

A Taxonomy of Exile: Vanavāsa, Agyātavāsa, and the Cultural Logic of Displacement

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HOW TO CITE:

Tarun Sehrawat, Tanu Kashyap
(2026). A Taxonomy of Exile:
Vanavāsa, Agyātavāsa, and the
Cultural Logic of Displacement.
International Journal of Special
Education, 41(22s), 1659-1668

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ABSTRACT:

Exile in the Mahabharata is often read as a narrative of banishment, hardship, and return, obscuring the epic's distinction between vanavāsa, the twelve-year forest residence, and agyātavāsa, the subsequent year of concealed existence. This paper argues that these are distinct yet interconnected modes of displacement. Vanavāsa produces geographical, political, and social displacement; agyātavāsa introduces identity concealment and the suspension of public recognition. The paper proposes a fourfold taxonomy: spatial displacement, political-social displacement, identity concealment, and recognitional displacement. Drawing on Said, Malkki, Massey, Cresswell, Brah, and Yuval-Davis, it situates the epic within broader debates on displacement and attachment to place. It then examines Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, and Neelakantan's *Ajaya* to demonstrate how contemporary retellings transform epic exile into questions of political marginalisation, unstable identity, and contested belonging. The study concludes that the Mahabharata anticipates a multidimensional understanding of displacement in which home is simultaneously geographical, political, social, mnemonic, and recognitional. This complexity accounts for the continuing cultural productivity of its exile narratives.

Keywords: Mahabharata, displacement, belonging, identity, adaptation, Indian literature.

Introduction

Exile holds an important place in the narrative of the *Mahabharata*. The Pandavas' expulsion from their kingdom after Yudhishthira loses the dice game is generally understood as an episode of banishment. The brothers leave the political centre of Hastinapura and enter the forest, where they remain for twelve years. The narrative does not end the Pandavas' exile with the completion of these twelve years. The thirteenth year requires an altogether different mode of existence. The Pandavas must enter a populated political space while remaining unknown to those who might identify them. The distinction between these two periods is important. Vanavāsa means leaving the

familiar political and territorial home. Agyātavāsa requires the temporary suspension of the very identity through which the Pandavas would ordinarily be recognised.

The *Mahabharata* itself marks this distinction with considerable precision. At the beginning of the thirteenth year, Yudhishthira declares, "Exiled from our kingdom, we have passed twelve years. The thirteenth year, hard to spend, hath now come" (Ganguli 1659-1668, "Virata Parva," sec. I). The statement establishes a temporal sequence while also distinguishing two forms of exile. The twelve years in the forest have already displaced the Pandavas from their political world; the thirteenth year requires them to survive within

another social world without being recognised. They must therefore enter Virata's kingdom without their names, insignia, weapons, occupations, or public status. Their displacement consequently becomes a question of recognition as well as location.

This distinction provides the basis for the present study. Exile is treated here as a condition with different forms rather than as a single experience. The paper accordingly develops a taxonomy through which *vanavāsa* and *agyātavāsa* may be understood as distinct forms of displacement. The first is chiefly spatial and territorial, though its consequences extend into political and social life. The second is spatial, social, and recognitional at once. Their experience unsettles the simple opposition between presence and absence. Physical presence does not necessarily entail social recognition. One may live and work within a community while remaining absent from its public understanding of who one is.

Understanding Epic Exile: *Vanavāsa* and *Agyātavāsa*

The twelve-year forest exile begins with the dice game and the political dispossession of the Pandavas. The terms of the wager establish a precise temporal and spatial condition: twelve years in the forest followed by a thirteenth year in concealment. The forest, more than a geographical destination, makes political subjects into displaced inhabitants. Although the Pandavas retain their royal lineage and claim to kingship, their political position has been suspended, altering their relationship with Hastinapura. The Vana Parva repeatedly presents the forest as a space in which the Pandavas must reorganise their existence. Yudhishtira instructs his brothers to seek a suitable place where they can remain for the stipulated period: "We shall have to dwell in the solitary forest for these twelve years" (Ganguli 1883–1896, "Vana Parva," sec. XXIV).

