

Silence, Responsibility, and the Limits of Dharma in the *Mahabharata*

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Abstract

This article examines the ethical significance of silence in the Mahabharata through selected episodes from the Sabha Parva, Udyoga Parva, and the war books. Rather than treating silence merely as the absence of speech, the study approaches it as an ethical condition shaped by power, responsibility, institutional authority, and moral uncertainty. The article analyzes Bhishma's hesitation during Draupadi's humiliation, the ineffectiveness of Vidura's counsel, the collective paralysis of the royal assembly, and the strategic ambiguities surrounding Drona's death. Drawing upon the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Foucault's reflections on discourse and power, and J. L. Austin's speech-act theory, the article argues that ethical collapse in the epic often emerges not only through visible violence, but through failures of response that permit violence to continue. Silence consequently becomes central to the Mahabharata's exploration of dharma, authority, and human responsibility.

Keywords: Mahabharata, Dharma, Ethical Silence, Political Power, Speech Acts, Institutional Ethics

Introduction

The *Mahabharata* endures not only because of its narrative scale, but because of the ethical tensions that shape its world. Across the epic, characters confront situations in which duty, kinship, justice, loyalty, and political necessity collide without clear resolution. Even figures associated with wisdom or righteousness hesitate, compromise, or fail at decisive moments. Dharma consequently appears less as a stable moral code than as something difficult to interpret in practice, shaped by circumstance and human limitation.

Critical discussions of the *Mahabharata* have often examined these tensions through kingship, warfare, gender, and political ethics. Scholars such as Alf Hiltebeitel and V. S. Sukthankar have emphasized the epic's sustained concern with the instability of dharma and the ethical complexity of political action (Hiltebeitel 12; Sukthankar 18). Yet one of the epic's most revealing dimensions remains comparatively underexplored: silence. Some of the most consequential moments in the narrative unfold through hesitation, non-intervention, suppressed response, and the failure to speak when speech becomes morally necessary. The silence of the royal assembly during Draupadi's humiliation, the ineffectiveness of Vidura's warnings, and

the strategic concealments surrounding Drona's death demonstrate that silence in the epic is neither passive nor neutral. It shapes events, redistributes responsibility, and permits violence to continue.

The force of silence becomes especially visible in moments where suffering is publicly witnessed yet inadequately answered. Draupadi's question in the sabha exposes not merely the legality of the dice game, but the inability of the assembly to respond decisively to visible injustice. Bhishma's hesitation transforms moral uncertainty into ethical delay, while Dhritarashtra's inaction reveals the destructive relationship between political attachment and moral failure. Even where speech exists, as in the case of Vidura, ethical counsel loses force within structures unwilling to respond to it.

At the same time, silence in the *Mahabharata* cannot be reduced to a single meaning. In the war books especially, it acquires strategic dimensions through omission, concealment, and partial disclosure. The episode surrounding Drona's death demonstrates how what remains unheard may become as consequential as direct speech itself.

This article examines selected episodes from the Sabha Parva, Udyoga Parva, and the war books to explore how silence operates within the ethical structure of the *Mahabharata*. The discussion places the epic in conversation with Emmanuel Levinas's understanding of ethical responsibility, Michel Foucault's reflections on discourse and power, and J. L. Austin's speech-act theory. The analysis draws primarily upon Bibek Debroy's English translation of the *Mahabharata* while also referring, where relevant, to the Critical Edition published by the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in order to situate key ethical formulations within the Sanskrit textual tradition. Rather than treating silence simply as the absence of speech, the study approaches it as an ethical condition shaped by power, obligation, and moral uncertainty. By foregrounding silence, the article argues that ethical collapse in the *Mahabharata* often begins not in open violence, but in failures of response that allow violence to continue unchecked.

Silence as Ethical Modality

Silence in the *Mahabharata* rarely appears as simple absence. The narrative repeatedly presents situations in which speech remains possible and ethically necessary, yet response falters. Characters hesitate, postpone judgment, or speak in ways that fail to interrupt unfolding violence. Silence therefore becomes consequential not because nothing is said, but because the failure to respond shapes events as decisively as action itself.

This becomes especially visible during Draupadi's humiliation in the royal assembly. The violence of the episode lies not solely in the attempted disrobing itself, but in the collective hesitation surrounding it. The sabha watches while ethical response dissolves into uncertainty, fear, and political calculation. Silence emerges not outside power, but from within structures that weaken or postpone intervention.

