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Reconstructing the *Mahabharata* through Human and Artificial Intelligence: A Comparative Study of Mythological Representation and Literary Creativity

Abin S
Student,
Department of Linguistics,
University of Kerala.

Abstract

This study compares human literary retellings of the *Mahabharata* with ChatGPT-generated English narratives to examine mythological fidelity, cultural representation, characterization, and literary creativity. Four scenarios structure the comparison: the Arjuna-Karna duel, Subhadra's monologue on patriarchy, Krishna's physical description, and an invented humorous encounter at Indraprastha. Each human text is compared with three AI variants generated through progressively specified prompts and comparable word targets. Qualitative close reading and thematic coding distinguish preservation, modification, expansion, omission, modernization, and invention. Both human and AI narratives retain recognizable epic identities, relationships, and cultural structures. AI frequently develops ethical reflection, psychological motivation, and explanatory kinship networks, and incorporates contemporary feminist concerns effectively. Human narratives employ denser devotional symbolism, more specific popular retelling motifs, more varied figurative language, and greater flexibility in comic characterization and anachronistic humour. These findings are limited to the selected corpus and prompt conditions. The comparison positions AI-generated storytelling within the epic's continuing adaptation history and demonstrates the value of literary criteria for assessing computational reconstructions of culturally embedded narratives.

Keywords: Digital Humanities; Generative Artificial Intelligence; Indian Epic; Cultural Representation; Comparative Literary Analysis.

1 Introduction

The *Mahabharata*, traditionally attributed to Ved Vyasa, narrates the Bharata lineage, particularly the Kuru dynasty, through interwoven accounts of warfare, kinship, divine intervention, and ethical conflict. Its cultural world organizes questions of dharma, karma, caste, kingship, gender, honour, and familial obligation. Krishna's instruction to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita* exemplifies its sustained engagement with action and moral responsibility. The epic remains a living cultural archive because successive communities reinterpret its characters and conflicts through translations, regional traditions, performance, and new media.

Modern novels such as Shivaji Sawant's *Mrityunjaya*, S. L. Bhyrappa's *Parva*, and Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* redistribute narrative attention and reconsider established moral hierarchies. Jean-Claude Carrière and Peter Brook's theatrical *The Mahabharata*, B. R. Chopra's *Mahabharat*, Siddharth Kumar Tewary's *Suryaputra Karn*, and B. R. Panthulu's *Karnan* extend this reconstruction through dramatic and visual forms. Platforms including Wattpad, Pratilipi, Matrubharti, and WebNovel enable further digital retellings. Generative AI introduces another mechanism of narrative production into this history, recombining inherited material under human prompting.

Research on AI literature often emphasizes authorship, fluency, and technical creativity, while culturally specific mythology requires attention to source traditions, social meanings, characterization, and literary form. This study asks how human and AI texts reconstruct comparable *Mahabharata* scenarios; what they preserve or transform; how they represent cultural structures and character agency; and which literary strategies distinguish their creativity. Its aim is to compare mythological reconstruction across these interconnected dimensions through systematic coding and interpretive close reading.

2 Literature Review

Scholarship establishes the *Mahabharata* as a plural and adaptive tradition. J. A. B. van Buitenen describes its combination of narrative, legend, theology, ethics, and metaphysical discourse (van Buitenen). Alf Hiltebeitel's *The Cult of Draupadi* examines South Indian ritual and performance traditions that reconstruct Draupadi as a regional goddess (Hiltebeitel). Nell Shapiro Hawley and Sohini Sarah Pillai's *Many Mahābhāratas* foregrounds multilingual and historical recreation (Hawley and Pillai), while R. K. Narayan's shortened prose version demonstrates selection, compression, translation, and stylistic modernization (Narayan). Adaptation therefore involves both continuity and interpretive change. John Stephens and

Robyn McCallum connect retelling with cultural and ideological reframing (Stephens and McCallum); Linda Hutcheon explains repetition and transformation across media (Hutcheon); and Julie Sanders examines retention, relocation, and appropriation (Sanders).

Computational creativity offers complementary concepts. Margaret A. Boden distinguishes combinational, exploratory, and transformational creativity, respectively involving recombination, exploration within conceptual spaces, and alteration of their governing rules (Boden). Sun et al.'s comparison across thirteen creative tasks finds substantial LLM performance in divergent thinking and problem-solving but weaker creative-writing results (Sun et al.). Mozaffari et al.'s review of forty-eight studies documents expanding literary applications (Mozaffari et al.), while Ma et al. identify continuing problems with long-range coherence, character consistency, plot diversity, and controllability (Ma et al.). These findings make fluency insufficient as a measure of narrative creativity.

