

**Re-telling the Narrative of Mahabharata in Contemporary Times from
Gender Perspective**

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Mahabharata is an amazingly sinuous yet cohesive work of art. It is an amazing book that continues to inspire even 4000 years later this epic of India, has captivated the hearts of its people for several millennia. Whether it is literature or vernacular arts, crafts, painting, music, dance, and drama, or temple motifs, no aspect of Indian culture has escaped the stamp of their influence. It is so wonderfully detailed and multi-dimensional that it has become a fit matter for being adapted into the creative medium of literature and arts.

Contemporary Indian cinema and popular culture support the narrative of the book, bringing modern valence to the arguments. In the late 1980s, the Mahabharat TV series, directed by Ravi Chopra, was televised and shown on India's national television that is Doordarshan and that was the greatest visual representation that had a devoted and bestowed audience. In the Western world, a well-known presentation of the epic is Peter Brook's nine-hour play, which premiered in Avignon in 1985, and its five-hour movie version *The Mahabharata* (1989)

Among literary reinterpretations of the Mahabharata the most famous is arguably Sashi Tharoor's major work entitled *The Great Indian Novel*, an involved literary, philosophical, and political novel which superimposes the major moments of post-independence India in the 20th century onto the driving events of the Mahabharata epic but since this about the women perspective I shall focus on those retellings that project feministic leanings. The existing parochial and unwarranted norms were challenged and deconstructed with an effort to re-conceptualise them such recasting often challenges the audience to reconsider marginalized female figures as heroic protagonists.

Bhishma Sahani's *Madhavi* is one such work that focussed exclusively on the minor character Madhavi, daughter of the King Yayati of the Mahabharata. In the epic Madhavi's voice is heard for a single time while stating her utility to Galav. Bhisham Sahani carved out a humanised portrait of Madhavi from the puppet, which comes into the foreground, speaks, feels and protests against politics of patriarchy. Retrieving Madhavi's fading image and placing her at the centre forecasts the tempestuous journey of the women from the shaded to the illumined area.

Shankar Shesh's *Komal Gandhar* talks about his protagonist Gandhari. Shesh's Gandhari is not a passive victim; rather she is strong, assertive and articulate. In the play, Gandhari defies the patriarchal interpretation of her blindfold as an act of obedience to her husband's unlighted world. She observed it as a mark of protest, anger and bitterness for negating her right to swayamvara and getting her married to a blind man. In spite of her relentless effort to leave behind the patriarchal discourse, she is always pulled back into it. Gandhari's position in the play reveals the real status of struggling women in their long way to their accomplished end.

Mahashweta Devi, the activist, re-casts Draupadi in a tribal backdrop of the Naxalbari movement in a short story, *Draupadi*. To grant a more realistic essence, she modified her to tribal Dopdi. Dopdi was a naxalite, arrested by the army and was assaulted by seven eight soldiers. This assault can link itself to Draupadi's undeserving polygamous marriage. When the army chief wanted to question her, she tears up her remaining strips of clothes and defiantly stood upright with her bruised face and heart in face to face with him. The armed commander was thoroughly bewildered. Thus, Dopdi, the recast of Draupadi, challenges the patriarchal establishment with her weapon of femininity. Mahashweta Devi in the disrobing of Draupadi showed women own struggle to negotiate a hostile environment.

Mallika Sarabhai continued this theme in her play *In Search of the Goddess*, In the introduction to her play, *In Search of the Goddess*, Sarabhai says that every construct around us is a view through a single prism – 'the prism of patriarchy'. Mallika Sarabhai attempts to look at it from 'a non-male prism of change'. This modern Draupadi vents out her long suppressed suffering in Sarabhai's *In Search of the Goddess*, Draupadi was fortunate to have her swayamvara, but in it she was only a ploy – she herself was 'the garland' (2). Her respected

father and beloved brother arranged for a tournament. For the winner Draupadi was the prize. Sarabhai's Draupadi complains:

Not mine the decision, whom to Marry

My heart was pledged to a bow and Arrow

Thus married to Arjuna, leaving behind all the princely leisure, she made her way into her in-laws house in the forest. Unfortunately, with the inadvertent words of her mother-in-law, Kunti, she became the consort of the five pandavas. Thus, unintentionally she was tied in a polyandrous relationship of marriage. The twentieth century Draupadi questions such a grim situation:

But to be shared by five, a commodity in the market place? (2)

Sarabhai presented a humanised portrayal of Draupadi. The epic is completely silent about her mental trauma in marrying five men, living with their co-wives, losing all her sons in the battle. She is only presented as a tool to valorise the heroic deeds of her men and to project the extent of their control on her. This recasting of Draupadi by Mallika Sarabhai reconstructs the epical image of Draupadi prevalent in the society, A woman who knows her mind, speaks her mind, refuses to be covered by her husbands, asserts her will and admonishes them when they fail her. Her portrayal empowers the present day women Draupadis of today with their voice, legal rights, justice, etc.