The distinction between exile and travel is important. Travel generally allows some control over movement and destination, but the Pandavas' movement is governed by an externally

imposed condition. Their departure follows political dispossession, and their return depends upon a stipulated temporal arrangement. Their movement has a juridical and political dimension. Tim Cresswell's distinction between movement and mobility is useful here because it draws attention to the social meanings attached to movement. In *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World*, he describes movement as "the general fact of displacement" before its particular strategies and social implications are considered (Cresswell 2006, 2). Mobility, by contrast, acquires meaning through relations of power, history, ideology, and place (Cresswell 2006, 3). Cresswell's fuller formulation clarifies the stakes of this distinction:

"If movement is the dynamic equivalent of location, then mobility is the dynamic equivalent of place. Place is a word we use in all manner of contexts in theoretical expositions and in everyday life. Within geographical theory and philosophy, it has come to signify meaningful segments of space-locations imbued with meaning and power" (Cresswell 2006, 3).

The Pandavas' passage through the forest is thus a politically produced form of mobility whose meaning derives from the circumstances of their dispossession.

Vanavāsa also alters the relationship between identity and place. Before exile, the Pandavas are identified with political spaces such as Hastinapura, Indraprastha, the royal court, and the institutions of kingship. Their status is sustained through palaces, weapons, servants, political authority, public recognition, and other material and social signs of power. Exile removes these supports. The forest thus becomes a counter-space to the political order from which they have been expelled. Yet displacement does not destroy their identity. They remain Pandavas even after losing the kingdom. *Vanavāsa*, therefore, creates a tension between political dispossession and the continuity of historical identity. The loss of territory does not amount to a loss of selfhood. This distinction becomes particularly important when *vanavāsa* gives way

to agyātavāsa, where the problem of displacement assumes a different form.

The thirteenth year changes the terms of displacement. The Pandavas cannot simply inhabit another territory openly. They must become unrecognisable. Virata's kingdom provides physical shelter, yet it cannot function as a conventional home because the Pandavas must inhabit it under assumed identities. Yudhishthira becomes Kanka, Bhima becomes Ballava, Arjuna becomes Brihannala, Nakula becomes Granthika, Sahadeva becomes Tantipala, and Draupadi becomes Sairandhri. Their royal identity is replaced by occupational identities appropriate to their concealed existence.

The difference is therefore fundamental. In vanavāsa, the Pandavas are displaced from their political territory while remaining publicly recognisable as Pandavas. In agyātavāsa, they enter a social world in which recognition itself becomes dangerous. Their survival depends upon remaining unknown. Duryodhana explicitly understands the juridical consequences of their discovery: "if even one of us is discovered, we shall, according to promise, have to pass another twelve years in the forest" (Neelakantan 2013, 232). The epic thus establishes a direct relationship between space and identity. This produces what may be termed recognitional displacement. The movement from vanavāsa to agyātavāsa therefore represents an intensification rather than a repetition of exile. The epic's conception of exile is consequently more sophisticated than a simple narrative of geographical removal.

Exile, Displacement and Belonging

Modern theories of exile provide a conceptual vocabulary for extending this argument. Edward Said's reflections on exile emphasise the rupture between the individual and the familiar social world, distinguishing exile from forms of voluntary mobility. As Said observes, "exile is a solitude experienced outside the group" (Said 2000, 177). This is relevant to vanavāsa, although the Pandavas' experience complicates Said's

emphasis on solitude. The brothers remain collectively together even as they are separated from the political community associated with their former status. Their exile thus involves social and political estrangement without complete communal isolation. Said also cautions against treating exile as a purely geographical condition. Exile, he argues, originates in the "age-old practice of banishment," whereas refugeehood is a political category associated with the modern state (Said 2000, 181). The distinction is useful for the *Mahabharata* because the epic likewise differentiates between forms of displacement. Vanavāsa results from a politically imposed agreement that removes the Pandavas from their kingdom, while agyātavāsa introduces the additional condition of concealment.

