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Retelling Kurukshetra Across Asia: A Digital Comparative Study of the Sanskrit Mahabharata, Tamil Villiparatam, and Malay Hikayat Pandawa Lima

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Abstract

The Kurukshetra war is the narrative and ethical centre of the *Mahabharata*, yet its regional retellings do not reproduce the war as a fixed sequence. This study compares the five war books, the Bhishma, Drona, Karna, Shalya, and Saupthika parvas, in three influential textual traditions: the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*, the Tamil *Villiparatam*, and the Malay *Hikayat Pandawa Lima*. Using qualitative comparative textual analysis, episodes were aligned across the three corpora and coded as preservation, modification, addition, reduction, or cultural localization. The comparison identifies a stable narrative architecture, including the succession of commanders, the deaths of Abhimanyu, Drona, Karna, and Shalya, the mace duel between Bhima and Duryodhana, and Asvatthama's nocturnal attack. Around this common structure, however, each tradition reorganizes the ethical and emotional meaning of war. The Sanskrit text provides the fullest tactical, genealogical, and dharmic elaboration. The Tamil version condenses many combat sequences while heightening devotional mediation, guru authority, divine grace, and scenes of affective recognition. The Malay version is the most expansive and transformative, incorporating Javanese-derived names, named weapons and battle formations, supernatural interventions, courtly mourning, family-centred pathos, and extended dialogue. Karna, Shalya, and the bereaved women receive especially pronounced humanization in the Malay narrative. These differences show that regional epic transmission operates through selective fidelity rather than literal equivalence. The Kurukshetra narrative remains recognizable because major plot functions are preserved, while local literary aesthetics determine which actions are expanded, moralized, ritualized, or omitted. The study contributes to comparative epic studies by placing Sanskrit, Tamil, and Malay materials within one analytical frame and by demonstrating how translation, adaptation, and localization jointly sustain the transregional life of the *Mahabharata*.

Keywords: Kurukshetra war; Mahabharata; Villiparatam; Hikayat Pandawa Lima; comparative literature; epic adaptation; localization

1. Introduction

The *Mahabharata* is not a single story moving unchanged through time. It is a vast, stratified textual tradition that has circulated through manuscripts, performance, commentary, translation, devotional recitation, visual culture, and regional literary rewriting. The Sanskrit epic provides the most widely recognized narrative frame, but the history of the work cannot be reduced to the history of one language or one critical edition. Across South and Southeast Asia, the epic has repeatedly been made intelligible within new religious, political, and aesthetic environments. Such retellings preserve central characters and conflicts while altering sequence, emphasis, motivation, imagery, and emotional texture. The result is best understood as a multilingual epic tradition rather than a single text surrounded by secondary copies (Brockington, 1998; Hegarty, 2012; Hildebrandt, 2001).

Within that tradition, the eighteen-day Kurukshetra war occupies a distinctive position. The war converts the preceding dispute over succession, kinship, sovereignty, humiliation, and dharma into irreversible action. It also tests the moral claims articulated throughout the epic. The conflict is presented as necessary after the failure of diplomacy, yet its conduct repeatedly violates the principles by which a righteous war might be justified. Warriors attack collectively, exploit curses, kill disarmed opponents, strike below the permitted line, fight after sunset, and finally murder sleeping enemies. The war therefore cannot be read as a simple victory of good over evil. It is a narrative laboratory in which duty, loyalty, revenge, divine strategy, kinship, and political necessity collide (Kosuta, 2020; Thapar, 2009).

The war narrative is distributed principally across five books. The Bhishma Parva covers the opening ten days and includes Arjuna's crisis, Krishna's instruction, the early battle formations, and Bhishma's fall. The Drona Parva narrates days eleven to fifteen, including the entrapment and death of Abhimanyu, Arjuna's vow

against Jayadratha, the death of Ghatotkacha, and Drona's killing. The Karna Parva presents the sixteenth and seventeenth days, culminating in the deaths of Duhsasana and Karna. The Shalya Parva recounts the final day, the collapse of the Kaurava army, and the mace duel between Bhima and Duryodhana. The Sauptika Parva then moves beyond formal battle into the night raid led by Asvatthama. Read together, these books create a progressive erosion of the codes that ostensibly regulate combat.

This study compares that sequence in three linguistic traditions. The first is the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*, represented by the critical-edition tradition associated with the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute. The critical edition remains an indispensable scholarly baseline, but it should not be mistaken for a recoverable, unitary original. It is an editorial reconstruction produced from a large and internally varied manuscript archive (Sukthankar, 1933, 1959). The second is the Tamil *Villiparatam*, attributed to Villiputturar and conventionally dated to the late medieval period. The work relocates the epic within Tamil poetic and devotional culture, often condensing extensive martial catalogues while amplifying divine mediation and emotional recognition (Jesudasan & Jesudasan, 1961; Pillai, 2024; Varatarasan, 1972). The third is the Malay *Hikayat Pandawa Lima*, preserved within the hikayat tradition and shaped strongly by Javanese intermediaries. Its vocabulary, characterization, supernatural motifs, and narrative pacing reveal a process of adaptation that is neither direct translation from Sanskrit nor simple imitation of a single Javanese source (Brakel, 1980; Ismail Hamid, 1987; Khalid Hussain, 1992; Ming, 2018; Singaravelu, 1990).

The three texts occupy different positions within the cultural geography of the epic. Sanskrit supplies a pan-Indic prestige language and an extensive scholastic archive. Tamil represents a major South Indian literary culture with its own long-standing poetics, devotional traditions, and regional understandings of divine agency. Malay represents a Southeast Asian courtly and manuscript culture in which Indic stories were reframed through Javanese transmission, local performance conventions, Islamic-era literary practices, and the social world of the Malay court. Comparing the versions therefore allows the same narrative events to be observed under three distinct regimes of value.

Existing research has usually examined one tradition in isolation or compared Sanskrit with one regional version. Scholarship on the Sanskrit epic is extensive, while work on Tamil and Malay materials remains less visible internationally. Studies of Malay epic transmission often emphasize Indic influence, Javanese mediation, or the place of hikayat within classical Malay literature. Tamil scholarship has documented the literary history of the *Villiparatam* and its devotional characterization of Krishna, but detailed episode-by-episode comparison with both Sanskrit and Malay versions is rare. Samuel's earlier thesis established a substantial comparative inventory across the three traditions, yet that material has not been fully recast in a concise journal-study form that separates evidence from interpretation and situates the findings within contemporary adaptation scholarship (Samuel, 2001).

The present study addresses this gap through one research question: **How are the major episodes of the Kurukshetra war preserved, modified, expanded, reduced, and localized in the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* with Tamil *Villiparatam*, and Malay *Hikayat Pandawa Lima*?** The objective is not to rank the texts according to fidelity to an assumed original. Instead, the comparison examines how narrative stability coexists with cultural transformation. This approach treats additions and omissions as meaningful literary decisions. A shortened battle catalogue may indicate a preference for narrative momentum rather than textual deficiency. A new mourning scene may reposition war from heroic spectacle to family catastrophe. A supernatural weapon may translate martial power into an aesthetic familiar to another performance tradition. Each deviation therefore offers evidence about the receiving culture's narrative priorities.

The study makes three contributions. First, it brings Sanskrit, Tamil, and Malay versions into a single comparative framework centred on the five war parvas. Second, it distinguishes between preserved plot functions and localized modes of narration, allowing fidelity and transformation to be analysed together. Third, it demonstrates that the Malay and Tamil versions do not merely condense or exaggerate the Sanskrit account in random ways. Their choices form coherent patterns. The Tamil text generally condenses military detail while intensifying devotional and ethical mediation. The Malay text expands domestic grief, courtly ritual, named formations, supernatural combat, and dialogue, often producing a more emotionally demonstrative account. These patterns illuminate how large-scale epics survive precisely because they can be re-authored without becoming unrecognizable.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Mahabharata as a Layered and Transregional Epic

Modern scholarship has long rejected the assumption that the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* emerged as a single, homogeneous composition. Philological work associated with the critical edition established the text as the outcome of prolonged accretion, redaction, and regional manuscript transmission. Sukthankar (1933, 1959) developed the editorial principles that made large-scale comparison of manuscript recensions possible, while Winternitz (1972), Vaidya (1966), Yardi (1986), and Brockington (1998) examined the epic's growth, structure, and textual layers from different methodological perspectives. Although their reconstructions

differ, they converge on one important point: textual plurality is internal to the Sanskrit tradition itself. Regional retellings should therefore not be approached as deviations from an entirely stable source.