Sarabhai also talks of Savitri, the daughter of king Asvapati tied her wedding knot with her self-arranged bridegroom, Satyavan, inspite of the warnings of Naradmuni that Satyavan's life would end on the completion of one year of their marriage. With the arrival of Yama on that ill-fated day, Savitri defies him and wins back her husband's life. The patriarchal interpretation goes – Savitri refused to live without her husband, Satyavan. Sarabhai made her Savitri enunciate the authentic and unprejudiced interpretation and its relevance in the contemporary era. An underlying strain of the characteristic of modern women is found in Sarabhai's Savitri. Her tone throughout is not as submissive and accepting, like the one in the Mahabharata. In her dramatic monologues she challenges Yama with arrows of questions.

Sarabhai's aim of recasting is to empower the women and to make them able to put up a strong impediment against the application of blind social norms whimsically to chain their feet, under the guise of religion, tradition or mythology.

Another dance drama is Gnosis which portrays the life of Gandhari where the story is recast from her angle. Like the book by Manu Sharma *Gandhari ke Atmakatha* which is story of Gandhari, what she saw and her dilemmas. Gandhari is a character present throughout the story as the mother of the hundred sons who were the reason for the Great War, but she never comes in the foreground in the story that is usually told from the Pandavas perspective. Amongst the women of Mahabharat also the more powerful characters of Draupadi and Kunti overshadow her throughout the story but here she is the agent through whom the story is presented through Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen by Kavita Kane is another narratology that retells the story of Mahabharata's much loved hero Karna through his wife Uruvi's perspective. Many of us perhaps know little or nothing about Karna's wives, family life and children and the effect war of Kurukshetra had on them. Not many of us know about Vrushali, Karna's first wife and their seven children. Uruvi's perspective reveals what we all know that in Mahabharata there are no characters that are completely good or evil. Uruvi's perspective brings a clarity and distinction to the various important personalities and their shades along with interesting gender observations about Kunti, Draupadi, Gandhari and Bhanumati. Also in this book Uruvi reveals the fact that Karna and Draupadi loved each other.

The Great Golden Sacrifice of the Mahabharata By Maggi Lidchi-Grassi is a retelling of the Mahabharata. To the credit of Maggi Lidchi-Grassi, she leaves her reader moved, spent and drawn at the end of the epic. Indeed, it is impossible not to empathise with her hero - Arjuna, who tells the story from his perspective through most of her book - as he lives out the aftermath of that soul-crushing war. Arjuna has the most mixed feelings of all, simultaneously feeling anger and sadness for his mother, Kunti, and yet wondering whether she hates him for killing her first-born.

Yajnaseni, the story of Draupadi is Pratibha Ray's version of Mahabharata in the perspective of Draupadi which won her a Bharatiya Jnanpith award in 1993. The author takes side with Draupadi here with a feminist attitude and tries to justify her actions. Panchali's heart-

rending cries of help and anger due to the abuses heaped on her can almost be heard through the pages. Draupadi is not mute. She does not believe that husband is God and she should always obey him. She is full of women consciousness. As a daughter or even as a wife she asks so many questions and declares doubts even regarding the dharma of a female on this earth to scholars. Thus the author has tried her level best to present a Psychological picture of Krishana as a woman living a predicament-ridden life, she was perhaps the strongest of them all, demanding her rights in a male-dominated society, and fighting injustice any which way she could.

Beautiful, brave and controversial, the heroine of the Mahabharat continues to fascinate writers and we have *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra banerjee Divakaruni where we hear the story from Draupadis angle. This book is a study of heroic femininity as it appears in the epic Mahabharata, and focuses particularly on the roles of wife, daughter-in-law, and mother, on how these women speak. As she mentions in the Author's Note at the beginning of the book, while there are a lot of strong, capable women in the Mahabharata, they aren't fully fleshed out. Divakaruni rectifies this by making Draupadi a three-dimensional, incredibly appealing woman. That's not to say she's perfect – she is petty, selfish and vengeful much of the time. She behaves like a real woman might.

Disrobing Draupadi is a Telugu novel, by Yarlagadda Lakshmi Prasad's, the book shortlisted by the Sahitya Akademi, has both the literary community and Hindu rightwing worked up over its 'pornographic' depiction of Draupadi. The book has dealt with the sexuality of Draupadi and her relationship with her husbands, it has been called tasteless and titillating trash. It is somewhat inexplicable that while the Mahabharata inquired into every aspect of the human condition, into every kind of relationship yet Draupadi's feelings both as a wife and as a woman in relation to each of her five husbands never formed the subject of anybody's concern.

Govind Nihalani adapted the great Indian epic Mahabharata into a film *Kalyug* by weaving it into a corporate modern-day scenario. This was some thirty years before Prakash Jha successfully aped the idea and applied it to a modern-day political setting called *Rajneeti*. Both the movies were successful. *Kalyug* gives a heightened role to the women of both families, particularly to Savitri, Subhadra.

