EXAMINING SELECTED EPIC WOMEN CHARACTERS IN THE CONTEMPORARY REVISIONIST RETELLINGS OF THE RAMAYANA AND MAHABHARATA

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Certified that the Thesis entitled

Examining Selected Epic Women Characters in the Contemporary Revisionist Retellings of the Ramayana and Mahabharata submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the supervision of **Dr. Nilanjana Deb of the Department of English, Jadavpur University, Kolkata;** and that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere/elsewhere.

Countersigned by the

Supervisor: Candidate:

Dated: Dated:

DEDICATED TO

The Memory of My Bapi,

Mukul Chandra Naskar (1961-2021)

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Note

This Dissertation has been written following the 17th edition of the Chicago Manual of Style guide. The 'Footnote and Bibliography' pattern has been followed to make the dissertation more convenient to read.

Contents

Introduction

"In that country
where doors are adorned
with flowers and mango-leaves,
the houses decorated
with lighted lamps,
in that country
the woman is still a slave.
Where Sita had to pass
the ordeal by fire
to prove she was a pativrata,
Ahilya to sacrifice herself
to Indra's desire,
and Draupadi was divided up
among five men,
the woman of that country
still remains a slave..."

— "The Slave"[1], Hira Bhansode

These lines aptly depict how the diverse narrative tradition of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* profoundly influence the socio-cultural dynamics of the Indian subcontinent by connecting the experiences of the legendary epic characters to the struggles of the peripheral beings in the contemporary world. The mythical characters of the ancient Indian epics continue to fascinate, influence, startle and even perplex numerous scholars, artists, performers, devotees, politicians and common individuals – as these perpetually retold tales create an engaging space for multifaceted discussions regarding problematic issues like gender and caste discrimination,

[1] Judith E. Walsh, "What Women Learned When Men Gave Them Advice: Rewriting Patriarchy in Late-Nineteenth-Century Bengal", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 56, no. 3 (Aug.1997): 641-677, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2659604.

social stratification, patriarchal subjugation and oppression etc. Various retellings and reinterpretations of the epics that often problematize the binary structures of myth and reality, past and present, temporal and spiritual, thus draw attention to the marginalization of the peripheral 'other' in a Brahminical/patriarchal society, while emphasizing on the issues that have always been side-lined by mainstream retellings of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Rewriting of epics or, restructuring the mythological tales have always been a part of the Indian literary tradition and these two grand epic tales that have been exerting their influence on the Indian cultural consciousness for more than two thousand years, have been frequently adapted by many noteworthy poets, playwrights and authors of both the colonial and post-colonial times like Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Rabindranath Tagore, Toru Dutt, K.V. Putappa, R.K. Narayan, Girish Karnad, Mahashweta Devi, Pratibha Ray, Dharamvir Bharati, Shashi Tharoor, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kavita Kane, Devdutt Pattanaik, Koral Dasgupta and others. Innumerable literary, cinematic and theatrical adaptations as well as oral narratives and folk songs attempt to create and propagate newer perceptions regarding the epic characters and their connections with the contemporary world, by rewriting and reinterpreting the well-known epic tales that are replete with metaphoric examples and philosophical teachings. Each and every telling/retelling stands out and validates itself in its own right as it recounts the mythical tale in a distinctly different manner incorporating the undeniable effects of regional, cultural, linguistic, religious and political affiliations.

No other ancient text or, narrative reflects on the intricate socio-cultural problems that are commonly found in contemporary India, in a much more detailed manner than these two epics that are sometimes used as a widely popular language which is spoken, comprehended and transmitted by many. Namita Gokhale thus relevantly notes in her essay "Sita: A Personal Journey" that— "Mythology in India is not just an academic or, a historical subject, it is a vital and living topic of contemporary relevance. The complex social, political and religious attitudes of 'modern' India cannot be understood without an understanding of our myths and their impact on the collective faith of people." (Lal and Gokhale, XIV) Following this contention it can be noted that, in India, the boundaries existing between the epical and mythological tales are quite indistinct, as the myths and epics are generally not perceived as different and distant from the historical, political, social and cultural reality of the nation. Thus, the Indian epics that conflate the magical/spiritual tales from the mythological narratives with profound philosophical discussions and phenomenal deeds of exalted heroic characters, are not only seen as significant and contested cultural records of the antiquated past, but they are also

perceived as sacred religious texts (encompassing valuable philosophical/ethical ideas) worthy to be emulated as well as worshipped.Hence, the poetic verses of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* become a remarkable source of devotional, cultural and artistic inspiration, and they are endlessly recited, sung, enacted, painted, and adapted in various folk tales, devotional songs (Bhajan, Kirtan etc.), indigenous theatrical performances (Koodiyattam, Yakshagana, Jatra, Tarja etc.), classical dance forms (Bharatnatyam, Kathak, Kathakali etc.), religious congregations and festivals (Ramleela, Dusshera, Janmashtami, Holi etc.), rural art forms and handicrafts (Madhubani, Kantha, Patachitra) etc. It is near to impossible to conceptualize Indian society or, culture without comprehending their interconnections with the multilayered mythical tales of the legendary epic characters who have either been perceived as exceptional embodiments of glorified virtues and qualities, or, as realistic mortal beings whose experiences and struggles seem to mirror that of the ordinary people. Thus, the folktales, songs, theatres and dance performances that revolve around the legendary tales of Sita-Ram or, Radha-Krishna or, Draupadi-Pandavas- remarkably lead the audience towards a sense of familiarity and relatability while mesmerizing them at the same time.

