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WIVES OF HASTINAPUR: DIVAKARUNI AND KANE'S "*REPRESENTATION OF THE FEMININE IN THE MAHABHARATA"*

Shikha Chandrashekhar[1]
MA English with Communication Studies, CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bangalore.
Vasudha MMJ[2]
MA English with Communication Studies, CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bangalore.

Abstract
Mythological works are texts which are expressive of a culture's religious values and norms. Existing as stories, they largely define the patterns of behaviour of the particular community and how the society has been shaped by upholding the sanctity of those norms. Most mythological works are largely male-centric narratives or signify the lives of characters within a patriarchal society. But a recent boom observed in contemporary Indian literature has been the're-writing' of various mythological stories and epics by giving a voice to the female in the narrative. This acts as a comment on India's literary past as well as its present social condition.

Two commercial novels in Indian contemporary literature have been chosen for this study. This includes '*The Palace of Illusions: A Novel*' by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and '*Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*' by Kavita Kane, both as a portrayal of the Indian epic *Mahabharata*. These novels give voice to Draupadi, and Uruvi and Vrushali, respectively. The use of mythological works to redefine conditions of gender roles and tradition in a contemporary scenario are what these works aim to capture and this paper will study how these chosen texts have offered representation to the feminine.

Keywords: Mahabharata, female voice, rewriting, contemporary Indian literature

1. Introduction

Mythological works are texts which are expressive of a culture's religious values and norms. Existing as stories, they largely define the patterns of behaviour of the particular community and how the society has been shaped by upholding the sanctity of those norms. Emerging as one of ancient India's most celebrated

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mythological epics, the Mahabharata has seen innumerable renditions of its story in media ranging from widely broadcasted television shows down to the ground-root level of travelling minstrels. But while the epic has been a major part of the Indian tradition and ethos, it has, since its inception as narrated by *Ved Vyas*, been rethought and restructured, through translation and representation, in a largely male-centered context. From Kisari Mohan Ganguli's English translation, to Devdutt Pattnaik's *Jaya*, the epic has, albeit not visibly, represented the patriarchal society as a norm, with hero-worship of the male characters and the agency of the narrative being granted to either an existing man or the voice of a patriarchal narrator.

But a recent boom observed in contemporary Indian literature has been the 're-writing' of various mythological stories and epics by giving a voice to the female in the narrative. While the major prospect that the Mahabharata offers for 're-writing' and its preponderance in this market in contemporary literature is its highly rich narrative and the "wider literary, cultural, and philosophical scope" it has for this style of writing, as compared to other mythological narratives, a specific shift to the female retelling has been largely noted (Sharma 147). Acting as a comment on India's literary past as well as its present social condition, such renditions of the epic thereby consciously give agency to the feminine, and while an emphasis on Draupadi has been noted, these novels have gone beyond a mere discussion of what the female went through in the epic, and rather openly embrace the female's perception of the events of the epic.

Panchaali, in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, is a feminine voice which shares the story of the Mahabharata epic by illustrating her own experience; she explores her identity as one who has been thrown into contexts unknown to her all her life and who thereby uses that to determine her own brand of femininity, as a woman with five husbands and a sharp tongue, existing in a society where there existed patriarchal norms about what women were wont to do and what they couldn't.

Uruvi, in Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife*, is established to be a strong female character from the first chapter itself. It has been noted in other feminist interpretations of the Mahabharata that there has been a limited focus on characters that are considered to be more significant to the narrative. Where Kane's book breathes a fresh breath into the epic is with her choice of frame, taking it to be someone who is doubly alienated from the original text of the Mahabharata, namely, Karna's wife.

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These novels use the mythological chronicle of the Mahabharata to redefine conditions of gender roles and tradition in a contemporary scenario by offering representation to the feminine and highlighting how the female experience has evolved as a common denominator in the still-existing patriarchal fabric of society. These have been noted as examples of what Helene Cixous termed 'l'ecriture feminine', essentially representing a female perspective to a male-centered narrative, written by women themselves, epitomizing what women's writing is expected to be, even in the face of the language of man (Cixous).

2. Representation of the Feminine

2.1 The Palace of Illusions: A Novel (2008)

The novel traces Panchaali's journey from her birth from within the ceremonial fire up to her death in the cold snowy slopes of the Himalayas, giving the reader a window from whereupon they accompany her in her growth as a young girl, and a woman, in a society which placed women second in the binary of the genders. There are various instances and questions that mark her female identity in the context of the patriarchy, and Divakaruni's construction of her character has given a voice to a female who is seen as one of the most celebrated, yet most misrepresented characters of the epic.