The critical edition remains necessary because it supplies a controlled comparative baseline, particularly for narrative sequence and the distribution of episodes among parvas. At the same time, the editorial removal of passages judged secondary does not erase the cultural significance of those passages within living recensions. González-Reimann (2011) shows that even the epic's ending reflects complex compositional and interpretive choices. Hegarty (2012) similarly emphasizes that the *Mahabharata* constructs public memory, place, and religious imagination through recurrent acts of narration. These insights support an approach in which textual difference is evidence of historical reception rather than corruption.

The transregional circulation of Indian epics also requires attention to the institutions that carried stories across language boundaries. Courts, temples, itinerant performers, scribal communities, devotional networks, and trade routes all participated in transmission. The process did not produce literal replicas. Narratives entered pre-existing systems of genre and authority, where they were reorganized according to local expectations. Pollock (2003) describes South and Southeast Asian literary cultures as historically connected but linguistically differentiated fields. Damrosch (2003) likewise argues that a work becomes part of world literature through transformations that occur when it moves beyond its culture of origin. The *Mahabharata* provides an especially powerful case because its scale and internal multiplicity invite selective retelling.

2.2 Adaptation, Appropriation, and Selective Fidelity

Adaptation theory offers a vocabulary for describing the relation among the three texts without reducing the later versions to inadequate translations. Hutcheon (2013) defines adaptation as both a product and a process of reinterpretation, while Sanders (2016) distinguishes adaptation from appropriation but recognizes that both involve creative recontextualization. These models are useful for epic transmission because regional authors often retain the recognizable narrative architecture of a source while changing its mode of address. The new work may be more concise, more performative, more devotional, or more closely aligned with local courtly conventions.

Selective fidelity is especially important in oral and performance-oriented traditions. A retelling can remain faithful to the identity of an episode even when the details of weapons, speeches, kinship relations, or ritual actions change. Abhimanyu must enter a dangerous formation and die unjustly for the larger narrative to retain its function, but the exact manner of his death can vary. Karna must fall after a sequence of disadvantages and moral ambiguities, yet one tradition may explain the death through curses, another through the donation of accumulated merit, and another through refusal to submit. The plot function remains, while the theological and ethical explanation changes.

This distinction also prevents the automatic privileging of length. Expansion does not necessarily indicate greater authenticity, and condensation does not necessarily indicate loss. An abbreviated series of battles may redirect attention toward central heroes. An expanded lament may make visible the social cost of war. A newly named weapon or formation may support mnemonic performance or connect the epic to a local martial imagination. Comparative analysis must therefore ask what each alteration accomplishes within the receiving text.

2.3 Tamil Mahabharata Traditions and the Villiparatam

Tamil engagement with the *Mahabharata* is deep and heterogeneous. The epic appears through allusion, devotional poetry, dramatic performance, prose retellings, and large-scale poetic reworkings. Histories of Tamil literature identify the *Villiparatam* as one of the most important Tamil versions because it combines narrative accessibility with established Tamil poetic conventions (Jesudasan & Jesudasan, 1961; Varatarasan, 1972). The work is conventionally associated with Villiputtur and with the late medieval religious and courtly environment of South India.

A defining characteristic of the *Villiparatam* is the intensification of divine presence. Valliammal (1989) argues that Krishna's role is amplified, and recent work by Pillai (2024) places Tamil retellings within a wider history of devotional beginnings and conclusions. The Tamil version repeatedly allows divine or sage figures to intervene at moments of crisis. Arjuna's access to Shiva, the appearance of rishis before Drona, Krishna's testing or protection of heroes, and Vyasa's restraint of Asvatthama make the war legible through bhakti and guru-mediated authority. Such scenes do not eliminate martial agency, but they frame it within a devotional hierarchy.

The Tamil version also demonstrates a strong capacity for condensation. Long daily accounts of minor duels may be reduced to brief transitions, while selected moments receive poetic elaboration. This pattern reflects more than economy. Tamil literary traditions often intensify a scene through concentrated affect, divine imagery, and the moral visibility of a decisive action. The deaths of Abhimanyu and Karna, the conduct of Drona, and Yudhishthira's final offer of peace are therefore especially revealing sites for comparison.

2.4 The Mahabharata in Malay and Javanese Literary Networks

The Malay reception of the *Mahabharata* developed through a network of Sanskrit, Old Javanese, Javanese, and Malay forms rather than through a single act of translation. Brakel (1980) and Singaravelu (1990) identify the importance of Javanese mediation, while Ismail Hamid (1987) places Indian-derived narratives within the broader development of classical Malay literature. The *Hikayat Pandawa Lima*, edited by Khalid Hussain (1992), preserves the Pandava-Kaurava conflict but adopts names, motifs, formulaic repetitions, and supernatural devices associated with the Javanese-Malay narrative world.

Ming (2018) describes the reworking of Indian epics by Javanese and Malay authors as an active process of cultural transformation. Characters may acquire different moral accents, local clown-servant or attendant figures may enter the narrative, and courtly protocols may shape scenes of reception, mourning, and reconciliation. Weapons and battle formations are frequently given memorable names. Magical objects, prophetic dreams, divine flowers, spirits, and transformations coexist with the heroic plot. These features are not ornamental additions alone. They reorganize causality by making signs, omens, and supernatural capacities central to the unfolding of war.

The Malay text's concern with family grief is equally significant. Parents retrieve bodies, wives receive dreams, queens seek permission to die with husbands, and funeral rituals receive sustained attention. Such scenes convert battlefield loss into a courtly and domestic crisis. Winstedt (1969) and Braginsky (2004) note the importance of courtly ethics, emotion, and exemplary conduct in traditional Malay literature. Within *Hikayat Pandawa Lima*, these values shape the representation of Mangaspati, Karna, Shalya, Satyawati, and other figures whose suffering is less prominent in the Sanskrit baseline.

2.5 War, Dharma, Character, and Moral Ambiguity

The Kurukshetra war has generated extensive debate because the epic simultaneously justifies and destabilizes violence. Krishna's instruction to Arjuna establishes a framework of duty without attachment, yet subsequent events expose the difficulty of maintaining righteous conduct in actual combat. Thapar (2009) emphasizes the war's historical and moral complexity, and Kosuta (2020) analyses the relation among warrior ethics, ritual, and conduct in battle. The progressive abandonment of rules is not incidental. It is part of the epic's critique of political necessity and revenge.

Regional retellings can sharpen or redirect this ambiguity. Karna is an important example. The Sanskrit tradition presents him through generosity, resentment, social exclusion, loyalty to Duryodhana, curses, and fatal misrecognition. Dhillon (2025) interprets Karna's identity conflict through caste and the need for social recognition. The Malay text further humanizes him by making him compassionate toward Abhimanyu and emotionally responsive to omens and his wife's fear. The Tamil text frames his death through the exhaustion of merit and the emotional recognition of Kunti. Each version preserves Karna's tragic position but supplies a different explanation of why his nobility cannot save him.

The same pattern applies to women and mourning. The Sanskrit war books contain grief, but the Malay and Tamil versions often relocate emotion to the centre of selected episodes. Kunti's embrace of Karna in the Tamil account, Satyawati's death on Shalya's pyre in the Malay account, and the accusation directed at Krishna after the night massacre transform the war into a conflict over memory, kinship, and responsibility. Comparative study must therefore analyse not only who kills whom, but also who is permitted to grieve, interpret, forgive, or condemn.

3. Method

The study employed qualitative comparative textual analysis. The design combines close reading with structured episode alignment. Rather than treating one text as a complete original and the others as derivative copies, the Sanskrit version was used as a comparative baseline because it offers the most extensive war narrative and the most established critical apparatus. The Tamil and Malay texts were then examined as autonomous literary works whose additions, reductions, and changes possess interpretive significance.

The corpus comprised the war narratives in the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* associated with the critical-edition tradition (Sukthankar, 1933), the Tamil *Villiparatam* edited by Manikkam (Villiputtur, 1990), and the Malay *Hikayat Pandawa Lima* edited by Khalid Hussain (1992) as displayed table 1.

