

Ekalavya's Polyphonic Resistance: Social-Political Engagement in Neelakantan's Ajaya Series and Its Echoes in Contemporary Indian Politics

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Abstract

Through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of polyphony, this paper analyses Anand Neelakantan's reimagining of Ekalavya in the *Ajaya* series (*Roll of the Dice* and *Rise of Kali*). By transforming the Nishada archer from a passive figure of traditional devotion into an "unfinalized" revolutionary, Neelakantan challenges the monologic authority of Brahmanical forces. The study explores how Ekalavya's autonomous skill-building and strategic alliances function as a "hostile takeover" of elite political arenas, paralleling contemporary subaltern resistance and Dalit self-assertion in modern India. Ultimately, Ekalavya's journey—from self-empowerment to systemic "mutilation"—serves as a powerful allegory for the tragic yet defiant outcomes of current socio-political movements, including reservation clashes and Bhim Army mobilizations. This re-reading underscores caste as a dynamic site of engagement, where marginalized voices disrupt majoritarian narratives to demand systemic justice.

KeyWords; Polyphony, Unfinalized, skill-building, carnivalesque, political engagement.

1. Introduction

Neelakantan defines Ekalavya as “a tribal youth who desperately wants to become a warrior; he is ready to give his life to achieve some dignity for his people” (Neelakantan i). The portrayal of Ekalavya has had a powerful impact on the *Ajaya* series as this character embodies current protests of Dalits and low caste. The *Rise of Kali* and *Roll of Dice* set aside a handful of pages for the narration of this character, highlighting anti-authorial Brahmanical forces and socio-political entrapments. This paper attempts to re-read Ekalavya from a polyphonic perspective that magnifies the efforts of the Nishada tribesman. Ekalavya's voice polyphonically clashes with Drona, Arjuna, and Kaurava ideologues, creating unfinalizable truths about justice and power. A Polyphonic rereading Ekalavya echoes the contemporary

Indian politics, resistance of the lower-caste groups, dominance of the power structures and ongoing struggle for social justice and equality in a deeply hierarchical society. Mikhail Bakhtin polyphony emphasizes multiple, independent voices in dialogue without authorial dominance that resembles characterisation of Ekalavya in the two books of Ajaya series. Ekalavya embodies subaltern resistance, engaging politically by rejecting guru submission and aligning with figures like Takshaka to challenge Kshatriya-Brahmin hegemony. His arc—from self-taught archer to sacrificial rebel—exposes how social exclusion breeds militancy, with Neelakantan using him to allegorize Dalit agency against systemic violence. Ekalavya's narrative resonates with current Indian politics, where caste-based affirmative action (e.g., reservation policies) sparks backlash akin to Drona's thumb demand. Figures like Bhima Koregaon activists or Bhim Army leaders evoke Ekalavya's defiant engagement, facing state labeling as "terrorists" while pushing polyphonic Dalit voices against upper-caste dominance. Neelakantan's polyphony critiques polarization in events like 2020-2025 caste census debates, where subaltern claims disrupt majoritarian narratives under President Trump's global influence on identity politics.

Thesis statement: Through Bakhtin's polyphony, Anand Neelakantan's reimagining of Ekalavya in *Roll of Dice* and *Rise of Kali* constructs a multivocal critique of caste as a dynamic site of social-political engagement, where the Nishada archer's self-empowerment and entrapment allegorize the tragic yet defiant outcomes of subaltern resistance in modern Indian politics, from reservation clashes to Bhim Army mobilizations.

In the *Mahabharata*, Ekalavya represents the tragic intersection of unparalleled merit and rigid social hierarchy. A Nishada prince denied tutelage by Guru Drona, his devotion leads him to practice before a clay idol of the master. Ekalavya's submission is often framed as the pinnacle of devotion, but from a socio-cultural lens, it is a profound example of passive submission to a rigid hierarchy. His "choice" to cut off his thumb wasn't just a personal gesture; it was the result of a system designed to ensure that talent never overthrew established social order. Ekalavya did not protest, bargain, or resist. This passivity stems from three cultural pillars of the time:

1. **Internalized Varna Hierarchy:** As a *Nishada* (living outside the four-tier Varna system), Ekalavya had been conditioned to believe that his worth was secondary to the *Kshatriya* (warrior) princes. By giving his thumb, he essentially accepted that his excellence was a "transgression" against the natural order.
2. **The Guru-Shishya Mandate:** In traditional Vedic culture, a Guru's word was absolute. Even though Drona rejected him, Ekalavya's use of Drona's image created a "spiritual debt." To refuse the *Guru Dakshina* (teacher's fee) would have been seen as a spiritual failure, effectively "voiding" the skill he had worked so hard to acquire.
3. **Preservation of Dharma:** At the time, *Dharma* was often interpreted as maintaining one's station in life. By surrendering his skill, Ekalavya passively upheld a status quo that ensured Arjuna—a royal—remained the supreme archer, thereby preventing a social upheaval where a "low-born" hunter could outmatch the state's elite.

Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya* series (comprising *Roll of the Dice* and *Rise of Kali*) functions as a "subaltern" history of the *Mahabharata*. By shifting the narrative lens from the victorious Pandavas to the

"villainous" Kauravas, Neelakantan transforms the epic from a tale of divine destiny into a gritty struggle for social justice. The series gives a megaphone to characters who are traditionally relegated to the footnotes or used as moral lessons for the elite:

- **Suyodhana (Duryodhana):** He is reimagined not as a jealous cousin, but as a leader who actively challenges the caste-based bigotry of his elders. He seeks to build a meritocracy where a person's skill matters more than their birth.
- **Ekalavya & the Nishadas:** Instead of a passive martyr, Ekalavya is portrayed as a revolutionary. His "submission" is reframed as a political assassination of talent by a fearful establishment (represented by Drona).
- **Karna:** His struggle is depicted as the agonizing internal conflict of a man who belongs to the marginalized but seeks validation from the very hierarchy that rejects him.

In literary theory—specifically that of Mikhail Bakhtin—polyphony is a narrative environment where no single voice (not even the author's) holds ultimate authority. According to David Lodge, a polyphonic novel is a "novel in which a variety of conflicting ideological positions are given a voice and set in play both between and within individual speaking subjects, without being placed and judged by an authoritative authorial voice" (Lodge 86). Neelakantan's Ekalavya is unfinalized, never fixed, and constantly reacting to the fixed truths of the power structures. His resistance to monologism—correct, one, and fixed—is an opening to the world of truths, polyphony, and unfinalisability. Therefore, Ekalavya is dialogical, intertextual, always unfinished, and refuses closure, as in a polyphony.

Ekalavya's Polyphonic Resistance: Textual Analysis

Neelakantan portrays the childhood of Ekalavya as a forest dweller, starving, finding ways and means to get to eat. He has little faint memory of his father, his world was around his aunt and other five cousins who were moving around India. He came across Suyodhana, Drona, and other Kaurava people. He was caught by them and questioned. He was in close with Nagas and their plans to attack Hastinapura. He sometimes wanted Thaksha to win. He wanted to be a warrior like them, but knew that it is not easy for him as of them. He knew that as a lowest of the caste hierarchy it is not possible and consoled himself saying; "Who needs a Guru? The world is my Guru. I can be a better archer than the luckiest bastard". (Neelakantan 27). This soliloquy is the first instance where Ekalavya explicitly expresses his ambition to become a warrior and defies the dharma of knowledge. In the traditional monologic framework, the Guru is the sole conduit of truth. Knowledge is a closed circuit: it flows from the divine to the Guru, and then to the "worthy" (Kshatriya) student. By stating, "*The world is my Guru*," Ekalavya (or the speaker) performs a polyphonic shift. He moves truth from a centralized authority (Drona) to a pluralistic environment (the world). This suggests that "truth" isn't a secret handed down to the elite, but a dialogue between an individual and their surroundings. Ekalavya refuses to accept the "finalized" identity of a "low-born hunter" who is incapable of mastery. He is defining himself through his own labour rather than through the lens of the establishment. Bakhtin often discussed the "*Carnavalesque*"—a style of literature that uses coarse, "low" language to mock the "high" and sacred. The use of the phrase "*luckiest bastard*" is a sharp, jagged piece of dialogue. It strips the "luck" (divine favour) of its sanctity and rebrands it as mere privilege. By calling the "Chosen One" a "bastard," the speaker's independent consciousness

punctures the balloon of royal dignity, forcing the reader to see Karna not as a hero, but as a product of systemic favourites.

During an unanticipated encounter, Ekalavya engaged in a dialogue with Drona while the princes were undergoing their tests. Arjuna had skillfully shot an arrow at a stray dog, targeting its right eye. Observing from behind a bush, Ekalavya aspired to surpass Arjuna's feat. Utilizing his rudimentary bow, he aimed and successfully struck the dog's left eye with precision. This remarkable shot drew the attention of all present, who then noticed Ekalavya in hiding. Ekalavya anticipated that his achievement would earn him recognition and that he would become the first Nishada to transcend caste restrictions (Neelakantan 111), envisioning a promising future. Despite being impressed by Ekalavya's performance, Guru Drona's caste biases and allegiance to Arjuna prevented him from acknowledging Ekalavya's talent. Pretending to express admiration, Drona addressed Ekalavya;

"As per custom, you must now give me my gurudakshina."

