

Rejecting *Dharma* and Narrative Wholeness

Mahābhārata Explorations of “the Right Thing to Do”

Imagine a moment of acute disillusionment, where everything you have perceived thus far as being true and valid, which has brought meaning, sense, and order in your perception of yourself and of the world that surrounds you, is drastically compromised. Visualize this moment in which your very identity is crumbling and you are left with a single feasible choice: somehow stepping out of this previous order of your world and observing it from outside. Once you have done so, the only thing left for you to do is to radically undermine, condemn, or reject it.

The above is of course an over-dramatization of the internal processes that the epic protagonist finds himself having to undergo at the ending of the MBh. Whether we consider this description to be accurate or not, I propose that, at least from the perspective of plot development, the most dramatic event in the *Svargārohaṇa* is Yudhiṣṭhira’s bitter denunciation of his father, Dharma. Moreover, since this event takes place in the ending that concludes the entire story line, and because it involves the epic’s cardinal theme, *dharma*, this moment ought to receive thorough consideration, particularly because it has not been given due consideration as yet. This moment is distinguished by the use of the Sanskrit verb *garh*, which is commonly translated as “to censure; reproach; reprove; blame.” The use of this verb in this context certainly heightens the dramatic effect, but also exposes a fascinating paradox in the MBh. For, how are we to understand a text whose primary preoccupation is the subject of *dharma* and which concludes with the condemnation of Dharma? This question becomes all the more intriguing if one bears in mind that

here in the MBh the word *dharma* denotes the god Dharma, who is Yudhiṣṭhira's father, and also the abstract concept of *dharma* (partly translatable as "justice," "law," "morality," "duty," "order," "world order," etc.), as well as Yudhiṣṭhira himself, whose common epithets in the epic are *Dharma-rāja* ("The Righteous King") or *Dharma-suta* ("Son of Dharma").

The main events leading up to this pivotal moment in the epic's concluding scenes begin with Yudhiṣṭhira's deception by Indra, who encourages him to enter *svarga* on the false pretext that his brothers and wife await him there. Upon entering he finds his long-time bitter rival, the villainous Duryodhana, thriving. He then relinquishes *svarga* in order to search for his relatives and eventually finds that they were, in fact, condemned to pain and anguish in hell (*naraka*). Finally, in an act of self-defiance and desperation, Yudhiṣṭhira denounces (*garhayām āsa*)¹ his father Dharma and the other gods.² The MBh's concluding scenes thus exhibit a harsh and highly paradoxical act of *dharma* denunciation ("*garhification*"). One could say that not even the more pacifying events that follow, in which the Pāṇḍavas and other characters in the narrative are assimilated into their divine origins, succeed in resolving this paradox.³ For a text that is obsessively preoccupied with the concept of *dharma*, an act of its denunciation at its ending, despite the last scene's happy note, surely must be significant. This chapter's main objective is to find out by philological and thematic means what the meaning of the epic's final *garh* scene is and to explore the relation between Yudhiṣṭhira's verbal injunction and the concept of *dharma* in the MBh.

A number of scholars have pointed out the problematic nature of the concept of *dharma* in the epic. Although it is emphasized that this concept is one of the central themes around which the MBh revolves, it is also noted that *dharma* is a highly intricate and complex concept. Indeed, the epic's own understanding of this concept is expressed in its repeated saying that *dharma* is *atisūkṣma* ("extremely subtle"). As noted by James Fitzgerald:

The word *dharma* signifies a concept that is one of the most central and important topics of thought and debate in the *Mahābhārata*. . . . The concept is complex and often under contestation in the MBh, explicitly and implicitly. And the usage of the word in the epic is varied and elusive. . . . The single biggest problem in coming to terms with *dharma* in

the *Mahābhārata* is the tremendous abundance of instances of it, and then the many different modes of variation within and among those different instances of the word. . . . Also, the *Mahābhārata* does not always speak with one voice about the particular behavior or behaviors that actually have the status of *dharma*, and sometimes what particular actions or behaviors constitute *dharma* are said to be unknown. . . . And while the basic attitude toward *dharma* may be one of respect, or even reverence, that attitude is not shared by all the epic's characters. Not even all the supposed "good guys" in the *Mahābhārata* assume that *dharma* is the most important and valuable kind of action . . . And not only is *dharma* frequently said in the *Mahābhārata* to be very subtle (*sūkṣma*) and difficult to know, whole sections of the text develop the point that often what appears to be *dharma* is actually *adhharma*, and vice-versa. . . . The word *dharma* points to something that someone holds to be religiously right and good; some voices in the *Mahābhārata* claim to know definitely what that, or those things, are; but often characters in the *Mahābhārata* exhibit uncertainty about the content of what is claimed to be *dharma* and ambivalence toward the idea itself.⁴

Along similar lines, John Smith explains:

So *dharma* is not a simple thing: indeed the *Mahābhārata* repeatedly insists how "subtle" (*sūkṣma*) it is. This subtlety offers storytellers great opportunities for the development of narratives focusing on personal or existential dilemmas, for situations can arise—or be imagined—in which the demands of a person's *dharma* seem to be mutually contradictory.⁵

Several questions arise from the dramatic moment of the epic's final *garh* scene. The first is, most plainly, what does this moment mean? What is Yudhiṣṭhira actually doing when he censures *dharma*? Additional questions concern the object that Yudhiṣṭhira's censure is directed at, namely, Dharma. Given the preoccupation with *dharma* throughout the length and breadth of the epic, what implications does such a conclusion have for the text's perception of *dharma*? How does this moment relate to the rest of the narrative? And last, is

this an integral, obvious, and “organically grown” conclusion for the entire epic?

