

Rewriting Gendered Narratives: A Comparative Reading of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and Kavitha Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*

Prathyaksh Janardhanan

Faculty of Business Administration, GLS University, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India

Keywords: Gender, Agency, Narratives, Draupadi, Uruvi, Mahabharat.

Abstract: Gender has always sparked debatable narratives that may not be binary in nature in sociological and academic discourse as a conceptual and epistemological construct. It is evidence of the necessity to continue these talks and arguments that the category continues to ignite the ashes of resistance. Due to their genre-based palimpsest narratives, Indian epics, which serve as the storehouse of stories, silence important voices from the macro narratives of the text. Additionally, epics have primarily highlighted the achievements of men. The only role for women in the epics is that of the muse, who provides the hero with courage and inspiration. In this sense, the Draupadi character is anomalous. Furthermore, the discussion of voices of self articulation is sparked by the title of Kavitha Kane's novel *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*. The tales told by the two ladies in the Mahabharata—whose husbands were among the most celebrated yet star-crossed warriors of their era—illustrate how their narratives rework their histories and so disrupt the epic's overarching macronarratives. In order to demonstrate how alternative narratives as depicted in these novels aid in articulating a narrative voice for the gendered subject, the paper attempts rewritings and works on two strong female characters from the epic. Through the use of these characters, the paper argues how the voice becomes the agency to generate resistance against macro epistemic narratives produced by the larger framework of a patriarchal ecosystem.

1 INTRODUCTION

One of the celebrated works on Indian women writings was by Susie Tharu and K Lalitha. In the compendious volumes on women writing, they argue that these writings respond to ideologies from complexly constituted and decentered positions. The collusion of ideologies portray defiance and subversion which is implicit in the conflict between the institutions and the subject (35)

One of the agencies of resistance against epistemic violence is the rewriting of epics through the perspective of the silenced subject. This paper looks at the rewriting of the epics through the rewriting of a famous woman epic character : Draupadi and a not so discussed character Uruvi (the princess who defied traditions to marry Karna. Through this study, the paper intends to showcase the complexity of rewriting women charecters from multiple perspectives such as caste, class and gender. The paper begins by interrogating the premise of rewriting the epics and myths and how this exercise

helps the silenced subject achieve the agency to voice themselves. The paper would then discuss Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and Kavitha Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND COMMENTARY

The West benefits from the epics and myths as a storehouse of tradition and culture and from their allusions to a glorious past. as a reminder of a beautiful past also contributed to shaping a nation's identity. This was demonstrated when Europe claimed the Greek epics as their own and used them to help build national identities (Martyniuk, 190). Romila Thapar challenges this assertion in "Epic and History: Tradition, Dissent, and Politics in India" by arguing that the epics contributed to the literary crystallization of a heroic ideal. The epics and other cultural forms, such as them, seem to have been a significant part of early Indian history (Thapar 26).

The fossils discovered near the base of the Swalik Hill, where the war occurred, serve as an example of this (Michael and John, 87). To rally support for a particular ideological viewpoint, nationalists all over the world likewise altered its form (Thapar, 3). According to Thapar (Thapar, 7), the Brahmins hijacked the epics to elevate the Vaishnava Cult through the depiction of Ram as Vishnu's incarnation. A brahminical vision of monarchical governance after the demise of the Mouryan Empire has been considered to find ideological and narrative support in the Mahabharata (Fitzgerald, 811). Thus, in the epic, the Great War heralded the demise of clan-based society and the advent of kingdoms (Thapar 100). This is demonstrated in the Pandav Lila performance in Garhwal by the Pandavas establishing the legitimacy of the Rajput heritage (Sax, 101).

The continuity of Indian tradition is provided by epics, myths, and the rewriting of the same to reimagine history (Chakrabarti, 12). According to Jain's *Indigenous Roots of Feminism*, the epics are regarded as a part of Indians' collective consciousness and are amenable to political interpretations and rewriting from various cultural and ideological perspectives, which changes how they are retold (Jain, *Indigenous Roots of Feminism*, 29).

Epics were rewritten in the late colonial era, as previously stated, extolling tales of bravery and serving as nothing less than allegories of colonial expression (Lothspeich, 280). This is particularly evident in how female epic characters like Draupadi, who was worshipped and had atrocities perpetrated upon her compared to Mother India, are portrayed. This can be seen in works by Ramcharit Upadhyay, such as *Dev Draupadi* (1920), *Sairandhri* (1927), and others. As shown in Narendra Sharma's *Draupadi* (1960), poets and playwrights used epic literature to portray dreams of an independent India after the country gained its freedom (Lothspeich, 28). The rewriting of epics was primarily concerned with challenging the myths' role in stifling the voice of the woman subject.

