

From Epic Dharma to Domestic Ethics: Moral Negotiation in the Mahabharata and Jane Austen

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ABSTRACT:

This article offers a comparative ethical reading of the Mahabharata and the novels of Jane Austen, examining how moral decision-making is negotiated across divergent narrative scales and cultural traditions. While the Mahabharata articulates dharma through epic conflict, public crisis, and collective responsibility, Austen's fiction locates ethical reasoning within domestic spaces shaped by social convention, gendered restraint, and moral perception. Drawing on ethical criticism, feminist theory, and comparative literature, the study argues that both traditions complicate moral absolutism rather than reject it outright and instead foreground ethical uncertainty, self-reflection, and situational judgment. Focusing on women characters such as Draupadi and Austen's heroines, the article demonstrates how ethical agency is articulated through questioning, resistance, and moral self-revision within patriarchal structures. By bringing epic dharma into dialogue with domestic ethics, the study contributes to debates in world literature ethics and highlights literature's capacity to stage moral imagination across cultures without recourse to influence-based models.

Keywords: Mahabharata, Jane Austen, Ethical Criticism, Dharma, Comparative Literature

Introduction - The Mahabharata and the novels of Jane Austen emerge from vastly different literary traditions, cultural histories, and narrative

forms. One is a Sanskrit epic of monumental scale, composed and transmitted over centuries, encompassing dynastic conflict, cosmic order,

and philosophical inquiry. The other consists of realist novels written in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England, focused on domestic life, social interaction, and the moral education of individuals within a rigidly stratified society. At a surface level, these traditions appear to share little common ground: the epic privileges war, kinship, and public action, while the novel privileges conversation, courtship, and interior reflection. Yet both bodies of work are deeply and consistently invested in ethical inquiry. Each explores how moral responsibility is negotiated within constraining social systems, and each foregrounds the difficulty of acting rightly in situations marked by ambiguity, pressure, and competing obligations.

At the centre of the Mahabharata lies the problem of dharma, a concept that resists simple definition. Dharma encompasses duty, justice, moral order, kinship responsibility, and social role, yet it is never presented as a fixed or universally applicable moral law. Instead, the epic repeatedly exposes dharma as situational, contested, and often internally contradictory. Characters are compelled to act in circumstances where every available choice carries an ethical cost. Moral action in the epic is therefore inseparable from uncertainty, delay, and tragic consequence. Ethical clarity, when it appears, is provisional rather than absolute.

Jane Austen's fiction, though operating on a far smaller narrative scale, exhibits a comparable concern with moral uncertainty. Her novels are structured around moments of misjudgment, ethical blindness, and gradual moral awakening. Rather than heroic action, Austen foregrounds moral perception: the ability to judge others fairly, to recognise one's own errors, and to revise one's understanding of self and society. Ethical growth in Austen is not achieved through adherence to abstract principles but through lived experience, reflection, and emotional intelligence. The moral seriousness of her work lies precisely in its attention to the everyday; those seemingly minor decisions and judgments that shape character and social harmony.

This article proposes that the Mahabharata and Austen's novels can be productively read together through the lens of moral negotiation. The comparison does not seek to establish ethical universality or cultural equivalence. Nor does it attempt to trace historical influence or shared philosophical lineage. Instead, it foregrounds relational convergence: how distinct literary traditions, shaped by different cultural logics and narrative forms, nonetheless articulate moral complexity through comparable narrative strategies. This study intervenes in comparative ethics by demonstrating how epic and realist narratives can be read within a shared ethical framework without collapsing cultural difference or privileging narrative scale.

A key concern of this study is the distinction between morality and ethics. Morality is often understood as a system of rules, norms, or codes governing right and wrong behaviour. Ethics, by contrast, refers to the process of moral reasoning: the deliberation, judgment, and self-reflection through which individuals negotiate competing values in specific contexts. Both the Mahabharata and Austen's fiction are ethical rather than moralistic texts. They do not prescribe clear moral rules; instead, they dramatize ethical dilemmas and invite readers to participate in judgment. Ethical understanding in these texts emerges through narrative engagement rather than doctrinal instruction.

