

Through the Eyes of Ulūpī: A Distinctive Snake Perspective in the *Mahābhārata*¹

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Abstract

In this paper, I will explore the role and significance of snakes in the *Mahābhārata*. Rather than offer a general account of how they are depicted across the text, I will focus my attention on one snake character in particular: Ulūpī, a vital, but often overlooked persona. Although she only participates in two episodes, in both cases she bursts into the narrative from underground to change the course of events decisively and with major consequences. By considering both of her appearances together, I will argue that Ulūpī plays a more central role in the unfolding of the narrative than has been previously realised. Throughout the paper, I will reflect on Ulūpī's identity as a snake. By looking at the terms used to describe her, how she relates to other prominent snake characters, and the relationship between her lineage and other snake lineages, I will show that her unique perspective brings out a nuanced and diverse understanding of snakes that can contribute to our wider appreciation of these complex characters in the *Mahābhārata*. Moreover, I will suggest that Ulūpī's distinctive vantage point as a snake within the lineage of Airāvata sheds new light on two pivotal episodes: Janamejaya's snake sacrifice and the burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest.

Introduction

The very first thing Ugraśravas says when he begins his narration to the Naimiṣa ṛṣis is that he was at Janamejaya's snake sacrifice (*sarpa-satra*) when he heard Vaiśampāyana recount the *Mahābhārata* (1.1.8-10). In addition to contextualising Vaiśampāyana's narration as taking place during this massacre of snakes, Ugraśravas' frame story recounts the events that led to the *sarpa-satra*, the history of other vendettas with snakes, and the origin of the snakes. Although snakes seem to play a peripheral role in much of the main story, Ugraśravas' introduction makes it clear that these episodes featuring snakes are central to understanding the main narrative about the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas.

There have been some excellent studies on the role and significance of snakes in the *Mahābhārata*. D.D. Kosambi was the first to highlight that snakes have 'extraordinary importance' (1964: 32), arguing that the 'interweaving of the *nāga*-myth into the Mbh was essential to the fabric and the pattern' of the text (1964: 32). Kosambi saw the 'Naga component' as the result of a 'process of acculturation', with snakes representing indigenous peoples who were displaced (1964: 43). Focusing more on snakes' symbolic significance within the text, Christopher Minkowski sees Janamejaya's *sarpa-satra* as 'an artfully chosen frame story' (1991: 385) that introduces the apocalyptic themes of 'the passing of an age, the eradication of a race, the survival of a few' (1991: 397). In addition to framing the main story, Minkowski argues that the *Mahābhārata* is a 'repository' for snake lore, containing 'the most extensive collection of stories about snakes we have in Sanskrit literature' (1991: 394-5). Meanwhile, Wendy Doniger has discussed snakes in the *Mahābhārata* in relation to their role and significance in Hinduism more generally. As she observes, snakes are often defined by their dual role as sacred and sinister; they

are characters who remain ‘betwixt and between’ and ‘slither over boundaries’ (2015: 2). Their liminality, as she points out, also affords them the role of acting as mediators between gods and demons.

In this paper, I will engage with these studies, as well as others, as I explore further the role and significance of snakes in the *Mahābhārata*. Rather than offer a general account of how they are depicted across the text, I will focus my attention on one snake character in particular. I hope to show that we can gain a fresh perspective on the ways that snakes are depicted and the roles they play in the story as a whole if we examine in detail the complex portrait of one of the most prominent snake characters. This paper will focus on Ulūpī, a vital, but often overlooked persona. Although Ulūpī operates on the edges, her actions and words make major contributions to the central narrative.

First, we will review the two episodes where Ulūpī actively participates in the main story. Her initial appearance is in the *Ādi Parvan*, when she carries Arjuna off to the snake world, Nāgaloka, and uses her clairvoyance and *dharma*-based arguments to convince him to have sex with her. This encounter with Arjuna closely precedes the burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest, an event that will set off the inter-generational vendetta between the Kurus and Takṣaka’s lineage of snakes and will culminate in Janamejaya’s *sarpa-satra* four generations later. Not only does Ulūpī conceive a son and make a strategic alliance between her lineage and Arjuna’s, but also, as I will argue, she plays a subtle, yet crucial role in the continuation of the Kuru lineage.

In her second appearance, in the *Aśvamedhika Parvan*, Ulūpī emerges from the ground to orchestrate her plan to save Arjuna from a vengeful curse of the Vasus, who disapprove of his undharmic method of killing Bhīṣma. After bringing Arjuna back to life and freeing him from the Vasus' curse, Ulūpī later accompanies him to the royal palace in Hāstinapura, where she lives with him for the remainder of the Pāṇḍavas' reign.

Although she only actively participates in two episodes, in both cases she bursts into the narrative from underground to change the course of events decisively and with major consequences. Her interventions, however, are not random, as in both cases her actions and the actions she persuades others to perform are based on her extra-sensory knowledge or her access to information at a cosmic level. In addition to the two scenes where she actively participates, we also learn about Ulūpī through the backstory provided by Saṃjaya in the *Bhīṣma Parvan*, when he narrates the events surrounding the death of her son, Irāvata.ⁱⁱ By considering all her appearances together, I will argue that Ulūpī plays a more central role in the unfolding of the narrative than has been previously realised.

Throughout the paper, we will reflect on Ulūpī's identity as a snake. By looking at the terms used to describe her, how she relates to other prominent snake characters, and the relationship between her lineage and other snakes lineages, I will show that her unique perspective brings out a nuanced and diverse understanding of snakes that can contribute to our wider appreciation these complex characters in the *Mahābhārata*. Moreover, I will suggest that Ulūpī's distinctive vantage point as a snake within the lineage of Airāvata sheds new light on two pivotal episodes: Janamejaya's snake sacrifice and the burning of

the Khāṇḍava Forest. As we look at how Ulūpī and other snake characters fit into the rivalries between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas, we might also sense that the ways the Kurus contribute to the rivalries between the snakes are as important as the ways that the snakes participate in the rivalries between the Kurus. Seen from this perspective, the union of Ulūpī and Arjuna brings together these two sets of mythologies.

Ulūpī in the *Ādi Parvan* (1.206)

Ulūpī bursts forth into the main story of the *Mahābhārata* when she emerges from the Gaṅgā river to pull Arjuna underwater into the subterranean snake world. She then uses her clairvoyance and *dharma*-based arguments to implore him to have sex with her. In Vaiśampāyana's narration in the *Ādi Parvan*, we do not hear about the consequences of the sexual encounter between Ulūpī and Arjuna. However, in Saṃjaya's narration of the *Bhīṣma Parvan*, we learn that they had a son (6.86.7-9), Irāvata, who dies fighting for the Pāṇḍavas in the Mahābhārata War.ⁱⁱⁱ Crucially, as we will discuss in more detail below, Saṃjaya also reveals that Ulūpī was a widow before she met Arjuna and that her first husband was killed by the bird-deity Garuḍa (6.86.7). Meanwhile, Saṃjaya discloses that Irāvata had briefly met Arjuna, when he accompanied him on his father's visit to the world of Indra during the Pāṇḍavas' period of exile (6.86.10).

When he first mentions Ulūpī, Vaiśampāyana refers to her as the daughter of the King of the Nāgas (*nāgarājasya kanyayā*, 1.206.13). Ulūpī subsequently introduces herself to Arjuna as 'Ulūpī of the Snakes' (*ulūpī nāma pannagī*, 1.206.18). Notably, she uses a different word for snake than Vaiśampāyana used to describe her, referring to herself as a

pannagī. *Nāgī* and *pannagī* are the two words used the most (both are used thirteen times) to designate Ulūpī's identity as a snake. The terms seem to be used interchangeably, with both designating a complex combination of divine, human, and reptilian traits.