By analyzing the epic character of Madhavi and rewriting the epic character in Bhisham Sahni's play *Madhavi*, Pankaj and Jaidev argue that the play retrieves the epic character and enables it to protest against the victimization of the epic character by the patriarchal structures (Pankaj and Jaidev, 4).

Similar to *Madhavi*, the rewriting of every epic character enables her to express her feelings and voice her protest against patriarchal persecution (Pankaj & Jaidev, 4).

While reinstating Draupadi's loneliness and angst, which are described as *nathavati anathvat* (Karve,

91), the Draupadi chapter by Irawati Karve in *Yuganta* analyzes the life of the epic heroine and offers a fresh view of the character. In Ram Kumar Brahma's *Aahuti*, where she travels with Arjun to visit her sons' corpses, she experiences loneliness as she recalls her past as a princess, queen, and wife and comes to the realization that she did not have a distinct identity. She was her father's (her creator's) pawn.

The crucial factor would be if Draupadi, the epic heroine, had expressed her displeasure through her exposed hair and desire for blood in the form of retribution, the epic's portrayal of Draupadi focuses on a few traits of the heroine, including her dark magnetic beauty and birth from the sacrificial fire for vengeance (*Adi Parva*, 473), her alternating between compassion and vengeance—she loved her husbands and co-wives but wanted blood as a retaliation for her insult (*Sabha Parva*, 828), her infatuable physical (sexual) stamina— This This deprives her of the respect accorded to her ancestor Sita and portrays her as a goddess or an example of sexual licentiousness for her non-normal acceptance of five men (Jain, *Indigenous Roots*, 42).

By contrasting the versions of the stories that have already essentialized Draupadi with Paanchali's versions, Divakaruni's presentation of the epic character through Paanchali operates alternatively through counter narratives. Paanchali's portrayal of her resolve to confront Karna (Divakaruni, 33) and her outbursts when her husbands' took more than one wife (Divakaruni, 90) serve as examples of this. Paanchali is always thinking about and reflecting on what is happening to her. This introspection served as the impetus for the development of an identity distinct from how the epic portrayed her.

The Palace of Illusions depicts Paanchali's education as being limited to the moral code, the abilities required for a woman to run her household by the sorceress, Dhai Ma, and the tales of admirable women. Through portions she stole from her brother Dhri and her battle with *Nyayasastra* in an effort to reach equality with men, she learned about the education of men.

She is also shown off in *The Palace of Illusions* in her capacity as queen. The figure of Divakaruni who combines grace and ferocity is Paanchali. Through the character, both of these elements are accurately portrayed. In his book *Indigenous Roots of Feminism*, Jasbir Jain examines how Draupadi has been rewritten to give women characters a dramatic voice that allows them to resist male authority and challenge patriarchal epistemic institutions as well (29).

The ubiquitous writings on Draupadi can be attributed to the fact that the epic heroine, was pivotal to the monumental changes in the epic. In other words, her presence within the epic may have been marginal in terms of representation, the rewritings on the other hand provide the alternative narrative voice to the character, but what about characters which do not figure at all in the epics due to its magnanimity. Kavitha Kane's *Karna's Wife : The Outcasts Queen* depicts one such character. The novel depicts the story of Uruvi, a Kshatriya princess who decides to wed Karna, despite his minority status. Her life is constantly contrasted with Draupadi, who refused to allow Karna to participate in her *svyamvar* due to his low birth status. The *svyamvar* plays a conspicuous role that aids unravelling of the destiny of the characters especially Draupadi.

While Draupadi gets inevitably drawn into family feuds and politics, which turns her first into the wife of five men and then the very embodiment of vengeance, Uruvi's life is determined by her decision to choose Karna, because she loved her, despite the fact that he was a 'sutaputra' and was already married to Vrushali, his first wife, who was from a lower caste (Kane, 42).

Through the narratives, the readers of the novel get insights into the life of Karna, from the perspective of the gendered subject : Uruvi. The novel thus forms a feminist rewriting of Shivaji Sawant's *Mritunjay*, the famed rendition of Karna's life (Kane, 52). In the Chapter titled " The Pariah's Wife", Uruvi argues with the grandsire Bhishma, regarding acceptance of Karna within the larger upper caste and class society. One day you will have to answer the question yourself. Is Karna a bad man doing good things or is he a good man doing bad things. (Kane , 62)

Further, in the Chapter titled "And Foes" : Shakuni, Uruvi reconciles to her fate as Karna's wife. She reflects:

She had to suffer the way people looked at her and Karna, the false sympathy she had to put up with. The embarrassment that deluged her often made her hate herself. Nor could she stand the contempt people showed for Karna..... She had to learn to survive and the only place she could hide was in the recesses of her thoughts , her silent tears slipping silently down the shadowy contours of her face, dripping into the darkness (Kane,95)