In answering these questions, this chapter looks at several other *garh* passages in the MBh in order to establish (1) a precise understanding of Yudhiṣṭhira’s action in the SĀ; (2) the various implications of the narrators’ use of *garh* in different contexts; (3) the semantic structural patterns of *garh* in the MBh; and, finally, (4) the relation between the use of *garh* and the meaning of *dharma* in the MBh.

In broader terms, the chapter discusses the MBh’s explorations of “the right thing to do” (i.e., *dharma*) through the perspective of *garh*’s semantic contexts. MBh authors experiment with the concept of *dharma*. In the course of some 100,000 verses they offer a highly intricate, elaborate, and creative exposition whose underlying theme is an exploration of “the right thing to do.” Yet, in their relentless search for this elusive value (“the right thing to do”), these literary architects of the epic are constantly impelled to reject other sets of morality in favor of selected *dharmas*. The discussion here argues that such a prolonged framework of favoring *dharmas* over *adharmas*, and vice versa, necessarily leads, eventually, to the paradoxical result of *dharma* turning in on itself by self-negating or rejecting its own nature at the ending of the MBh. And since, as this chapter will demonstrate, this is the intrinsic structure in which the epic plot is delivered, then, perhaps such a topsy-turvy outcome is the only way in which a problematic text like the MBh can come to a conclusion.

Since a study of *garh*’s usage in the MBh is vital to understanding the SĀ’s significance in the epic, this chapter presents several crucial instances of its appearance in the narrative and analyzes them according to meaning and context. The first section of this chapter presents a tentative typology of *garh*’s structural semantic patterns in the MBh. The second section examines two of *garh*’s cognate verbs in the MBh, while the last section offers a detailed analysis of several *garh* passages in the epic. The argument throughout this section demonstrates that (1) *garh* is present in key narrative junctures of the epic; (2) *garh*’s usage in the MBh reveals that *dharma* is perceived in the epic as a highly contextual and circumstance-dependent concept; (3) *garh* serves as a “marker” for the core meditation on *dharma*, which the entire epic is devoted to, in various modes, and that there is a consistency in the verb’s appearance in critical passages.

In summarizing my findings of the verb’s semantic patterns in the epic, I conclude by arguing that the epic’s final *garh* scene is sig-

nificant for the understanding of the entire text, and that as opposed to the stance that tends to overlook the SĀ, *garh*'s study in the MBh reveals that the SĀ is integral to the thematic structure of the epic as a whole.

1. Semantic Typology of *Garh* in the *Mahābhārata*

The study of *garh*'s usage in the MBh provides an internal perspective of the epic with regard to its conclusion. Looking at other uses of *garh* in passages within the epic may help to establish the significance of the SĀ and the way *garh* is related to the concept of *dharma* in the MBh as a whole.

It is worth noting some relevant data regarding *garh*'s occurrences in the epic before embarking on the investigation of its semantic flux. To the best of my knowledge, the verb *garh* occurs 169 times in the MBh in a large range of grammatical forms.⁶ *Garh* features in finite verbs in various modes and tenses, as well as in nominal derivations.⁷ While the verb appears in fifteen MBh books, it occurs most frequently in the *Śānti* and the *Udyoga parvans* (occurring thirty-six times in each book). Of the 169 *garh* instances, the verb's perfect periphrastic conjugation features only eight times.⁸ Notably, in the SĀ the verb *garh* appears exclusively in this particular form (*garhayām āsa*).⁹ In the majority of cases in the MBh, *garh* tends to mean "to rebuke, reproach, censure, blame, revile." Yet there are distinct cases where *garh* statements tend to appear more emphatically. In such cases, I have translated the verb as "to denounce." As will emerge from the discussion below, such cases in the MBh are distinct because, unlike others (where *garh* is aimed by the MBh protagonists at others who have offended them), emphatic *garh* statements are directed against *dharma* itself. Indeed, such is the case of the epic's final *garh* scene in the SĀ. Therefore, this lends such statements the sense of a public, and certainly more emphasized, denunciation. In a few exceptional cases we find examples where *garh* means "to renounce, reject." In these cases the verb approximates its common semantic meaning (one can see how an act of censuring can gain a sense of rejecting or renouncing), although occurrences of this type are quite rare.¹⁰

In the discussion that follows I present several crucial *garh* moments in the narrative by analyzing them according to meaning and context. Of the approximately one third of the total range of

grammatical forms of *garh* and its derivatives (roughly around fifty cases) examined in my research, I shall discuss seven significant instances, which were selected according to contextual occurrences relevant to the discussion and that contribute to understanding the epic's final *garh* scene. Additionally, I have developed a tentative typology of *garh*'s usage in the MBh, which is based on the large number of cases my study examined. It should be noted, however, that this typology reflects the majority of *garh* incidents in the epic. That is to say, other *garh* instances are more or less replicates of the major strands represented here. In the discussion below I shall refer to the five prevalent divisions.

1. *Garh* aimed at wrong acts. In the majority of cases, *garh* reproves transgressions of dharmic laws by the protagonists of the MBh. Examples of this type are often quoted within general statements of reproof and sometimes in the form of censure lists. Such moments typically portray plain, relatively uncomplicated *garh* aimed at acts that are simply deemed "wrong." Often, these statements are expressed in a didactic tone by MBh protagonists and at times they may simply express dissatisfaction with or aversion to things one dislikes or finds distasteful. Although the majority of *garh* instances in the MBh fall into this category, I shall present but a few examples of these since this usage is less relevant to the discussion at hand.