Kosambi described *nāgas* as 'demonic beings who appear simultaneously in the guise of poisonous cobras and also in human form' (1964: 31). Although Kosambi recognised the complexity of the portrayal of *nāgas*, he emphasised their human qualities, seeing them as representing indigenous peoples who lived in ancient India's non-agricultural areas.

According to Kosambi:

Nagas were food-gathering aborigines ready to change over. There is no question of a wide-spread Naga population; the name must indicate linguistically and perhaps ethnically diverse, primitive tribesmen who had a snake totem or snake worship among other totems and worship (1964: 38).

Kosambi's portrayal of *nāgas* as autochthonous has been widely accepted among scholars, including Doniger, who describes 'the Naga Princess Ulupi' as 'symbolic of tribal people who marry into Kshatriya families' (2009: 245).

Doniger, however, is more interested in their symbolic connotations in Indian mythology. In an essay that discusses snakes in the *Mahābhārata*, as well as in Hinduism more generally, she has noted the ambiguity of the term *nāga*:

One word that is usually translated as 'snake' is far more ambiguous than a simple serpent; it is *naga*, which designates any of the creatures, anthropomorphic from

the waist up and cobra from the waist down, who live in the watery underworld (*patala*) and in deep waters on earth. The translation of *naga* as “snake” is somewhat justified by the fact that nagas are often assimilated to more ordinary snakes or reptiles (*sarpas*, cognate with the English word “serpents”, meaning “gliders” or “slitherers”), but they remain creatures betwixt and between. Sometimes they are represented with several serpent hoods; sometimes they take on fully human form, though still with a crest of serpent hoods’ (2015: 1-2). Here, Doniger brings attention to snakes’ combination of divine, reptilian, and human characteristics, as well as their mythological significance as representing liminality.

Kosambi’s and Doniger’s insights are helpful because they articulate the complex combination of traits associated with snakes. When we focus our attention on Ulūpī, however, we see that these traits play out slightly differently than they do with other snake characters. In particular, Kosambi’s equation of snake characters with indigenous peoples is not apparent in the case of Ulūpī. Although it is certainly possible that on some level *nāga* characters, as well as other divine beings, such as *gandharvas* or *rākṣasas*, can represent groups of people, it is notable that Ulūpī is depicted as more of a divine being than as an indigenous person. Although she approaches Arjuna because she is ‘afflicted’ (*ārta*; 1.206.27), she is not depicted as socially inferior or disempowered in relation to Arjuna or other human characters. Rather, Ulūpī is portrayed as a princess in a royal lineage, who has access to divine information and a superior knowledge of *dharma*.

Doniger does well to emphasise the plurality of characteristics that snakes can inhabit at one and the same time, but her description of *nāgas* as physically half human and half cobra does not seem to apply to Ulūpī. Nor does Ulūpī appear to have a crest of serpent hoods. We cannot be certain, of course, because her physical appearance is never described, but there is no indication within the narrative that Ulūpī is a cobra from the waist down, or that she physically resembles a snake in any way. Rather than combining the physical characteristics of a human and a reptile at the same time, it seems that Ulūpī's identity as a *nāgī* bestows her with the power to shape-shift into either snake or human form, and perhaps into other forms as well.

The sexual nature of Ulūpī's encounter with Arjuna has prompted some scholars to eroticise her character as a *nāgī*. Ruth Katz suggests: 'As a snake, Ulupi is a fertility figure connected with the earth' (1989: 62). Doniger comments more generally about snake women: 'female nagas are very beautiful and particularly generous with men that they take a liking to' (2015: 2). Similarly, Laurie Cozad has described *nāgīs* as 'fabulously beautiful and sexually irresistible; they have healthy sexual appetites and are often driven to find a moral man in order to satisfy these cravings; and they are forever fertile, often giving birth to a host of sons' (2004: 72).

Although her encounter with Arjuna might have overlapping features with the episodes featuring *nāgīs* examined by Doniger and Cozad, Ulūpī's participation in this scene is far more than as a fertility figure or an amorous woman. Indeed, Ulūpī's role in initiating sexual relations with a man on her own terms could be seen as contributing to discussions

about female agency that take place across the *Mahābhārata*. Although it could be argued that her identity as a *nāgī* means that she does not directly serve as a model for mortal women, we should keep in mind not only the complexity of her character portrait that incorporates both human and divine characteristics, but also the fact that almost all human characters in the *Mahābhārata* have divine characteristics. If Draupadī, an incarnation of Śrī, can contribute to discussions on the ideal *pativrata*, and Yudhiṣṭhira, an incarnation of the deity Dharma, can contribute to human understandings of *dharma*, then it does not seem too far-fetched to think that Ulūpī could contribute to larger discussions about how human women can negotiate sexual relations with men.

In making this point, it is worth noting that Ulūpī puts forth two main arguments justifying their sexual liaison, both of which she articulates in terms of *dharma*.^{iv} Her first argument is that Arjuna would not violate *dharma* in having a sexual relationship with her, because the agreement with his brothers to remain celibate was exclusive to Draupadī: ‘When you were all living with the daughter of Drupada, you made a covenant that anyone of you who would foolishly enter should have to live in the forest as a hermit for twelve months’ (1.206.25).^v As Emily West describes it: ‘Ulūpī carefully explicates the *dharma* involved in Arjuna’s temporary celibacy, making a compelling case that the ban does not apply to her’ (2010: 19).

It is interesting that Ulūpī does not address the dharmic status of Arjuna’s *brahmacharya* vow directly; we might wonder if her argument sidesteps what could be considered the most pressing issue of *dharma* in this situation: the breaking of a vow. Instead, Ulūpī

focuses on Arjuna's agreement with his brothers, which was the basis for him taking the vow in the first place. Vaiśampāyana's narration does not specifically describe this agreement in terms of *dharma*; it is called a *samaya* (1.204.27), not a *dharma-samaya*. Nevertheless, when the Pāṇḍavas make this agreement, there is already a precedent for considering an agreement between the brothers as having dharmic status. When attempting to persuade Drupada to allow his daughter to have a polyandrous marriage with all five of the Pāṇḍavas brothers, Yudhiṣṭhira argues that Draupadī becoming their common wife would be in accordance with *dharma* because of a previous agreement (*samaya*) he had made with his brothers (1.187.24).^{vi} It is unclear whether Ulūpī knows about this, but her argument here seems to tap into what Arjuna would consider to be his most pressing dharmic concern: his promise to his brothers.

Ulūpī's second argument is that a sexual union between them would uphold *dharma* because it would save her life. She characterises herself as 'afflicted' (*ārta*), saying that Arjuna can save her life by being with her and that he has a duty to protect her (1.206.27). It is not clear exactly why Ulūpī's life is in danger or exactly how a sexual encounter with Arjuna will save her. We might wonder whether she is threatening suicide or suggesting she will die from lust. Although Ulūpī does not disclose what is threatening her life, we will see later in this paper that there are good reasons to take her concerns here as referring to an external threat from her enemies. In any case, her argument seems to be based on her claim that because her life is in the balance, this is a case of extenuating circumstances where the conventional norms of *dharma* do not apply.

Indeed, she acknowledges that a sexual union between them might be a subtle (*sūkṣma*) transgression (*vyatikrama*) (1.206.28).