Liisa Malkki's work complicates the assumption that identity is naturally and permanently rooted in territory. She critiques the tendency to imagine people through metaphors of roots, territory, and bounded national space. She observes that "the world of nations tends to be conceived as discrete spatial partitionings of territory" (Malkki 1992, 34). Malkki's argument is useful for reading the Pandavas because their territorial displacement does not sever their identity from the political world they have left behind. Their removal from Hastinapura does not erase their lineage, their memory of political authority, or their claim to a future return.

Doreen Massey challenges the idea of place as a bounded and self-contained entity. She calls for "a sense of place which is adequate to this era of time-space compression" (Massey 1991, 24). Her approach allows place to be understood through the relations, histories, and movements that connect it to other locations. This perspective is particularly productive for reading the *Mahabharata*, where Hastinapura, Indraprastha, the forest, and Virata's kingdom are connected through political conflict, movement, memory, and return. These locations do not function as isolated settings. Each acquires meaning through its relationship to the others and through the changing political and social positions of the Pandavas.

Tim Cresswell similarly distinguishes physical movement from mobility understood as socially meaningful movement (Cresswell 2006, 2–3). Mobility, according to him, involves the meanings, practices, and relations of power through which movement acquires social significance. This distinction enables vanavāsa to be understood as more than movement from palace to forest. The Pandavas' departure is politically imposed, and the movement itself acquires meaning from their dispossession, altered status, and enforced separation from the political centre. Agyātavāsa, in turn, involves more than movement from the forest to Virata's kingdom. It entails concealment, occupational change, and the deliberate management of visibility.

Avtar Brah's conception of home in *Cartographies of Diaspora* further contributes to the discussion. Brah resists reducing home to a fixed physical location and distinguishes between the desire for a homeland and the experience of living in a particular locality. She observes that one may "be at home" without necessarily "feeling at home," thereby separating physical habitation from the experience of belonging (Brah 1996, 190). Brah extends this point by specifying what home actually consists of:

"Home is also the lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heats and dust, balmy summer evenings, or the excitement of the first snowfall, its associations with childhood memories...our networks of family, kin, friends, colleagues and various other significant others" (Brah 1996, 188).

Brah further describes home as "a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination" while also defining it as "the lived experience of a locality" (Brah 1996, 188–89). Home thus encompasses memory, affect, social relations, and the everyday experience of place. This distinction is productive for reading the Pandavas in Virata's kingdom. They inhabit a functioning social environment, perform recognised occupations, and participate in the life of the court, yet they cannot publicly claim the identities through which their political belonging would ordinarily be established. Their

situation shows that physical habitation and social belonging do not necessarily coincide.

Nira Yuval-Davis further distinguishes belonging from the politics through which belonging is organised. For her, belonging involves emotional attachment and the experience of feeling "at home," whereas the politics of belonging concerns the political projects through which particular forms of membership, entitlement, and inclusion are constructed (Yuval-Davis 2006, 197). Pandavas' displacement is also a question of political membership. They remain attached to their kingdom while being deprived of the political position through which that attachment could be exercised.

Taken together, these theorists allow exile to be understood through several interrelated dimensions, including spatial location, political status, social recognition, identity, memory, and belonging. Vanavāsa primarily involves territorial and political displacement, while agyātavāsa extends displacement into the domains of identity and recognition. The taxonomy developed in the following section emerges from this distinction.

A Taxonomy of Epic Displacement

The distinction between vanavāsa and agyātavāsa yields a fourfold taxonomy of epic displacement: spatial displacement, political-social displacement, identity concealment, and recognitional displacement. These categories are interconnected, yet each identifies a different alteration in the Pandavas' relationship with territory, political authority, social identity, and public recognition. Vanavāsa primarily produces spatial and political-social displacement: the Pandavas are removed from their territorial space of political existence and separated from the institutions through which their royal status is exercised. Agyātavāsa introduces a different condition: they must remain within a settled political community while concealing the identities through which they would ordinarily be recognised. Yudhishtira becomes Kanka, Bhima becomes Ballava, Arjuna becomes Bṛhannalā, Nakula becomes Granthika, Sahadeva becomes

Tantipāla, and Draupadi enters Virāṭa's household as Sairandhrī (Neelakantan 2013, 5–6; Debroy 2015, Virata Parva). The movement from vanavāsa to agyātavāsa thus involves a shift from territorial exclusion to concealed participation: the Pandavas are first removed from their political world and subsequently required to inhabit another political and social world without publicly appearing as themselves.