Another central focus of this article is the role of women as ethical agents. In both traditions, women occupy structurally constrained positions within patriarchal social systems. Yet it is often through their speech, silence, suffering, and resistance that ethical contradictions are exposed. Draupadi's interrogation of justice in the royal assembly constitutes one of the epic's most powerful ethical moments, revealing the moral collapse of institutional authority. Similarly, Austen's heroines—Elizabeth Bennet, Elinor Dashwood, and Anne Elliot—function as ethical interpreters whose judgments, misjudgments, and self-revisions form the moral core of the novels. By foregrounding women's ethical labour, this study aligns with feminist ethical criticism

and challenges readings that marginalise female agency.

Situating this comparison within the framework of world literature ethics allows for a broader rethinking of how moral imagination travels across cultures. World literature, understood not as a canon but as a mode of circulation and reading, enables texts from different traditions to enter ethical dialogue without requiring sameness. Reading the Mahabharata and Austen together highlights how ethical seriousness is not dependent on narrative scale. Drawing rooms can be as morally consequential as battlefields, and private self-revision can be as transformative as public protest.

Through close reading and comparative analysis, this article argues that moral negotiation, rather than moral certainty, constitutes a shared narrative principle across epic and realist traditions. By bringing epic dharma into dialogue with domestic ethics, the study contributes to comparative literature, ethical criticism, and world literature studies, offering a framework for reading moral complexity across cultural and generic boundaries.

2. Literature Review

Critical engagement with the Mahabharata has long recognised its ethical and philosophical depth. Classical commentarial traditions approached the epic as a text of moral instruction, yet modern scholarship has increasingly emphasised its resistance to moral simplification. Scholars have noted that the epic repeatedly stages ethical dilemmas without offering definitive resolutions, thereby presenting dharma as a problem rather than a solution. The critical edition project foregrounded the epic's layered textual history, revealing how ethical debate is embedded within narrative plurality rather than doctrinal closure.

Contemporary epic scholarship has focused on the situational nature of dharma. Rather than functioning as a stable moral code, dharma emerges as relational and contingent, shaped by social role, historical circumstance, and personal limitations. Characters such as Yudhishtira,

Arjuna, and Karna are frequently cited as embodiments of ethical conflict. Yudhishtira's commitment to truth leads to catastrophic consequences; Arjuna's moral paralysis becomes the precondition for philosophical discourse; Karna's loyalty binds him to an unjust cause. These figures illustrate how ethical action in the epic is inseparable from tragedy and loss, underscoring the epic's scepticism toward moral absolutism.

Feminist readings of the Mahabharata have significantly reshaped ethical interpretation. Earlier scholarship often treated women characters as symbolic or secondary, but more recent studies foreground their central ethical role. Draupadi's humiliation in the royal assembly has been read as a moment of juridical and moral collapse, exposing the failure of patriarchal institutions. Kunti's maternal decisions reveal the ethical cost of survival within restrictive social norms, while modern critics have read Gandhari's self-imposed blindness as a symbolic moral protest. These readings reposition women not merely as sufferers within the epic but as ethical commentators whose experiences illuminate the limitations of masculine codes of honour, duty, and authority.

Jane Austen criticism has followed a parallel trajectory. Early readings emphasised social realism and moral instruction, often portraying Austen as a conservative defender of social order. However, later critics have demonstrated that Austen's fiction is deeply engaged with ethical complexity. Her novels interrogate the relationship between individual conscience and social convention, revealing the moral costs of prejudice, pride, emotional rigidity, and moral inattentiveness. Ethical growth in Austen is rarely linear; it is achieved through error, embarrassment, reflection, and self-correction rather than adherence to fixed moral principles.