Although the extenuating circumstances remain unclear, we might see Ulūpī's invocation of a contingency-based *dharma* as displaying a higher knowledge that includes an understanding of when it is acceptable to break the ordinary rules. Indeed, an understanding of *dharma* that takes into consideration contexts and contingencies would be consistent with the subtle *dharma* that is taught by Kṛṣṇa, Bhīṣma, and Yudhiṣṭhira, as well as others, in other sections of the text.^{vii} In considering this suggestion, it is notable that Ulūpī urges Arjuna to observe the highest (*anuttama*) *dharma* (1.206.30), implying that her explication is based on this highest understanding. Moreover, Arjuna defers to her as if she has a higher understanding, asking her how he should act to avoid transgressing *dharma* (1.206.23). When Arjuna finally obliges, Vaiśampāyana describes him as motivated by *dharma* (1.206.33).

Ulūpī relies on more than her knowledge of *dharma*, however, as she seems to invoke her divine powers as a *nāgī* when she reveals that she is aware of Arjuna's agreement with his brothers, despite not having witnessed this episode or being told about it. Although the text is not explicit about how she knows what she knows, clairvoyance is a widespread trait among divine figures in the *Mahābhārata*, as well as in other epic contexts. As West suggests, Ulūpī's prior knowledge of Arjuna's identity and personal history is part of a shared motif among Demi-goddesses who appear as helpers of the protagonists in Indian and Greek epics (2010: 18-19).

In addition to producing a son who will fight on the Pāṇḍava side during the Mahābhārata war, another possible result of Ulūpī's encounter with Arjuna is a subtle, yet major contribution to the continuation of the Kuru lineage. Although the narrative does not make this explicit, it is worth noting that only after Arjuna is persuaded by Ulūpī's *dharma*-based arguments to have sex with her does he have sexual liaisons with Citrāṅgadā and Subhadrā. Immediately after spending one night with Ulūpī, Arjuna goes off to Maṇalūra, where he marries Citrāṅgadā, which leads to having the son Babhruvāhana. After spending several months with Citrāṅgadā, Arjuna goes to Dvārakā, where he marries Subhadrā, with whom he has the son Abhimanyu, who will carry on the Kuru line. Considering that the son that emerges from his union with Subhadrā is the only Pāṇḍava heir who survives the war and is the grandfather of Janamejaya, we might see Ulūpī's role of articulating Arjuna's extra-marital sexual activity in terms of *dharma* as crucial to the continuation of the royal line. Indeed, we should note that Arjuna is initially hesitant to have sex with Ulūpī, concerned that he would break his *brahmacarya* vow (1.206.21). Although Ulūpī does not address this concern directly, we might wonder whether Arjuna's other liaisons would have taken place if he had not heard Ulūpī's argument that the restrictions on his sexual activity only pertained to Draupadī. Even though Ulūpī's own son with Arjuna dies in the Mahābhārata war, we might see her argument that his celibacy is exclusive to Draupadī as offering him the justification to produce an heir with another woman.^{viii}

In reflecting on her first interjection into the narrative, we see indications that Ulūpī's arguments to persuade Arjuna to have sex with her are not based on blind passion, but on her higher knowledge of *dharma* and her divine powers as a *nāgī*. Although Ulūpī might be 'fabulously beautiful and sexually irresistible' – the text does not say –, it is clear that she convinces Arjuna to be with her because of her arguments. Moreover, rather than acting out of blind passion, Ulūpī seems to choose her moment of intervention quite deliberately.

Nevertheless, a question still remains about why she makes her argument with such urgency, pleading with Arjuna to save her, claiming that she will die if he does not love her, and praising him for always protecting the destitute and unprotected (1.206.27-32). I will suggest below that we might make more sense of Ulūpī's words when we consider her rivalries with the snake Takṣaka and the bird Garuḍa. From this perspective, we might see Ulūpī pulling Arjuna down to the snake world as a planned abduction to recruit an important ally, rather than an act of spontaneous passion. We will return to this possibility in the final section of this paper.

Ulūpī in the *Aśvamedhika Parvan* (14.78-82)

After the *Ādi Parvan*, Ulūpī's next appearance is when she suddenly emerges out of the ground to convince Babhruvāhana to fight Arjuna. She later revives Arjuna, freeing him from a divine curse, after he is accidentally killed in combat. This episode takes place during Yudhiṣṭhira's *aśvamedha* after the war, when Arjuna, while wandering with the sacrificial horse, enters the kingdom of Maṅalūra, where he is greeted by Babhruvāhana –

his son by Ulūpī's co-wife Citrāṅgadā. When Babhruvāhana refuses to respond to his father's challenge to take his territory, Arjuna criticises him for acting like a woman and not fulfilling his duties as a *kṣatriya*. Just at this moment, Ulūpī rises up through the ground to convince Babhruvāhana to fight Arjuna. Babhruvāhana obliges, but when he engages his father in battle, he ends up killing him. When Citrāṅgadā sees her son strike down her husband in battle, she rushes to the battlefield, weeping. Holding Ulūpī responsible for Arjuna's death, Citrāṅgadā questions both her knowledge of *dharma* and her loyalty as a wife (*pativrata*) (14.79.4). When Citrāṅgadā later demands that Ulūpī revive Arjuna, Ulūpī summons a snake jewel, instructing Babhruvāhana how to use it to bring his father back to life. When a resuscitated Arjuna asks her to explain what happened, Ulūpī reveals that she orchestrated his death and revival to save him from the Vasus, who had cursed him because of the undharmic way he killed Bhīṣma. As Ulūpī explains to Arjuna, if he had died without atoning for this evil, he would have fallen into hell (14.82.8-10). Ulūpī adds that her father was distressed to hear about the Vasus' curse and assisted her in carrying out her plan by negotiating with the Vasus for a way for Arjuna to be released from their curse (14.82.16-19).

Shortly after this episode, Ulūpī, along with Citrāṅgadā, travels to Hāstinapura to attend the final ceremony of the *aśvamedha* (14.89.25). When they arrive, Ulūpī and Citrāṅgadā politely approach Kuntī, Draupadī, and Subhadrā, who greet them respectfully and offer them jewels. Ulūpī then lives in the palace, among the costliest of beds and seats, for the remainder of the Pāṇḍavas' rule. When Arjuna and his brothers depart on their final pilgrimage, Ulūpī returns on her own to the river Gaṅgā (17.1.25).

Like in the *Ādi Parvan*, in the *Aśvamedhika Parvan* Ulūpī exhibits characteristics that are strongly associated with her identity as a snake. While in her first appearance she emerges from underwater to abduct Arjuna and seems to possess the power of clairvoyance, here she appears out of the earth at exactly the right moment, conjures the snake jewel, and then uses it to bring him back to life. She also reveals that she knows about the Vasus' plan because she overheard their conversation by the bank of the river Gaṅgā, indicating that she has access to the activities taking place among celestial beings.

In addition to her divine characteristics, her appearance in the *Aśvamedhika Parvan* brings out her more reptilian qualities. When Babhruvāhana is fighting Arjuna, Vaiśampāyana compares an arrow shot by Babhruvāhana as penetrating Arjuna's body like a snake (*pannaga*) penetrating an anthill (14.78.22). Here, *pannaga* is not used directly to describe Ulūpī, but we might see Vaiśampāyana's use of this term as reinforcing the idea, as Citrāṅgadā indicates, that Ulūpī is the agent of Arjuna's temporary death and Babhruvāhana only the instrument.

Additionally, Ulūpī is obliquely associated with the term *āśīviṣa*, again when Vaiśampāyana narrates the confrontation between Babhruvāhana and Arjuna. Here, Vaiśampāyana twice describes the arrows that Babhruvāhana shoots at Arjuna as resembling 'poisonous snakes' (*āśīviṣa*) (14.78.19; 32). The fact that Ulūpī later reveals herself to be responsible for Arjuna's temporary death indicates that Babhruvāhana's

arrows have more than an allegorical relationship with her. Indeed, we might wonder if Ulūpī's *nāgī* powers extend to directing the arrows towards Arjuna.