Ekalavya scampered up to stand with bowed head. "Command me, Swami," he said. The Nishada's mind rippled with waves of ecstasy. It was official - he was a disciple of the greatest warrior of Hastinapura now. His dream had come true. 'Shankara, oh Lord of the Universe, you are too kind to this Untouchable,' he thought in silent gratitude.

"I want your right thumb as my fee."

A shocked silence followed Drona's words. Even Arjuna flinched when he heard it. Only Bhima looked confused and asked his twin brothers what the cranky Guru was going to do with a thumb.

The world came crashing down upon Ekalavya. His mind and body became numb. He knew it was the end of his dreams. As a lefthander, his right thumb was important. He would never again be able to grip the heavy Indian bow without the thumb of his right hand. The cunning Brahmin had finished the archer in him with one move. . . . Then Ekalavya took the sharp hunting knife from his waist and bowed to the great Guru one last time. He knelt and firmly spread his right palm on the earth.

. . . The razor sharp hunting knife severed Ekalavya's thumb and it fell away. Blood spurted from the open wound, splattering the Guru's white dhoti. Drona did not bother to look down; his eyes remained on the setting sun.

To Ekalavya, being an "official disciple" is the only way to "finalize" his identity as a warrior. He doesn't realize that for Drona, "officializing" him is actually a way to terminate him. Drona's demand for the thumb is the ultimate monologic act. He doesn't want a fee; he wants to "close" Ekalavya's narrative. By taking the thumb, Drona ensures that Ekalavya can never "speak" through his archery again. The text's description of the "cunning Brahmin" creates a double-voicing. While Ekalavya still sees a "Great Guru," the narrative voice (and the reader) sees a political assassin. This friction between how Ekalavya perceives the act and what the act *is* is the essence of polyphony.

While a monologic text would portray this as a glorious sacrifice, Neelakantan introduces a polyphony of reactions that challenge the morality of the act, ranging from Arjuna's flinch—representing

the guilt of the privileged whose greatness is bought with another's blood—to Bhima's confusion, which serves as a "carnavalesque" element that strips the ritual of its sacredness by revealing it as absurd and grotesque. Consequently, the resistance here is not physical but consciousness-based, manifesting in the moment Ekalavya's mind becomes "numb" and the illusion of the Guru-Shishya bond shatters. This "death of the dialogue" marks the realization that the "cunning Brahmin" has systematically finished the archer within him, allowing Ekalavya's independent consciousness to break free from religious delusion even as his body submits to social custom. Ultimately, Ekalavya's submission remains "passive" in action but becomes "active" in the reader's conscience; by depicting the internal "crash" of Ekalavya's world, Neelakantan ensures the reader rejects the monologic authority of the "Great Guru" to instead hear the silent scream of the "Untouchable."

Despite the loss of his thumb, Ekalavya remained undeterred. He reconsidered his position during the final contest between Arjuna and Karna. Arjuna, apprehensive about the possibility of losing to Karna, refused to compete against him, citing Karna's low birth as a Suta and his lack of royal status. In a strategic maneuver, Duryodhana crowned Karna as the King of Anga. Observing this, Ekalavya withdrew from the arena, reflecting that, had he not lost his thumb, he might have been in Karna's position. As he departed the field, he contemplated his circumstances.

"hope sprouted again in the wounded mind of Ekalavya. A Prince had dared challenge the system. Perhaps the future would belong to him. Perhaps this country was not as bad as he had imagined if she had given birth to one such as Suyodhana. 'Why should the lack of a thumb stand in the way of my dreams?' the Nishada wondered, and took a fateful decision. He ran to where his bow lay gathering dust. Picking it up gently, he began practising again. Perhaps, even without a thumb, he could best Arjuna.(Neelakantan 149)

If his previous submission was a "finalization" of his fate by a monologic authority (Drona), this moment is the "unfinalizing" of his spirit. He moves from being a victim of a single truth to a participant in a broader, more complex dialogue about power and merit. In Bakhtinian theory, a character is truly alive when their consciousness interacts with another's. Here, Ekalavya's "wounded mind" begins to dialogue with the revolutionary energy of Suyodhana. Suyodhana's challenge to the system acts as a "counter-word" to Drona's command. It breaks the monopoly of the elite truth. For Ekalavya, the fact that a *Prince* (a member of the upper tier) challenged the hierarchy makes his own dream feel legitimate again. By asking, *"Why should the lack of a thumb stand in the way of my dreams?"*, Ekalavya refuses to let his physical mutilation define his existence. He stops being a character in Drona's story and starts authoring his own. The act of picking up the "dust-gathering bow" is a physical manifestation of an independent consciousness reclaiming its agency.