2. Divergence in the interpretation of *dharma*. Other *garh* moments in the epic are found when there is a significant difference in interpreting *dharma*, with both interpretations being correct but contextually determined. These moments are characterized by dharmic polemics and controversial disputes, and often depict both sides of the debate usually offering sound arguments. However, the argument is typically determined contextually according to the different planes of *dharma*'s hierarchies (i.e., a lesser obligatory *dharma* is being rejected in favor of a higher one). It should be noted that in some instances, especially when one of the characters is a Brahmin, the dispute is eventually determined by a curse. In such cases, the curse will often correspond to the offender's action.¹¹

3. "Dharmic deadlock." Another example of the verb's occurrence in the MBh is characterized by moments of total dharmic deadlock. This stalemate results in *garh* statements that typically derive from the protagonists' doubt, hesitation, and despair ensuing from dead-end, irresolvable dilemmas and are often made in self-deprecating tones. These moments of self-reproach emerge, as will be shown

below, when one finds himself incapable of accepting the fate he is dealt. In these instances, the MBh protagonists use *garh* when they are utterly despondent, either about an event that has yet to materialize but in all probability will, or when one regrets the consequences of an event that he could not, in all probability, have prevented. Accordingly, such moments are typically expressed in *garh*'s future, optative, or gerundive forms, conveying the future's uncertainty (e.g., "I wish that such and such will not happen"), or conveying retrospective regret when looking back in hindsight (e.g., "If only this did not happen").

4. ***Garh* signaling a "higher *dharma*."** Other *garh* passages point to discursive elaborations of the semantic range of *garh* in specified contexts. Such instances illustrate a semantic link between *garh* and *nṛśaṃsa* ("cruelty") or *hiṃsā* ("injury, harm, violence"). My investigation suggests that by associating *garh* with *nṛśaṃsa* or *hiṃsā*, authors of the MBh draw attention to these terms' counterpart words, namely *ānṛśaṃsa* ("noninjury, nonviolence"), or *ahiṃsā* ("harmlessness, non-violence"). Thus, in such passages the verb tends to signal a "higher *dharma*" and, at times, conclude with a curse.

5. **"Garhing" (censuring) *dharma*.** A unique type of *garh* in the MBh consists of cases in which epic protagonists, such as Yudhiṣṭhira in the SĀ, censure *Dharma*. These significant moments when *dharma* twists back on itself and "*garhs*" itself employ *garh* in a recursive act, as if *dharma* were collapsing deep into itself. Unlike the preceding four *garh* types (where the verb is used by the protagonists against *others* who have offended them), these instances have *garh* aimed at abstract agents or notions.¹² Such passages are unique because they do not necessarily portray a simple judgment like the examples found in the other categories, where the moral authority derives from dharmic laws. Rather, these moments are a cry of anguish, since the mind cannot think beyond the paradox of *dharma*'s turning in on itself. The theme of *dharma* censuring *dharma*, or the censure of *dharma* itself, which is present in cases of this type, resonates strongly in the epic's final *garh* scene. Accordingly, the discussion below pays considerable attention to instances of this type.

2. Cognate Verbs of *Garh* in the *Mahābhārata*

Before embarking on a detailed analysis of *garh* passages, it is necessary to explore cognate verbs of *garh* in the MBh in order to establish

the precise nature of its usage in the epic. However, it should be emphasized that since the main focus of this discussion is concerned with *garh*, it is beyond its scope to offer a comprehensive study of all possible cognate verbs of *garh* in the MBh. Nonetheless, I examine two verbs that, semantically, are closest to *garh* in the epic, namely, *nind* and *kṣip*. The following discussion offers a study of the occurrences of these verbs in several MBh *parvans*, with the aim of pointing out the *major* and most *common* strands in which they are employed. In other words, although it points out some exceptional cases, this section's primary concern is to show in the broadest terms how *garh*'s cognate verbs feature in the epic.

2.1. *Nind*

The verb semantically closest to *garh* in the MBh is the verb *nind* ("to blame, censure, revile, despise, ridicule"). To the best of my knowledge, the verb occurs 266 times in the MBh, but all of these occur in the first fifteen *parvans* (i.e., it does not feature in the three concluding books of the epic—the *Mausala*, MhP, and the *SĀ parvans*).¹³ Among these 266 occurrences, *nind* has four main semantic uses in the epic, as follows:

1. *Anindita* passages. In a strikingly large majority of cases, the verb *nind* appears in its negative adjectival form, namely *anindita*. Such occurrences of *nind* rise to significant numbers in the epic. There are 129 such *anindita* passages, that is, roughly *half* of the total occurrences of the verb in the entire MBh. Moreover, in the majority of these negative adjectival passages, *nind* mostly appears as a female noun (*aninditā/anindite*, etc.) and thus forms a formulaic expression for depicting women (e.g., "blameless lady, faultless woman, woman beyond reproach, woman of faultless form," etc.). The multiple recurrences of such forms in the MBh indicate that the negative adjectival *aninditā* is a common expression in the epic to describe the female sex.¹⁴ There are of course various occurrences of the positive *nindita* adjectival form, but these occur in relatively small numbers in comparison with the numerous *anindita* passages.¹⁵