In addition to expanding her portrayal as a *nāgī*, this scene further develops her association with a knowledge of *dharma*. When she first appears out of the ground to convince Babhruvāhana to fight Arjuna, she is described as proficient in *kṣatriya-dharma* (14.78.10). Later, when Citrāṅgadā blames Ulūpī for Arjuna's death, she also praises her as a knower of *dharma* (*dharmajñā*) (14.79.6). Taking this exchange with Babhruvāhana along with her dialogue with Arjuna in the *Ādi Parvan*, we see that Ulūpī is characterised as having both a pragmatic and pluralistic understanding of *dharma*, while using that knowledge toward the righteous cause of supporting the Pāṇḍavas. In both cases, she instructs her male interlocutors on aspects of *dharma* that pertain to them, but not to her, showing that she understands the dharmic responsibilities of her male interlocutors as well as, if not better than, they do.

Additionally, Ulūpī's intervention in the *Aśvamedhika Parvan* again contributes towards intertextual discussions about women in the *Mahābhārata*. When Citrāṅgadā sees Arjuna has been felled in battle, she blames Ulūpī for his death. Citrāṅgadā interrogates her, asking her if she is a devoted wife (*pativratā*). By bringing up the *pativratā* in this context, Citrāṅgadā indicates that her own understanding of this ideal is based more on loyalty than on service. Like Ulūpī, Citrāṅgadā does not live with Arjuna, so would hardly expect her to show devotion to her husband through everyday practices such as waking before him, serving meals to him, and avoiding the food and drink that he does

not consume – all of which are outlined by Draupadī when describing the *pativrata* ideal to Satyabhāmā in the *Āraṇyaka Parvan* (3.222-3). Rather, her questioning of Ulūpī's status as a *pativrata* assumes that she could be a devoted wife, even if she lives independently.

Ulūpī does not offer a verbal response to Citrāṅgadā, but rather demonstrates her devotion by executing her elaborate plan to save Arjuna's life. Soon after Citrāṅgadā addresses her, Ulūpī conjures the jewel (*maṇi*) that restores Arjuna (14.81.2). After he is revived, Ulūpī explains to Arjuna that she had overheard the Vasus planning their vengeful curse for the undharmic way he killed Bhīṣma. Here, when Ulūpī's role as a *pativrata* is questioned, she proves her dedication by carrying out the intricate plan she designed to save him from the the curse of the Vasus. In a *nāgī* twist on the *pativrata* ideal, Ulūpī draws on her divine powers to show the ultimate loyalty to her husband by saving his life.

Another distinguishing feature of Ulūpī's marital relationship with Arjuna is their living arrangements after the marriage. Whereas both Draupadī and Subhadrā join the Pāṇḍavas in Indraprastha, Ulūpī and Citrāṅgadā remain in their respective ancestral homes, raising their sons as part of their fathers' families. In terms of her living arrangements, Ulūpī resembles a *putrikā*, as she does not go off to live with Arjuna, but remains in her father's domain.^{ix} It is noteworthy that other *nāgas* also seem to follow this matrilocal custom. Āstika, for example, who like Irāvata is the son of a snake mother and a human father, is raised by his maternal uncle Vasuki. But while Ulūpī has characteristics of a *putrikā*, she

deviates from this model because her son goes off to fight and die for husband, rather than remain with her to become her father's heir. In contrast, Citrāṅgadā appears to live up to the ideal of *putrikā* more closely, as her son becomes the king of Maṅalūra. Nevertheless, both Ulūpī and Citrāṅgadā reside with Arjuna after the war, living as his wives in Hāstinapura.

Although the text does not go into further detail, we might see Ulūpī as extending the model of a devoted wife by combining aspects of both the *putrikā* and *pativratā* ideals. She remains faithful by using her superior knowledge and access to more information to protect Arjuna. But rather than attending to his every need, she lives alone for most of their married life and returns to the waters from which she first emerged when her husband enters his final stage of life. If by protecting Arjuna she fulfils her role as a *pativratā*, then she exhibits that ideal on her own terms, in the process offering a distinctive contribution to the *Mahābhārata*'s diverse portrayals of devoted wives.

Looking at Ulūpī's two encounters with Arjuna together, it is also notable that there is a narrative continuity and balance between them. As we have seen, in both episodes Ulūpī emerges spontaneously from underground and displays her *nāgī* powers. Both episodes also include the motif of the interrupted sacrifice. When Arjuna is pulled down into the water by Ulūpī, he has just completed performing oblations to his ancestors and is bathing before conducting the fire-rites (1.206.12-13). Then, when he arrives in Nāgāloka, Arjuna completes a ritual that had already been prepared (1.206.14-15). Noting that the narrative describes the fire as pleased with Arjuna for completing the

ritual, West has suggested that his performance of the fire-rite in Nāgaloka completes the rites he was performing when he was suddenly abducted by Ulūpī:

Fortunately, a solution to the interrupted rite is at hand: Arjuna sees a fire already prepared in the *nāga* palace, and he immediately performs an underwater version of the ritual so as to avoid divine displeasure (2010: 7).

It is notable, then, that the second encounter between Ulūpī and Arjuna also takes place within the context of a ritual, when Arjuna is following the horse as part of the *aśvamedha*. Minkowski has explored the motif of the interrupted sacrifice in the *Mahābhārata* as exploring themes ‘of patrilineal descent, of excessive violence, and of the virtues of poetry’ (2001: 180). In the case of the episodes featuring Ulūpī, the ritual is only interrupted briefly and is then completely successfully. Also, in both cases the episode concludes with a union between Ulūpī and Arjuna, in the first with their night together in the Nāgaloka, in the second with her later joining him in Hāstinapura. In comparison with some of the more violent examples discussed by Minkowski, we might see these occasions with Ulūpī as a more positive take on the interrupted sacrifice motif, which can otherwise depict rituals as ‘scenes of antagonism, rivalry, conflict’ (2001: 180).

Both episodes also depict the liaison between Ulūpī and Arjuna as saving one of their lives. In their first encounter, although it is not completely clear why Ulūpī’s life is in danger, she insists that their union will rescue her from death. Then, in their second encounter, Ulūpī reciprocates by saving Arjuna’s life. In the first episode it is not clear to what extent Arjuna completing the ritual is related to saving Ulūpī’s life, but in the

Aśvamedhika Parvan Ulūpī's resuscitation of Arjuna not only saves his life but also ensures that Yudhiṣṭhira's *aśvamedha* can be completed successfully. That both episodes between Ulūpī and Arjuna include the themes of an interrupted ritual and a life saved is worth keeping in mind as we look at Ulūpī's connection to another ritual episode that contains both of these themes: Janamejaya's *sarpa-satra*.^x

Ulūpī and the *sarpa-satra*

When Ulūpī introduces herself to Arjuna, she refers to herself as the daughter of Kauravya, within the lineage of the snake Airāvata (1.206.18). As we will see in this section, paying attention to Ulūpī's ancestry and its relationship to other snake genealogies deepens our understanding of one of the central events of the *Mahābhārata*: Janamejaya's snake sacrifice. Minkowski highlights the significance of Janamejaya's snake sacrifice as framing the themes of intergenerational violence and the ongoing rivalry between the Kuru family and snakes. As he describes it: 'the Kuru dynasty has a long and close association with serpents' (1991: 396). Minkowski is right to highlight the importance of Janamejaya's snake sacrifice as framing the central story, but his tendency to treat snakes as a homogenous category obscures the rivalries between different lineages of snake characters. In this section I will show that Ulūpī's unique perspective brings to attention some of the distinctions between different snake lineages; I will also suggest that her rivalries with different branches of snakes mirrors the main story's depiction of the rivalry between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas.