Spatial displacement is the most immediate consequence of vanavāsa. The forest replaces the palace, court, and institutions of kingship with a materially different mode of habitation. Yudhishtira's instruction that his brothers seek a suitable place in the forest indicates that the forest is to function as a dwelling rather than a route of passage (Debroy 2015, Virata Parva; Ganguli, Vana Parva, sec. 24). Yet the Vana Parva does not represent this environment as an undifferentiated wilderness. The Pandavas encounter ascetics, Brahmins, sages, sacred sites, and hermitages; they undertake journeys, engage in conversations, hear stories, and participate in practices associated with knowledge and religious life (Ganguli, Vana Parva, sec. 24). The forest thus becomes a complex social and cultural space. It signifies deprivation while simultaneously enabling new relations with landscape, ascetic communities, knowledge, and ethical traditions. Spatial displacement does not produce simple absence; it reorganises how the displaced inhabit and understand place.

Political-social displacement operates through suspended authority rather than lost lineage. The Pandavas retain their royal status and claim to legitimacy, but their removal from Hastinapura deprives them of the means to exercise that authority. Their relationship with the kingdom shifts from participation to exclusion. This exposes a distinction between historical belonging and recognised political authority. The Pandavas remain connected to the Kuru political order through lineage, memory, entitlement, and their claim to the kingdom, yet they are denied the institutional position through which these claims could be enacted. This corresponds with Yuval-Davis's separation of belonging-emotional

attachment and identification—from the politics of belonging, which concerns the political processes through which membership, entitlement, and inclusion are established (Yuval-Davis 2006, 197). The Pandavas' experience exposes the tension between these dimensions: connection to the political community persists even as participation in its structures of authority is suspended. Vanavāsa thus produces exclusion from political power without erasing historical belonging. The condition becomes more complex in agyātavāsa, when they must enter another political community while concealing the identities through which their status would ordinarily be recognised.

Identity concealment defines agyātavāsa. Survival depends not on physical absence but on the deliberate reconstruction of public identity. The Pandavas alter the signs through which others might recognise them: names, occupations, clothing, bodily presentation, and patterns of conduct become instruments of concealment. Yudhishtira becomes Kanka, Bhima becomes Ballava, Arjuna becomes Bṛhannalā, Nakula becomes Granthika, Sahadeva becomes Tantipāla, and Draupadi becomes Sairandhrī (Neelakantan 2013, 5–6; Debroy 2015, Virata Parva). These identities do more than disguise; they relocate the Pandavas within a different social order by assigning them occupations appropriate to their concealed status. Yuval-Davis's understanding of belonging as a dynamic process of identification is relevant here: social identity depends partly on the categories through which a person becomes legible to others (Yuval-Davis 2006, 197). The Pandavas retain knowledge of their own identities, lineage, and political claims, while their public identities are deliberately reorganised. Agyātavāsa thus produces a distinction between personal continuity and public legibility: they remain who they are, yet survival requires them to appear as someone else.

Recognitional displacement is the most distinctive dimension of agyātavāsa. The Pandavas are not absent from society; they are concealed within it. They work, move, interact,

and participate in daily life while withholding the identities through which they would ordinarily be recognised. Their condition is therefore different from literal invisibility-what is suspended is public recognition. The episode concerning their weapons makes this clear. Before entering the city, the Pandavas must conceal the Gandiva because its presence could reveal Arjuna's identity. Yudhishtira warns that if they enter carrying their weapons, "people will, without doubt, recognise us soon," and discovery would result in another twelve years of exile (Ganguli, Virata Parva, sec. 5). The epic frames this danger explicitly through Yudhishtira's own warning about disguise, which Ganatra records as central to the Pandavas' survival strategy:

I will dress like a Brahmin, take the name Kanka and become a courtier in Virata's assembly... I will display my skill in playing dice (Ganatra 2021, 238).