Table 1. Comparative corpus and analytical rationale

Tradition	Primary text	Comparative function	Dominant features examined
Sanskrit	Mahabharata, critical-edition tradition	Detailed baseline for narrative sequence	Daily battle chronology, dharma, genealogy, weapons, tactical elaboration
Tamil	Villiparatam	Regional poetic and devotional adaptation	Condensation, bhakti mediation, guru authority, affective intensification

Malay	Hikayat Pandawa Lima	Southeast Asian courtly adaptation through Javanese networks	Named formations, supernatural combat, extended dialogue, courtly mourning, family pathos
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The episode inventory and cross-text correspondences documented in Samuel (2001) were revisited and reorganized for the present analysis. Secondary scholarship was used to contextualize textual history, Tamil devotional poetics, Malay-Javanese transmission, adaptation, and the ethics of war. The Scopus export supplied with the manuscript was reviewed for relevant recent studies, particularly work on war ethics and Karna's identity (Dhillon, 2025; Kosuta, 2020).

The unit of analysis was the narrative episode. An episode was defined as a coherent action or encounter that could be identified across versions, such as Yudhisthira seeking blessings before battle, Abhimanyu entering the military formation, Krishna obscuring the sun before Jayadratha's death, Karna's chariot becoming disabled, or Asvatthama attacking the sleeping camp. Very short combat notices were also treated as episodes when they involved named opponents or had a clear function in the daily sequence.

Each episode was coded in five categories as displayed in table 2. Preservation referred to a plot event present in all three versions with the same essential function. Modification referred to an event shared across versions but altered in agency, weapon, sequence, motivation, or outcome. Addition identified material found in one regional version but absent from the other two. Reduction referred to material substantially abbreviated or omitted relative to the Sanskrit baseline. Cultural localization identified an addition or modification that clearly aligned the episode with Tamil devotional aesthetics, Malay courtly practice, Javanese-derived narrative conventions, local supernatural imagery, or performance-oriented repetition. These categories could overlap. A scene could be both an addition and a cultural localization, while a preserved event could contain a modified mechanism.

The analytical procedure involved four stages. First, the five parvas were divided into chronological and thematic episode blocks. Second, corresponding events were aligned across the three texts. Third, similarities and differences were recorded in an episode matrix. Fourth, recurrent patterns were interpreted at the level of each parva and across the whole war narrative. Descriptive counts were used only to indicate the relative density of shared events and additions. They were not treated as inferential statistics, and no claim of mathematical precision is made for categories that depend on the boundaries assigned to complex episodes. The analysis prioritized transparent comparison. Version-specific names were retained where they were important to the local form of an episode, while standard Sanskrit spellings were used for widely recognized characters. Variants such as Bhishma/Bisma, Shalya/Salya, and Asvatthama/Ashwatthama reflect linguistic traditions rather than different characters. **The abbreviations SM, VP, and HPL refer respectively to the Sanskrit Mahabharata, Tamil Villiparatam, and Malay Hikayat Pandawa Lima.**

Because the materials are published literary texts and the study did not involve human participants, ethical approval was not required. Interpretive limitations remain, however. The comparison uses published editions rather than the full manuscript history of each tradition, and it depends on translations and editorial standardization where direct linguistic equivalence is impossible. The findings should therefore be understood as a comparison of selected textual forms, not as a definitive account of every Sanskrit, Tamil, or Malay recension.

Table 2. Coding categories used in the comparative analysis

Category	Operational definition	Illustrative example
Preservation	The same essential plot function appears in all three versions.	Bhishma falls after Sikhandi and Arjuna confront him.
Modification	A shared event changes in agent, sequence, weapon, motive, or outcome.	Abhimanyu dies by different mechanisms in SM, VP, and HPL.
Addition	An episode appears in one regional text but not in the other two.	HPL narrates Satyawati's search for Shalya and death on his pyre.
Reduction	An event in the Sanskrit baseline is omitted or sharply condensed.	VP abbreviates several daily battle catalogues.
Localization	A change aligns the narrative with regional religious, courtly, performative, or supernatural conventions.	VP takes Arjuna to Shiva; HPL names magical weapons and formations.

4. Results

4.1 Overview of Comparative Patterns

The comparison identified a substantial common narrative core across the five war parvas. Eighty-eight episode-level similarities were recorded in the source comparison: 16 in the Bhishma Parva, 36 in the Drona Parva, 17 in the Karna Parva, 15 in the Shalya Parva, and 4 in the Sauptika Parva as shown in table 3. The Drona Parva is therefore the most stable section across the three traditions. Its major narrative functions,

Abhimanyu's death, Arjuna's vow, Jayadratha's killing, the night battle, Ghatotkacha's death, Drona's deception, and Asvatthama's retaliation, remain highly recognizable.

The regional texts differ most clearly in their patterns of addition. HPL contains 68 identified additions across the five parvas, while VP contains 31. The distribution is systematic rather than random. HPL expands mourning, domestic consultation, omens, named chariots, magical weapons, battle formations, and interpersonal dialogue. VP adds fewer episodes, but its additions often involve Shiva, Krishna, sages, gurus, vows, or moral restraint. The difference is qualitative as well as quantitative.

Reductions are concentrated in daily battle catalogues and encounters involving minor warriors. Both regional versions shorten repetitive lists of duels, but VP does so more consistently as a strategy of compression. HPL also omits many Sanskrit episodes, yet it compensates through expansion elsewhere. Consequently, HPL is not simply longer or shorter than the Sanskrit baseline. It redistributes narrative space from exhaustive battle reporting to dramatic, emotional, and supernatural episodes.

Table 3. Stable episode counts and regional additions by parva

Parva	War period	Shared episodes across all versions	HPL additions	VP additions
Bhishma	Days 1 to 10	16	14	11
Drona	Days 11 to 15	36	21	11
Karna	Days 16 to 17	17	12	6
Shalya	Day 18	15	13	1
Sauptika	Night after Day 18	4	8	2
Total	Full war sequence	88	68	31

4.2 Bhishma Parva: Moral Authorization and the Fall of the Grandfather

The Bhishma Parva establishes the ethical and emotional grammar of the war. In all three versions, the failure of Krishna's peace mission makes battle unavoidable, Arjuna hesitates before fighting his kin, and Krishna provides the spiritual justification for action. The episode is preserved because it converts a dynastic conflict into a moral problem. Arjuna's reluctance is not cowardice. It arises from the contradiction between warrior duty and responsibility toward teachers, elders, cousins, and friends. Krishna's response authorizes action, but it does not remove the emotional cost of killing relatives (Khalid Hussain, 1992; Samuel, 2001; Sukthankar, 1933; Villiputturar, 1990).

The three texts also preserve Yudhishthira's movement toward the Kaurava camp to seek permission or blessings from Bhishma, Drona, and Shalya. The act confirms that kinship and pedagogical obligation remain active even at the threshold of war. The battlefield is not a space outside social order. It is the place where social bonds become lethal. Krishna's role as Arjuna's charioteer similarly survives in every version and retains its symbolic inversion of hierarchy, since the divine figure accepts a position of service while directing the moral and strategic course of the conflict.

The opening deaths of Uttara and Sveta form another stable cluster. Shalya kills Uttara, Sveta seeks revenge, Bhishma and Drona assist the Kaurava response, and Sveta eventually falls. Yet the mechanism of the death changes. In SM and HPL, a heavenly voice directs or emboldens Bhishma, while VP omits the intervention. HPL names Bhishma's weapon *Bursta*, whereas the Sanskrit account describes the fatal arrow more conventionally. The naming of the weapon in HPL converts the act into a memorable performance unit and anticipates the Malay text's broader fascination with named supernatural arms.

The Sveta episode also illustrates variation in scale. HPL presents Sveta destroying five elephants, receiving help from his brothers, damaging Bhishma's chariot, and provoking a more elaborate sequence of retreat and return. VP gives Citravarman and Cuvetan an extended duel in which Cuvetan continues fighting after losing a hand. Both versions intensify heroism, but they do so differently. HPL expands the battlefield spectacle and kinship network, while VP concentrates courage in the body of the wounded warrior.