Direct human-AI comparisons support literary evaluation. Nina Beguš compares 250 human stories with GPT-3.5 and GPT-4 narratives based on the Pygmalion myth, finding occasional AI innovation but greater human imaginative range and rhetorical variation (Beguš). Silvia Elias et al. identify AI playwriting potential alongside stronger overall human performance (Elias et al.). Within epic studies, João Pedro Oliveira analyses contemporary English adaptations and their ideological and narrative strategies (Oliveira). Pillai's *Krishna's Mahabharatas* examines more than forty retellings in eleven South Asian languages, including Villiputturar's Tamil *Pāratam* and Sabalsingh Chauhan's Old Hindi *Mahābhārat*, showing that regional transformation is integral to transmission (Pillai). Mishra, Singh, and Pandey survey AI applications to the epic, including named-entity recognition, sentiment analysis, social networks, and stylometry, principally treating AI as an analytical instrument (Mishra et al.).

Indian cultural representation requires locally grounded evaluation. Bhatt et al. show why frameworks centred on Western social categories inadequately address Indian caste, religious, and regional identities (Bhatt et al.). Chhikara, Kumar, and Chakraborty distinguish dominant Great Traditions from localized Little Traditions and find that LLMs may explain cultural concepts without applying them consistently (Chhikara et al.). Together, this scholarship leaves scope for direct comparison of human and AI reconstructions of the same epic situations. The present study addresses that gap through fidelity, cultural context, characterization, and literary devices, while recognizing that similar textual departures may have different aesthetic or generative origins.

3 Methodology

The study uses comparative qualitative textual analysis supported by thematic coding. Human material comprises selected narratives from Wattpad works *DRUPATNANDHAN* and *Crazy Cousins* by B_R_U_T_U_S and *YAMIRNA* by Blackmermaid44. Each case includes a human passage labelled Human and three ChatGPT-generated variants labelled AI-1, AI-2, and AI-3. The four designs represent martial narration, imagined interiority, physical description, and deliberately inverted comic reconstruction. Prompts are formulated using GPT-5.6 Luna and specify comparable scenarios and word targets. Table 1 summarizes their progression; the variants are different prompt conditions rather than identical repeated generations.

Table 1: Narrative designs and prompt progression

Case and target words	AI-1	AI-2	AI-3
Krishna (466)	Physical description	Retain setting; emphasize characterization and cultural symbolism	Describe eyes, hair, clothes, and ornaments through life events, nature, and divinity
Arjuna and Karna (2,201)	Final duel	Include weapons and key incidents	Incorporate later retellings
Subhadra (482)	Monologue on patriarchy	Include her brothers	Add modern perspectives and animal imagery
Indraprastha (2,494)	Invitation, confinement, and ensuing chaos	Add fight, pond, Bhishma, and Ashwatthama episodes	Add modern humour and Indian cultural references

The Indraprastha scenario establishes Karna's revealed kinship and the Pandavas' attempt to reclaim him by inviting and confining the Kauravas, Karna, and Ashwatthama. Bhishma arrives with an alarmed Bhanumati. The fuller prompts add Bhima and Duryodhana's fight, their fall into a palace pond with Bhishma, elder discipline, and Ashwatthama's collision with the group. This plot deliberately departs from the epic and tests alternative characterization and comic invention.

Five analytical dimensions organize the comparison. Mythological fidelity distinguishes preservation of traditional elements, modification, expansion, omission of expected information, modernization through contemporary frameworks, and invention without clear traditional support. Mythological elements comprise relationships, ritual references, divine intervention, and cultural detail. Cultural representation examines dharma, karma, caste, kinship, honour, guru-disciple relations, kingship, gender, sacrifice, divine authority, family obligation, and hierarchy. Characterization concerns conflict, psychological complexity, moral ambiguity, agency, motivation, emotional depth, relationships, and heroic or villainous framing. Literary creativity examines metaphor, imagery, symbolism, simile,

irony, foreshadowing, dialogue, voice, focalization, description, temporal organization, interior monologue, repetition, and intertextuality.

Texts are organized into analytical units, coded by these categories, and annotated for literary devices. Comparison identifies recurrent similarities and differences, after which close reading interprets their cultural and aesthetic significance. This procedure produces qualitative findings rather than numerical rankings of creativity.