The cultural and literary narrative traditions associated with the two Indian epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* transcend and challenge the western definitions of myth and epic – that categorize 'amorphous' and 'purely fictional' mythological tales as largely different from the 'well-structured', 'exaggerated' verses of the epics. These ancient Sanskrit epics and their endless versions exceptionally combine the concrete poetic account of the celebrated historic episodes with abstract mythical events and characters, while emphasizing upon the fruitless act of compartmentalizing the epic and the myth as mutually exclusive forms. It can be noted that mystical myths and folklores are often concretized through the grand form and structure of the epic narratives, and in the Indian context this conflation of formless myths with structured epic verses quite evidently reflect on the complex ideas of national history, cultural identity as well as collective memory. Varsha Jha's contention in her article "The Mytho-epic Re-imagination" relevantly addresses this idea — "Besides coming to terms with the complexities that the Indian literary tradition thrives upon, one needs also to reconcile with the notion that the Indian mega-stories such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, whether described as 'mythical epics' or 'epical myths', are indispensable to Indian culture. They are characterized by an inherent redefinability. Speaking of Indian epics, it is difficult to draw the line where the epic ends and where the myth begins. It is this interpenetration that makes them so susceptible to transmission and retellings. The magical and the mythical in the epics sustains them to a perpetual probing;

while the epical in the myths "positions them in the contemporary world" to question its ideological relation to tropes of "nationalism, community, gender and identity." (Beissinger 3)" (Varsha Jha, 189)

Continuing influence of the epic narratives especially the overbearing impact of the *Ramayana* tradition on Indian culture, society and politics is undeniably deep-rooted and widespread. Many right-wing social reformers, activists, and politicians frequently use selected episodes, quotes, symbols and references from the epics in an attempt to reclaim the 'lost' glory of the Hindu nation which is hypothetically associated with the utopian image of 'Ramarajya' (the ideal nation-state formed by Rama). These politicized discourses fervently engage in worshipping and promoting the image of the defied figure of Lord Rama as 'the divine king' able to 'rescue' India from the clutches of the British and Muslim invaders (namely their geo-political as well as cultural influences) who are often reimagined as the abominable adversary, Ravana. Hence one of the most influential feminist scholars, Mukti Lakhi Mangharam contends – "Together, the proponents of Hindutva aim to revive a mythological "golden age" of Hinduism based on cultural "purity." In doing so, they propagate a certain reading of Indian history in which the "glorious" Hindu age of antiquity was followed by the dark ages, or kalyuga, due to a series of foreign invasions. In this kalyuga, docile, disorganized, and unarmed Hindus were conquered and subjugated by aggressive, well-armed marauders such as the Muslim Mughals and the British. The conquerors, the story goes, looted, impoverished, and ruined a prosperous Indian civilization, previously unparalleled in its artistic and scientific achievements [Sharma 4]. Hindutva's attempts at recovering this "golden age" involve going back to an unadulterated "Hindu" cultural heritage by mobilizing epics such as the *Ramayana* to determine who constitutes a true Indian citizen and woman. To a large extent, this policy has worked; Hindu nationalists subscribing to elements of Hindutva ideology have used symbolism from the *Ramayana* to rally Hindus against Muslims, constructing Muslims as the enemy (Ravana) and as outsiders to the Indian state. In 1992, Hindutva rhetoric claimed that the Babri mosque in Ayodhya (Rama's hometown) stood on Rama's original birthplace, a contention that led to its destruction by Hindu fundamentalists backed by the BJP. Their wish to erect a Hindu temple there has caused recurring mob violence between Hindus and Muslims over the following decades." (Mangharam, 80)

"A folk legend says that Hanuman wrote the original Ramayana on a mountain top, after the Great War, and scattered the manuscript; it was many times larger than what we have now. Valmiki is said to have captured only a fragment of it. In this sense, no text is original. Yet no

telling is a mere retelling- and the story has no closure, although it may be enclosed in a text"— A.K. Ramanujan, in "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation". These lines aptly question the authenticity of the original text thus complicating the dichotomy of 'the authoritative' and 'the oppositional'. This dichotomy leads us to the idea that the temporal and the timeless together construct the idea of 'historicity' which is significantly important in the process of revisiting the past and treating it as a chronology to which the present is perpetually being added. The longstanding epic narratives of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* that are intricately interwoven with the collective cultural memory and national historiography of India, challenge and question western ideas of structured chronological history by blurring the boundaries existing between past and present, myth and reality, rational and magical, mortal and immortal. The Indian epics are also often upheld and worshipped as sacred texts containing significant philosophical, religious and moral discussions that make them distinctly different from the western epics commonly perceived as archaic heroic tales unable to mutate themselves according to the demands of contemporary times. Varsha Jha relevantly notes— "Moreover, it is important to remember that the Indian epics unlike most of the western epics are not secular (or pagan) in nature. They have over generations and cultures, been celebrated as religious /sacral narratives. Similarly, the term 'myth' translates in Hindi as 'devkatha' (story of the gods) or 'pauranic katha' (an old legendary tale /story). Whether a cultural text (written or oral), is mythical or not, can be determined not by ascertaining its historical truth value, but by determining its ethical and archetypal value." (Jha, 188)