Ethical criticism has been particularly influential in Austen studies. Scholars argue that Austen's novels function as moral training grounds for readers, cultivating judgment, sympathy, and attentiveness to others. Rather than offering explicit moral lessons, the novels invite readers to

evaluate characters' decisions and to recognise the limits of their own judgments. This emphasis on moral perception aligns Austen's fiction with broader traditions of ethical narrative that privilege process over prescription.

Comparative studies between Indian epic literature and English realist fiction remain relatively limited. Existing work has often focused on thematic parallels, mythic archetypes, or colonial encounters rather than ethical structures. While world literature scholarship has expanded the scope of comparative reading by shifting attention from influence to circulation and readership, sustained ethical comparisons between epic and realist traditions are still rare. From this perspective, texts enter comparative dialogue not because they share origins but because they invite comparable modes of ethical engagement and readerly judgment.

Ethical criticism, particularly as articulated in narrative philosophy, provides a productive framework for such comparison. Literature is understood not as a repository of moral codes but as a space in which ethical reasoning is enacted through narrative immersion, emotional identification, and reflective judgment. This approach allows the Mahabharata and Austen's novels to be read together without flattening cultural difference or subordinating one tradition to another.

While existing scholarship has examined epic ethics in the Mahabharata and moral realism in Jane Austen largely in isolation, this study brings these traditions into direct ethical dialogue. By foregrounding moral negotiation rather than influence or thematic parallel, the article positions epic and realist narratives within a shared ethical framework attentive to narrative form, gendered agency, and cultural specificity.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in ethical criticism, comparative literature, and feminist ethics. Rather than treating literature as a repository of moral rules, ethical criticism approaches literary texts as spaces in which moral reasoning is

enacted, tested, and revised. From this perspective, ethical understanding arises through narrative engagement—through characters' decisions, conflicts, hesitations, and failures—rather than through prescriptive doctrine. Such an approach is particularly suited to texts like the Mahabharata and the novels of Jane Austen, both of which resist moral closure and foreground the instability of ethical judgment.

Ethical criticism, as developed by philosophers and literary theorists, emphasises the role of narrative in shaping moral perception. Literature does not instruct readers what to think; instead, it trains readers how to think ethically—how to attend to context, recognise competing claims, and remain open to self-revision. This reader-oriented dimension is crucial to the present study. Both the epic and the realist novel demand sustained interpretive labour from their audiences. Ethical meaning emerges not from isolated passages but from cumulative engagement with narrative complexity.

Within this framework, a distinction is maintained between morality and ethics. Morality refers to socially sanctioned norms, rules, or codes that govern behaviour within a given community. Ethics, by contrast, refers to the process of deliberation through which individuals negotiate moral claims in particular situations. The Mahabharata is centrally concerned with this distinction: characters often act according to moral codes that nonetheless produce ethically disastrous outcomes. Austen's fiction similarly reveals how socially accepted moral norms, such as class prejudice or gender propriety, can obscure ethical judgment. By focusing on ethical process rather than moral prescription, the study avoids reductive readings that treat either tradition as didactic.

The comparative dimension of the methodology is deliberately non-influence-based. The study does not seek to trace historical contact, philosophical transmission, or shared origins between the Mahabharata and Austen's novels. Instead, it adopts a relational comparative approach, examining how distinct literary traditions articulate analogous ethical problems

through different narrative forms. This approach aligns with contemporary comparative literature scholarship, which emphasises dialogue over genealogy and convergence over equivalence. Texts are brought into comparison not because they are the same, but because they illuminate one another when read together.

Feminist ethical criticism plays a central role in this methodology. Feminist ethics challenges abstract, universalising models of moral reasoning by foregrounding relationality, care, vulnerability, and power. In literary analysis, this translates into close attention to how gendered experiences shape ethical perception and agency. Women characters in both the Mahabharata and Austen's novels operate within restrictive social structures; yet, their ethical labour, often expressed through questioning, silence, endurance, and moral clarity, reveals the limitations of dominant moral frameworks. By centring women as ethical agents rather than marginal figures, the study challenges patriarchal readings of both traditions.