2. "Praise and blame" passages. Another recurrent usage of the verb *nind* in the MBh relates to the antonyms "praise" and "blame." There are many such copulative compounds (*dvandvas*) in the epic that typically pair up the noun *nindā* ("blame") with either *praśamsā* or *stuti* ("praise").¹⁶ Besides these compound forms, there are also other

fairly elaborate passages that exhibit “praise and blame” as mental conditions toward which one has to cultivate indifference or equality (e.g., *tulya*; *sama*).¹⁷

3. *Vedanindaka* passages. In addition to the passages above, a phrase that occurs often in the epic is *vedanindaka*, “a reviler of the Veda.” As to be expected, this expression is couched in negative terms in the MBh. Below I quote a few similar expressions that use *nindaka* (“a reviler”) with other nouns, as well.¹⁸

4. Finite *nind* passages. The above-mentioned *nind* passages (i.e., *anindita*, “praise and blame,” and *vedanindaka*) jointly make up nearly two thirds of the total occurrences of *nind* in the MBh.¹⁹ The remainder is composed of finite *nind* passages, in which the verb features in a variety of its conjugational forms. The semantic meaning of *nind* in such instances may range from to “blame,” “criticize,” “despise,” “offend,” or “mock” to “find fault.”²⁰ My findings of *nind*’s study in the MBh suggest that in some of these passages *nind* may be interchangeable with *garh* in its most basic semantic meaning, namely, “*garh* aimed at wrong acts,” which is the first type proposed above. A typical example of this kind, where *nind* may alternate with *garh*, comes from the following verse from the *Śānti parvan*, which illustrates a “censure list” by stringing together several wrong acts that wise men scorn:

striyo'kṣā mṛgayā pānaṁ prasaṅgān ninditā budhailḥ (12.28.31)
Women, dice, hunting, and drinking are condemned by the
wise due to their adhesive [nature].

Yet more often than not, finite *nind* passages exhibit situations in which MBh protagonists are blamed because of their failure to behave according to dharmic laws and, more specifically, in accordance with their own social norms. A typical instance of this kind comes from the *Bhagavadgītā* episode, in which Kṛṣṇa urges Arjuna to fight the battle by warning the latter that a failure to fulfill his Kṣatriya duty will result in his becoming the laughing stock of his enemies:

avācyavādānś ca bahūn vadiṣyanti tavāhitāḥ |
nindantas tava sāmartyaṁ tato duḥkhataraṁ nu kim || (6.24.36)
Your enemies will say various unspeakable things about
you while mocking your strength. What [could be] more
painful than this?

However, the numerous recurrences of *nind* in the particular passages mentioned above (*anindita*, “praise and blame,” and *vedanindaka* passages) indicate that although it is semantically close to *garh*, *nind* is not always a default substitute verb for *garh*, as it is seldom used to replace *garh* in its full range of semantic meanings. Significant indications for this derive from the fact that *nind* is used considerably more frequently than *garh* in the MBh, and that it is consistently used in the above-mentioned, fixed expressions. *Garh*, on the other hand, has a far more selective use than *nind* and appears in particular contexts in the epic (i.e., “*garh* aimed at wrong acts,” “divergence in the interpretation of *dharmā*,” “dharmic deadlock,” “*garh* signaling a higher *dharmā*,” and “*garh*ing *dharmā*”). The mere nine cases that I was able to find, in which *nind* may thematically share some of *garh*’s semantics (other than “aimed at wrong acts”), are exceptional, and rare in comparison with the verb’s frequent uses in the epic, as discussed above.²¹

2.2. *Kṣip*

The Sanskrit verb *kṣip* has a large variety of meanings, most commonly “to cast; to throw; to send; to dispatch; to throw a glance; to strike; to hit; to put or to place something; to scatter; to pour; to throw away; to get rid of; to strike down; to ruin; to destroy.” An additional, and insofar as the MBh is concerned, less frequent meaning of *kṣip* is “to revile, abuse, and insult.”

My investigation of the verb indicates that *kṣip* in the latter sense (“revile, abuse, insult”) is relatively rare in the epic in comparison with its other meanings. Having arrived at this conclusion after examining several epic books, the study of this verb was narrowed down to seven MBh books, namely, the *Ādi*, *Sabhā*, *Vana*, *Virāṭa*, *Udyoga*, *Strī*, and *Śānti parvāns*. These particular books were selected for closer examination because some of them are considered to be among the longest books of the epic (e.g., *Ādi*, *Vana*, *Udyoga*, and *Śānti*), and also because some are considered of a relatively early date (e.g., parts of the *Ādi*, *Sabhā*, and *Vana*). The reason the battle books were not selected for closer inspection was that a preliminary reading proved that *kṣip* features in them very frequently in its other meanings, which are naturally germane to the battle’s semantics of conflict, violence, and armed struggle (e.g., “to throw/scatter arrows, to cast/dispatch various weapons, to strike down/hit/ruin/destroy,” etc.). In order to show the relatively infrequent use of *kṣip* in the sense “to abuse/revile/

insult," the statistics of its occurrence in the seven *parvans* that were selected for closer examination are presented below.²²

The findings of *kṣip*'s study in the latter sense suggest that it is not used as a verb interchangeable with *garh*, mainly because the contexts in which *kṣip* occurs are "weaker" than the emphatic and public *garh* statements that feature consistently in the epic. The primary meanings of *kṣip* are therefore milder and less pronounced than those of *garh*. In the majority of cases, the meaning of *kṣip* in the MBh may range from "abuse,"²³ "insult,"²⁴ "slight,"²⁵ "berate,"²⁶ "offend,"²⁷ and "accuse"²⁸ to "contempt."²⁹ An example that demonstrates *kṣip*'s weakened meaning in relation to *garh* comes from the following *Vana parva*n passage, in which after Draupadī "garhed" Brahmā (at 3.31.39),³⁰ Yudhiṣṭhira warns her:

*ato nārhasi kalyāṇi dhātāraṁ dharmam eva ca /
rajomūḍhena manasā kṣeptum śāṅkitum eva ca // (3.32.14)*

Therefore, beautiful woman, you certainly ought not, with heart stupefied by anger, abuse or distrust the Creator nor *dharma*.