Emmanuel Levinas provides an important framework for understanding this tension. For Levinas, ethical responsibility originates in encounter with the vulnerability of the other (Levinas 75). Read through this framework, many silences in the *Mahabharata* become ethically significant because they occur where suffering is visible and intervention remains possible. The failure lies not merely in uncertainty, but in the interruption of response before visible vulnerability.

At the same time, the epic resists explaining silence solely through individual morality. Many silences arise from political and institutional structures that regulate authority and legitimacy unevenly. The royal sabha is shaped by hierarchy, dynastic loyalty, sovereignty, and gendered power. Silence therefore emerges not simply through refusal to speak, but through systems that determine whose speech carries force and whose may be ignored.

Michel Foucault's reflections on discourse and power become relevant here. Foucault argues that silence is not simply the opposite of discourse; it operates within structures that regulate speech and authority (Foucault 27). The *Mahabharata* repeatedly reveals how institutions produce conditions under which ethical speech loses effectiveness even while continuing to circulate publicly.

The figure of Vidura demonstrates this problem clearly. Unlike Bhishma, Vidura openly condemns injustice and repeatedly warns Dhritarashtra about the consequences of political blindness. Yet his counsel remains ineffective. The issue, therefore, is not silence in the literal sense, but the collapse of ethical communication within structures unwilling to respond.

The epic further complicates ethical judgment through its insistence upon the unstable nature of dharma itself. Bhishma's declaration that "the course of dharma is subtle" (sukshmodharmah) reflects a moral world in which competing obligations resist easy resolution. Yet the *Mahabharata* also suggests that such uncertainty may become ethically dangerous when interpretation continually postpones action.

The importance of this formulation becomes clearer when read alongside the Sanskrit tradition of the epic. In the critical text of the Sabha Parva, Bhishma's response to Draupadi's question does not simply register indecision; it reflects the larger Mahabharata understanding that dharma often remains difficult to discern in situations where competing obligations collide (Debroy, Sabha Parva 68; Sukthankar 18). The declaration that dharma is subtle (sūkṣma) points toward a mode of ethical reasoning that resists mechanical application of rules. As several scholars of the epic have observed, the Mahabharata repeatedly presents dharma as contextual rather than absolute, requiring judgment rather than mere adherence to established norms (Sukthankar 21–22).

This ethical framework also shapes the reader's understanding of Bhishma's silence in the assembly. Yet the same episode also exposes the limitations of such interpretive caution. Bhishma's recognition of complexity does not prevent injustice from unfolding before him. The narrative therefore preserves a tension between ethical reflection and ethical action, suggesting that awareness of dharma's subtlety cannot by itself absolve one of responsibility.

The war books complicate this further by introducing silence as strategy. In the episode surrounding Drona's death, omission and partial disclosure become tactical instruments. Silence here no longer signifies hesitation alone; it becomes entangled with deception and survival.

J. L. Austin's speech-act theory helps clarify why silence acquires such force within the narrative. Austin argues that speech acts produce consequences through authority and recognition (Austin 5). In spaces such as the royal assembly or battlefield, authoritative speech possesses the power to interrupt, legitimize, or redirect events. When such intervention fails to occur, silence itself becomes historically and ethically consequential.

Seen in this light, silence in the *Mahabharata* cannot be understood as passive emptiness. It is an ethical condition shaped by hierarchy, institutional failure, political power, and competing obligations. The epic repeatedly suggests that moral catastrophe emerges not only through visible violence, but also through failures of response that permit violence to continue.

Bhishma's Silence: Authority, Witnessing, and Ethical Paralysis

Among the many ethical crises in the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi's humiliation in the Kuru assembly remains one of the most disturbing because the violence unfolds in full public view. She is dragged into the sabha, insulted before kings and elders, and threatened with disrobing within the very institution meant to uphold justice. The force of the episode lies not only in Duhshasana's brutality, but in the collective witnessing that surrounds it. The assembly sees what is happening, yet fails to interrupt it.

No figure embodies this tension more sharply than Bhishma. As guardian of the Kuru dynasty and one of the principal custodians of dharma, Bhishma carries immense moral authority. Precisely for this reason, his hesitation during Draupadi's humiliation becomes deeply significant. The crisis emerges not from ignorance or incapacity, but from the failure of a figure uniquely positioned to intervene.