The methodology also attends to narrative form as an ethical determinant. The epic and the realist novel differ significantly in scale, temporality, and narrative organisation. These formal differences shape how ethical conflict is represented and resolved. The epic accommodates multiplicity, contradiction, and irresolution; the realist novel privileges interiority, development, and narrative closure. Rather than treating form as a neutral container, the study reads form as integral to ethical meaning. Ethical negotiation unfolds differently in a narrative world structured by cosmic time than in one governed by social realism and psychological development.

Finally, the methodology acknowledges its own limits. Comparative reading across cultures risks flattening differences or imposing external frameworks. To mitigate this, the study maintains cultural specificity while tracing structural convergence. Ethical concepts such as dharma are not translated into Western moral philosophy, nor are Austen's novels read through epic categories. Instead, the analysis allows each tradition to retain its conceptual integrity while

entering into dialogue at the level of ethical representation. This balance between specificity and comparison underpins the study's critical stance.

4. Epic Dharma in the Mahabharata

The concept of dharma forms the ethical backbone of the Mahabharata, yet it is also the source of its deepest moral crises. Unlike codified law or doctrinal morality, dharma in the epic is fluid, situational, and often internally contradictory. It encompasses personal duty, social obligation, kinship loyalty, political responsibility, and cosmic order. Crucially, the epic does not offer a single authoritative interpretation of dharma. Instead, it stages competing claims, exposing the difficulty, often the impossibility, of ethical certainty.

From its opening narratives to its catastrophic conclusion, the Mahabharata repeatedly demonstrates that adherence to dharma does not guarantee ethical success. On the contrary, characters who act in strict accordance with their perceived duty often produce devastating consequences. This tension transforms the epic into a sustained meditation on ethical failure. Moral action is portrayed not as the execution of clear principles but as a tragic negotiation between incompatible demands.

4.1. Yudhishtira and the Ethics of Truth

Yudhishtira, frequently regarded as the embodiment of righteousness, illustrates the paradox of dharma most clearly. His unwavering commitment to truth (satya) and duty positions him as a moral ideal, yet his ethical rigidity repeatedly results in harm. His decision to stake Draupadi in the dice game, justified through adherence to royal codes of honour, exposes the catastrophic limits of moral formalism. Similarly, his half-truth during the war—spoken under divine instruction—reveals the impossibility of absolute truth in ethically compromised circumstances.

Yudhishtira's ethical struggles underscore the epic's scepticism toward moral purity. His suffering suggests that ethical integrity cannot be maintained through rigid adherence to principle

alone. Instead, the epic exposes the tragic cost of moral absolutism, positioning ethical wisdom as something that emerges through suffering, doubt, and self-questioning rather than certainty.

4.2. Arjuna and Moral Paralysis

. Arjuna's crisis on the battlefield of Kurukshetra represents one of the most iconic moments of ethical hesitation in world literature. Faced with the prospect of killing kin, teachers, and friends, Arjuna experiences moral paralysis. His refusal to fight is not cowardice but ethical revulsion. The Bhagavad Gita, which emerges from this moment, is often read as a philosophical resolution. Yet even here, ethical clarity is provisional. Krishna's counsel does not eliminate moral ambiguity; it reframes it.

Arjuna's dilemma highlights a crucial aspect of epic ethics: ethical understanding arises from confrontation with contradiction. The battlefield becomes a site of moral inquiry rather than moral triumph. Arjuna's eventual action does not resolve ethical tension but accepts it as an inescapable condition of human agency.

4.3. Karna and the Ethics of Loyalty

Karna's ethical tragedy lies in his unwavering loyalty to Duryodhana, despite recognising the injustice of his cause. Bound by gratitude and social marginalisation, Karna chooses allegiance over righteousness. His ethical failure is not rooted in ignorance but in constraint. Karna's story foregrounds the social dimensions of ethics, revealing how caste, exclusion, and humiliation shape moral choice.

Through Karna, the epic interrogates the limits of individual agency. Ethical action is shown to be inseparable from social location. Karna's loyalty, though morally flawed, is ethically intelligible within his lived experience. The epic thus resists simplistic moral judgment, inviting readers to consider the conditions under which ethical compromise becomes inevitable.