Affective response is more prominent in the regional versions. HPL and VP include Yudhishthira and Krishna consoling King Mangaspati after the deaths of his sons. HPL then elaborates the parents' mourning, cremation, collection of ashes, and dispersal of the remains at sea. The Sanskrit baseline moves more rapidly into subsequent combat. The regional additions therefore shift the event from tactical loss to bereavement and ritual closure. In HPL, the war repeatedly pauses so that families can confront the bodies produced by heroic action.

The death of Iravan is preserved across the three traditions, as is the crisis in which Krishna moves against Bhishma and Arjuna restrains him. The exact causal sequence varies, but the episode maintains three functions: it demonstrates the intensity of Krishna's commitment to the Pandavas, exposes the instability of his vow not to fight, and prepares for Bhishma's chosen death. Bhishma's willingness to die before Krishna or through a divinely guided strategy is preserved because it reconciles defeat with spiritual authority.

Sikhandi's role is central to Bhishma's fall. All versions retain the logic that Bhishma will not fight someone associated with female birth, thereby allowing Arjuna to attack. HPL presents Sikhandi and Arjuna as visibly

cooperating, with one warrior's arrow assisted by the other. VP emphasizes that Arjuna first breaks Bhishma's bow and that Sikhandi's arrows then contribute to the fall. SM provides the most extended martial and theological framing. In every version, however, Bhishma falls through a deliberate suspension of ordinary heroic reciprocity. The greatest elder is defeated not by straightforward superiority but by a strategy tailored to his vow.

HPL adds several scenes after the fall. Bhima continues fighting, Duryodhana approaches only after Bhima lowers his mace, and Bhishma urges reconciliation. Bhishma rejects Duryodhana's luxurious mat and accepts an arrow-bed associated with Arjuna; he likewise rejects ordinary water and receives water released through Arjuna's arrow. These episodes sharpen the contrast between material kingship and morally meaningful service. They also align with the hikayat preference for symbolic objects, ceremonious dialogue, and visible demonstrations of allegiance.

VP adds tactical formations on selected days and redistributes combat roles among Satyaki, Abhimanyu, Ghatotkacha, Vikarna, and other warriors. At the same time, it sharply condenses days four to nine and omits several minor duels. HPL also reduces many Sanskrit encounters, including extended sequences involving Satyaki's sons, Bhagadatta, Krpa, Cekitana, Nakula, Sahadeva, and other secondary figures. The reductions confirm that neither regional text seeks to reproduce the Sanskrit chronicle of battle in full. Each selects scenes according to its own economy of relevance.

Figure 1 synthesizes the Bhishma Parva's four principal functions in the comparative corpus: the Bhagavad Gita as moral authorization, Bhishma's conflict between affection and duty, the ten-day command, and his fall on the tenth day.



Figure 1. Narrative functions of the Bhishma Parva across the comparative corpus.

4.3 Drona Parva: Abhimanyu, Vows, and the Collapse of Martial Restraint

The Drona Parva contains the largest number of shared episodes and provides the strongest evidence for a stable transregional narrative skeleton. All three versions appoint Drona after Bhishma's fall, present renewed Kaurava aggression, show Arjuna and Bhima reversing early Pandava losses, and preserve Bhagadatta's intervention and death. Drona's effort to exploit Arjuna's absence also remains central, even though the Malay version frames the diversion differently. The narrative depends on removing the one warrior capable of breaking the formation and protecting Yudhisthira.

Abhimanyu's entry into the formation is one of the most stable and emotionally charged episodes in the entire comparison. In each version, he knows how to enter but not how to leave. The admission transforms courage into foreknown vulnerability. Jayadratha prevents the other Pandavas from following, Abhimanyu fights alone, kills Laksmana, and is attacked collectively. The shared structure preserves the ethical scandal of the death. A young warrior is not defeated in equal combat but overwhelmed after being isolated by older and more experienced opponents.

The manner of death, however, differs markedly. In SM, Abhimanyu continues fighting with a chariot wheel after losing his weapons and is killed by the son of Duhsasana with a mace. HPL gives him a discus and has Duryodhana's horse-keeper inflict fatal injuries to his ear and face. VP presents Drona severing the sword-bearing hand before Jayadratha strikes with a mace associated with Shiva. These changes reveal different

narrative priorities. SM emphasizes progressive disarmament and collective illegality. VP makes guru authority and a divinely connected weapon part of the fatal chain. HPL introduces a socially lower battlefield agent, intensifying the unpredictability and humiliation of the death.

HPL further expands the episode through Semar Danta, Abhimanyu's nursemaid, who accompanies him into the formation and dies. This addition gives the young warrior a loyal attendant and connects his battlefield isolation to a domestic history. HPL also humanizes Karna. Karna urges Abhimanyu to withdraw, grieves when the advice is rejected, and embraces or kisses the body after death. The antagonist becomes capable of compassion even while remaining implicated in collective violence. This portrayal anticipates the Malay Karna Parva, where omens, marital concern, and fatal loyalty deepen his tragedy.

The consequences of Abhimanyu's death are also preserved. Uttari's pregnancy secures dynastic continuity, Yudhishthira informs Arjuna, Arjuna responds with suicidal grief, and he vows to kill Jayadratha before the next sunset. The vow reorganizes the following day into a race against time. Jayadratha seeks Drona's advice, Drona constructs protective formations, and Krishna prepares Arjuna for the attack. HPL names the chariot Delikur Puspa and its horses, while VP adds a journey to Mount Kailash and Shiva's blessing. The same military objective is therefore framed through different forms of sacral preparation.

Arjuna's advance toward Jayadratha retains several common actions. He creates water from the earth, destroys Duryodhana's chariot or armour, and receives reinforcement from Bhima and Satyaki. Bhima kills numerous Kaurava attendants, and Satyaki confronts Bhurisravas. The Bhurisravas episode varies in detail but preserves the ethical problem of attacking a distracted or disabled opponent. HPL supplies a more elaborate duel and direct stabbing, whereas other versions develop the dispute over Arjuna's intervention and Satyaki's retaliation.

Krishna's obscuring of the sun is one of the most recognizable preserved strategies. Jayadratha emerges because he believes the day has ended, the darkness is reversed, and Arjuna kills him. HPL elaborates the spectacle of the discus and the restoration of daylight. All three versions then continue into fighting by torchlight, marking a further erosion of the normal temporal limits of war. The movement from daylight battle to nocturnal combat anticipates the Sauptika massacre, where darkness ceases to be an exceptional extension and becomes the condition of murder.

Ghatotkacha's death is preserved as a strategic sacrifice. Krishna sends him against Karna at night, Karna uses the exceptional weapon he had reserved for Arjuna, and the immediate Pandava loss becomes a strategic advantage because the weapon can no longer threaten Arjuna. HPL heightens Ghatotkacha's supernatural identity by allowing weapons to emerge from his body. This addition aligns rakshasa warfare with the Malay-Javanese taste for metamorphic and magical combat.

Drona's death provides another major site of modification. All versions use the death of an elephant named Asvatthama to produce the false impression that Drona's son has been killed. Drona loses the will to continue, and Dhrstadyumna beheads him. SM frames the death through Drona's yogic withdrawal and includes criticism of the brahmana who has embraced warrior violence. VP adds the appearance of rishis and Agastya, who urge Drona to abandon weapons and return to brahmana duty. HPL emphasizes Arjuna's refusal to lie to his teacher and proceeds through Bhima's action and Drona's collapse. The ethical meaning therefore varies: SM stresses social and ritual contradiction, VP restores normative hierarchy through sage intervention, and HPL foregrounds the student's reluctance to deceive a guru.

Asvatthama's retaliation is preserved, including the use of a devastating weapon and Krishna's instruction that the Pandavas dismount. Yet the weapon's identity and theological framing vary. VP gives Vyasa a restraining role when Asvatthama threatens further escalation. HPL reduces some of the Sanskrit weapon theology but expands interpersonal blame after Jayadratha's death. Duryodhana and his allies accuse Drona, Duryodhana commands Karna, and Arjuna weeps when Ghatotkacha is sent into danger. The Malay account repeatedly translates strategic decisions into visible emotional exchanges.

The regional reductions are concentrated in the Drona Parva's extensive battle catalogues. HPL omits or abbreviates many encounters from days eleven to fifteen, including several named duels, Samsaptaka details, portions of Bhagadatta's elephant warfare, and extended accounts of Bhima's confrontations with Karna and the sons of Dhritarashtra. VP also condenses daily sequences, but preserves devotional additions that clarify divine authorization. The Drona Parva thus demonstrates a central pattern of the study: plot functions remain highly stable, while causal explanation, affective emphasis, and theological mediation remain flexible.