The turning point of the episode arrives when Draupadi questions whether Yudhishtira, having already lost himself in the dice game, possessed any right afterward to wager her (Debroy, Sabha Parva 60–61). Her question destabilizes the moral basis of the proceeding and forces the sabha into confrontation with its own silence. Draupadi does not merely seek sympathy; she demands judgment.

Bhishma's response is famously uncertain. Rather than delivering a decisive judgment, he declares that "the course of dharma is subtle" (sukshmodharmah) and difficult to determine (Debroy, Sabha Parva 68). Within the philosophical world of the epic, the statement carries genuine weight. The *Mahabharata* repeatedly portrays dharma as unstable in practice, shaped by conflicting obligations that resist simple resolution.

The significance of Bhishma's formulation extends beyond the immediate crisis in the assembly. The *Mahabharata* repeatedly associates dharma with complexity and interpretive difficulty, particularly in situations where obligations to family, kingship, truth, and justice come into conflict. Read in this broader context, Bhishma's appeal to the subtle nature of dharma reflects an important feature of the epic's ethical imagination rather than a purely personal hesitation. As Sukthankar observes, the *Mahabharata* rarely presents dharma as a fixed code capable of resolving every moral dilemma in advance (18–20). Yet the Draupadi episode also reveals the danger that accompanies such ethical uncertainty. The recognition that dharma is difficult to discern does not eliminate the need for judgment. The narrative consequently leaves open the troubling possibility that an appeal to complexity may itself become a form of ethical delay when immediate intervention is required.

Yet within the immediate context of Draupadi's humiliation, Bhishma's appeal to subtlety suspends intervention at the moment action becomes ethically necessary. Reflection turns into delay. Bhishma recognizes the gravity of the crisis, but recognition does not become response. The episode therefore exposes one of the epic's central anxieties: moral uncertainty may itself become complicit in injustice when interpretation continually postpones action.

This hesitation becomes especially significant when read through Emmanuel Levinas's understanding of ethical responsibility. For Levinas, responsibility begins in encounter with the vulnerability of the other (Levinas 197). Draupadi's appeal emerges from precisely such vulnerability. Bhishma's failure lies not simply in uncertainty about dharma, but in allowing interpretive hesitation to override the ethical demand created by visible suffering.

At the same time, the *Mahabharata* resists reducing Bhishma's silence to mere cowardice. His paralysis emerges from obligations that bind him to the Kuru throne even after that political order becomes ethically compromised. Loyalty to dynasty and oath increasingly conflicts with the demands of justice. In this sense, Bhishma's silence reflects not only personal hesitation, but the exhaustion of an ethical system unable to reconcile competing duties.

Michel Foucault's reflections on power clarify this tension further. The sabha is not a neutral space of ethical deliberation; it is structured by hierarchy and dynastic authority (Foucault 27). Bhishma speaks from within these structures rather than outside them. His authority is immense, yet not entirely free.

Still, the epic does not allow institutional constraint to erase responsibility. Bhishma's silence carries consequence precisely because his words possess enormous authority within the assembly. As J. L. Austin argues, speech within juridical settings produces effects through

public recognition (Austin 8). A decisive condemnation from Bhishma could have disrupted the legitimacy of the proceeding itself. His failure to intervene therefore becomes historically and ethically consequential.

Bhishma's silence ultimately demonstrates how injustice may persist not only through cruelty, but through the hesitation of those entrusted with resisting it. The *Mahabharata* repeatedly suggests that ethical collapse begins in moments where suffering is visible, intervention remains possible, and those capable of acting still fail to respond.

Vidura's Speech and the Failure of Ethical Communication

If Bhishma represents the paralysis of ethical authority in the *Mahabharata*, Vidura represents a different crisis: the failure of ethical speech within structures unwilling to respond to it. Unlike many figures in the Kuru court, Vidura does not remain silent before injustice. He repeatedly warns, advises, and criticizes both Duryodhana's ambition and Dhritarashtra's political blindness. Yet despite the clarity of his counsel, catastrophe continues to advance. The problem, therefore, is not silence in the literal sense, but the inability of ethical speech to produce meaningful intervention.

Throughout the epic, Vidura is associated with wisdom and moral clarity. During the dice-game episode, he openly condemns Draupadi's humiliation. In the Udyoga Parva, he repeatedly warns Dhritarashtra that attachment to Duryodhana will destroy the Kuru lineage. Unlike Bhishma, Vidura does not retreat into philosophical uncertainty or invoke the subtlety of dharma to avoid judgment.

