Blast from the past

What is the challenge and thrill of writing a story that is already known? Why is the past more interesting than the contemporary? Why would a writer choose to go back to the past and wrest her material from there? These are questions only the writer can answer. I guess, and I am only speculating here, that this is something to do with the motivations of the writer.

What could those motivations be? Is it a story that Krishna has grown up with, thinking it through her mind, raveling and unraveling its myriad secrets and twists, fascinated by its characters? Or is she trying to give a voice to the voiceless (most importantly, to the female characters of the *Mahabharata*, especially Panchali), that is, is she rewriting their well-known stories with feminist undertones? The female characters in the novel are very self-conscious of their status, the rights that have been denied to them and the social injustice that happens to them in the name of tradition and law. Is there any historical proof of this (that, this was how their minds worked)? Or is this was how the writer needed to balance out the world of the *Mahabharata*, by thrusting today's moral positions onto characters who lived several thousand years ago?



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You may agree or disagree with the author's decision to mix up the worldviews, but one thing you must admire is the language that she has employed in her novel: lush, vivid and evocative. It is a welcome relief, given the state of immaturity of commercial Indian writing in English. The danger was that she could have fallen into pushing the language of her narrative into theatricality. She has thankfully avoided that.

This is the story of Govinda, the cowherd prince and the commander-in-chief of Dwarka but most other characters have also been so well-etched out that you get lost with them in the thicket of the story. Also, some readers can get overwhelmed by dealing with so many characters in the novel.

In *Govinda*, the heroes are mythic characters and yet they are ordinary. The writer has stripped them of their magical powers. Imposing this kind of realism onto mythical characters is an achievement in itself—it is certainly genre-bending in that sense.

Krishna's writing style betrays her scholarship (she is a lecturer) and she does not stoop to be over-simple to garner mass market success. However, in an otherwise authentic piece of writing, the soldiers wear 'boots', there are 'roads' and 'assassins', and a prince is 'bookish'. These objects or actions or strategies might have existed in some form in the remote past but is it appropriate to use these modern day words to signify them? These are minor details but they jumped out at me because everything else seemed to be so perfect, that without these jarring notes, the writer's spell would have continued unbroken for me (for example, you can translate 'naan' as bread but does that feel right?). Yet, this is a useless quarrel to pick up. 'Why write the novel in English then', the writer can argue back. 'Write in Sanskrit.' Fair point.

While Krishna's writing is first-rate and most scenes are beautifully developed, sometimes overwrought descriptions slow down the pace of the novel. This is not your typical airport novel. This is a fine read that needs your languorous attention. And even if you call this novel genre fiction, it re-establishes my faith in young Indian writers who can write without compromising on the quality of the prose.

You have to welcome a book like this at a time when *Fifty Shades of Grey* is all the rage. If *Fifty* is a *gori* courtesan who promises to fulfill your fantasies in bed, then *Govinda* is a charming, brave and respectable soldier-scholar who has a tale to tell. ■