4.4. Women and Ethical Critique in the Epic

While male heroes dominate the epic's action, women articulate some of its most incisive ethical critiques. Draupadi, Kunti, and Gandhari expose

the ethical failures of patriarchal authority through their suffering and resistance. Their experiences reveal how moral codes designed to preserve honour and power systematically marginalise women.

Draupadi's humiliation in the royal assembly constitutes a public ethical collapse. Her interrogation of the legality of her treatment exposes the hollowness of institutional dharma. Kunti's morally fraught decisions—marked by secrecy and survival—reveal the ethical costs imposed on women by rigid social norms. Gandhari's self-imposed blindness operates as a silent indictment of complicity and moral evasion.

Through these figures, the epic locates ethical insight not in dominance or victory but in vulnerability and protest. Women become ethical witnesses whose suffering demands moral reckoning from both characters and readers.

4.5. Dharma As Tragic Ethics

Taken together, these narratives reveal dharma in the Mahabharata as a form of tragic ethics. Ethical action is always compromised, and moral success is often indistinguishable from moral failure. The epic does not offer redemption through ethical certainty; it offers understanding through ethical struggle. This tragic vision of ethics aligns the Mahabharata with broader traditions of moral inquiry that prioritise humility, self-reflection, and acknowledgment of limitation.

4.6. Draupadi and the Ethics of Public Justice

Among all the figures in the Mahabharata, Draupadi occupies the most ethically charged position. Her experience crystallises the epic's interrogation of dharma by exposing how moral codes collapse when they are divorced from justice and human dignity. Draupadi's humiliation in the sabhā is not simply an episode of personal suffering; it is the epic's most devastating ethical crisis, revealing the failure of kingship, law, and collective responsibility.

Draupadi enters the royal assembly as a woman forcibly drawn into a public, juridical space

dominated by male authority. Her body becomes the site upon which competing claims of honour, ownership, and duty are violently enacted. What distinguishes Draupadi, however, is not only her suffering but her response. Rather than submitting to silence, she questions the very legality of the proceedings. Her interrogation—whether Yudhishtira had the right to stake her after losing himself—exposes the logical and moral contradictions underlying patriarchal authority.

Draupadi's questions are addressed to elders who embody institutional dharma: Bhishma, Drona, and Vidura. Their inability or unwillingness to answer her reveals that the failure of justice is not accidental but systemic. The assembly's silence functions as an ethical indictment. Dharma, which is meant to protect the vulnerable, instead becomes a tool for legitimising violence. Draupadi thus transforms the sabhā from a space of royal authority into a site of moral exposure.

Crucially, Draupadi's ethical intervention is grounded in reason rather than emotional appeal. She does not merely protest her humiliation; she demands legal and moral coherence. This insistence on rational inquiry positions her as a proto-judicial thinker whose ethical clarity surpasses that of the men who claim authority. Her voice disrupts the narrative hierarchy of the epic, demonstrating that ethical insight does not necessarily accompany political power.

From a feminist ethical perspective, Draupadi's suffering exposes the gendered distribution of moral burden. Patriarchal systems often preserve masculine honour at the cost of female dignity. Draupadi's public violation reveals how women are made to bear the consequences of male ethical failure. Yet the epic does not render her merely a victim. Her resistance—articulated through speech, refusal, and memory—ensures that injustice cannot be narratively erased.

Draupadi's ethical significance extends beyond the immediate episode of the sabhā. Her demand for justice becomes a moral memory that fuels the epic's catastrophic war. The Kurukshetra conflict is not only a struggle for political power; it is also a deferred ethical reckoning. Draupadi's

unresolved injustice haunts the epic, reminding readers that ethical failure cannot be contained within narrative closure.

In this sense, Draupadi embodies what may be termed ethical witnessing. She stands as a figure who names injustice even when no remedy is available. Her role aligns with broader traditions of feminist ethics that emphasise testimony, vulnerability, and resistance as central to moral life. Draupadi's suffering compels readers to confront the limits of dharma when it becomes detached from justice.