4 Analysis and Results

4.1 Mythological Fidelity

All four case designs retain recognizable epic identities, although the kinds of transformation differ. Table 2 condenses the recorded fidelity classifications. The subsequent case readings integrate the study's analyses of mythological elements, cultural representation, characterization, and literary creativity.

Table 2: Mythological fidelity coding

Case	Human	AI-1	AI-2	AI-3
Arjuna and Karna	P M E	P Mz	P Mz	P Mz
Subhadra	P M E Mz	P M E Mz	P M E Mz	P M E Mz
Krishna	P M E Mz	P	P	P
Indraprastha	P M E O Mz I	P M I	P M E I	P M E I

P = preserved; M = modified; E = expanded; O = omitted; Mz = modernized; I = invented. Listed categories are coded Yes; unlisted categories are coded No. These source-fidelity classifications are distinct from the descriptive and psychological developments examined below.

4.2 The Arjuna and Karna Duel

Both human and AI versions preserve the central battlefield rivalry, Krishna's protection of Arjuna, Karna's curses, supernatural weapons, the trapped chariot wheel, and the tragic relationship between honour and death. The human narrative emphasizes immediate battlefield relationships, celestial spectators, Surya, Bhudevi, and spectacular divine action. AI expands explanatory context through Duryodhana, Kunti, Radha and Adhiratha, Parashurama, Abhimanyu, and Karna's concealed Pandava identity. Weapon references in the human passage include Divyastra, Brahmastra, Nagastra, and Rudrastra; AI more systematically relates astras to mantras, guru-transmitted knowledge, elemental forces, and Añjalika. These differences make human narration more mythically spectacular and AI narration more genealogical and explanatory.

Culturally, the human text centres kshatriya ethics, Karna's stigmatized Suta identity, heroic reputation, sacrifice, and tragic brotherhood. Karna's refusal of unfair assistance foregrounds personal honour, while Arjuna's insecurity and reliance on Krishna destabilize

conventional heroic hierarchy. Krishna admires Karna while enabling Arjuna's victory. AI develops these conflicts into debates over combat rules and accumulated responsibility, birth and merit, and biological kinship versus chosen loyalty. Karna becomes simultaneously generous, proud, wounded, loyal, and complicit in injustice; Arjuna becomes an ethically burdened victor; and Krishna emerges as protector, strategist, and morally difficult agent of destiny. Thus, AI's psychological explanation broadens rather than removes the episode's ambiguity.

Both employ solar symbolism, elemental similes, battlefield imagery, shifting focalization, foreshadowing, and an omniscient voice. In the human narrative, Karna's sun imagery, the sinking wheel, celestial interventions, and Krishna's tears produce an emotionally charged tragic tableau. AI explicitly interprets the wheel as fate, lost armour as vulnerability, and the two bows as hidden brotherhood. Flashbacks and anticipation make the duel a convergence of Karna's biography, while dialogue increasingly becomes ethical debate. Human narration incorporates particular popular retelling motifs: Krishna praising Karna for moving Arjuna's chariot three feet despite Arjuna moving Karna's ten feet, Rudrastra use, and ordinary arrows neutralizing a Brahmastra. These are features of the analysed retelling, whose canonical status is distinct from their narrative presence. Although AI-3 requests later retellings, the comparison finds more limited use of these specific transmitted variants. AI instead tends toward philosophical closure and retrospective grief.

4.3 Subhadra's Monologue on Patriarchy

This case imagines Subhadra's interiority beyond her identities as Krishna and Balarama's sister, Arjuna's wife, and Abhimanyu's mother. Both human and AI versions modernize the epic through consent, autonomy, freedom, and female voice. The human text questions royal marriage, father-to-husband dependence, and the contradiction between privilege and confinement. Ornamentation, bridal transition, dynastic honour, and palace life expose patriarchal control over women across royal and ordinary households. Dharma becomes gendered obligation, while caste and karma remain marginal. Divine intervention is absent: mythological figures operate as family and cultural actors.

AI retains this critique but broadens its emotional and relational setting through Arjuna, Abhimanyu, Vasudeva, Duryodhana, Draupadi, Gandhari, and Kunti. Marriage alliances, prayer, lamps, conches, warrior culture, and maternal grief connect personal experience with a wider epic world. Subhadra's affection for her brothers coexists with criticism of their authority: Balarama can be loving and patriarchal, while Krishna's support

does not fully dissolve male dominance. Protection becomes potentially controlling, and duty without consent becomes an ethical problem. AI therefore gives the monologue stronger relational ambivalence, extending resistance into self-naming, choosing, speaking, and reclaiming personhood.