According to Ugraśravas' narration, there are five main lineages of snakes that perished in Janamejaya's *sarpa-satra*: they are the descendants of Vāsuki, Takṣaka, Airāvata, Kauravya, and Dhṛtarāṣṭra (1.52.4-17). Although Ugraśravas explains that there are too many snakes for him to mention by name, among the snakes he does mention, some lineages seem to have lost more snakes in the massacre than others. Ugraśravas names 15 that were killed from Vāsuki's line; 17 from Takṣaka's; 10 from Airāvata's; 10 from Kauravya's; and 35 from Dhṛtarāṣṭra's. Although we should not take these abbreviated lists as recording exact numbers, it is worth noting that the two branches with which Ulūpī is most closely affiliated – Airāvata's and Kauravya's – seem to have lost the fewest number of snakes in the sacrifice.

When Nārada talks about the different branches of snakes in the *Udyoga Parvan* (5.101.9-16), he also makes it clear that there are many different lineages. Similar to Ugraśravas, Nārada comments on the sheer number of snakes, speaking of millions in each lineage. He then lists the chiefs among the different lineages, naming sixty-six. Included among them are the five mentioned by Ugraśravas: Vāsuki, Takṣaka, Airāvata, Kauravya, and Dhṛtarāṣṭra.

Among the lineages of snakes, Ulūpī identifies herself as the daughter of Kauravya, which literally means 'descendent of Kuru' (1.206.18). It is intriguing that at the beginning of her encounter with him, Arjuna himself is described as Kaurava (1.206.1). Of course, as a member of the Kuru family, he is technically a Kaurava, but given his rivalry with his cousins, who are collectively known by this name, this is a designation

that is rarely used to describe him. As if to emphasise their alliance, in the *Aśvamedhika Parvan* Ulūpī refers to Arjuna as Kauravya (14.82.7) and to Babhruvāhana as Kaurava (14.81.6). Rather than implying a blood relationship, however, their shared names seem more likely to be part of what Minkowski describes as ‘a systematic overlapping of snake names with Kuru and Bhārata names’ (1991: 396). In addition to Kauravya, other overlapping names include Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Janamejaya, Dhanamjaya, Dilīpa, and Nahuṣa. The common names, especially in cases such as Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Janamejaya, and Dhanamjaya where there is no indication of a shared genealogy, seem to reiterate the notion that the mythologies of the Kurus and the Snakes are distinct, but intertwined.

We have seen that Ulūpī identifies her father as Kauravya in the lineage of Airāvata. In contrast to the lists of Ugraśravas and Nārada where the lineages of Airāvata and Kauravya are distinct, Ulūpī indicates that her father Kauravya is a descendent of Airāvata, who is repeatedly described as king of the snakes. When Arjuna is pulled into the snake underworld, he performs a ritual in which he praises Airāvata as Nāgarāja (1.206.14–15). Four generations later, when Uttan̄ka visits the snake underworld, Airāvata is again referred to as the king of the snakes (1.3.139-140). It is not clear exactly what the relationship between Kauravya and Airāvata is, but other details suggest that Ulūpī has a close connection with Airāvata. According to Saṃjaya’s narration in the *Bhīṣma Parvan*, Ulūpī was given away by Airāvata when she married Arjuna (6.86.7).

While Ulūpī is strongly associated with Airāvata, she is sharply distinguished from Takṣaka, the text’s most prominent snake character. Throughout Ugraśravas’ frame story,

Takṣaka is cast as a villain: he steals earrings from Uttāṅka (1.3.136-70), deceives a brahmin (1.38.35), and then kills Parikṣit (1.39.29-33). As Cozad notes: ‘Takṣaka ‘is characterized as a malevolent force bent on deceit and destruction’ (2004: 64). However, the first time Takṣaka appears in the main story, he is one of the numerous divine beings who pays respects to Arjuna just after he is born (1.114.60-1). In other words, it seems that before the Khāṇḍava Forest episode, Takṣaka was not considered an enemy of the Kurus. Meena Nayak reflects: ‘Perhaps it was Arjuna’s reprehensible actions in the Khāṇḍava that angered Takṣaka and turned him against the Kurus. But, aside from Takṣaka, there are no major epic nāga enemies’ (2018: 55).

The first time Takṣaka appears in Ugraśravas’ narration is in the story of Uttāṅka (1.3.86-195). In this tale, Uttāṅka embarks on a quest to obtain earrings to give to his guru’s wife. After he secures the earrings, Takṣaka steals them. Takṣaka is able to deceive Uttāṅka, not only by using his power of shape shifting to disguise himself in the form of a naked mendicant, but also to alternate between being visible and invisible. When trying to retrieve the earrings, Uttāṅka follows Takṣaka down a chasm to Nāgaloka (1.3.136-8). Like Ulūpī, then, Takṣaka takes a human down to the world of the snakes. The circumstances, however, are very different: Ulūpī deliberately brings her love interest and future ally to the snake world, whereas Takṣaka inadvertently lures an adversary. But as we will explore more below, in both cases a human encounter with a snake in Nāgaloka precedes a massacre of snakes. Whereas Ulūpī is regarded as an ally of the Kurus, making a formal alliance through her marriage to Arjuna, Takṣaka, at least after his initial appearance at Arjuna’s birth, is depicted as a threatening enemy. And whereas Ulūpī uses

her extraordinary powers as a snake to help Arjuna and the Pāṇḍavas, Takṣaka uses his shape-shifting ability first to appear as a sometimes invisible naked mendicant to steal King Pauṣya's wife's earrings, and later to appear as a worm, who then changes into a cobra to kill Parikṣit (1.39.29-33). In sharp contrast with Ulūpī, Takṣaka's use of his special snake powers is depicted as sneaky, deceitful, and deadly.

That Ulūpī is closely associated with Airāvata while distinguished from Takṣaka fits into a larger pattern of differentiating between two main branches of snakes, a division that plays out in the ongoing battle between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas. Considering that we know that Irāvata fights on the side of the Pāṇḍavas and that Takṣaka's son Aśvasena takes the form of Karṇa's arrow, it seems that the lineages of Kauravya and Airāvata fought alongside the Pāṇḍavas, while the lineage of Takṣaka fought alongside the Kauravas.

This division seems to map onto the distinction between those snakes who live underground and those who live in the land of the Kurus, which includes the Khāṇḍava Forest. Further evidence of this distinction appears in the story of Uttāṅka. Although, Vaiśampāyana describes Nāgaloka as Takṣaka's 'abode' (*svabhavana*) (1.3.138), other passages make it clear that he lived in the land of the Kurus. According to Uttāṅka, Nāgaloka is presided over by Airāvata. In his description of the snake world, Uttāṅka praises the descendants of Airāvata, while mentioning Dhṛtarāṣṭra as a leader of an army of snakes and Takṣaka as the one who took the earrings. He also describes Takṣaka as dwelling in the Land of the Kurus and the Khāṇḍava Forest (1.3.144-5). According to this

account, there seems to be two dwellings of snakes, the underworld and the land of the Kurus, particularly the Khāṇḍava Forest. While Airāvata and Dhṛtarāṣṭra are associated with Nāgaloka, Takṣaka is associated with Kurukṣetra and the Khāṇḍava Forest.^{xi} Notably, when Takṣaka is not in the forest when it is burning down, he is not in the snake world either, but in Kurukṣetra (1.218.4).

There is also a distinction between how Takṣaka and Airāvata are depicted in relation to Uttāṅka. According to Ugraśravas' narration, Uttāṅka's visit to the world of the snakes immediately precedes the snake sacrifice, in addition to being one of its main causes. It is after this episode that Uttāṅka goes to Janamejaya to tell him to perform the *sarpa-satra* (1.3.178-192). In his plea, he focuses his revenge specifically on Takṣaka, revealing to Janamejaya the identity of who had killed his father.