5. Domestic Ethics in Jane Austen

If Draupadi represents the ethics of public justice, Jane Austen's novels articulate the ethics of everyday life. Austen's narrative world is governed not by epic warfare or cosmic order but by social interaction, reputation, and emotional restraint. Yet the ethical stakes of her fiction are no less significant. Austen's novels explore how moral failure arises not from overt cruelty but from misjudgment, pride, and moral inattentiveness.

Ethical conflict in Austen is deeply interior. Characters rarely face dramatic choices with immediate public consequence. Instead, they confront moments of perception: how they see others, how they interpret behaviour, and how they respond to social norms. Moral growth in Austen is therefore inseparable from epistemological humility—the recognition that one's judgments may be flawed.

5.1. Elizabeth Bennet and Ethical Self-Revision

Elizabeth Bennet's ethical journey in *Pride and Prejudice* exemplifies Austen's moral vision. Elizabeth prides herself on her discernment and independence of mind, yet her early judgments are shaped by prejudice and wounded vanity. Her dismissal of Darcy is grounded not in careful evaluation but in partial evidence and emotional response. Austen does not present Elizabeth's error as moral corruption; rather, it is a failure of ethical perception.

The turning point occurs with Darcy's letter, which forces Elizabeth into a painful process of self-recognition. Her admission, "Till this moment, I never knew myself." marks a profound ethical awakening. This moment is significant not because Elizabeth learns a new moral rule but because she recognises the limits of her judgment. Ethical growth, in Austen's framework, requires the courage to revise one's self-conception.

Elizabeth's self-revision is not immediate or effortless. It unfolds through reflection, embarrassment, and emotional labour. Austen thus presents ethics as a temporal process rather than an instantaneous revelation. Moral understanding develops through lived experience and sustained self-examination.

5.2. Sense, Sensibility, and Ethical Balance

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen explores ethical tension through the contrast between emotional excess and restraint. Marianne Dashwood's expressive sincerity and Elinor Dashwood's controlled judgment represent competing ethical dispositions. Austen does not endorse one uncritically over the other. Instead, she suggests that ethical maturity requires balance—emotional responsiveness tempered by responsibility to others.

Elinor's ethical labour is largely invisible. She bears emotional suffering in silence to preserve social harmony, illustrating how women often shoulder the moral burden of restraint. Marianne's moral education, by contrast, involves learning the ethical consequences of unregulated emotion. Through these sisters, Austen examines how ethical failure can arise from both excess and suppression.

5.3. Persuasion and the Ethics of Regret

Persuasion offers a more melancholic ethical vision. Anne Elliot's moral world is shaped by regret, memory, and belated recognition. Unlike Elizabeth Bennet, Anne's ethical clarity precedes her social success. Her suffering stems not from misjudgment but from moral compromise imposed by external authority. Austen thus

explores the ethical cost of yielding to social pressure.

Anne's eventual reunion with Captain Wentworth is not merely a romantic resolution; it represents ethical restoration. The novel suggests that moral constancy, though often unrewarded in the short term, retains ethical value. Austen's emphasis on temporal depth—on how past decisions shape present moral life—adds complexity to her ethical vision.

5.4. Marriage as a Moral Institution

Across Austen's fiction, marriage functions as a crucial ethical institution. Austen consistently critiques marriages founded on economic convenience or social ambition. Ethical marriage, in her novels, is grounded in mutual respect, moral compatibility, and emotional intelligence. By evaluating marriage ethically rather than romantically, Austen transforms domestic choice into a site of moral reasoning.

This focus on marriage highlights Austen's broader ethical concern: the alignment of private desire with social responsibility. Domestic ethics, in Austen's hands, becomes a mode of ethical negotiation between individual happiness and communal stability.