Recognition is mediated through material and social signs: weapons, names, clothing, occupations, and bodily practices can disclose an identity that must remain concealed. Agyātavāsa thus produces a distinctive form of displacement: the Pandavas are physically present within a functioning community, yet their actual social and political identities remain outside public recognition.

The four categories may be understood as an accumulating sequence. Vanavāsa begins with spatial displacement: the Pandavas are removed from their political territory and compelled to establish a temporary existence in the forest. This territorial removal is accompanied by political and social displacement, since they retain their lineage and claims while losing access to the institutions through which those claims can be exercised. Agyātavāsa intensifies these conditions by requiring the Pandavas to enter another political community under assumed identities. Their names, occupations, clothing, and public conduct must be altered so that their actual identities remain undiscovered. The distinction between the two stages is explicitly established in the terms of their exile: after twelve years in the forest, the thirteenth year must be spent in an inhabited region without recognition; discovery

would result in another twelve years of exile (Ganguli, Sabha Parva, sec. 75; Virata Parva, sec. 1). The sequence moves from territorial removal to political exclusion and then to identity concealment and recognitional displacement. Agyātavāsa presupposes the displacement produced by vanavāsa, yet it also transforms its character by requiring the displaced to participate in a social world while concealing the identities through which their historical position would ordinarily be recognised.

This taxonomy also demonstrates why exile cannot be reduced to physical movement. Cresswell's distinction between movement and mobility directs attention to the social conditions and power relations that give movement its meaning (Cresswell 2006, 2–3). The Pandavas' arrival in Virāṭa's kingdom does not bring their displacement to an end. Their physical relocation is complete, yet their condition remains precarious because continued residence depends upon concealment. The contrast between the forest and Virāṭa's kingdom complicates any simple opposition between exile and settlement. The forest, despite being the site of territorial exclusion, becomes a temporary habitation in which the Pandavas retain their names, relationships, and collective identity. Virāṭa's kingdom offers physical security and social participation, yet these are possible only through assumed identities. The narrative thus distinguishes physical habitation from political and social belonging. A place may provide shelter without restoring the status or recognition associated with home. The restoration of the Pandavas' identities at the end of agyātavāsa has political significance: their emergence from concealment enables them to resume the public identities and claims that had been suspended during exile. Recognition, in this sense, forms an important dimension of belonging alongside territory, memory, political status, and social attachment.

Contemporary Reconfigurations of Exile

Contemporary retellings of *Mahabharata* demonstrate how the epic's logic of exile can be transferred into modern political and

psychological contexts. These adaptations do not reproduce *vanavāsa* and *agyātavāsa* literally; instead, they reinterpret displacement through questions of territory, legitimacy, narrative authority, memory and belonging. Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice*, and Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* each reconfigure different dimensions of epic exile.

Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* relocates the epic struggle over territory and political legitimacy into the history of modern India. By adapting the *Mahabharata* to the histories of nationalism, Partition, and postcolonial politics, Tharoor transforms geographical exile into political and territorial displacement. His fictional division of India and "Karnistan" satirises the authority of those who draw political boundaries without understanding the social worlds those boundaries divide. The border cuts through markets, fields, religious institutions, and established networks of community, turning an abstract cartographic line into a source of forced movement and fractured belonging (Tharoor 1989, 224). Tharoor's adaptation therefore extends the taxonomy of exile from the forest to the nation-state. Displacement becomes a consequence of political decisions that determine who may belong within a territory and who must leave it.

Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* shifts the question from territorial displacement to displacement within cultural representation. Retelling the epic from the Kaurava perspective, the novel presents itself as "the narrative of the Others-the defeated, insulted, trampled upon" (Neelakantan 2013, 8). Its central intervention lies in relocating narrative authority from the traditionally privileged Pandava perspective to the defeated Kaurava side. This shift does not erase the juridical conditions of the Pandavas' exile; rather, it complicates the distribution of sympathy and legitimacy through which readers interpret the conflict. *Ajaya* consequently introduces narrative displacement as an extension of the paper's taxonomy. A character may remain central to the historical events represented in a

narrative while becoming marginal within the dominant version of that history. Belonging, therefore, concerns not only territory and political status but also the authority to narrate the past.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* foregrounds the experiential and affective dimensions of exile through Draupadi's perspective. The novel connects the loss of Indraprastha with the loss of a material and imagined home. Draupadi's dream of a palace "where I finally belonged" makes clear that place is tied to identity, desire, and recognition (Divakaruni 2008, 103–4). The movement from palace to forest consequently signifies more than a change of setting. It transforms everyday life, social status, memory, and the conditions through which belonging is experienced. Divakaruni's retelling shows that the forest can become a remembered space shaped by loss, survival, and self-formation. Taken together, these adaptations demonstrate that epic exile remains culturally productive because its underlying structure is adaptable. Tharoor politicises displacement, Neelakantan relocates narrative authority, and Divakaruni connects exile with memory and identity. Their works confirm that exile is not merely physical departure but a disruption of territory, recognition, political legitimacy, and the experience of home.

Epic Exile and Modern Displacement

The distinction between *vanavāsa* and *agyātavāsa* provides a conceptual resource for thinking about contemporary displacement without conflating ancient exile with modern conditions. Modern displacement occurs under diverse circumstances-forced migration, political conflict, war, partition, environmental crisis, economic change, and loss of legal status. The *Mahabharata* cannot be converted into a sociological case study, but it raises enduring conceptual questions about the relationship between movement, home, identity, and belonging.

The first dimension concerns territory. The Pandavas' experience demonstrates that exile modifies social identity. Yudhishtira's losses in the dice game—wealth, kingdom, brothers, self, Draupadi—convert political dispossession into exile (Ganatra 2021, 21–22). The memory of their former status permeates their experience of displacement. When Duryodhana and Karna visit the forest to display their wealth before the Pandavas, territorial loss is accompanied by deliberate public humiliation (Ganatra 2021, 22–23). Draupadi's recollection of her former dignity similarly reveals the gap between her status in the Kuru household and her treatment in the gambling hall (Ganatra 2021, 101). Agyātavāsa, by contrast, demands a more thorough reconstruction of social identity. Before entering Virata's kingdom, Dhaumya instructs the Pandavas on how to live inconspicuously among ordinary people (Ganatra 2021, 237). Malkki's critique of territorialised identity is relevant here, as she questions the assumption that identity is naturally secured by attachment to a particular territory (Malkki 1992, 24–27). Displacement strips them of recognition; as Yudhishtira notes, "I will dress like a Brahmin, take the name Kanka and become a courtier in Virata's assembly... I will display my skill in playing dice" (Ganatra 2021, 238). The Pandavas are recognized as kings only when they reclaim Indraprastha. Bhishma says,

A person who has lost himself cannot stake what is not his. But a husband has been seen to still have a claim on his wife. Hence, my intellect fails me. I cannot decide what is right and wrong here. But I do foresee that consumed by greed, the Kauravas would soon invite their end (Ganatra 2021, 1659-1668).

The second dimension concerns recognition. Agyātavāsa shows that physical presence does not guarantee social presence. The Pandavas are present in Virata's kingdom, yet they must conceal their identities. Modern forms of displacement can similarly involve administrative, political, or cultural invisibility.