This *kṣip* passage is extremely pertinent to our discussion because it responds to and follows an act of *garh* (censuring). It is obvious that in his speech Yudhiṣṭhira is careful not even to repeat verbally the same verb Draupadī used in her desperate act of censure against the Creator (Brahmā). Yudhiṣṭhira uses a different verb, which allows him to attenuate the harsh act of censure previously enacted by Draupadī. In this passage, Yudhiṣṭhira warns his wife of the danger that her "garhing" may arouse, and by using a different verb, namely, *kṣip*, he perhaps wishes to undo the "damage" she had caused in its utterance.

In summary, the discussion above shows that among *garh*'s cognate verbs, *nind* is semantically closer to *garh* than *kṣip*, and unlike *kṣip*, *nind* occurs in the epic very frequently. However, despite its contiguous semantic relation to *garh*, *nind* mostly features in specific contexts that are characteristic of the verb's usage in the epic (that is, in *anindita*, "blame and praise," and *vedanindaka* passages). Furthermore, we have seen that, as a general rule, none of these cognate verbs are used as alternative verbs for *garh* in its full range of semantic meanings in the epic. In certain cases, both may be used in a way akin to *garh*'s most basic, or simplest meaning in the epic—the first type

proposed above, “*garh* aimed at wrong acts.” Besides this particular context, in the majority of cases, neither *nind* nor *kṣip* may semantically replace *garh* in instances where the MBh exhibits a “divergence in the interpretation of *dharma*,” in cases of a “dharmic deadlock,” in passages in which “*garh* signals a higher *dharma*,” or in recursive moments when *dharma* twists back upon itself and “*garhs*” itself.³¹ The most important thing to note in summarizing our findings of the occurrences of these verbs in the epic is that, unlike *garh*, these cognate verbs are generally not present in key narrative junctures in the epic, and their consistency therein does not reveal significant information about *dharma* and its meaning in the epic. Last, neither of the two verbs occurs in the ending of the epic. Consequently, they are far less relevant for understanding the implications that Yudhiṣṭhira’s condemnation of *dharma*, which features in the concluding scenes of the MBh, have for the epic as a whole.³²

3. Detailed Analysis of *Garh* Passages in the *Mahābhārata*

The majority of the cases investigated below are elaborate passages in which *garh* occurs many times. Therefore, except for the first two instances, which exemplify the relatively straightforward “*garh* aimed at wrong acts,” I will not attempt to illustrate each type individually with a corresponding *garh* instance because in some of the selected passages one can find several (typically two) of the above *garh* types.

3.1. Instances of *Garh* Aimed at Wrong Acts

The first *garh* instance to be considered is from the *Śānti parvan*. Overwhelmed with guilt over his kinsmen’s death during the war, Yudhiṣṭhira asks Vyāsa what might be considered an appropriate atonement (*prāyaścitta*). Vyāsa provides a long list of sinful acts that require expiation. Among these, he mentions the following:

*śūdrastrivadhako yaś ca pūrvah pūrvas tu garhitah /
vṛthāpaśusamālabhī vanadāhasya kārakah //* (C.Ed. 12.35.6;
B. 12.34.7)

One who kills a woman or a servant—each earlier one is more blameworthy than the following—one who hunts animals at pleasure or one who sets fire to a forest.³³

This is a relatively straightforward example of *garh* that illustrates the case of the first category. Here, *garh* is aimed at several wrong acts arranged in the form of a list. This list of censurable acts consists of various expressions of transgressions of dharmic moral laws.

The following verse, quoted from the *Udyoga parvan*, is taken from the events leading to the outbreak of the Kurukṣetra War. At Dhṛtarāṣṭra's command, Saṃjaya tries to dissuade Yudhiṣṭhira from declaring war. Pointing out the grave injustice committed by the Kauravas against the Pāṇḍavas, Yudhiṣṭhira discusses several reasons why he thinks this is a just war. He concludes his speech by alluding to Duryodhana as a thief:

*steno hared yatra dhanam hy adṛṣṭaḥ
 prasahya vā yatra hareta dṛṣṭaḥ /
 ubhau garhyau bhavataḥ saṃjayaitau
 kim vai pṛthak tvam dhṛtarāṣṭrasya putre //* (C.Ed. 5.29.28;
 B. 5.29.33)

Whether a thief steals valuables when he is unobserved, or when he does so forcibly and while being noticed, he is [equally] culpable in both instances. O Saṃjaya, why do you then [reckon] differently as far as Dhṛtarāṣṭra's son is concerned?