5.5 Austen's Heroines as Ethical Interpreters

Austen's heroines operate as ethical interpreters of their social world. Their judgments shape narrative outcomes, and their errors generate ethical tension. Unlike epic heroes, they do not wield political power. Their agency lies in perception, reflection, and moral courage. By centring ethical life within female consciousness, Austen redefines heroism as moral attentiveness rather than public action.

6. Comparative Analysis: Moral Negotiation Across Scales

Despite the vast differences in genre, scale, and cultural context, the Mahabharata and Jane Austen's novels share a sustained commitment to ethical complexity. Both traditions complicate moral absolutism rather than reject it outright. and instead foreground ethical negotiation as an ongoing process shaped by circumstance, power,

and human limitation. What differs is not the seriousness of ethical inquiry but the narrative scale at which moral conflict is staged. The epic externalises ethical struggle through war, public humiliation, and dynastic collapse, while the realist novel internalises it through judgment, misjudgment, and psychological self-revision.

At the heart of this convergence lies the recognition that ethical action is rarely clear-cut. In the Mahabharata, moral agents act within overlapping systems of obligation—kinship, kingship, caste, and cosmic order. Ethical failure often arises not from malicious intent but from the impossibility of satisfying all competing claims. Austen's characters face a comparable dilemma, albeit within a narrower social frame. They must balance personal desire, social expectation, familial duty, and moral integrity. In both traditions, ethical action is compromised, provisional, and frequently belated.

6.1. Public Ethics and Private Ethics

One of the most productive axes of comparison is the distinction between public and private ethics. In the Mahabharata, ethical crises are staged in public arenas: the royal assembly, the battlefield, and the court. Moral failure has immediate collective consequences. An entire political order witnesses Draupadi's humiliation; Arjuna's hesitation threatens cosmic balance. Ethical failure is therefore inseparable from public accountability.

In Austen's fiction, ethical struggle unfolds largely in private or semi-private spaces—drawing rooms, letters, internal monologue. Yet these private decisions have social ramifications. Elizabeth Bennet's prejudice shapes family relationships and marriage prospects; Anne Elliot's moral compromise alters the course of her life. Austen demonstrates that private ethical failure can sustain unjust social structures just as effectively as public injustice.

The comparison reveals that ethical seriousness is not a function of scale. Private misjudgment can perpetuate systemic inequality, while public injustice often originates in private moral compromise. Moral negotiation thus operates

across scales, linking the domestic and the political.

6.2. Gendered Moral Labor

Both traditions assign disproportionate ethical labour to women. In the Mahabharata, women bear the consequences of male ethical failure while possessing limited institutional power to address injustice. Draupadi's public interrogation exposes this imbalance, as she alone articulates ethical clarity in a space dominated by men. Kunti and Gandhari similarly carry the moral weight of decisions shaped by patriarchal authority.

Austen's novels present a subtler but parallel dynamic. Women are expected to manage emotional restraint, social harmony, and moral judgment. Elinor Dashwood's silence, Anne Elliot's patience, and Elizabeth Bennet's self-correction exemplify the invisible ethical labour demanded of women. Austen's critique lies not in overt rebellion but in revealing the cost of such labour.

This gendered distribution of ethical responsibility highlights a shared concern across traditions: moral systems often preserve social order by placing ethical burden on those with the least power. Feminist ethical criticism allows these parallels to emerge without erasing cultural specificity.

6.3. Crisis, Shame, and Ethical Awakening

Ethical awakening in both traditions is triggered by crisis. Draupadi's crisis is violent and imposed; Elizabeth Bennet's is internal and affective. Yet both moments involve shame—not as humiliation alone but as moral recognition. Draupadi's refusal to accept shame exposes injustice; Elizabeth's acceptance of shame enables ethical growth.

Shame functions here as an ethical catalyst. It disrupts self-certainty and demands moral reassessment. Whether public or private, an ethical crisis compels characters to confront the gap between moral ideals and lived reality. Moral negotiation, therefore, is not a purely rational process but an affective one, shaped by emotion, vulnerability, and recognition.