Yet his speech repeatedly loses force within the political structure of the court. Dhritarashtra listens without acting, while Duryodhana dismisses him openly. Vidura's tragedy lies not in his inability to perceive ethical truth, but in the inability of ethical truth to alter political reality.

Michel Foucault's reflections on discourse and authority clarify this problem. For Foucault, speech does not acquire force simply because it is truthful; institutions determine which voices matter and which may be ignored (Foucault 58). Vidura possesses moral insight, but he lacks sovereign authority. The narrative repeatedly exposes the gap between ethical legitimacy and political power.

Dhritarashtra's relationship with Vidura intensifies this contradiction. The king often acknowledges the wisdom of Vidura's counsel, yet fails to act because of attachment to his son. Political weakness and paternal loyalty repeatedly override ethical judgment. The result is a form of listening without response. Vidura is neither silenced nor excluded; instead, his speech is absorbed into a political structure incapable of ethical transformation.

The Udyoga Parva develops this dilemma with particular force. As tensions between the Kauravas and Pandavas move steadily toward war, Vidura repeatedly attempts to persuade Dhritarashtra to abandon policies driven by attachment and fear. His counsel extends beyond immediate political strategy and takes the form of sustained ethical instruction. He reminds the king that rulers who ignore wise advice ultimately destroy both themselves and the institutions they seek to preserve. The emphasis falls not merely on personal virtue, but on the relationship between moral judgment and political responsibility. Vidura repeatedly presents justice as a practical necessity for the stability of the kingdom rather than as an abstract ethical ideal.

What gives these exchanges their tragic quality is that Dhritarashtra often recognizes the truth of what he hears. The king seldom dismisses Vidura outright. On the contrary, he frequently acknowledges Vidura's wisdom and expresses anxiety about the consequences of Duryodhana's conduct. Yet recognition repeatedly fails to become action. The pattern recurs throughout the narrative: counsel is offered, understood, and even accepted, but remains politically ineffective. The failure therefore cannot be explained through ignorance alone. The Udyoga Parva instead

reveals how ethical knowledge may coexist with political paralysis. Vidura's speeches acquire significance precisely because they expose the distance between knowing what is right and possessing the will to act upon that knowledge. In this respect, the epic locates moral failure not only in wrongful action, but also in the inability to translate ethical understanding into political decision.

The narrative repeatedly underscores this irony by presenting Dhritarashtra as a ruler who actively seeks Vidura's counsel while remaining unable to follow it. Vidura Niti, embedded within the Udyoga Parva, offers sustained reflections on kingship, self-control, greed, and political prudence. Vidura repeatedly warns that rulers who allow attachment and desire to govern their decisions ultimately undermine both personal authority and public order. What is striking is that Dhritarashtra seldom disputes the validity of these observations. Instead, he acknowledges their wisdom while continuing to act in ways shaped by affection for Duryodhana. The epic therefore locates moral failure not simply in ignorance but in the inability to align political action with ethical understanding. Vidura's speeches acquire their significance precisely because they expose the limits of knowledge when institutions lack the will to transform insight into action.

At this point, silence becomes relational rather than purely individual. It is produced not only through the absence of speech, but through the refusal of institutions to allow ethical speech to matter. The failure belongs as much to the listener as to the speaker.

J. L. Austin's speech-act theory further illuminates this dynamic. Austin argues that speech becomes performative only when institutionally recognized (Austin 14). Vidura's warnings repeatedly fail at this level of uptake. They are ethically coherent and politically perceptive, yet they do not acquire the authority necessary to redirect events.

The *Mahabharata*, however, does not portray Vidura's speech as meaningless. Its very ineffectiveness deepens the tragedy of the narrative. Vidura remains one of the few figures who preserve moral clarity within a deeply compromised political world. At the same time, the failure of his voice exposes the fragility of ethical discourse within corrupt institutions.

Through Vidura, the *Mahabharata* complicates any simple opposition between speech and silence. One may speak continuously and still remain politically unheard. Injustice survives not merely because some remain silent, but because structures of authority gradually render meaningful speech ineffective.