Exemplifying the first category, *garh* in this passage is aimed at an act that is judged unlawful by the codes of *dharma's* moral law, and, as in the first instance, the verb is voiced here in a didactic tone. *Garh* further expresses here the protagonist's (in this case, Yudhiṣṭhira's) dissatisfaction with or aversion to what he finds absolutely distasteful or harmful. Considering the verse in context, Yudhiṣṭhira claims that although going to war against one's own cousins might be considered immoral (adharmic), Duryodhana's robbing the kingdom from its rightful heirs (the Pāṇḍavas) constitutes an even greater act of immorality (*adharmā*).³⁴

3.2. Pāṇḍu and the Deer

The next passage is the famous story of Pāṇḍu's curse in the *Ādi parvan*. This elaborate episode, in which *garh* occurs six times, demonstrates two of the verb's types (types 2 and 4). Consequently, the discussion looks at several semantic layers: the first of these is the

second type, which I have labeled “divergence in the interpretation of *dharma*”; the second is the fourth type, namely, “*garh* signaling a ‘higher *dharma*.’”

After shooting the deer, Pāṇḍu attempts to justify his act before the animal, which is in fact the ṛṣi Kindama, as follows:

*śatrūṇāṃ yā vadhe vṛttiḥ sā mṛgāṇāṃ vadhe smṛtā /
rājñāṃ mṛga na māṃ mohāt tvaṃ garhayitum arhasi //* (C.Ed.
1.109.12; B. 1.118.12)

O Deer, the conduct of kings in striking enemies is stated in *Smṛti* to be the same for striking deer. It does not fit you to reprove me out of ignorance.

*acchadmanāmāyayā ca mṛgāṇāṃ vadha iṣyate /
sa eva dharmo rājñāṃ tu tad vidvān kiṃ nu garhase //* (C.Ed.
1.109.13; B. 1.118.13)

Indeed, the *dharma* of kings is impelled to deer hunting without trickery and cunningness. Knowing this, why do you then reprove [me]?

*pramāṇadr̥ṣṭadharmeṇa katham asmān vigarhase /
agastyasyābhicāreṇa yuṣmākaṃ vai vapā hutā //* (C.Ed. 1.109.15;
B. 1.118.15)

Why do you reprove me for a conduct that is countenanced by authority? Your kind’s omentum was sacrificed in Agastya’s sorcery.

*pramattam apramattaṃ vā vīvṛtaṃ ghnanti caujaṣā /
upāyair iṣubhis tikṣṇaiḥ kasmān mṛga vigarhase //* (C.Ed.
1.109.17; B. 1.118.17)

[Kings] kill [an animal] openly and forcefully by means of sharpened arrows, whether it is on guard or off guard. So why do you reprove me, O Deer?

Having listened patiently to his offender’s speech, the deer replies thus:

varjayanti nṛśamsāni pāpeṣv abhiratā narāḥ (C.Ed. 1.109.9;
B. 1.118.9)

[Even] men who delight in sins avoid [such] cruel [acts].

*nāhaṁ ghnantam mṛgān rājan vigarhe ātmakāraṇāt /
maithunam tu pratikṣyam me syāt tvayehānṛśamsataḥ* // (C.Ed.

1.109.18; B. 1.118.18)

O King, I do not blame [you] for deer hunting or [even] out of my own selfish reasons. But out of lack of cruelty you should have waited for my intercourse [to conclude].

*nṛśamsam karma sumahat sarvalokavigarhitam /
asvargyam ayaśasyam ca adharmiṣṭham ca bhārata* // (C.Ed.

1.109.21; B. 1.118.22)

[Such a] deed is extremely cruel and is universally reprehensible. It is hellish, infamous and is utterly against *dharma*, O Bhārata.

*tvayā nṛśamsakartāraḥ pāpācārās ca mānavāḥ /
nigrāhyāḥ pāṛthivaśreṣṭha trivargaparivarjitāḥ* // (C.Ed. 1.109.23;

B. 1.118.24)

O best of monarchs, men who act cruelly, sinners, and those who have abandoned the three precepts [*kāma*, *artha*, and *dharma*]³⁵ ought to be condemned by you!

Concluding his harsh speech, the deer (the ṛṣi Kindama) eventually curses Pāṇḍu, as follows:

tvayāham hiṁsito yasmāt tasmāt tvām apy aham śape (B. 1.118.26cd).

Since I was killed by you, therefore, I now curse you!³⁶

It should first be noted that this *garh* passage presents two different interpretations of *dharma*. Both characters (Pāṇḍu and the deer) use *garh* in their speech, but their interpretations of the Law diverge considerably. While Pāṇḍu is convinced that his deeds are not censurable for the mere fact that the duty (*dharma*) of kings is, among other things, to hunt animals, the deer deems Pāṇḍu's act censurable as he shot it during copulation. Thus, according to the deer's interpretation of *dharma*, while kings are permitted and even encouraged to hunt, they are restricted from hunting an animal that is mating.

Both characters present strong arguments, yet this passage clearly illustrates the extent to which the MBh perceives *dharma* as a

polemical concept. The use of *garh* in this passage exposes a view of *dharma* as fundamentally disputable. The verb's presence (here and elsewhere in the MBh) draws attention to *dharma's* hierarchical nature, and consequently highlights the problem that arises from the multifarious hermeneutics intrinsic to *dharma*.

Apart from the twofold divergence in the interpretation of *dharma*, this passage illustrates another category of *garh* as that which signals a "higher *dharma*." The deer repeatedly mentions in his speech the term *nṛśaṃsa*, "cruelty." In fact, he does not accuse Pāṇḍu for hunting (it), at all. Rather, the deer accuses the offender of an act of *cruelty*. In other words, the deer does not censure Pāṇḍu for the offensive act of hunting, but rather for the callous motivation behind it. However, not once is the term *nṛśaṃsa* used in Pāṇḍu's speech. The deer, on the other hand, specifically says that out of regard for *ānṛśaṃsa*, Pāṇḍu should have waited for its intercourse to conclude.