6.4. Narrative Form: Epic and Realist Ethics

Narrative form plays a decisive role in shaping ethical representation. The Mahabharata's epic form accommodates multiplicity, contradiction, and narrative excess. Its vast temporal scope allows ethical dilemmas to remain unresolved across generations. Ethical failure accumulates rather than resolves, reinforcing the epic's tragic vision of moral life. Closure, when it arrives, is sombre rather than redemptive.

The realist novel, by contrast, privileges psychological depth, linear development, and narrative closure. Austen's novels resolve ethical conflict through self-knowledge rather than catastrophe. Closure is achieved not through moral certainty but through improved judgment and relational harmony. The realist form thus aligns ethical resolution with personal growth.

Despite these differences, both forms demand ethical participation from readers. The epic invites readers to weigh competing claims of dharma without authoritative resolution. The novel invites readers to judge characters' moral perceptions and to revise their own sympathies. In both cases, ethical meaning emerges through readerly engagement rather than authorial instruction.

6.5. Time, Memory, and Moral Consequence

Epic time and novelistic time shape ethical imagination differently. The Mahabharata operates on cosmic time, where ethical failure reverberates across lifetimes and dynasties. Memory functions as a moral burden; unresolved injustice demands catastrophic reckoning. Draupadi's humiliation, remembered and unredressed, becomes one of the moral engines of war.

Austen's novels operate on social time, where memory shapes character development rather than cosmic destiny. Regret, reflection, and delayed recognition structure ethical growth. In *Persuasion*, moral time is deeply retrospective; ethical clarity arrives through remembrance rather than action.

Both temporal frameworks underscore the durability of ethical consequences. Moral choices cannot be undone; they can only be reinterpreted and lived with. This shared emphasis on moral temporality strengthens the comparative ethical framework.

6.6. Collective and Individual Ethics

The epic foregrounds collective ethics—how individual actions affect social and cosmic order. The novel foregrounds individual ethics—how personal judgment shapes social relations. Yet these are not mutually exclusive. Collective collapse in the epic arises from individual compromise; social harmony in the novel depends on individual ethical maturity.

Reading these forms together reveals ethics as a continuum between the individual and the collective. Moral negotiation operates across narrative scales, linking private conscience to public consequence.

7. Conclusion

Reading the Mahabharata alongside the novels of Jane Austen reveals moral negotiation as a shared literary concern that transcends cultural, historical, and generic boundaries. Although separated by geography, language, and narrative scale, both traditions complicate moral absolutism rather than reject it outright and instead foreground ethical uncertainty, deliberation, and responsibility. Dharma in the epic and domestic ethics in the novel emerge not as rigid codes but as dynamic processes shaped by circumstance, power, and human limitation.

Foregrounding this comparison within the framework of world literature ethics allows for a rethinking of how moral imagination travels across cultures through translation, circulation, and comparative readership. The Mahabharata and Austen's novels enter a shared ethical conversation not because they offer identical values, but because they invite comparable modes of ethical engagement. Both demand that readers attend to context, acknowledge limitations, and remain open to moral self-revision.

Women occupy a central position in this ethical dialogue. Draupadi's interrogation of justice and Austen's heroines' commitment to moral discernment reveal how ethical insight often emerges from marginalised positions. Their presence challenges patriarchal authority and redefines ethical agency as the capacity to question, endure, and revise rather than dominate.

By placing epic dharma and domestic ethics in sustained dialogue, this study proposes an

ethically oriented mode of comparative reading attentive to ambiguity, narrative form, and cultural specificity. Such a framework affirms literature's enduring role as a space for ethical reflection across traditions and demonstrates that moral seriousness is not dependent on narrative scale. By reading ethical negotiation across epic and realist traditions without recourse to influence or universality, this study models a comparative practice attentive to difference, scale, and readerly ethical engagement

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9. Author Declaration

We, the authors, hereby declare that this manuscript is our original work and has not been published or submitted for publication elsewhere, either in whole or in part. All sources used in this work have been appropriately acknowledged and cited.

We further declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this work.