excess of affection bedewed his head with tears" (*Mahabharata*, Adi Parva, sec. 139), and Karna bows to him in front of the princes. Vidura's warnings keep the Pandavas alive. Kunti's nurse shares her secret. Duryodhana's friendship gives Karna belonging but binds him to Duryodhana's cause, so the same relationship protects and harms. Ekalavya, who has no such bond, is the one character whose story ends at the moment of injury.

4. Discussion

Read as a set of childhoods, the Mahabharata narrates adversity in almost every major family line and ties it to adult conduct in ways that resemble ACE research. The units with the most coded categories, Karna and the Pandavas, are among those whose adult lives are most marked by rage, compulsion or fixed loyalty. The outcomes the text attaches to early adversity, namely interpersonal violence, revenge and self-destructive conduct, are the outcomes most strongly associated with multiple ACEs in the meta-analytic literature (Hughes et al. e356). The epic also anticipates the move beyond the household: two of its best-remembered injuries, Karna's and Ekalavya's, are injuries of birth and caste, which the original ten categories do not record and the expanded instruments were built to capture (Cronholm et al. 354; World Health Organization).

Three findings complicate a simple count. First, the chain begins with an adolescent. Kunti's story contains the features that make concealed adolescent pregnancy dangerous today: an unmarried girl, a sexual encounter she could not refuse, fear of her family, a single confidante, and a birth followed at once by abandonment. Her child's first adversity is the direct result of her own. Second, Duryodhana had one coded category and one of the worst outcomes. The text ascribes his conduct less to anything done to him than to what his parents failed to do, which supports measuring the quality of parenting alongside the number of adverse events. Third, Ekalavya had several categories and no recorded outcome beyond the loss of his skill, because the epic stops telling his story; in practice his equivalent is the adolescent whose adversity stays invisible because no one follows them up.

The chain from Ashwatthama's hunger to the Sauptika Parva (fig. 1) is a narrative of intergenerational transmission. Research on trauma across generations proposes biological, psychological and social routes by which a parent's adversity reaches a child (Yehuda and Lehrner 243). The epic dramatises the social route: a father's shame becomes a vow, the vow shapes a son's loyalties, and the son's grief becomes violence against the next generation. Against this, the protective bonds in the text (Karna's foster parents, Vidura, Kunti's nurse) are the ordinary supportive relationships that resilience research identifies as the main source of recovery (Masten 227).

Implications for Adolescent Health

The practical value of this reading is familiarity: Indian adolescents, parents and teachers often know these stories from early childhood (Kakar). An episode can open a subject that a direct question would close. Kunti's night at the river can introduce a discussion of stigma around premarital pregnancy and of where a frightened girl can go for confidential help. Karna's humiliation and Ekalavya's thumb can introduce caste-based bullying and harm by teachers; Duryodhana's upbringing, permissive parenting. Three settings follow. In schools, episodes can anchor life-skills sessions on bullying, discrimination, anger and sexual and reproductive health. In counselling, they can serve as shared metaphors, as the Bhagavad Gita already does alongside cognitive and existential therapies (Bhatia et al. S315). In teacher and parent training, the Drona episodes show how an adult with authority can injure a child, which fits the emphasis on safety and the use of power in trauma-informed approaches (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration). In each setting the stories should be offered as narratives for reflection, not as evidence about any person.

Conclusion

The war at Kurukshetra is the epic's most famous event, but the text prepares it through childhoods: a girl who hides a pregnancy, a baby on a river, a boy thrown into the Ganga, a child given rice-water for milk, a thumb cut off to keep a promise. Read through the ACE framework, these episodes describe how abandonment, poverty, violence inside the family, discrimination and parental neglect shape adolescent and adult lives, and how a single protective bond can alter that course. Because the stories already belong to the way many Indian families talk about children, they give health workers, teachers and counsellors a familiar way to raise childhood adversity with adolescents. Future studies could test structured, epic-based sessions in schools for their effect on adolescents' recognition of abuse and discrimination and on their willingness to seek help.

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