The semantic linkage between *garh* and *nṛśaṃsa* is instructive of the epic's finer distinctions as regards this verb. By associating *garh* and *ānṛśaṃsa*, MBh narrators use *garh* as a "marker" for a higher *dharma*.³⁷ Judging by the dictionary definition of *ānṛśaṃsa*—"absence of cruelty or harm; absence of injury; mildness; kindness; benevolence"—it would appear that the deer's accusation of Pāṇḍu derives from values that transcend customary dharmic laws. The deer's moral authority grants it an edge over its interlocutor, which eventually leads to its winning the debate. Since the passage presents *garh* as signaling a higher moral authority, which is denoted by the term *ānṛśaṃsa*, the legitimacy for the deer's accusation ensues from Pāṇḍu's lack of benevolence, kindness, or goodwill toward it. This semantic range (denoted by *ānṛśaṃsa*) signals the *motivation* behind the offender's act (in this case, Pāṇḍu). The passage, therefore, shows that the motivation behind one's action is judged more severely by the censor.

Finally, the use of a curse in close proximity to *garh* in this passage is of marked significance. Indeed, the deer is revealed to be a potent ṛṣi (Kindama) whose moral authority derives from the ability to cast a curse when he so wishes. The curse thus creates a higher moral vantage point for the deer over Pāṇḍu's argument of self-defense and, as such, unequivocally establishes the deer's victory in this dispute about *dharma's* multifarious hierarchies. This argument is further validated by the content of the curse, which directly corresponds to Pāṇḍu's offense. According to this analogy, then, since Pāṇḍu shot the deer at a time of

copulation, he is sentenced by his cursor to meet the exact same fate (i.e., dying during intercourse with his wife Mādri).

This *garh* instance, as well as others to be discussed below, reveals that *garh* is palpable in key narrative junctures of the MBh, and is crucial to the advancement of the entire plot.³⁸ The offense against *dharma*, its prohibition, and the recurrent reflection on correcting or redefining *dharma's* intricate operations are themes that preoccupy the authors of this text.

3.3. Dhṛṣṭadyumna Slays Droṇa

Another episode that exemplifies the MBh protagonists' divergence in interpreting *dharma* comes from the Droṇa *parvan*. This *garh* instance takes place after Droṇa's beheading by Dhṛṣṭadyumna during the Kurukṣetra War.³⁹ Having heard the news, Arjuna shows signs of sudden remorse and accuses Dhṛṣṭadyumna of killing his guru. Dhṛṣṭadyumna attempts to defend his actions by tarnishing Droṇa's character, as follows:

*bībhatso viprakarmāṇi viditāni manīṣiṇām /
yājanādhyāpane dānaṁ tathā yajñapratigrahau //* (C.Ed. 7.168.22;
B. 7.198.24)

O Arjuna (*bībhatso*), the following duties have been declared by the sages to belong to the Brāhmaṇas—conducting sacrifice on behalf of others, teaching, gift offering, sacrifice, and the acceptance of presents.

*ṣaṣṭham adhyayanam nāma teṣāṁ kasmin pratiṣṭhitāḥ /
hato droṇo mayā yat tat kiṁ mām pārtha vīgarhase //* (C.Ed.
7.168.23; B. 7.198.25)

The sixth duty is called study. In which of those was Droṇa, whom I killed, accomplished? Why do you, O Pārtha, reprove me for this?

*vidharṁiṇaṁ dharmavidbhiḥ proktaṁ teṣāṁ viṣopamam /
jānan dharmārthatattvajñāḥ kim arjuna vīgarhase //* (C.Ed.
7.168.31; B. 7.198.33)

Knowing that one who has transgressed the duties [of his order] is called by the virtuous equal to poison for them;

why, O Arjuna, knower of the truth regarding the essence of *dharma*, do you reprove [me]?

Resembling the Pāṇḍu episode, this passage depicts two protagonists whose interpretations of *dharma* diverge considerably. From Dhṛṣṭadyumna's speech it is understood that Arjuna accuses him of Droṇa's killing. Yet the passage does not clearly state *why* Arjuna reproves this action. However, it would appear that Dhṛṣṭadyumna's speech reveals the reason behind Arjuna's accusation. The passage implies that Arjuna's interpretation of *dharma* differs from that of Dhṛṣṭadyumna's, and that Arjuna's stance is one of doubt and hesitation regarding the "right thing to do" (i.e., *dharma*).

Dhṛṣṭadyumna presents before Arjuna a clever syllogism that juxtaposes two moral duties (*dharmas*). His basic claim is that Droṇa's killing was not an adharmic act because although Droṇa was born a Brahmin, he never practiced any of his duties as one. Therefore, this makes him a Brahmin in name alone, and so it is permissible for Dhṛṣṭadyumna to kill him. This entire maneuver is designed by Dhṛṣṭadyumna to eliminate Arjuna's doubt regarding one of the gravest *adharmas*, namely, the *mahāpātaka* ("grave sin") of killing a Brahmin. What Dhṛṣṭadyumna wants to prove is that he did not slay a Brahmin in battle but a Kṣatriya, and that this is a fair killing, certainly in times of war. Being a full-fledged Kṣatriya, as Dhṛṣṭadyumna would have him be, it is a warrior's moral duty to fight against someone like Droṇa and slay him.