The human passage uses a confined murti, ornaments as burdens, patriarchy as a devouring beast, and mountains, oceans, clouds, and animal comparisons to articulate aspiration and restraint. Elephants, penguins, dolphins, and tigresses supply varied figurative models; the tigress particularly signifies autonomy. Rhetorical questions, internal focalization, and repetition create a manifesto-like rhythm within a third-person voice. AI employs more recurrent symbolic patterns involving windows, cages, mirrors, names, seas, and lamps. These connect confinement with self-recognition and organize movement from silence toward agency. AI-3 shifts to first-person autobiography, granting Subhadra direct narrative authority. Human creativity is more varied in figurative associations; AI develops a more integrated reflective structure incorporating childhood, marriage, motherhood, and women's suffering beneath heroic history.

4.4 Krishna's Physical Description

The human portrayal constructs Krishna through devotional material detail and cosmic association. Its catalogue includes makara kundala, Vaijayanti mala, Kaustubha, Srivatsa, keyura, kankana, mekhala, nupura, pitambara, tilak, crown, and peacock feather. References to Brahmanda, Kshira Sagara, Navaratna, amrita, Shakti, sacred geography, and planetary symbolism connect the body with creation and divine kingship. Epithets such as Dwarkadhish, Shyamasundara, Kaliya-mardana, and Hrishikesha deepen devotional specificity. Recollections of Govardhana, Kaliya, Trinavarta, Kuvalayapeeda, and the Mathura bow turn a static portrait into an account of divine agency.

AI preserves rain-cloud complexion, lotus eyes, yellow garments, Kaustubha, floral garlands, gold ornaments, and the peacock feather, but selects fewer traditional terms. It extends physical description through Devaki and Vasudeva, Arjuna, the Pandavas, pastoral communities, statesmanship, diplomacy, and philosophical instruction. Cultural emphasis consequently shifts from ornamented sovereignty toward dharma, ethical leadership, and relational divinity. The Krishna-Arjuna guru-disciple relationship becomes prominent, while the charioteer role associates power with service and voluntary self-limitation. Divine authority remains central in both versions; caste, gender, and direct internal conflict remain comparatively weak.

Human characterization combines tenderness, playfulness, majesty, and cosmic self-containment. Its imagery transforms eyes into the universe, hair into the cosmic ocean, and feet into the support of worlds. A reverential, hyperbolic voice, cumulative description, devotional focalization, and chant-like repetition produce an iconic deity. AI presents a similarly stable figure whose complexity arises from compassion and severity, political engagement and detachment, humanity and transcendence. More selective metaphors emphasize radiance, stillness, mystery, and wisdom, while a compressed biography links childhood, Dwaraka, and Kurukshetra. The paradox of supreme divinity serving as charioteer supplies a major symbolic tension. Neither version relies on interior monologue or direct dialogue. Human narration offers denser religious intertextuality; AI integrates appearance with the roles of teacher, friend, strategist, and ethical guide.

4.5 The Humorous Indraprastha Recreation

The invented encounter preserves a recognizable Kuru ensemble while transforming epic hostility into chaotic family interaction. Both versions include Pandavas, Kauravas, Karna, Draupadi, Bhanumati, Bhishma, and Ashwatthama; supernatural intervention is absent. Human narration maintains cultural specificity through Indraprastha, Hastinapura, Maya Sabha, Aryavarta, royal protocol, mace warfare, and epithets including Dharmaraj, Vayuputra, Yajnaseni, Pitamaha, and Angaraj. Dharma, honour, kingship, and hierarchy become comic targets as princes and elders share physical humiliation. Draupadi and Bhanumati actively shape events rather than remaining passive dynastic figures.

Human characterization freely reimagines Bhishma as a strict grandfather, Yudhishthira as anxiously moral yet complicit in deception, Bhima as hungry and childish, Draupadi as mischievous and strategic, Nakula as absorbed in beauty and mirrors, and Sahadeva as an obsessive scholar. Duryodhana becomes a cousin and husband whose dignity repeatedly collapses. Modern references to magnets, baking, wrestling rings, referees, sports commentary, flight landings, schools, principals, Archimedes' principle, surface tension, and viscosity create sustained anachronistic humour. Animal caricatures and allusions to Matsya, Narasimha, Yamaloka, and the Himalayas combine contemporary parody with mythological familiarity. Intrusive narration, colloquial banter, interruptions, imagined punishments, running jokes, and the pond episode give the passage the rhythm of ensemble stage comedy.