Collective Silence: The Assembly as an Ethical Failure

The ethical significance of silence in the *Mahabharata* extends beyond individual figures such as Bhishma or Vidura. The royal sabha itself functions as a political structure in which silence becomes systemic rather than personal. The crisis of the assembly lies not simply in isolated failures of speech, but in the institution's inability to sustain ethical intervention when it becomes most necessary.

Throughout the epic, the sabha is represented as a space of deliberation and judgment. Its authority depends not only upon political power, but upon its ability to uphold dharma through public response. Once this function begins to fail, the crisis becomes institutional rather than merely individual.

Draupadi's humiliation in the Sabha Parva dramatizes this collapse with particular force. The attempted disrobing takes place publicly before kings, elders, teachers, and counsellors, yet decisive intervention never arrives (Debroy, Sabha parva 67–68). Although a few voices emerge intermittently, none succeeds in interrupting the violence. The silence of the sabha therefore cannot be reduced to any single individual. It is produced collectively through hesitation, fear, dynastic loyalty, and political paralysis.

The public visibility of the episode intensifies its ethical implications. Draupadi's humiliation unfolds within the symbolic center of royal authority. The assembly witnesses injustice collectively, yet fails to produce an authoritative response capable of interrupting it. This collective spectatorship transforms silence into institutional complicity. The sabha does not merely fail to prevent violence; its inability to produce authoritative response allows violence to continue under the tacit legitimacy of public acceptance.

The episode also reveals how responsibility becomes diffused within institutions. Authority is distributed among rulers, elders, teachers, and advisers, yet this very distribution weakens accountability. Because responsibility appears collectively shared, intervention becomes continually deferred. Silence thus emerges not through explicit agreement, but through the normalization of non-response.

Michel Foucault's understanding of discourse and power becomes especially relevant here. Speech within the sabha is conditioned by rank, lineage, and political allegiance (Foucault 52). Not all voices possess equal capacity to intervene effectively. Silence therefore arises not only from refusal to speak, but from structures that restrict the force and legitimacy of ethical speech.

Yet the dispersal of responsibility does not eliminate accountability. Each participant contributes differently to the maintenance of silence—through fear, compliance, indecision, or deliberate withdrawal. The silence of the assembly is therefore cumulative: a systemic condition produced through converging individual failures.

The *Mahabharata* consequently presents the sabha not merely as the setting of ethical crisis, but as one of its enabling structures. The collapse of ethical speech reveals that injustice within the epic is sustained not only through overt violence, but also through institutional failure to interrupt it.

Strategy, Secrecy, and Moral Ambiguity

While the earlier episodes of the *Mahabharata* present silence primarily through hesitation or failed intervention, the war books introduce a more unstable ethical landscape. On the battlefield of Kurukshetra, silence becomes entangled with strategy, survival, and tactical deception. What remains unsaid in war often proves as consequential as direct violence itself.

The war narrative repeatedly exposes the widening distance between the ideal of dharma-yuddha and the realities of destruction. Codes of righteous warfare continue to be invoked, yet the pressures of survival gradually erode the possibility of maintaining ethical purity. As the conflict intensifies, victory increasingly depends upon concealment and controlled disclosure. This tension reaches one of its most troubling forms in the episode surrounding Drona's death in the Drona Parva. Unable to defeat Drona directly, the Pandavas devise a strategy intended to break him psychologically. Bhima kills an elephant named Ashvatthama and loudly announces, "Ashvatthama is dead" (Debroy, Drona Parva 191). The declaration is carefully calculated because Drona trusts only Yudhishtira, whose commitment to truth has remained nearly unquestioned throughout the epic.

When Drona seeks confirmation, Yudhishtira declares that "Ashvatthama is dead," while quietly adding, "the elephant" (Debroy, Drona Parva 191). In many retellings, the latter words remain unheard. Drona receives only the part of the statement capable of destroying him psychologically.

The force of the episode lies in this incompleteness. The Sanskrit text of the Drona Parva places particular emphasis on the ambiguity of Yudhishtira's utterance and the differing reception of its two parts. The episode demonstrates that ethical significance in the *Mahabharata* often depends not merely on what is spoken but on how speech is heard, interpreted, or partially

concealed. The narrative therefore treats omission itself as a morally consequential element of communication. Yudhishtira does not utter a direct falsehood, yet the statement depends for its effectiveness upon what remains unheard. Silence here operates within speech itself. The scene consequently unsettles any stable distinction between truth and deception. Yudhishtira's statement remains technically accurate, yet ethically compromised because it exploits trust while preserving the outward form of truthfulness.