Garh is employed here by the narrators of this passage as a moral compass to plot the way to unraveling hierarchies of *dharma*. The question that Dhṛṣṭadyumna's speech raises is: what is more appropriate—killing Droṇa, or allowing him to bring the Pāṇḍava army to destruction? Dhṛṣṭadyumna claims to have served Arjuna's purpose loyally. Hence, he repeatedly asks, "why do you then reprove me?" The message implicit in Dhṛṣṭadyumna's words is that had he not killed Droṇa, the great warrior and guru would not have hesitated to kill even his closest pupil (Arjuna).⁴⁰

The passage thus centers on a moral dilemma regarding the "right thing to do" (*dharma*). Two contradictory *dharmas* are illustrated in this episode. On the one hand, the law (*dharma*) prohibiting the killing of Brahmins (represented by Arjuna), and on the other, the duty to fight the war in order to bring about victory (represented by Dhṛṣṭadyumna). *Garh*'s usage in the epic thus repeatedly exposes the hermeneutics of doubt exercised by narrators of the MBh regarding

dharma. This instance encapsulates, to a certain degree, the ways in which the epic authors perceive *garh*. Every such juncture of doubt regarding hierarchies of *dharma* in the narrative presents a moral dilemma. These dilemmas are adapted in the MBh through *garh*'s defining, refining, and selecting *dharmas*. The employment of *garh* thus serves MBh narrators as a kind of device designed to determine what *dharma* is or should be at any given moment. By employing *garh* in instances in which doubt regarding the right *dharma* arises, MBh narrators are offering some resolution. Yet, those moral resolutions also hold within them the rejection of other sets of morality; lesser, or rather less pertinent, *dharma* is rejected in favor of higher or more relevant *dharma*. Since the semantics of this verb are so closely related to the elusive meanings of the concept of *dharma*, *garh*'s moral compass, as is apparent from the examples presented here, does not operate transparently in the MBh. This particular passage, for instance, shows that by employing *garh*, the epic certainly exhibits a world of moral hierarchies, yet it does not seem to paint a black-and-white picture of them, as a clear-cut dichotomy between "good" and "evil" might.

3.4. The Death of Abhimanyu

What emerges from the episode above (3.3) is that some of *garh*'s most striking moments in the epic come from the war books. The dramatic setting of these books corresponds well with *garh*'s semantics of conflict. The following passage is another famous MBh scene quoted from the *Droṇa parva*, which occurs on the thirteenth day of battle, when the Pāṇḍavas are challenged by the Kauravas to break the circular array (the *cakravyūha*). On that day, Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, the only ones who know how to defeat such a formation, are despatched to another war front. Since only Arjuna's young son, Abhimanyu, knows how to break into the formation (but he has no idea how to break out of it), Yudhiṣṭhira is left with no alternative other than to assign him the dangerous task:

etya no nārjuno garhed yathā tāta tathā kuru /
cakravyūhasya na vayanī vidma bhedaṁ katham cana // (C.Ed.
 7.34.14; B. 7.35.14)

As none of us knows how to break the circular array, O you dear boy act in such a way that when Arjuna comes he will not censure us.

*dhanamjayo hi nas tāta garhayed etya samyugāt /
kṣipram astram samādāya droṇānikam viśātaya //* (C.Ed. 7.34.17;
B. 7.35.17)

Quickly taking up your arms, knock out Droṇa's army. Surely, Arjuna will reprove us upon his return from the battle.

As to be expected, Abhimanyu gets trapped in the array and is killed by the Kauravas, who fight him *jointly*, contrary to the warrior's code of conduct. This instance exemplifies the third *garh* type, namely, "Dharmic Deadlock." The verb's occurrence in this passage ensues from a fateful moment, when Yudhiṣṭhira must choose between two duties: the duty to protect the well-being of his nephew on the one hand, and the duty to conduct the battle as efficiently as possible in order to protect the well-being of his entire army, on the other hand. Portraying Yudhiṣṭhira as having the ominous premonition that both choices will have misfortunate outcomes, the narrators of this passage express the hero's ghastly moment of doubt with *garh*'s optative conjugation. Note here that *garh* in the optative expresses two incompatible messages. In the first verse, Yudhiṣṭhira expresses a wish that his premonition (regarding Abhimanyu's probable death in the *cakravyūha*) will not materialize ("may Arjuna *not* reprove us," *no nārjuno garhed*). Whereas in the second verse, Yudhiṣṭhira's premonition gains a sense of certainty ("Arjuna will *surely* blame us upon his return from the battle," *dhanamjayo hi nas tāta garhayed etya samyugāt*). *Garh*'s optative conjugation thus features in both cases, once in the negative and once in the affirmative. *Garh* statements of this type ensue from grave doubts and moral dilemmas regarding *dharma*. In such moments of dharmic deadlock, the MBh protagonists find themselves again and again in situations in which all they can do is to "*garh*." Such is the case in this passage, in which Yudhiṣṭhira is facing a dilemma that poses no good alternatives and anticipating events he cannot prevent from materializing.⁴¹

This idea is further validated by the consequences ensuing from Yudhiṣṭhira's decision to assign Abhimanyu the dangerous task. When Arjuna learns of the tragic outcome of this mission, he blames himself for his son's death while addressing Yudhiṣṭhira:

*ātmānam eva garheyam yad aham vaḥ sudurbalān /
yuṣmān ājñāya nirvāto bhīrūn akṛtaniśramān //* (C.Ed. 7.50.77;
B. 7.72.82)