Emerging from the fire with her brother Dhristadyumna in tow, Panchaali is shown to have grown up in the shadow of the prophecy of his birth. She herself was prophesized to change the course of history, a recurring narrative point that Panchaali returns to constantly whenever her identity gets redefined in light of newer experiences and situations that she faces, but which is neglected by the others in the story. Rather than preparing her for this prophecy or believing the power that she held as a woman to change history, Panchaali was resigned to be concerned about her marriage, her love life, and motherhood – things she considered desirable to other women who surrounded her, women who "were wrapped in the cocoons of their unimaginative lives, not even knowing enough to want to escape" (43). She even questions whether her agency to change the world exists solely in her role of being the wife of the greatest archer of their time and guiding his most important decisions, or whether it would be her direct actions that would cause ripples in time. Eventually, in the *sabha* where she was humiliated, she realizes that it is indeed the latter, and thus proclaims the curse that triggered a chain of events leading up to the battle of Kurukshetra.

Divakaruni's portrayal of this disdain of Panchaali's power by the society and those around her is showcased in the education that was granted to her as

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compared to her brother, or the other men who are primary to the narrative. While they are taught the art of warfare and policy-making, her education is limited to the "sixty-four arts that noble ladies must know"(29) – this included, but was not limited to, singing, dancing, painting, sewing, and writing poetry, all of which made Panchaali feel like the 'world of women' was tightening around her.

Another aspect of this 'world of women' is the still-existing obsession with whiteness or fairness of skin. Panchaali, growing up as a dark-skinned young girl, was constantly bombarded with 'solutions' to make herself fairer to become more attractive. It is only through her early interactions with Krishna, who is darker than her in skin tone, that she realizes the power and magnetism that her dark-skinned beauty and identity as a female give her – women and their power stems not from mere bruteness and force like that of a man, but is subtle and sensual that give her an edge in relationships and even in society, as Panchaali is told by the sorceress (66).

As the story progresses, one of the most important identities that Panchaali inhabits is that of being a wife to all the five Pandava brothers. Vyasa's verdict that bound her fate to the five brothers was shaped by a code of marital conduct that determined that Panchaali would be wife to each brother, from oldest to youngest, for a year. But the added 'boon' that Vyasa provided Panchaali with is what epitomises the patriarchy that accorded piety and chastity to a woman's sexual identity – thereby, he provided her with a virginity boon that would make her a virgin again every time she would become the wife of another brother. Panchaali herself had mixed feelings about this boon, as she felt that it seemed designed "more for [my] husbands' benefit than [mine]…"; boons were handed to women like "presents they didn't quite want" (120).

Within this marital system, Panchaali occupied a far different position than did the women of her time in their marriages, as also the other wives of the Pandavas. She was an important part of the politics of Indraprastha and Hastinapur, a constant by the Pandavas' side through all their failures and victories, and acted as a voice of reason for each of the brothers – this has often been hailed as extremely unique characterization, for hers is the only female character who so strongly pushes herself to the forefront of all matters and does not stay limited to the space that women were deigned to occupy – namely, the home and the hearth. Comparatively, Panchaali recognizes herself as more of a queen of the Pandavas than a mother of their children, creating her own unique female identity differently from what society expected, and still does expect, of women.

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Lastly, while used in a different context, the idea of a princess having no privacy rings true throughout the text. This is not just limited to her humiliation in the *sabha*, but especially in her interaction with Keechak, Queen Sudeshna's brother in the kingdom of Matsya. Keechak's advances towards Panchaali while she portrayed being a maid in Sudeshna's consort were out of line, not simply because Panchaali was a queen and that no one had dared look at her as lecherously as Keechak had, but because he had done so with a confidence that was borne out of a belief in her low status as compared to the royalty of the palace – as she asks, "Is this how men looked at ordinary women, then?" (228) Her further discussion represents Laura Mulvey's idea of the male gaze and how men perceive and wish to possess women as an object of desire, solely flesh, more so when this object is said to be out of reach – which she was by her complete denial of his advances (Mulvey).

2.2 Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen (2013)

Uruvi was the only daughter of King Vahusha and Queen Shubra of Pukeya. She is described as a blend of her father's intelligence and her mother's beauty. She had incisive wit, "her thoughts were enticing, and she was too spirited to be restrained, too proud to be cautious and too forthright to think of the consequences of her actions". Most of the people were carried away by her beauty and wit (Kane 8). She was good at music and art, and was a natural artist (15). She had an unusual gift of healing and was also known to be a good horse rider. These traits are very unusual for a woman of her time; women were restricted to do things like household chores and knitting which were imposed on them.