Whereas Takṣaka is depicted as an enemy of Uttāṅka, Airāvata is depicted as helping him. After being lured underground by Takṣaka, Uttāṅka fills Nāgaloka with smoke to get the earrings (1.3.158). When he later describes these events to his teacher, his teacher explains how Airāvata played a role in helping him survive the smoke. Before Takṣaka had stolen the earrings, Uttāṅka had seen a bull, with a man riding on top of him. The man had ordered Uttāṅka to eat the dung of his bull. After eating the bull's dung, Uttāṅka then goes to see King Pauṣya, from whose wife he first gets the earrings. When Uttāṅka later recounts these events, his teacher discloses that the bull was Airāvata 'king of the Snakes', while the man on the bull was Indra. As his teacher explains, the dung of the bull was the 'Elixir of Immortality': 'That, to be sure, was the reason why you did not

succumb in the dwelling place of the snakes (*nāgabhavana*)’ (1.3.175).^{xii} In contrast to Takṣaka, who uses his powers as a *nāga* to deceive and to kill, Airāvata allows Uttara to survive his dangerous sojourn into the snake underworld.

Returning to Ulūpī, we see that, like Airāvata she performs the role of helper and ally of the Kurus. By contrasting Ulūpī and Takṣaka, we see different, yet overlapping depictions of snakes. Both have a combination of reptilian, human, and divine features, but they exhibit this combination differently. Takṣaka can shift into the form of a human or a worm, but he is most vividly portrayed in the physical form of a reptile that is both frightening and dangerous to humans. He has coils, he hisses, and it is his venomous bite that kills Parikṣit (1.40.1-4). In contrast, Ulūpī’s physical description is never revealed, which perhaps makes her both more mysterious and more human. Crucially, in contrast with Takṣaka, Ulūpī is portrayed far more positively, thus countering the depiction of snakes as deceptive enemies to the Kuru family. Perhaps concentrating too much on Takṣaka, Cozad characterises the depiction of snakes in the *Mahābhārata* as overwhelmingly negative: ‘the snakes are made to behave as troublesome and deceptive creatures ... they are presented as a threatening multitudinous force that deserves to die’ (2004: 52). Through Ulūpī, however, we are reminded that snakes can also be portrayed as helpers and allies, that Takṣaka is the only snake adversary of the Pāṇḍavas, and that even Takṣaka was at one time more of a friend than a foe.

So how does Ulūpī’s perspective shed further light on the *sarpa-satra*? One clue might lie in the story of Ruru, which is recounted by Ugrasravas as he sets the scene for his

account of the snake sacrifice (1.8-12). Ruru has a fiancée, Pramadvarā, who is killed by snakebite. Through an act of truth (*satyagrīya*), Ruru revives his bride-to-be, but only after giving up half of his own life. We should note at this point the parallel between Ulūpī bringing Arjuna back to life and Ruru reviving his wife. But even after bringing his bride back from the dead, Ruru swears to take revenge by killing all the snakes. He then goes around lashing snakes with a stick, but one day strikes a lizard (*duṇḍubha*) instead.^{xiii} This lizard, as it turns out, is actually a sage who has been cursed because he had frightened another sage with a snake. He tells Ruru: ‘Do not kill lizards because we resemble snakes. Lizards share the misfortune of snakes, though we have our own purposes ... You know *dharma*, therefore, deign not to injure lizards’ (1.10.3-4). The sage then tells Ruru about Āstīka, who saved the snakes from extermination through his inspiring song of praise to Janamejaya.

One of the reasons why the Ruru story serves as an appropriate frame for the *sarpa-satra* is because it brings attention to the fact that not all reptiles are the same – that in wanting to avenge his wife’s near death, Ruru declares war on all snakes and almost ends up killing a reptile who is not even a snake. In other words, Ruru, like Janamejaya kills indiscriminately. Similar to the story of Ruru, Ulūpī’s perspective also reminds us that that not all snakes are the same. Her vantage points gives us the opportunity to see the *sarpa-satra* as the tragedy that it is: a massacre of millions is carried out because of the actions of one individual. Not only that, but most of the snakes killed in the sacrifice were not even related to Takṣaka, nor were they aligned with him. Once we begin to see this

episode through the eyes of Ulūpī, we begin to wonder where she was during the *sarpa-satra* and about her relatives that perish.

Ulūpī and the burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest

Throughout this paper, I have argued that Ulūpī plays a more central role in the main story than has been previously understood. Not only does she contribute towards the continuation of the Kuru line, but her own lineage seems to have a multi-generational rivalry with Takṣaka's branch of snakes. The more we recognise the crucial role that Ulūpī plays in the narrative, however, especially the ways that she helps Arjuna, the more difficult it is to make sense out of what Arjuna does several years after their initial meeting: assist Kṛṣṇa in the burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest.

The burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest is the final episode of the *Ādi Parvan*. The incident begins when Agni, disguised as a brahmin, approaches Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, asking them to help him burn down the forest. Agni explains that he needs their assistance because Indra protects the forest on account of the fact that his friend Takṣaka lives there (1.215.7).

Although Agni does not specify Takṣaka as the target of the fire, the forest itself is identified as his abode, and thus the burning is at least indirectly an attack on him and followers. In this way, an important connection between the burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest and the *sarpa-satra* is that they both single out Takṣaka in one way or another, although neither kills him.

While Takṣaka escapes the forest unharmed, Arjuna is particularly violent towards his snake relatives who remain in the forest. Not only does he kill Takṣaka's wife and curse his son Aśvasena when he escapes, but also he is responsible for the death of countless snakes. As Vaiśampāyana describes it: 'Nests of Snakes (*uraga*) came out close to the Pāṇḍava, spewing with burning mouths their ghastly venom. No sooner did he see the raging, airborne beasts than the Pārtha cut them up with his arrows. Powerlessly, they fell into the fire to part with their bodies' (1.218.21-22).

In terms of the unfolding of the central storyline, the burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest is an integral part of the Pāṇḍavas setting up their capital in Indraprastha. As van Buitenen explained: 'In order to found their own kingdom, the Pandavas need to clear the forest, which is done by fire in the form of the God of Fire' (1973: 13). The burning of the forest also sets in motion the four generations of violence between the Kurus and the snakes. As Minkowski succinctly summarises, this cycle of violence is 'begun by Arjuna who kills Takṣaka's wife (1.218.1-11); Takṣaka's son Aśvasena, barely escaping the Khāṇḍava fire, tries to kill Arjuna by becoming one of Karṇa's arrows. Arjuna is saved by Krishna and kills Aśvasena (8.66.1-24). Takṣaka kills Parikṣit, Arjuna's grandson (1.45-6). Janamejaya, Parikṣit's son tries to kill Takṣaka (1.47-53). Āstika ends the vendetta (1.53)' (1991: 397).

Because of its excessive violence, scholars have found the Khāṇḍava Forest episode morally problematic and difficult to explain. Christopher Framarin has brought attention to the curious pleasure with which Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa carry out their acts of violence:

‘Not only do Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna help Agni devour the vast forest and its inhabitants, but they do so eagerly and joyfully’ (Framarin 2013: 185). Similarly troubled by this episode, Hildebeitel calls it: ‘one of the oddest and most grisly segments of the epic’ (1976: 210).