Ekalavya's hope—*"Perhaps this country was not as bad as he had imagined"*—shows him re-evaluating his entire social reality. He is no longer looking for a Guru's blessing; he is looking for a political shift. The desire to "best Arjuna" even without a thumb is the ultimate "carnavalesque" subversion. It suggests that the "perfect" hero (Arjuna) can be defeated by the "broken" marginalized man, stripping the royal warrior of his divine invincibility. In this retelling, Neelakantan transforms Ekalavya from a tragic footnote into a living consciousness that refuses to stay silenced. His return to archery is not just a sports comeback; it is a political act of refusing to be "finished" by those in power.

After aligning with Thaksha, Ekalavya launched an attack on Krishna but was compelled to retreat. Subsequently, he was apprehended by Duryodhana and engaged in a confrontation with him at his palace. Demonstrating considerable courage, Ekalavya maintained his composure and addressed the prince assertively, symbolizing a form of rebellion.

“I have been trying to trace you for a long time, Ekalavya, in fact, from the day you gave Drona your gurudakshina,” Suyodhana said.

Ekalavya quickly covered his mutilated hand with his other one. “So you have not finished having fun with us, eh?” Ekalavya smiled at the gasps in the Sabha. It felt good talking back to the mighty Crown Prince. Perhaps he only had a few minutes to live but he was determined to go down with his head held high. “You think you have defeated us? Krishna thinks he has escaped. You may kill me, but one day my people will rise and sweep you into the Ganga. You can kill me now, but how many Ekalavyas will you kill, Duryodhana? The forests of this country are pregnant with revolution. There are thousands of Ekalavyas rising.”

“Ekalavya, I wish to stop the revolution.”

“The entire army of Hastinapura and all the great warriors here will not be able to stop it, Prince.”

“I do not wish to stop it by force. I know I cannot do that. I wish to stop it by...”

“By acting nice and throwing us some tidbits? Ha, I would rather face your cousin Arjuna’s arrows than your patronising acts” (Neelakantan Rise of Kali, 137).

The interaction between Ekalavya and Duryodhana exemplifies the response of individuals of lower social status to those of higher status. The excerpt highlights Ekalavya's awareness of his autonomy and his determination to challenge injustices. This scenario paves the way for polyphonic resistance and carnivalesque settings. Ekalavya is no longer a silent victim practicing in obscurity; he has emerged as a vocal and political revolutionary. Ekalavya's smile in response to the "gasps in the Sabha" exemplifies a quintessential Bakhtinian moment of the Carnavalesque "Talk Back." He takes pleasure in transgressing the sacred decorum of the royal court. By challenging the "mighty Crown Prince," he diminishes the office's divine authority. By concealing his mutilated hand and subsequently revealing his defiance, Ekalavya refuses to be "finalized" by his injury. He transcends the identity of "The Archer who lost a thumb" to become "The Revolutionary who found a voice." This scenario illustrates the collision of two distinct worldviews. Suyodhana seeks to "stop the revolution" through reformist, top-down approaches, whereas Ekalavya advocates for total systemic upheaval through radical, bottom-up means. The author does not silence either perspective; instead, they coexist in a state of unresolved tension.

Social-Political Engagement in Contemporary Indian Politics

Connecting Ekalavya's narrative to these contemporary socio-political frameworks reveals that his "polyphony" is not just a literary device, but a living strategy for survival and resistance. In Neelakantan's retelling, Ekalavya's journey moves from individual mastery to a systemic critique of power. In the traditional monologic view, Ekalavya's archery is a private act of faith. In the polyphonic view, it is a hostile takeover of a political arena.

While traditional monologic perspectives view Ekalavya's archery as a private act of devotion, a polyphonic standpoint reveals it as a contentious appropriation of a political domain where his practice in the forest establishes an "alternative Sabha." Through this model of self-assertion, Ekalavya demonstrates that excellence is not a divine privilege confined to the palace but a political entitlement accessible to the marginalized, paralleling contemporary Dalit movements that reject the notion of awaiting "permission" to access spheres of power. Ultimately, this defiance allows him to redefine his identity, transitioning from a mere "subject" of the Kuru crown to a "citizen" empowered and legitimized by his own autonomous skill.