Figure 2 foregrounds the three chronological anchors retained across the traditions, Drona's appointment, Abhimanyu's death, and Drona's fall, while also representing the parva as the emotional turning point of the war.



Figure 2. The Drona Parva as a five-day sequence of command, entrapment, and loss.

4.4 Karna Parva: Tragic Identity, Omen, and the Conditions of Defeat

The Karna Parva is shorter than the two preceding war books but concentrates several of the epic's most morally difficult scenes. All versions appoint Karna after Drona's death, make Shalya his charioteer, and retain the hostility between them. Shalya mocks Karna's previous failures and repeatedly undermines his confidence. The relationship places Karna in command without granting him full support. He possesses martial authority but remains socially and emotionally isolated.

The versions also preserve the organization of the armies, Karna's vow to destroy the Pandavas, and Bhima's killing of Duhsasana. Bhima's drinking of Duhsasana's blood fulfils the oath made after Draupadi's humiliation, but it also marks a collapse of heroic restraint. The act is simultaneously represented as justice, revenge, and bodily excess. Its survival across all three traditions indicates that the fulfilment of vows is indispensable to the logic of the war, even when fulfilment becomes morally disturbing.

The serpent Asvasena and the near-fatal arrow also remain recognizable. Asvasena seeks revenge for the burning of the Khandava forest, enters or empowers Karna's arrow, and creates a moment in which Arjuna survives through Krishna's intervention. Shalya warns that the aim is too high, Krishna lowers the chariot, and the arrow strikes Arjuna's crown or another part of his attire. The episode binds a past act of violence to the present battle. Arjuna is nearly killed not only by Karna's skill but by an unresolved victim from an earlier narrative cycle.

VP adds an ethical restriction to the serpent weapon. Asvasena asks for a second shot, but Karna refuses because of his promise to Kunti. The refusal makes loyalty to a vow contribute directly to defeat. Karna's tragedy arises not from a lack of virtue but from virtues that operate within incompatible relationships. His generosity, fidelity to Duryodhana, respect for promises, and desire for warrior recognition cannot be reconciled. This complexity supports recent interpretations of Karna as a figure whose identity is shaped by social exclusion and the search for recognition (Dhillon, 2025).

HPL expands this tragic framing through omens and domestic scenes. Duryodhana asks yogis and brahmanas to pray for Karna's victory, but their signs predict defeat. A violent wind damages Wangsa Pura, Karna's wife dreams that he and his army are drowning, and Karna returns to comfort her. These additions delay the battle to make the audience inhabit foreknowledge. The death is no longer a sudden military reversal. It becomes a fate anticipated by religious specialists, the natural world, and the intimate anxiety of a spouse.

The Malay version also inserts a reflective visit to the bodies or chariots of Bhishma and Drona. Yudhisthira, Krishna, and Arjuna seek forgiveness, and Bhishma absolves them by explaining that killing belongs to the condition of war. The episode does not remove responsibility, but it provides ritualized moral accounting before the final confrontation with Karna. HPL thus creates pauses in which violence is interpreted by elders and mourners rather than simply continued.

Karna's weapons in HPL are significantly localized. Nila Perjanta and Wijaya Capa produce winds, mountains, stones, serpents, ghosts, demons, and other supernatural effects. The weapons are not merely projectiles. They transform the battlefield into a cosmological theatre. This differs from the Sanskrit tendency to locate extraordinary power in divine missiles with genealogies, invocations, and curses. HPL retains exceptional martial power but translates its imagery into a Malay-Javanese supernatural repertoire.

The mechanism of Karna's death varies most sharply. In SM, accumulated curses converge. Karna forgets the invocation for a decisive weapon, a chariot wheel sinks into the earth, and Arjuna kills him while he is struggling with the disabled chariot. The narrative emphasizes fate, prior wrongdoing, and the impossibility of isolating the present from the past. In VP, Dharma or accumulated merit protects Karna. Krishna becomes a brahmana and asks him to donate that merit. Karna gives it away, maintaining generosity to the end, and only then can Arjuna kill him. The Tamil version converts the death into a devotional paradox: Karna's defining virtue makes him spiritually admirable while removing his worldly protection.

HPL follows another route. Shalya signals Krishna, Krishna causes the chariot to sink, and Karna's arrow fails to strike Arjuna fatally. Arjuna offers Karna the possibility of surrender or submission, but Karna refuses and is killed before he can use Birawa Sakti. The emphasis falls on pride, autonomy, and refusal. Karna dies because he will not abandon the identity and allegiance through which he has lived.

Kunti's response also differentiates the traditions. VP places her at Karna's body, where she embraces and mourns the son whose identity could not be publicly acknowledged in life. The scene retroactively reframes the battle as fratricide. HPL gives greater space to Karna's wife and to public omens, while SM gives the fullest account of curse and tactical vulnerability. In each version, Karna's death is tragic, but the source of tragedy differs: fate and curse in SM, exhausted merit and maternal recognition in VP, and omen, loyalty, and refusal in HPL.

Both regional versions reduce the Sanskrit account of the sixteenth day and several secondary combats. HPL omits extended sequences involving Asvatthama, Dhrstadyumna, Yudhisthira, Arjuna, and Karna's son. VP compresses day sixteen even more sharply. The condensation directs attention to Duhsasana, the serpent arrow, and Karna's death, the three events that complete long-standing vows and unresolved relationships. Figure 3 summarizes the Karna Parva as a movement from appointment, through Duhsasana's death, to Karna's final defeat, and it visually emphasizes the tension between exceptional ability, social birth, and loyalty.



Figure 3. The Karna Parva and the tragic convergence of skill, loyalty, and fate.

4.5 Shalya Parva: The Final Day and the Breakdown of Legitimate Combat

The Shalya Parva narrates the final day of formal war. Across all three versions, Duryodhana appoints Shalya after Karna's death, Yudhisthira kills Shalya, and the Kaurava army collapses. Duryodhana withdraws to water, the Pandavas call him out, and Bhima is selected for the mace duel. Balarama arrives, witnesses the forbidden blow to the thighs, and threatens retaliation before Krishna explains the vow or curse that makes Bhima's action necessary. The basic sequence remains stable because it provides the political and bodily conclusion of the dynastic struggle.

The killing of Shalya differs in emotional preparation. HPL presents both Shalya and the Pandavas as distressed by the need to fight close kin. Yudhisthira sends Nakula to meet Shalya, and Shalya reveals the weapon needed to defeat him. The scene preserves the paradox already visible in Bhishma's fall: an elder

aligned with the Kauravas assists the Pandavas in arranging his own death. Loyalty to the commander's role coexists with affection for the nephews who must kill him.

HPL intensifies this paradox through conflict within the Kaurava camp. Asvatthama objects to Shalya's appointment and accuses him of having helped Arjuna during Karna's battle. Shalya draws his sword, Duryodhana intervenes, and Asvatthama withdraws to meditate on a mountain. The addition depicts the Kaurava alliance as internally fractured before the final engagement. Command has become ceremonial because trust has already disappeared.

The most substantial Malay addition concerns Shalya's wife, Satyawati. She attempts to die when she learns that Shalya must return to battle, is comforted, spends the night with him, and later searches for his body. Divine assistance allows her to find him. She then enters his funeral fire with her attendant Sukanda, and Narada takes the three to heaven. The episode shifts Shalya's death from a line in a military chronology to a complete domestic tragedy. Conjugal fidelity, ritual death, and heavenly reunion become the dominant frame. VP adds only one major scene, but it is ethically significant. Before the mace duel, Yudhisthira offers the kingdom to Duryodhana if peace can still be made. The offer portrays Yudhisthira as willing to surrender political victory to prevent one more death. It also heightens Duryodhana's refusal, since the continuation of combat can no longer be explained by material necessity alone.

Sakuni's death illustrates redistribution of agency. SM and VP assign the killing to Sahadeva, fulfilling the appropriate personal vow. HPL gives the act to Bhima, who cuts the body into four pieces and casts them in different directions. The Malay version concentrates vengeance in its most physically forceful Pandava and amplifies the punishment of the strategist blamed for the dice game and exile.