The momentous meeting between Uruvi and Draupadi, after the ill fated dice game is of the intricately crafted moments in the novel. In the Chapter titled " Draupadi's revenge", Uruvi understands a shocking discovery that Draupadi too loved Karna and perhaps longed to be his queen than

Arjun or the Pandavs. While Uruvi is livid with anger at the role played by her husband in the unfortunate events in the Sabha, Draupadi comforts her:

But I am not angry with him. He insulted me in a moment of heat!. Love knows how to forgive. Love is blind- to faults to flaws. You are fortunate to have him...keep him, don't lose him (Kane, 135)

In the novel, Uruvi's anger at the actions of her husband was only matched by Draupadi's anger for her husband's inability to save her from the public shaming in the Kuru Sabha. The novel also shows the undercurrents of hypocrisy, where Uruvi's mother Shubra finally approves the decision by her daughter to wed Karna instead of Arjun and chastises her for being angry at Karna (Kane, 143). The novel provides multiple perspectives on the nature of Karna, which is described through the chapters wherein Uruvi discusses her life with Kunti and Bhanumati. In her conversation with Bhanumati, she understands that even the latter longed for Karna and finally reconciles to the fact that Karna's friendship with Duryodhan is strong and everlasting, which ironically will be their downfall (Kane, 209).

Thus, Uruvi emerges from the narrative scape of the novel as the critical feminist voice, which flags the flaws of the most illustrious men such as Bhishma, Shona (the elder brother of Karna), Sakuni and many others. She also criticises Kunti in the Chapter titled Karna and Kunti, for having revealed the secret of Karna's birth at the opportune moment, thereby effectively crippling him mentally just before the war (Kane, 260).

3 CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, the rewritings of women characters of the epic enable articulation of the silenced or marginalised characters, thereby improvising the polyphony that the epic already boasts of. One of the key inferences that can be drawn from this analysis is that the plight of the women have always remained suppressed, due to the hegemonic tendencies of the patriarchal order. Draupadi and Uruvi are both princesses, born to affluent families, yet are destined to suffer due to the men in their lives. Further, Uruvi has been shown as a character, on whom destiny has not imposed its will, as we see in the case of Draupadi. Uruvi is shown to have the agency of making decisions on her own , beginning from marrying Karna to being a healer and mother. Her life has been depicted as a choice of her own. When the Mahabharat valorises the indomitable spirit of the men, the rewritings make a humble attempt to

showcase that the women in the epic have a lived an equally fulfilling life, despite the fact that their marital roles have limited them to the confined spaces of the gendered roles in their lives.