Perhaps because it is both odd and grisly, scholars have offered a diverse array of interpretations of this episode. One of the most persistent understandings of this scene, as Katz explains, is that it represents ‘a historic burning of forests for the purpose of conquest or land clearing, the animals killed representing the local tribes wiped out during the expansion’ (1989: 78).^{xiv} Although it is possible that there is a historical kernel to this story, this interpretation might not be as straightforward if we consider the diversity among different groups of snakes. As we discussed above, even if some snakes on some occasions might represent indigenous peoples, the snakes depicted in the *Mahābhārata* are almost always more than human; they are portrayed as a complex and ever shifting combination of humans, reptiles, and divine beings. We might wonder if a historical understanding of snakes remains as strong when we keep in mind that they are not a homogenous group and that snake characters tend to have more positive than negative interactions with the Kurus.

Madeleine Biardeau has interpreted this episode more mythologically, seeing the conflagration in the forest in terms of the Purāṇic theme of *pralaya* – the dissolution of the universe that occurs at the end of a cosmic age. Accordingly, Biardeau sees the four survivors of the fire as representing the restoration that emerges out of destruction (Biardeau 1971–2: 140–1). Hildebeitel endorses some aspects of Biardeau’s reading, but

ultimately sees the symbolism of *pralaya* as secondary to its primary theme of initiation, in which Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa are initiated into ‘the capacity for world destruction’ (1976: 223).

Meanwhile, Katz reflects on the morally challenging aspects of the episode: ‘The episode of the Khandava Forest burning is one of the most difficult sections of the epic to understand. For not only does it offend modern sensibilities (both Hindu and Western); it also goes against the morality propounded by the extant epic’ (1989: 72-3). Katz has in mind the *Mahābhārata*’s teachings on nonviolence, as well as its portrayal of the *kṣatriya* rules of warfare, ‘which state clearly that innocent bystanders are never to be slain in battle’ (1989: 73). Although it is perhaps not surprising that this episode challenges ideals of non-violence and codes for warriors in other sections of the text, Katz is right to point out that what is notable is the lack of any attempt to justify the episode. While the *Mahābhārata*’s protagonists challenge dharmic norms on countless occasions, most instances prompt attempts at moral justification, or explanations that such actions are not what they seem. What makes the Khāṇḍava Forest unique, Katz argues, is ‘its freedom from apologetic or moralizing commentary’ (1989: 73). Finally, Katz suggests that the violence of the forest burning might not need explanation because it is perpetrated against natural forces and animals, that there are no human victims.

What I find particularly puzzling about this episode, however, is not so much the scale of the harm the forest burning causes to thousands of innocent creatures, or even the enjoyment that Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa take in wreaking havoc. Rather, I find Arjuna’s

participation in this episode surprising in light of his relatively recent amorous encounter with Ulūpī. Why, after spending intimate time with a snake princess, would Arjuna subsequently act violently against snakes, countless of whom die in the Khāṇḍava Forest? Not only does Arjuna have a son with Ulūpī, but when he visits her in the underworld, he makes religious offerings (1.206.14–15) and describes the world of the snakes as a lovely place (1.206.17). Given his appreciation of Nāgaloka and the respect he pays by performing a religious rite, it hardly seems appropriate that he would subsequently participate in a massacre against snakes. Indeed, even if we could interpret Arjuna's actions as thoughtless and cruel, then why would Ulūpī revive him in the *Aśvamedhika Parvan* after he had killed so many of her snake relatives? Or even if we might understand Ulūpī as blindly in love with Arjuna, then why would her father intervene to help revive him?

Although the *Mahābhārata* does not provide definitive answers to these questions, I think we can make more sense out of Arjuna's involvement in the Khāṇḍava Forest episode when we try to understand it from Ulūpī's perspective. This episode, I maintain, is more comprehensible when we take into consideration Ulūpī's rivalries with snakes related to Takṣaka – as we saw in the previous section – and her rivalries with birds related to Garuḍa. Indeed, it is primarily the descendants of Takṣaka and Garuḍa who perish in the Khāṇḍava Forest. By looking into these two rivalries in more detail, I will suggest that her initial abduction of Arjuna might have been motivated by much more than her sexual attraction to the Pāṇḍava hero.

Let us begin by looking at some interesting parallels between Arjuna and Uttāṅka. They are two of very few human characters in the *Mahābhārata* to visit Nāgaloka: Uttāṅka is lured by Takṣaka; Arjuna pulled down by Ulūpī. As we have seen, both of them pay homage to Airāvata as Nāgarāja. Meanwhile, both of their visits are followed by a holocaust of snakes: in Uttāṅka's case, his visit precipitates Janamejaya's snake sacrifice, while Arjuna's visit to Nāgaloka comes several years before the burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest. We know it must be about five years, because between the time when Arjuna returns from his sojourn and when he participates in the burning of the forest, Draupadī gives birth to five sons. The gap between Arjuna's visit to Nāgaloka and the massacre of snakes in the forest, then, is much longer than the time between Uttāṅka's visit and Janamejaya's snake sacrifice. According to how the narrative is recounted by Vaiśampāyana, however, the Khāṇḍava Forest episode follows shortly after Arjuna's visit with Ulūpī. In other words, although there are differences between their circumstances, there seems to be a shared narrative structure of their stories: in both cases a visit to the world of the snakes is followed by a mass slaughter of snakes.

Despite this similarity, Uttāṅka's and Arjuna's visits to the world of the snakes are characterised very differently. Whereas Uttāṅka is angered by Takṣaka, who steals the earrings he has retrieved for a gift to his guru's wife, Arjuna is given no explicit reason to take revenge against the snakes. However, it is worth considering what Ulūpī had to gain. As have seen in the previous section, there is a distinction between the snakes who live underground and those who live on land, with Ulūpī aligned with Airāvata and the snakes of the Nāgaloka, in opposition to Takṣaka who lives in the Khāṇḍava Forest.

Another clue as to why Ulūpī might benefit from the burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest can be found in the *Bhīṣma Parvan*, when Saṃjaya offers a backstory about Irāvata, just before he is killed in battle. Here, as we have seen, Saṃjaya explains that Irāvata was the son of Ulūpī and Arjuna. Saṃjaya also reveals that Ulūpī had been married before and that her first husband had been killed by Suparna – also known as Garuḍa (6.86.7). In addition to the multitude of snakes that die in the forest, it should be remembered that thousands of birds perish as well. According to Vaiśampāyana’s narration, Garuḍa is included among the birds that are in the Khāṇḍava Forest at the beginning of the episode. At one point, together with other birds, Garuḍa flies towards Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa, attempting to strike them (1.218.19-20). Although Garuḍa escapes unscathed, the other birds, along with countless snakes, fall into the fire (1.218.22).

In addition to the fact that Ulūpī’s first husband was killed by Garuḍa, there are indications that Irāvata might also be in danger. In the *Udyoga Parvan*, we get another glimpse of the battle between birds and snakes, this one revealing that Garuḍa intends to kill the son of a prominent snake he had already killed. According to Nārada, who narrates this episode, Mātali wants the snake Sumukha to be his son-in-law, but Garuḍa has killed his father and wants to kill him too (5.101.24). Here we see that the conflict between birds and snakes is inter-generational, as Garuḍa continues a rivalry he had with a snake father against his son. Returning to the *Bhīṣma Parvan*, it is notable that Irāvata is eventually killed by a *rākṣasa* that uses his shape-shifting powers to take the form of

Garuḍa. Even though the *rākṣasa* is not actually Garuḍa, symbolically Irāvāt is killed by the same bird who killed his mother's first husband.

Keeping in mind Ulūpī's rivalries with Garuḍa, as well as Takṣaka, we can return to her surprisingly urgent appeal to Arjuna to rescue her. As we have seen, when Ulūpī pleads with Arjuna to have sex with her, she indicates that she is in danger and needs his protection (1.206.27-32). Ulūpī says that she will die if he does not agree and that she is approaching him as someone who protects those who are in danger. We might be able to make better sense of the urgency of her words if we see her pulling Arjuna down to the snake world as a planned abduction to recruit an important ally in her ongoing battles with her enemies. In other words, perhaps Ulūpī asks Arjuna to rescue her out of her fear of Garuḍa and/or Takṣaka. Indeed, we might wonder if Ulūpī tells Arjuna about how her husband died during their night together in Nāgaloka.