The third dimension concerns home. Avtar Brah's conception of home as a complex relational formation prevents home from being reduced to a fixed geographical location. For

Brah, home encompasses both the imagined place of origin and the lived experience of locality, including the social relations through which belonging is formed (Brah 1996, 188–89). Doreen Massey similarly challenges static conceptions of place by understanding places through the relations, histories, and movements that constitute them (Massey 1994, 146–56). The Pandavas' experience reflects this complexity. Their home is simultaneously a territory, a political inheritance, a remembered space, and a future objective. Indraprastha cannot be understood merely as the physical territory from which they are expelled. Ganatra observes that the Pandavas "toil and establish a flourishing kingdom of Indraprastha," yet the achievement remains vulnerable to political dispossession (Ganatra 2021, 21). The dice game makes this vulnerability stark: Yudhishtira wagers and loses his kingdom, transforming political territory into an object transferable through juridical dispossession (Ganatra 2021, 22). The subsequent period in Matsya complicates habitation and belonging still further. The Pandavas occupy a functioning social environment, yet they cannot inhabit it under their own names or exercise their former identities. Physical presence in Virata's kingdom does not restore the sense of belonging associated with their former home. Agyātavāsa separates habitation from recognition, demonstrating that home depends upon social relations and political identity as much as upon geographical location.

The relational nature of home emerges still more clearly in the account of Indraprastha. Ganatra observes that the Pandavas "had built Indraprastha with a lot of effort; the land was a part of their inheritance but the prosperous kingdom was what they had toiled to establish with their sweat and blood" (Ganatra 2021, 105). Home is simultaneously inherited and constructed: the territory has a dynastic history, while the kingdom acquires significance through the labour invested in its creation. During negotiations preceding the Kurukshetra war, Yudhishtira is prepared to reduce his demand from the restoration of Indraprastha to five

villages, indicating that territorial magnitude can change without eliminating the underlying demand for a recognised political place (Ganatra 2021, 25). The episode separates the idea of home from territorial extent. What the Pandavas seek is not simply land but a legitimate space in which their familial, political, and dynastic identity can be re-established. Home emerges as a remembered inheritance, a political claim, and a future possibility, held together by the labour and loss through which Indraprastha acquired its meaning.

The fourth question concerns mobility itself. Cresswell's distinction between movement as "the dynamic equivalent of location" and "mobility abstracted from contexts of power" allows the epic journey to be read as politically structured experience rather than a sequence of geographical coordinates (Cresswell 2006, 2–3). Movement, for Cresswell, is "the general fact of displacement before the type, strategies, and social implications of that movement are considered" (Cresswell 2006, 3). The Pandavas' passage from Hastinapura to the forest, and subsequently from forest to Virata, cannot be understood as ordinary changes of dwelling. Each movement alters their relationship to political power, social visibility, occupation, identity, and belonging. The significance of their mobility lies in these changes: movement becomes inseparable from the political conditions under which they travel and the identities they are permitted to inhabit.

The epic consequently provides a cultural logic of displacement in which the loss of home generates several secondary transformations. Spatial removal can become political marginalisation; political marginalisation can produce social displacement; social displacement can necessitate identity concealment; concealment can produce recognitional instability. The return to the original political centre becomes more than a physical return. It becomes the restoration of

recognition and status. This is the principal connection between epic exile and modern theories of displacement. Exile is multidimensional. Its geographical dimension is fundamental, yet it does not exhaust the experience. The loss of place can alter identity; altered identity can affect recognition; recognition can determine belonging; and belonging can remain unsettled even after physical movement has ceased.

Conclusion

The *Mahabharata* differentiates exile through *vanavāsa* and *agyātavāsa*. This distinction yields a fourfold taxonomy: spatial displacement, political-social displacement, identity concealment, and recognitional displacement. The narrative moves from territorial removal to concealment and ultimately toward the restoration of public identity and political belonging. The epic's logic reveals that a person may lose a place, enter another, remain connected to the former through memory and claim, and yet remain displaced because recognition and belonging have not been restored. Exile is neither departure nor residence elsewhere; it is a disruption of the relations through which home becomes meaningful. Displacement involves territory, political status, social visibility, identity, memory, recognition, and belonging simultaneously. This taxonomy explains why the *Mahabharata*'s narratives of displacement continue to generate new meanings in contemporary literary culture.

Author Declarations

Originality of the Work:

The authors confirm that this manuscript is an original work and has not been published previously.

Conflict of Interest:

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest related to this manuscript.

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