Duryodhana's concealment also receives local elaboration. SM and VP place him in a lake through his own capacity, while HPL has him protected in the Mahadra River by Ganga. The river becomes an active sacred refuge. Yet protection cannot prevent the final duel. The water episode briefly suspends political time before Duryodhana re-enters the visible world of combat.

The mace fight retains its controversial ending. Bhima is unable to defeat Duryodhana while obeying the rule against striking below the waist. Krishna or Arjuna signals the thighs, Bhima delivers the blow, and Balarama condemns the violation. The explanation that follows appeals to a prior oath or curse. This structure shows the war's final contradiction. Justice can be completed only through an act that violates the code governing legitimate victory. The three versions preserve the contradiction rather than resolving it.

HPL omits several Sanskrit encounters preceding the duel, including Krpa's advice to make peace and battles involving Salva, Krtavarma, Satyaki, Uluka, and other remaining warriors. The omissions produce a sharper movement from Shalya's death to Duryodhana's isolation. The final day becomes less a catalogue of military collapse than a sequence of broken relationships: Asvatthama against Shalya, Shalya against his nephews, Satyawati against widowhood, and Duryodhana against the possibility of peace.

Figure 4 presents the Shalya Parva as the last formal stage of the war, moving from Shalya's command to Duryodhana's defeat and the Pandava victory.



Figure 4. The final day of formal battle in the Shalya Parva.

4.6 Sauptika Parva: Night Massacre and Postwar Moral Rupture

The Sauptika Parva contains fewer shared episodes because the regional versions reorganize the postwar sequence more extensively. All three retain four essential functions: Asvatthama visits the defeated Duryodhana, vows revenge, attacks the Pandava camp at night, and kills sleeping warriors; the Pandavas later return to Hastinapura, where Yudhisthira becomes king. These events are sufficient to preserve the tragic reversal of victory. Formal battle has ended, but violence continues beyond the codes of war.

The source of Asvatthama's plan differs. In SM and VP, he observes an owl killing sleeping crows and converts the natural image into a strategy. The scene gives the massacre a disturbing form of tactical logic. HPL removes the owl and makes Duryodhana explicitly request the heads of the Pandavas, claiming that he can die only after seeing proof of their destruction. The Malay version therefore relocates responsibility. Asvatthama remains the killer, but the dying king becomes the immediate author of the revenge mission.

The victims also differ. SM and VP focus on the five sons of Draupadi and other sleeping warriors. HPL includes Dhristadyumna, Sikhandi, and many members of the camp, but the head brought to Duryodhana belongs to Panji Kumara, identified as Yudhishthira's son. Because the Pandavas themselves are absent, the massacre produces a fatal misrecognition. Duryodhana dies believing that his enemies have been beheaded. Duryodhana's final response is particularly revealing. In SM, he dies after hearing that the attack has succeeded. HPL makes the sight of the mistaken head the final satisfaction of revenge. VP, by contrast, allows Duryodhana to condemn Asvatthama for destroying the lineage of the gurus and to send a message through Sanjaya instructing Dhrtarastra to crown the Pandavas. The Tamil addition grants Duryodhana a final moment of ethical recognition. He cannot undo the war, but he can distinguish battle from the extermination of sleeping descendants.

HPL adds a further cycle of accusation and explanation. Krishna takes the Pandavas away on a hunt, thereby saving them, but Kunti and Draupadi initially accuse him of causing Panji Kumara's death. Bhishma appears to explain that the absence was protective. The episode is consistent with the Malay text's preference for explicit clarification by an authoritative elder. Divine strategy is not left morally opaque. It is interpreted in dialogue for grieving characters and audience alike.

Bhima's punishment of Asvatthama is also unique in HPL. Because Asvatthama is not destined to die, Bhima skins him alive to fulfil the demand for vengeance. The act continues the text's willingness to represent bodily violence in extreme form. SM and VP instead devote greater attention to divine weapons, Shiva's role, the protection of Uttari's unborn child, and the curse that extends Asvatthama's suffering. HPL reduces these theological sequences but intensifies immediate physical punishment.

The Sauptika comparison confirms that postwar narratives are especially open to localization. The formal succession of commanders no longer constrains the plot, and the versions can assign different victims, motives, and final words. Yet all preserve the same larger meaning: victory at Kurukshetra does not restore moral order. The night attack exposes a remainder of vengeance that kingship alone cannot absorb.

Figure 5 represents the Sauptika Parva as a progression from Duryodhana's defeat to Asvatthama's vow, the nocturnal massacre, and Yudhishthira's postwar coronation.



Figure 5. The Sauptika Parva and the transformation of defeat into nocturnal revenge.

4.7 Cross-Parva Comparison

Across the five parvas, preservation operates most strongly at the level of narrative function. The succession Bhishma, Drona, Karna, and Shalya is unchanged. The deaths that redirect the war are also stable. Abhimanyu's death motivates Arjuna's vow, Jayadratha's death escalates the conflict, Ghatotkacha's death neutralizes Karna's special weapon, Drona's death releases Asvatthama's rage, Karna's death leaves

Duryodhana politically isolated, and the broken-thigh duel ends formal battle. These functions are the load-bearing structure of the war narrative.

Modification is concentrated in mechanisms and moral explanations. The same hero may die through a different weapon or attacker. Divine agency may be explicit in one text and implicit in another. A curse in SM may become an act of donated merit in VP or a prophetic omen in HPL. Such changes do not alter the outcome, but they alter the ethical grammar through which the outcome is understood.

Additions reveal the clearest regional signatures. VP repeatedly introduces or strengthens divine and guru-mediated authority. Shiva, Krishna, Vyasa, rishis, and ethical vows regulate action. HPL adds family members, attendants, wives, dreams, funerals, named weapons, supernatural transformations, and extended conversations. Its battlefield is connected continually to palace, household, ritual, and cosmic sign.

Reductions affect the social breadth of the Sanskrit war. The Sanskrit version records numerous minor duels and daily tactical shifts. VP removes much of this accumulation to create a faster, more concentrated narrative. HPL also omits many secondary combats, but it uses the recovered narrative space for localized expansions. Thus, both regional versions narrow the military archive, yet only HPL consistently re-expands the story through domestic and supernatural material.

Table 4 summarizes the dominant transformation associated with each parva. The table should not be read as excluding other patterns. It identifies the most visible comparative tendency within each section.

Table 4. Dominant comparative transformation by parva

Parva	Stable narrative function	Tamil emphasis	Malay emphasis
Bhishma	Moral authorization and fall of the elder	Selected heroic duels, tactical compression, concentrated affect	Mourning ritual, named formations, symbolic service to Bhishma
Drona	Abhimanyu, Jayadratha, Ghatotkacha, and Drona	Shiva, rishis, guru authority, devotional preparation	Semar Danta, compassionate Karna, named chariots, magical night warfare
Karna	Duhsasana's death and Karna's fall	Donation of merit, promise to Kunti, maternal lament	Omens, wife's dream, supernatural weapons, refusal to submit
Shalya	Final commander and mace duel	Last offer of peace	Camp conflict, conjugal tragedy, funeral pyre, Ganga's protection
Sauptika	Night massacre and postwar kingship	Duryodhana's final ethical recognition	Direct command for revenge, mistaken head, accusation of Krishna, bodily punishment

4.8 Naming, Dialogue, and Narrative Tempo

The comparison also reveals that localization operates at the level of narrative form, not only at the level of event. SM frequently produces the impression of an archive. Days are differentiated, formations are identified, warriors are paired, weapons are traced through lineages, and speeches are embedded within a large genealogical and didactic structure. This density establishes the war as an event whose meaning depends on cumulative record. Even minor duels contribute to the sense that Kurukshetra involves an entire political world rather than a small group of protagonists.

VP creates a different tempo. It regularly moves across several battles in compressed form and then slows at episodes that permit devotional, ethical, or affective concentration. Compression makes divine intervention more prominent because it removes intervening military detail. When Shiva, Krishna, Vyasa, or a group of sages appears, the intervention occupies a proportionally larger part of the narrative field. The Tamil version therefore produces intensity through selectivity. Its shorter account is not merely a reduced chronicle, but a reorganization of attention.