In Mahabharata, Draupadi, the wife of the mighty Pandava brothers was humiliated and thus was responsible for leading her husband's into action. Rekha as Draupadi is interestingly enigmatic; She is the wife of Dharmraj (Eldest brother of the troika playing the Pandavas), and throughout the movie comes across as having immense power on her husband and his brothers especially on the youngest one as her character conveys volumes through silence. Many relationships like her antagonism towards her husband are not implicitly stated. The relationship is dysfunctional but there are no reasons given and her bond with Bharat raj who symbolizes Arjun is very unclear Till the end there is no clarity whether their relationship is just one of mutual respect or something more (In the Mahabharata there is no Bhabhi and Draupadi is wedded to all the five brothers but it was implied that she had a soft corner for Arjun is this what is explored here. Her dislike of Karana there is a passing reference that his marriage proposal was rejected by Supriya. Draupadi-Karna relationship is clearly hinted in three different scenes in Kalyug.

In a recent cinematic adaption of the Mahabharata *Rajneeti*, the character of Draupadi is played by Katrina Kaif. She is beautiful, passionate, and arrogant. She has only one all-consuming love that is her love for Samar, Arjun but little did she know that her personal happiness was dependent on the changing electoral fortunes of her love, and that even a slight shift in the faultiness of political negotiation would cause a devastating earthquake in her personal life? In another instance like Draupadi, Indu has no say of her own when it comes to her marriage. It is a marriage of convenience where she has to compromise between the choices of her father a business icon, and the person that she loved dearly! This clearly expressing the idea women have always been used in society and politics from the time of Mahabharata to the present day.

Thus Draupadi is presented both as a victim of patriarchy as well as an empowered woman. Sagarika Chakarborty's book *A Calendar too crowded* has a story called *An Equal Friendship* where Panchali writes a letter to Krishna contradicting the fact that women are not treated equally in society. "The little that I have witnessed of the ways of this world has convinced me that the notion of women's equality is the biggest misconception they live by here" She asserts her skills in warfare, horse riding, culinary and states that women have been equal to

men since eternity. She reminds him on how a sense of equal friendship had prevailed over her as she ripped her saree to dress his bleeding wound, when he was attacked by Shishupal. Her innocent questions like "If the same was acceptable then, why a hue and cry is raised today when a woman stands up for a friend, who incidentally happens to be a man?"

Draupadi is synonymous with individuality, strength, and unyielding determination for both justice and vengeance. Through these characteristics the figure of Draupadi has come to be a symbol of empowerment for women. Not only is Draupadi an empowering character. She is seen as tool for women to take some control within their lives and fight the patriarchal oppressions of Indian society. The paper is an attempt at how each writer interprets these myths and specially that of Draupadi and recasts it in a new setting. It is through the individual capacity for projecting their own ideals onto the character that the character becomes less of a myth and more of a flesh and blood human being. There is a clear need for discussion of these books to understand the use of folklore and mythology and see how these works challenge, deconstruct and alter and adapt the myth of the enigmatic woman Draupadi. Also I would like to end with the controversial statement that Draupadi has taken over the mantle of a role model for the modern woman from Sita.

Works Cited:

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Gender and Narrative in the Mahabharata will be appreciated by readers interested in South Asian studies, Hinduism, religious studies and gender studies. © 2007 Editorial selection and matter, Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black; individual chapters, the contributors. All rights reserved. View. Show abstract. The practice of critical discourse analysis: An introduction. Article. Narrative Perspective. Introduction. Every literary text has a narrator who guides us through the story. The narrator is the voice that recounts events and has the ability to take on different points of view. Depending on how much the narrator knows about the protagonists and the story, or from which point of view the story is told, we can choose between three different types of narration in English. First-person narration. Narrator speaks in the first person. A first-person narrator is directly involved in the story and tells it from his or her point of view, frequently making use of the pron... The story is told through the perspective of the third person (he/she/they etc.). There are three types of third person narration in English: limited point of view. The setting is both the time and geographic location within a narrative or within a work of fiction. A literary element, the setting initiates the main backdrop and mood of a story, often referred to as the story world. A specific form of narrative hook. The Iliad and the Odyssey of Homer are prime examples. The latter work begins with the return of Odysseus to his home of Ithaca and then in flashbacks tells of his ten years of wandering following the Trojan War. Narrative hook. Story opening that "hooks" readers' attention so they will keep reading. Early examples include the legend of Oedipus, and the story of Krishna in the Mahabharata. Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn uses the title character as the narrator, while Sherlock Holmes is primarily told from Watson's perspective. In contemporary historical theory the topic of narrative has been the subject of extraordinarily intense debate. Looked at from one perspective, this is surprising; for on the face of it there should be very little to debate about narrative. Narration is a manner of speaking as universal as language itself, and narrative is a mode of verbal representation so seemingly natural to human consciousness that to suggest it is a problem might well appear pedantic. 1 But it is precisely because the narrative mode of representation is so natural to human consciousness, so much an aspect of everyday (re)examining marginalized characters: caste and gender in select retellings of the mahabharata in recent indian english fiction. Download. (re)examining marginalized characters: caste and gender in select retellings of the mahabharata in recent indian english fiction. In order to do this, the research uses contemporary caste and gender theories to understand what, and how, changes have occurred with respect to these two issues. Caste and gender issues are ever-present in Indian society and Indian literature reflects these issues in their changing forms. It is interesting to study how authors in the 21 st century retell an epic like the Mahabharata to showcase these changes in society.