Ekalavya's engagement tactics mirror the sophisticated strategies employed by marginalized groups today to navigate institutional gatekeeping, most notably through his practice of autonomous skill-building before a clay idol, which functions as a primal form of "lateral entry." This parallels modern skill-based quotas and self-taught digital literacy, where individuals bypass prestige institutions—the gatekeeping "Dronas" of the world—to achieve parity through sheer grit and extra-institutional learning. Furthermore, his alliance with Suyodhana represents a shrewd turn toward coalition politics, rooted in the understanding that an independent voice gains significant resonance when joined with a power block sharing a common enemy. Much like modern "Third Fronts" or Dalit-Bahujan-Minority alliances, this strategic partnership fractures the monologic dominance of the ruling ideology, transforming a solitary struggle into a collective political force that refuses to be silenced by traditional authorities.

The most sobering aspect of this polyphonic critique is its warning against "naive militancy," illustrating the high cost of visibility where Ekalavya's empowerment—his attainment of world-class mastery—leads directly to his systemic mutilation. This narrative trajectory suggests that displaying one's brilliance to a monologic authority before possessing the political power to protect it constitutes a strategic trap, a theme that resonates in modern contexts where marginalized leaders are often "mutilated" via smears, incarceration, or co-option the moment their influence becomes effective. Ultimately, the short-term "win" of gaining recognition from the state or the elite Sabha can precipitate a long-term loss of agency, critiquing the idea that individual excellence can survive within an unchanged system that prioritizes the preservation of established hierarchies over the inclusion of dissident voices.

The transition from Neelakantan's subaltern fiction to India's current socio-political landscape is remarkably seamless. By using Ekalavya as a prism, we can see how the "monologic" structures of the ancient epic are mirrored in modern policy, movements, and digital discourse.

While the traditional monologic view frames Ekalavya's archery as a private act of faith, a polyphonic lens reveals it as a hostile takeover of a political arena where his practice in the forest effectively establishes an "alternative Sabha." This model of self-assertion fundamentally challenges the narrative that excellence is a divine gift restricted to the palace elite, reframing it instead as a political right accessible to the marginalized. Consequently, Ekalavya's rebellion serves as a template for modern Dalit movements that reject the need for institutional "permission" to enter spaces of power, enabling him to transcend his status as a mere "subject" of the Kuru crown and emerge as a "citizen" defined and legitimized by his own autonomous skill.

Ekalavya's engagement tactics mirror the complex strategies used by marginalized groups today to navigate institutional gatekeeping, specifically through autonomous skill-building and strategic coalition politics. By practicing before a clay idol, Ekalavya performs the ultimate "lateral entry," a move that parallels modern skill-based quotas and self-taught digital literacy where the marginalized bypass "prestige institutions"—the gatekeeping Dronas of the world—to achieve parity through sheer grit rather than formal sanction. Furthermore, his alliance with Suyodhana (Duryodhana) represents a calculated shift toward coalition politics, rooted in the understanding that an independent voice carries more weight when joined with a power block that shares a common enemy. This reflects modern political "Third Fronts" or Dalit-Bahujan-Minority alliances that work to fracture the monologic dominance of a single ruling ideology, effectively transforming a solitary act of defiance into a collective challenge against systemic exclusion.

The most sobering aspect of the polyphonic critique is its warning against "naive militancy," highlighting the high cost of visibility where Ekalavya's empowerment—attaining world-class skill—leads directly to his systemic mutilation. This trajectory suggests that displaying one's brilliance to a monologic authority before securing the political power to protect it functions as a strategic trap, where the short-term "win" of being recognized by the elite Sabha inevitably results in a long-term loss of agency. In contemporary terms, this mirrors how marginalized leaders are often "mutilated" through smears, incarceration, or co-option the moment they become truly effective, illustrating that excellence alone cannot dismantle a rigid hierarchy. Ultimately, by portraying Ekalavya's "crash" into reality, Neelakantan critiques the idealistic hope that individual merit can survive within an unchanged system, asserting that without structural revolution, visibility often serves merely as a target for the state's silencing mechanisms.

2. Conclusion

Through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's polyphony, Anand Neelakantan's reimagining of Ekalavya in *Roll of the Dice* and *Rise of Kali* constructs a profound critique of caste as a dynamic site of socio-political engagement. By transforming Ekalavya from a passive, tragic figure of devotion into a vocal, "unfinalized" revolutionary, the narrative challenges the monologic authority of traditional Brahmanical forces. The Nishada archer's journey—from autonomous skill-building to strategic political alignment and eventual entrapment—serves as a powerful allegory for the defiant yet tragic outcomes of subaltern resistance in modern India. Ultimately, Neelakantan uses Ekalavya to strip the "sacred" status from established hierarchies, replacing a single divine truth with a plurality of voices that demand justice and systemic upheaval.

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