AI retains slapstick and playful dialogue but organizes the plot more strongly around Karna's divided belonging. Hidden biological brotherhood competes with loyalty to Duryodhana and foster parents Radha and Adhiratha. Duryodhana acquires vulnerability

through fear of losing his friend, while the Pandavas' coercive reunion complicates their righteous status. Draupadi remains practically perceptive; Bhishma more often retains dignified authority, limiting the informal grandfatherly reinvention found in the human version. Locked chambers become symbols of forced reconciliation, and bureaucratic or diplomatic humour adds controlled modernization. Comic exchanges increasingly carry reflections on caste, identity, loyalty, and chosen family. AI broadens psychological motivation and softens heroic-villainous binaries, yet employs fewer eclectic contemporary references and less exaggerated language. The strongest divergence concerns sustained comic invention: human narration pursues cultural parody, while AI repeatedly moves toward emotional explanation and family reconciliation.

5 Discussion and Implications

The comparison distinguishes recognizable mythology from the literary means of reconstructing it. Both human and AI texts preserve epic names, central relationships, culturally significant settings, and familiar symbols. AI frequently contextualizes these elements through biography, ethical interpretation, and psychological motivation. Human texts more often accumulate devotional terminology, particular retelling traditions, culturally embedded imagery, and unconventional comic associations. Cultural specificity therefore depends on how references function within narrative form, beyond their mere presence.

Modernization also varies by genre. In Subhadra's monologue, AI incorporates consent, agency, and autonomy effectively, developing reflective kinship and emotional conflict. In the comic scenario, it introduces some contemporary idioms but sustains less extensive anachronistic parody. Human humour more freely disrupts established characterization and juxtaposes epic grandeur with familiar modern institutions. AI's coherence and explanatory emphasis can consequently coexist with reduced stylistic risk. These findings describe the selected narratives rather than a universal hierarchy between human and computational creativity.

Fidelity must likewise be distinguished from artistic achievement. Retaining epic relationships can support effective reconstruction, while deliberate modification may serve feminist, devotional, tragic, or comic interpretation. Invention in the Indraprastha case is part of the scenario's design. Its value depends on the integration of cultural continuity, character consistency, and literary effect. Similar departures in AI outputs require contextual reading because recombination, generalization, source confusion, and intentional prompting may produce superficially comparable results.

For digital humanities, the study provides a framework linking thematic coding with close reading. It extends adaptation studies by treating generative narration as another site of epic transmission and shows why assessment should include symbolism, focalization, emotional complexity, humour, and cultural meaning alongside linguistic fluency. Its contribution is an interpretive account of how the epic's inherited structures are preserved and transformed within computational storytelling.

6 Limitations and Future Research

The corpus contains four case designs and therefore cannot represent the full narrative or interpretive range of the *Mahabharata*. Dependence on one generative system restricts comparison across models, while changes in prompt wording and specificity affect the resulting style and content. AI-1, AI-2, and AI-3 are differently prompted conditions, which limits attribution of their differences to model behaviour alone. The epic's multiple textual, regional, oral, and popular traditions also complicate evaluation against a single authoritative source. These constraints limit generalization of the qualitative findings.

Future research can compare multiple language models and larger corpora, distinguish textual traditions more explicitly, and examine caste, gender, and emotional representation in greater depth. Reader-response studies can test how audiences perceive cultural credibility, characterization, and creativity in human and AI retellings.

7 Conclusion

In this corpus, AI reconstructs recognizable *Mahabharata* identities, cultural structures, and literary conventions while frequently extending them through philosophical reflection and psychological explanation. Its strongest modernization appears in feminist interiority. Human narratives employ more diverse devotional symbolism, specific transmitted retelling motifs, and sustained contemporary humour, particularly when reimagining characters in an invented situation. Mythological reconstruction therefore requires attention to source, culture, characterization, and literary creativity together. Generative AI contributes a prompted mechanism of cultural recombination to the epic's adaptation history. The *Mahabharata* offers a productive test case for examining how inherited narratives survive, change, and acquire meaning within computational environments.

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