This becomes especially significant because Yudhishtira has long functioned as one of the epic's principal figures of righteousness. His participation in deception therefore reveals how prolonged violence fractures ethical certainty itself. The battlefield forces even those most closely associated with dharma into morally unstable action.

J. L. Austin's speech-act theory helps illuminate this moment further. Austin argues that utterances produce consequences within specific conditions of authority and reception (Austin 101). Yudhishtira's declaration acquires force not simply because of its semantic content, but because Drona trusts the speaker absolutely. The deception succeeds because trust itself becomes weaponized.

At the same time, the *Mahabharata* refuses to present this act as morally uncomplicated necessity. In several traditional interpretations, Yudhishtira's chariot—said previously to float above the ground because of his righteousness—touches the earth after this moment, symbolizing the diminishment of his moral stature. The episode suggests that strategic necessity does not erase ethical consequence.

The war books repeatedly return to this atmosphere of erosion. As the conflict continues, both sides increasingly rely upon concealed intentions, broken codes, and tactical ambiguities that would earlier have appeared unacceptable. The language of dharma remains present, yet its authority grows unstable within the logic of survival.

Kurukshetra therefore deepens the ethical instability already visible elsewhere in the epic. In the royal assembly, silence enables injustice through non-intervention; on the battlefield, silence becomes inseparable from survival and deception. The war books ultimately reveal how violence transforms ethical language itself, making words instruments of strategy as much as truth.

Conclusion

The *Mahabharata* repeatedly demonstrates that ethical crises emerge not only through visible acts of violence, but also through failures of response that allow such violence to continue. Across the episodes examined in this study, silence appears in multiple forms: Bhishma's hesitation before public injustice, the institutional paralysis of the royal sabha, the ineffectiveness of Vidura's counsel, and the strategic ambiguities surrounding Drona's death. In each case, silence shapes ethical outcomes decisively, becoming part of the process through which responsibility is deferred and violence sustained.

This study has approached silence not as passive absence, but as an ethical condition shaped by power, authority, obligation, and political necessity. The epic suggests that responsibility cannot be measured solely through direct action or explicit wrongdoing. Ethical failure also emerges through delayed intervention, ineffective speech, and collective non-response.

At the same time, the *Mahabharata* complicates any simple opposition between speech and silence. Vidura speaks clearly, yet his words fail to alter political reality. Yudhishtira's partial truth surrounding Drona's death reveals how speech itself may operate through omission and controlled silence. The issue, therefore, is not merely whether characters speak, but whether moral judgment can retain authority within structures shaped by hierarchy, attachment, and political calculation.

The war books intensify these tensions further by revealing how survival and strategic necessity blur the boundaries between righteousness and compromise. Silence in the epic cannot be assigned a single moral meaning. Depending upon circumstance, it may emerge from hesitation, fear, loyalty, calculation, or tactical necessity. The *Mahabharata* resists reducing silence either to absolute culpability or complete justification.

By foregrounding silence, this article has sought to widen discussions of ethics in the *Mahabharata* beyond an exclusive focus on heroic action or codified duty. The epic repeatedly suggests that ethical failure emerges not only through acts of violence, but also through forms of non-response that remain publicly visible yet insufficiently challenged. Silence consequently becomes a crucial medium through which the narrative explores the relationship between responsibility and power.

The significance of this concern extends beyond the *Mahabharata* itself. Other classical traditions likewise recognize that moral crises often develop through hesitation, deferred judgment, and failures of intervention. The Ramayana, for example, contains episodes in which questions of public duty and personal responsibility generate forms of ethical silence that continue to provoke debate. Comparable tensions may also be observed in Greek tragedy, where delayed judgment and political hesitation frequently contribute to catastrophe. Yet the *Mahabharata* develops this problem with particular intensity by repeatedly placing silence at the centre of conflicts concerning dharma. The epic returns again and again to situations in which individuals understand the gravity of a moral crisis yet remain unable, unwilling, or institutionally constrained from acting decisively.

Rather than resolving these tensions, the *Mahabharata* preserves them. Its enduring force lies in its refusal to offer stable moral certainties in situations where competing obligations render judgment difficult. Silence therefore emerges not merely as the absence of speech, but as one of the principal sites through which the epic investigates the limits of dharma and the burdens of human responsibility.

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