HPL often slows the narrative through dialogue. Warriors ask permission, explain signs, console spouses, accuse commanders, seek absolution, and interpret the meaning of death. The effect is performative. Repetition and direct speech allow audiences to follow changes in loyalty and emotion without depending on an extensive narrator-led commentary. The spoken exchange becomes a method of ethical interpretation. Bhishma explains responsibility, Karna advises Abhimanyu, Shalya reveals the means of his own defeat, and Bhishma later clarifies Krishna's protective strategy. Characters repeatedly explain the war to one another. Naming is another important formal difference. HPL gives memorable names to chariots, horses, formations, arrows, and supernatural weapons. Delikur Puspa, Trisula Petala, Wijaya Capa, Nila Perjanta, Garuda Bayu, and other names detach objects from ordinary description and give them an identity within performance. A

named object can carry anticipation before it is used and recognition when it returns. The practice also integrates the imported epic into local systems of martial and magical vocabulary.

SM also names weapons and formations, but often links them to divine acquisition, mantra, curse, or a larger taxonomy of astras. VP selectively retains this sacred weaponry and may redirect it toward Shiva or Krishna. HPL translates extraordinary force into visible transformations, including winds, mountains, serpents, ghosts, demons, and protective waters. The difference is not between a supernatural Sanskrit text and a supernatural Malay text. It concerns the narrative grammar of the supernatural. SM tends toward genealogy and invocation, VP toward devotion and grace, and HPL toward spectacle, omen, and metamorphosis.

These formal differences shape characterization. A character who receives extended dialogue appears more psychologically accessible. A character surrounded by divine interventions appears more clearly located within a devotional hierarchy. A character embedded in a dense battle catalogue appears as part of a collective martial order. Thus, the versions do not simply tell different amounts of the same story. They construct different relationships among narrator, character, audience, and sacred authority.

5. Discussion

5.1 A Stable Epic Architecture with Flexible Narrative Mechanisms

The central finding is that the Kurukshetra war survives regional transmission through selective fidelity. The major sequence of command, death, vow, retaliation, and succession is remarkably stable. This stability ensures recognizability. An audience can encounter a different weapon, a new attendant, an altered speech, or a condensed day of battle and still identify the same epic episode. The plot functions operate as a mnemonic and cultural skeleton.

The mechanisms surrounding those functions remain flexible because they carry the interpretive work of adaptation. The death of Abhimanyu must be unjust, but each text can define injustice differently. Karna must die under compromised conditions, but curse, merit, omen, and refusal produce distinct moral explanations. Duryodhana must fall through a forbidden blow, but the explanation can appeal to vow, curse, strategy, or divine necessity. Such variation confirms Hutcheon's (2013) argument that adaptation is repetition without replication.

The findings also caution against a simple source-and-copy model. The Sanskrit critical edition itself represents editorial selection among manuscripts, while VP and HPL are coherent literary works with their own aesthetic systems. The Sanskrit text is the most detailed baseline, but detail is not equivalent to interpretive superiority. Regional condensation may sharpen narrative causality, and regional addition may expose social consequences that an extensive martial catalogue leaves dispersed.

5.2 Tamil Condensation as Devotional Reframing

VP's major contribution is not numerical expansion but theological concentration. The Tamil text repeatedly places decisive action within a chain of divine or guru-mediated authorization. Arjuna approaches Shiva, sages correct Drona, Vyasa restrains Asvatthama, Krishna tests or redirects heroes, and Karna's merit becomes the final condition of his mortality. These interventions align the war with the Tamil bhakti environment described by Valliammal (1989) and Pillai (2024).

Condensation supports this devotional reframing. By reducing minor duels and repetitive daily reporting, VP makes selected moments more visible. Its ethical world is less interested in cataloguing every encounter than in identifying the spiritual meaning of decisive actions. The result is not a peaceful text. Violence remains intense, but violence is repeatedly interpreted through devotion, vows, guru obligation, and the circulation of merit.

The Tamil representation of Karna is especially important. His refusal to use the serpent weapon twice and his donation of merit preserve generosity and fidelity at the instant of death. Kunti's lament then supplies recognition after social recognition has failed during life. This sequence shifts the tragedy from tactical misfortune toward moral surplus. Karna possesses virtues that cannot rescue him because they are attached to incompatible loyalties.

5.3 Malay Expansion as Courtly, Emotional, and Supernatural Localization

HPL's distinctive pattern is redistribution. It removes many secondary battles but adds a larger number of emotionally and culturally marked scenes. The result is an expanded world in which warfare is inseparable from palace relationships, conjugal anxiety, parental grief, ritual treatment of bodies, prophetic dreams, and supernatural signs. The text's additions are therefore not detachable decorations. They change the scale at which war is experienced.

The courtly orientation is visible in formal meetings, requests for permission, the exchange of symbolic objects, and extended acts of consolation. Bhishma's rejection of luxurious offerings, Karna's return to his wife, and Shalya's final night with Satyawati all convert battlefield narrative into courtly moral drama. The ruler or warrior is judged not only through combat but through conduct toward elders, spouses, attendants, and the dead.

The supernatural localization is equally systematic. Named formations and weapons, weapons that generate beings or landscapes, protective rivers, prophetic winds, divine flowers, and bodily transformations connect HPL to Javanese and Malay narrative repertoires (Ming, 2018; Singaravelu, 1990). These motifs make power visible and performable. They also allow fate to be communicated through sensory signs rather than through long genealogies of curses.

HPL's humanization of antagonists is one of its most significant interpretive achievements. Karna's compassion toward Abhimanyu, Duryodhana's dependence on Asvatthama, Shalya's grief at fighting nephews, and the quarrel among Kaurava leaders create moral complexity within the losing side. The epic conflict remains polarized politically, but emotional legitimacy is distributed more broadly. This is particularly clear in the attention given to women, attendants, and parents whose grief interrupts heroic momentum.

5.4 The Ethics of War and the Progressive Erosion of Rules

Read sequentially, the five parvas describe not only military defeat but the erosion of legitimate combat. The war begins with blessings, formations, chariots, and warrior codes. Abhimanyu is then isolated and attacked collectively. Jayadratha is killed through manipulated light. Fighting continues after sunset. Drona is defeated through deceptive speech. Karna is killed while disadvantaged. Duryodhana is struck below the permitted line. Asvatthama finally abandons battle altogether and kills sleepers. The structure confirms Kosuta's (2020) observation that the epic links religious ethics with the actual behaviour of combatants rather than offering an abstract doctrine alone.

The regional versions preserve this deterioration but interpret it differently. VP often introduces sages or divine figures to clarify limits, while HPL uses elders, omens, and emotional dialogue. Neither strategy restores a pure moral order. Instead, each helps the audience understand why characters act within compromised conditions. The ethical power of the war narrative lies precisely in this refusal of uncomplicated righteousness.

The repeated appeal to vows is central. Bhima's blood-drinking and blow to the thighs, Arjuna's deadline for Jayadratha, Karna's promise to Kunti, and Asvatthama's revenge all transform speech into coercive destiny. Once uttered, the vow narrows the future. Regional retellings preserve vows because they connect personal memory to public violence. The war is driven not only by political interests but by promises made in moments of humiliation and grief.

5.5 Kinship, Gender, and the Social Visibility of Loss

A major consequence of the regional transformations is the widening of the social field in which war is evaluated. The formal combatants are overwhelmingly male, but the meaning of their deaths is frequently produced by parents, wives, mothers, attendants, and teachers. HPL makes this especially visible. Mangaspati and his wife perform the work of mourning after Sveta's death. Karna's wife receives the dream that announces catastrophe. Satyawati turns Shalya's military death into a conjugal and ritual narrative. Kunti and Draupadi challenge Krishna after the nocturnal massacre. These additions give bereaved figures interpretive agency.

The presence of women should not automatically be read as modern emancipation. Several scenes remain governed by ideals of wifely fidelity, self-sacrifice, and attachment to male warriors. Satyawati's death on the pyre, for example, intensifies her emotional significance while also locating that significance within a patriarchal model of conjugality. Nevertheless, the scene changes the structure of attention. Shalya is no longer remembered only as the final commander killed by Yudhisthira. He becomes a husband whose death reorganizes the lives of women at court.