Although the *Mahābhārata* does not provide these details, attempting to view the burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest from Ulūpī's perspective offers some intriguing possibilities. It can also caution us against interpretations that do not differentiate between the different types of snakes and the complexity with which they are characterised. Framarin, for example, has tried to make sense of the moral problems caused by the burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest through the lens of *pralaya*. As he suggests, the forest, because it is the 'typical habitat for snakes and demons' is 'an especially suitable setting for the metaphoric portrayal of *pralaya* ... If the universe in the Kali age is to be purged of *adharmā* in order to re-emerge in the *dharmic* Kṛta *yuga*, where better to start than with

the destruction of these enemies of *dharma*?' (2013: 196).^{xv} Undeniably, there is *pralaya* imagery in the burning of the forest episode, but seeing the snakes as representing *adharma* does not take into account the multifaceted ways that they are portrayed. As we have seen, Ulūpī has both an extensive and detailed understanding of *dharma* and uses this understanding in support of the larger dharmic cause of assisting the Pāṇḍavas. Other snake characters who are associated with a knowledge of *dharma* include Śeṣa (1.32.5-25), Nahuṣa (3.175-8), and Padmanābha (12.340-52). And although Takṣaka is repeatedly depicted negatively, most of the prominent snake characters in the *Mahābhārata* are more likely to support *dharma*, than to represent *adharma*. If the burning of the forest is seen as representing the victory of *dharma* over *adharma*, then I do not think we should extend the adharmic characterisation of Takṣaka and 'his people' to all snakes. Ulūpī's perspective might prompt us to question whether the burning of the forest is meant to be considered in such cosmic terms.

As we can see, there are a number of compelling interpretations of the burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest. I am not suggesting here that any of these interpretations are undermined completely, but only that by looking at this episode through the eyes of Ulūpī these readings perhaps need to be qualified by adding another layer to consider. Most significantly, Ulūpī's perspective reminds us that no matter how excessive the violence of the burning of the forest, we cannot see it as an attack on all snakes in the same way that Janamejaya's *sarpa-satra* will be several generations later. Compared to the countless lineages of snakes massacred in the *sarpa-satra*, only one lineage of snakes is mentioned as dwelling in the forest; and, as we learn from Ulūpī, this lineage has major

rivalries with other snake lineages. With this in mind, I have speculated that Ulūpī might have had as much to gain from the burning of the forest as Arjuna did, as she had bitter rivalries with the two groups that suffer the most from the forest fire. Considering Ulūpī's conflicts with both Takṣaka and Garuḍa, then, we might see her initial encounter with Arjuna as a mutually beneficial liaison in which she gives Arjuna a son who will help him fight the Kauravas, while Arjuna's participation in the burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest nearly avenges her first husband's death.

Conclusion

Because of his role in Janamejaya's *sarpa-satra*, most studies that recognise the importance of snakes in the *Mahābhārata* emphasise the character of Takṣaka. As I have tried to show in this paper, we get a different perspective about snakes when we focus our attention on Ulūpī, who is a lover, wife, and ally of one of the text's central characters. As we have seen, Ulūpī represents a more human side of snakes, as she not only is versed in *dharma*, but uses her special powers to help the Kurus, rather than to fight against them.

In her initial encounter with Arjuna, Ulūpī's intervention gives a dharmic justification for Arjuna to have sexual liaisons with other women, which arguably results in securing an heir to the kingdom and the continuation of the Kuru line. Ulūpī's initial appearance also contributes towards ongoing debates within the text about the sexual autonomy of women, with her words and actions indicating that an understanding of *dharma* can empower her to negotiate a sexual relationship with a man on her own terms. We have also seen that Ulūpī remains both independent and empowered after she becomes a wife,

in the process expanding the range of ways women might live up to the ideal of the *pativrata*.

In the second part of this paper, we saw that Ulūpī offers a fresh perspective on how to understand the meaning and significance of snake characters. By contrasting the portrayal of Ulūpī with that of Takṣaka, we learn that snakes are a far more complex category than usually acknowledged. Not only are there a number of different types of snakes, but among those snakes who perish in Janamejaya's *sarpa-satra*, there are several different lineages, some of which are more aligned with the Kurus than with Takṣaka. We have also seen that Ulūpī plays an important role in the inter-generational vendetta between the Kurus and snakes, which culminates in Janamejaya's *sarpa-satra*. In particular, Arjuna's participation in the burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest seems to make more sense when viewed from her perspective.

Not only is Ulūpī a more prominent character than we might otherwise have realised, but also her story invites us to ask how Arjuna's actions contribute to the wider drama between different lineages of snakes. As far as I can tell, the *Mahābharatā* does not give us enough details to piece together a larger story of the snakes, but it does give us enough information to indicate that Arjuna's interactions with the snakes are part of a wider and more complex drama involving both rivalries between snakes and rivalries between snakes and birds.

Taken together, we see that despite only making two appearances, Ulūpī contributes far more to the central narrative, as well as to the text's central teachings, than has been previously understood. Many major themes throughout the text intersect in the unfolding of Ulūpī's very brief, yet integral story. By examining the interventions she makes into the main story, their implications, and how her perspective deepens our understanding of major episodes, we gain a greater appreciation of the literary depth of the *Mahābhārata* and the intricacy of its intra-textual textures. Through Ulūpī we gain a unique perspective from which to reflect back on the *Mahābhārata* as a whole.

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ⁱⁱ For discussion of Irāvāt in the *Mahābhārata* and in subsequent traditions, see Hildebetel (2018: 138-201).

ⁱⁱⁱ Irāvāt is also mentioned several times before his death (see 6.43.66-8; 6.52.16; 6.71.11; 6.77.35; and 6.79.12-22), but we only learn that he is the son of Ulūpī and Arjuna in Saṃjaya's account of the battle that leads to his death (6.86.6).

^{iv} I would like to thank the second blind reviewer for their helpful comments in response to an earlier draft of this section.

^v Translations of the *Ādi Parvan* loosely follow van Buitenen (1973).

^{vi} For a discussion of Yudhiṣṭhira's arguments in this scene, see Black (2021: 67-73)

^{vii} For a discussion on subtle *dharma*, see Black (2021a:178–181; and 2021b).

^{viii} Here we might draw a parallel with Satyavatī, another women whose *dharma*-based arguments contribute to preserving the Kuru line (1.97-99). For a detailed discussion of this dialogue, see Black (2021a: 30-34).

^{ix} For a further discussion of *putrikās*, see Brodbeck (2009: 48-56).

^x I would like to thank the first blind reviewer for suggesting that I consider these themes.

^{xi} As Cozad points out, in Vedic literature Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Airāvata are one and the same snake (2004: 55).

^{xii} Airāvata is also the name of the elephant that Indra rides. As Doniger explains: 'since the Sanskrit word *naga* means both snake and elephant (probably because of the serpentine trunk), it seems likely that the author chose the snakier of the two alternative meanings for this snaky story' (2015: 18-19).

^{xiii} van Buitenen notes that 'lizard' is a 'merely approximate' translation (1973: 442, n. 20). Doniger notes 'the liminality of the lizard, who is a reptile but not a snake' (2015: 14).

^{xiv} Versions of this view has been put forward by Holtzmann (younger), C.V. Vaidya, Irawati Karve, and van Buitenen (See Hildebeitel 1976: 213ff for discussion).

^{xv} Cozad also associates snakes with *adharmā* (2004: 64).