She is presented as a curious and inquisitive girl who questioned everything. She often questioned the concept of war – "how can you feel triumphant when you have hurt and killed so many?" When she saw Karna for the first time in the archery competition, and saw him get humiliated for his assumed low birth, she voiced her displeasure to Kunti quite forthrightly when she commented, "Bhima is downright mean! How can he ridicule the humble and the helpless? Does the pride and pettiness befit a prince?", portraying how the norms of patriarchy did not hold her back from expressing her disagreement with the ways of the world (6).

She fell in love with Karna from the moment she saw him, even though she knew he was a *sutaputra* and would always remain a pariah or outcast, contrasted with Draupadi's reaction to the same information. She chose him as her husband against all odds as well as against her parents' wish in her *swayamvara*. She convinced her father by saying, "I'm not ashamed to have fallen in love with Karna.

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And if it's going to be a mistake, I think I have enough courage in me to tackle the worst moments as and when I come across them one day" (21). In an era when woman was treated like a commodity or a trophy, and the concept of *swayamvar*itself existed as a construct where the woman was portrayed as something to be won at the end of a challenge, Uruvi stood up for herself to marry the man she loved. Unlike Draupadi who was pressurized by the family to marry Arjuna, Uruvi decided her own future and acted upon her instincts.

As a wife, Uruvi was often seen defending Karna and being very protective of him, owing to the patriarchal paradigm of a wife being considered a part of a unit with her husband, taking his name and belonging to him. But instead of being a silent woman on Karna's arm, she is vocal about their relationship and her feelings about him. She argued with Bhishma when he didn't approve of her choice of marrying him; she became furious when Radha told her about Dronacharya's denial to teach Karna; she kept advising Karna to stay away from Duryodhana who she thought was a bad influence on him – examples of her strength as an opinionated woman are abound in the text.

When Draupadi was humiliated in the court of Hastinapur, Uruvi was furious at Karna for letting that happen and for calling Draupadi a whore, following which she left Hastinapur. She informed Karna about her decision and didn't ask for his permission, as a wife was wont to do. This is proof of the agency she had as a woman. Before leaving she visited Draupadi and apologized on behalf of her husband. Shared experiences often create a sense of kinship among people – Uruvi being a part of the same patriarchal society could empathize with the experiences of other women characters and the predicaments that womanhood brought for them. She empathized with Gandhari who was stuck in the middle of the power politics her brother Shakuni was playing and who "accepted her fate with a smile on her face and silk cloth around her eyes so that she would experience the world in darkness, just as her blind husband did" (90).

While talking to Kunti about her life, she said "It's like you are playing a role, living up to an image. What are you really like? How could you accept it when King Sura, your father, gave you away to Kuntibhoja? I would have been furious – how dare he!" (26)

Even though she was angry at Kunti for giving up Karna and not accepting until his death, she forgave her when she had come to Uruvi to take Vrushakethu (Karna's son) to the palace. She hugged her and "she knew what it was to forgive. It was leaving hell and touching heaven. It was divinity." When Draupadi was humiliated, she felt embarrassed and

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responsible for it. She went to her to seek an apology and she left her husband as punishment for what he did to stand in solidarity with Draupadi. She could relate to her pain and anguish. She also knew that Draupadi loved Karna. She admired Draupadi as "even in her extreme humiliation, she had the courage to strike back at her offenders" (131).She continued to provide warm friendship to Bhanumati, Duryodhan's young wife. She would always calm her down when was distressed because of Duryodhana's tussle with the Pandavas. She maintained a cordial relationship with Vrushali, Karna's other wife, as well, providing her support upon his death.

When Krishna, Kunti, Draupadi, and the Pandavas came to take her to Hastinapur after Karna's death, she said, "This is my home! This is Karna's home; this is our home with his memories in every corner! This is my sanctuary!"(298), and refused to go with them. When Arjun asked her to send Vrushakethu and convinced her about the importance of his education, she agreed to send him with them but with a condition – she told them that she did not want Vrushakethu to be king and that Parikshit is entitled to the throne. On this condition, Arjuna told her she that he will take care of him and will not let history repeat itself. As a mother, she didn't want her son to be involved in any feud that could still mar the family and did what she thought was the best for her son.

3. Conclusion

In contemporary Indian English literature, the chosen texts have received immense commercial success, wherein millions of copies have been sold and the books have even been translated into regional languages. The reason for their omnipresent influence in the literary circles of India, and the world over, has been their representation of the marginalized voices of the epic Mahabharata, which managed to catch the eyes of the readers of contemporary society. Their success spells a new era of change, an era where the stories and experiences of the female are not simply established in reality through news media or reports, but whose presence is traced through historical fiction as well, cementing the idea of femininity being a pervasive force to reckon with. They provide the female the agency to go against a patriarchal, phallocentric narrative of the epic and of society, such that these texts become testimony to their resistance and struggle to find their voice and a medium to share it.

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