VP's treatment of Kunti and Karna has a different effect. Kunti's bodily embrace after Karna's death makes belated kinship visible. During the battle, Karna is classified by alliance and social identity. After death, the maternal relation can no longer be strategically concealed. The lament does not repair the injustice of abandonment, but it exposes the cost of secrecy. Karna's tragedy becomes both political and familial.

Attendants also matter. Semar Danta's presence beside Abhimanyu in HPL gives the prince a relationship that lies outside the dominant network of heroic brothers, fathers, and teachers. Her death suggests that epic wars consume those whose loyalty is personal rather than dynastic. The expansion of such figures is consistent with the Malay text's interest in courtly households and with broader Southeast Asian performance traditions in which attendants mediate between heroic and ordinary social worlds.

The emotional expansion of HPL therefore does more than make the story sadder. It changes the evidence by which actions are judged. A battlefield victory may be followed by a funeral, a prophetic dream, a spouse's accusation, or an elder's explanation. These scenes place heroic action under the scrutiny of relationships that cannot be satisfied by military success. The narrative repeatedly asks what victory means to those who inherit bodies, ashes, vows, and memories.

5.6 Implications for Comparative Epic Studies

The findings support a model of epic circulation based on modular stability and local interpretive density. A large epic can travel because it contains episodes that are detachable enough to be retold yet structurally connected enough to remain part of a recognizable whole. Regional authors select modules, condense transitions, and intensify scenes that resonate with local genres and institutions. This process resembles what Sanders (2016) calls appropriation, but it also preserves a strong sense of inherited narrative obligation.

The comparison further demonstrates the value of including Southeast Asian and South Indian materials in discussions of the *Mahabharata*. When only the Sanskrit text is examined, mourning rituals, conjugal scenes, supernatural names, and devotional interventions may appear marginal. In the regional texts, they become central interpretive devices. Comparative study therefore changes the object being studied. The *Mahabharata* becomes not one monumental poem but a transregional archive of decisions about what deserves to be remembered.

Finally, the results show that cultural localization is not equivalent to secularization or religious dilution. VP intensifies bhakti, while HPL combines inherited Indic theology with Javanese-Malay supernatural and courtly conventions. Both versions remain religiously meaningful, but they organize sacred authority differently. The Sanskrit text often explains events through dharma, karma, divine weapons, and curses. VP relies heavily on grace, merit, and guru intervention. HPL often communicates destiny through dreams, signs, magical objects, ritual mourning, and authoritative appearances. These are alternative modes of sacral narration rather than stages of decline.

5.7 Methodological Boundaries and Interpretive Cautions

Several methodological cautions are necessary when interpreting the comparison. First, the three texts do not occupy equivalent textual conditions. The Sanskrit critical edition is the product of a modern philological project involving a large manuscript base. The published VP and HPL editions represent specific editorial forms within their respective traditions. A difference between texts may therefore reflect regional authorship, manuscript transmission, editorial normalization, or a combination of these processes. The analysis identifies literary patterns in the selected editions, not a complete stemma of transmission.

Second, episode counting depends on analytical segmentation. A prolonged combat sequence can be treated as one episode or divided into several smaller encounters. The descriptive counts in Table 3 are most reliable for showing relative concentration, especially the unusually high number of shared events in the Drona Parva and the greater density of HPL additions. They should not be interpreted as absolute measurements of textual distance. Qualitative function remains more important than numerical difference.

Third, the labels addition and reduction are relational rather than evaluative. Addition does not imply that a regional author invented material without precedent in another oral, Javanese, Tamil, or manuscript source. Reduction does not imply carelessness or inferior knowledge. HPL may preserve material from performance or intermediary traditions that is absent from the Sanskrit edition used here. VP may condense a sequence because its intended poetic and devotional design does not require exhaustive martial reporting. The categories describe the relation among the selected texts only.

Fourth, linguistic form cannot be fully represented in an English-language synthesis. Sound, metre, formulaic repetition, honorific usage, semantic range, and culturally specific naming practices contribute to meaning. The present study focuses primarily on narrative action, characterization, theology, and cultural localization. A fuller study would require sustained comparison in Sanskrit, Tamil, and Malay, with attention to metre, syntax, lexical borrowing, and the performative qualities of direct speech.

Finally, the comparative framework is intentionally centred on the war. This focus clarifies transformation across the five parvas, but it limits interpretation of motivations established earlier and consequences developed later. Karna's identity depends on the Adi and Udyoga narratives, Draupadi's humiliation on the Sabha Parva, and Yudhishthira's postwar crisis on the Stri and Shanti parvas. Future work should connect the present findings to these wider narrative arcs and should compare written versions with wayang, shadow play, temple recitation, television, and digital adaptation.

5.8 Scholarly Significance

Bringing the three traditions into one study changes the scale of comparison. Studies confined to Sanskrit can explain the epic's internal ethical tensions, while studies confined to one regional tradition can document local literary achievement. A triadic comparison shows how the same narrative pressure is answered in different ways. When Abhimanyu, Drona, Karna, Shalya, or Duryodhana dies, the event remains structurally necessary, but the surrounding explanation reveals what each literary culture considers persuasive. This makes comparative epic study a method for analysing cultural reasoning as well as textual transmission.

The study also demonstrates the importance of regional works for theories of adaptation. HPL and VP do not simply modernize an ancient story. They move the epic into established literary worlds with their own histories, religious institutions, performance expectations, and moral vocabularies. Their transformations are therefore historically situated acts of authorship. The versions preserve inherited obligations while

claiming the right to redirect attention, assign speech, alter agency, and make local audiences emotionally present within the story.

For future scholarship, the episode matrix can support more specialized inquiries. Researchers may examine only Karna across the three traditions, trace the changing role of women in war narratives, compare the representation of gurus, or study the language of formations and weapons. The same method can also be extended to Balinese, Javanese, Thai, Bengali, Hindi, and modern media versions. Such work would move comparative literature beyond broad statements about influence and toward precise accounts of how individual narrative units travel, change, and acquire new cultural force.

The comparative evidence also has pedagogical value. Teaching the war through parallel episodes enables students to distinguish plot from interpretation and to see that literary inheritance is sustained through argument, selection, and performance. A three-text approach discourages the assumption that regional works are simplified copies. It instead presents them as critical readings that preserve an epic framework while debating the meaning of heroism, duty, grief, and divine intervention. This perspective is particularly useful in multilingual Asian literary studies, where translation and adaptation are often inseparable from cultural memory and identity.

6. Conclusion

The comparison of the Bhishma, Drona, Karna, Shalya, and Saupthika parvas demonstrates that the Kurukshetra war is simultaneously stable and transformable. All three versions preserve the major commanders, decisive deaths, vows, reversals, and final outcome. This stable architecture allows the narrative to remain recognizably the *Mahabharata* across Sanskrit, Tamil, and Malay literary cultures.

The differences are nevertheless substantial and patterned. The Sanskrit version offers the fullest daily chronology and the densest elaboration of martial, genealogical, and dharmic detail. The Tamil *Villiparatam* condenses many combat sequences while intensifying devotion, guru authority, merit, and moments of moral recognition. The Malay *Hikayat Pandawa Lima* redistributes narrative space toward courtly dialogue, family grief, supernatural weapons, omens, ritual treatment of the dead, and complex characterization. Karna and Shalya, in particular, become vehicles for exploring loyalty, conjugal attachment, social identity, and foreknown loss.

These patterns confirm that epic transmission is not passive reproduction. It is an act of cultural selection. Episodes survive because later authors and audiences recognize their structural necessity, while details change because each tradition asks different questions of the war. VP asks how divine grace and moral authority operate within violence. HPL asks how war is experienced through family, court, omen, ritual, and supernatural power. The Sanskrit text supplies the most extensive field in which these questions first become visible, but the regional versions reveal alternative answers.

The study is limited to published forms of three texts and to the five war parvas. Future research should compare manuscript variants, oral and shadow-play traditions, modern print retellings, and visual adaptations. It should also examine other parvas, especially the Sabha, Stri, Shanti, and Anushasana books, where humiliation, mourning, kingship, and postwar ethics receive further development. Even within its present scope, however, the comparison demonstrates that the transregional life of the *Mahabharata* depends on a productive balance between memory and reinvention.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest concerning the research, authorship, or publication of this study.

Data Availability

The study is based on published literary texts and the comparative episode inventory identified in the cited sources. No new human-participant dataset was generated.

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