REFERENCES

- Adarkar, Aditya. (2001) *Karna in the Mahabharatha* Diss. Ann Harbor: UMI
- Baldwin, Singh, Shauna (2011) "We are so Different Now" 2009 Web. 15th April 2011.
- Bhattacharya, Pradip (2011) "She who must be obeyed: Draupadi the ill fated one" 2001. Web. 15th April 2011
- Bhramar, Ram Kumar. (1984) अहूति (*Aahuti*) Mumbai: Hindi Granth Karyalaya
- Curti, Lidia. (1998) *Female stories, Female Bodies: Narrative Identity and Representation*. London: Macmillan Press
- Dutt, M.N. Trans. (2008) *The Mahabharata* 8 Vols., New Delhi: Parimal publications
- Devi, Mahasweta. (1997) *Breast Stories*. Trans. Gayatri Spivak, Calcutta: Seagull Books.
- Dharwadker, B., Aparna. (2005) *Theatres of Independence, Drama Theory and urban performance in India since 1947*. Thomas Postelwait (ed). Iowa: U of Iowa Press.
- Divakaruni, B., Chitra. (2009) *The Palace of Illusions*, Basingstoke and Oxford Picador.
- Divakaruni Chitra and Fredrick L Aldama (2000) "Unbraiding Tradition: An Interview with Chitra Divakaruni" *Journal of South Asian Literature* 35:1/2(2000):1-12
- Frasca, A., Richard (1994) "Pancali Capatam" (The Vow of Draupadi): Images of Ritual and Political liberation in Tamil Theatre" *TDR*, 38:2(1994):89-105. JSTOR. Web
- Fitzgerald, James (2003) "The Many Voices Of The Mahabharatha" *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 123:4(2003):204-811 JSTOR. Web
- Gitomer, David. (1992) "King Duryodhana: The Mahabharatha Discourse of Sinning and Virtue in Epic and Drama" *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 112:2(1992):222-232 JSTOR. Web.
- Ghosh, V, Shobha and Roshan G shahani. (2000) "Indian feminist criticism: In search of New paradigms" *Economic and Political weekly* Vol 35:43/44, 2000. pp.3813- 3816. JSTOR. Web.
- Gomach, Barbara. (2001) *Ancillary Stories in the Sanskrit Mahabharatha*. Diss Columbia U. 2001 Ann Harbor: UMI
- Hansen, Kathryn (2006) "'Mythological' Betab's Mahabharath in Parsi Theatre" *Economic and Political Weekly* 41:48(2006):4985-4991. Jstor. Web
- Hiltebeitel, Alf (1998) "Empire Invasion and Indian National epics" *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 2:3(1998):387-421. JSTOR.
- (2005) "On Reading Fitzgerald's Vyasa" *Journal of the American oriental Society* 125:2(2005):241-261. JSTOR.
- Hendry, Marie (2003). *The prolific Goddess: imagery of the Goddess within Indian Literature*. Diss Florida U
- Hiltebeitel Alf, (2002) *Rethinking the Mahabharatha : A Readers Guide to the Education of the Dharma King*. New Delhi: U of Oxford P
- (1988) *The cult of Draupadi : Mythologies from Ginge to Kurushetra* Vol 1 New Delhi :Motilal Bansaridass
- (1999) *Rethinking India's Oral and Classical Epics: Draupadi among Rajputs, Muslims and dalits*. Chicago and London :U of Chicago P
- Jain, Jasbir. (2006) *Beyond Postcolonialism: Dreams and realities of a nation*. Jaipur: Rawat Publication.
- (2011) *Indegenous roots of feminism: Culture, Subjectivity and Agency*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Juneja, Monica. (1997) "Reclaiming the public sphere: Husain's portrayal of Saraswati and Draupadi" 32:4(1997):155-157. JSTOR
- Kane, Kavitha . (1995) *Karna's Wife: The Outcasts Queen* New Delhi, Rupa Publications Pvt. Ltd.
- Khan, Faizal. (2010) "There is no distortion of the epic in my Draupadi" Web
- Karve, Irawati. (2008) *Yuganta: End of the Epoch*. Mumbai: Orient Longman
- Lothspeich, Pamela. (2008) "The Mahabharatha as National history and allegory in modern tales of Abhimanyu" *School of Oriental and African studies* 71:2(2008):279-296 JSTOR. Web.
- Merivirta, R., Chakrabarti. (2007) "Myth, history and historiography in Shashi Tharoor's The Great Indian Novel" 2007. Web.
- Mohanty, K Prafulla. (2005) "Mahabharatha: A Reading in Political Structuring" *Indian Literature: Sahitya Akademi*. Jan-Feb 2005: 146-151
- Rajan, S., Rajeshwari. (1993) *Real and imagined women: Gender, culture and postcolonialism* London: Routledge.
- Raveendran P. (2005) "Fiction and Reception: Reconstructions of the Mahabharata in Malayalam". *Indian Literature: Sahitya Akademi*. Jan-Feb 2005: 152-162
- Rao, C. Ananth. (2005) "Myth and the Creative Process: A View of Creativity in the light of Three Indian Myths" *Creativity Research Journal*. 17:2 and 3(2005):221-240. JSTOR. Web
- Sangari, Kunkum and Uma Chakravarti. (eds) (1999) *From Myths to Markets: Essays on Gender*. Shimla: IAS
- Thapar Romila . (2002) *The Penquin history of Early India: From origins to AD 1300*. London :Penquin.
- (2000) *History and Beyond*. New Delhi: U of Oxford P
- Talpade, M., Chandra, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres (eds) (1991) *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Bloomington: U of Indiana P
- Thorat, Harishchandra (2005) "The Mahabharata and the Marathi Novel: Textual Strategies". *Indian Literature: Sahitya Akademi*. Jan-Feb 2005: 128-137

- Tharu, Susie and K.Lalitha.(eds) (1991) *Women writing in India 600 BC to the present: 600 Bc to the early twentieth century*. Vol I, New Delhi: U of Oxford P
- Tymoczko,Maria.(1995) “ The Metonymics of Translating Marginalised Texts”*Comparative Literature* 47:1(1995):11-24.JSTOR.
- Vishwanathan P Indira. (2008). *Design and Rhetoric in a Sanskrit Court Epic: The kiratarjuniya of Bhairavi* .Albany :New York Press
- Vos,de John et al (2008) “ Fossil Folklore from India: The Siwalik Hills and the Mahabharatha” *Folklore* 119(2008) :71-98. JSTOR
- Wadley,Susan. (1999) “ Bhakti Rendition of Nala Damayanti: Todarmal’s Nectar of Nal’s Life”*International Journal of Hindu Studies*.3:1(1999):27-56 JSTOR
- Williams,David. Ed (1991) *Peter Brook and the Mahabharata: Critical Perspectives* New York and London: Routledge.