While talking about the significance of the epic narratives in the contemporary world, Jha deliberates on an assertion made by Radhavallabh Tripathi who claims in his essay "Aesthetics of the Mahabharata: Traditional Interpretations" that the *Mahabharata* is not perceived as an ordinary epic, rather the grand narrative is often described as 'upajivya', 'itihasa', 'akhyana' or 'akhyanavarishtha', 'kavya', 'pancamaveda' , and 'bharatadruma'— "Upajivya, Tripathi explains, is that which sustains, hence the enduring quality of the Mahabharata. Itihasa again is not simply 'history'. The concept of itihasa encapsulates the idea of the present, as these epics are not just static recordings of the past, but active and dynamic teachings of how to live the present and the future. To quote Tripathi again, "The concept of itihasa, in this way, incorporates a cultural narrative of epic dimensions, a grand discourse as well as history of ideas, history of philosophy, together with cosmology." (Tripathi 87) Akhyana stands for the idea of a narrative, and upakhyana suggests a narrative within a narrative. Kavya is no ordinary

poem but a grandiose literary composition composed by wise seers blessed with divine powers." (Jha, 185) Similarly, while talking about the remarkable thematic diversity, philosophical depth and universal relevance of the ancient Sanskrit epics, David Shulman proclaims in his notable work, *The Wisdom of Poets* that— "The *Mahabharata* is conterminous with the world… It presents itself not as a work of art but as reality itself. No boundary marks off this text from the world. Even in recitation, it functions not as a purveyor of dramatic illusion, nor as an imaginative venture in narrative, but as the vehicle of what might properly be termed "realistic" insight. And it is no accident that this insight, or series of insights, presents itself to us in the context of intractable dilemmas and hopelessly frustrating ambiguities." Shulman's observation also specifically points at the perplexing uncertainties and complex paradoxes found in the characters, episodes and ideas of the *Mahabharata* that make it so realistically multifaceted and uncompromisingly relevant in the contemporary world.

According to Julia Kristeva, dissident forms of rewriting "provides a context within which we can rend and renew our relation to the established order: prompting us to reject what unfairly binds us while reaffirming our allegiance to what is productive"[2], thus the existing order of significance is constantly challenged by the new set of values that tend to redefine the questions of individual interpretations, identity and literary authority. Many mytho-epic retellings of the colonial and postcolonial period (especially those revisions that focus on the marginalized characters and their silenced tales) recurrently go back to the old mythic texts in an attempt to subvert the pre-existing notions while challenging the mainstream narratives. Most of these traditional discourses often rigidly emphasize upon the contrasting categories of 'good' and 'evil', 'pure' and 'impure', 'righteous' and 'un-righteous'. The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* that have always been considered to be one of the richest repositories of traditional philosophical concepts and mythical content, are frequently reinterpreted and restructured for different scholarly, artistic, ethical, theoretical and political pursuits. On one hand, canonical narratives revisit the legendary mythical characters like Rama, Sita, or, Krishna in an attempt to idealize their exemplary acts of sacrifice and righteousness, and on the other hand, the non-conformist revisionist retellings try to subvert hegemonic discourses and dominant ideology by reimagining the invisiblized/marginalized characters like Ravana, Tara, Urmila, Surpanakha etc. Whereas, some of the subversive reiterations vehemently address contemporary women's issues while empowering the marginal women characters so that they can talk of their emotions

[2] Susan Sellers, "Myth and Fairy tale in contemporary Women's Fiction', in *Feminist Literary Theory: A Study*, (Willey-Blackwell, 2011), 189.

and desires in an uninhibited manner, some radical epic adaptations attempt to challenge and overthrow the dominant historiography by associating the vanquished Asuras/ non-Aryans as the oppressed, silenced subaltern. Edward Said also observes that, contemporary postcolonial literatures often talk about the formerly suppressed, ignored or disparaged ideas, values and beliefs while playing 'a crucial role in the re-establishment of indigenous cultural heritage and in the re-instalment of native idioms'[3]. Whether the radical literary works produced at the advent of colonial modernity, the anti-colonial writings of the pre-independence era that sought to transmit nationalist ideas, or, the post-independence contemporary literary compositions dealing with the nuanced issues of gender equations, class/caste discriminations, and political power struggles— all of them have been significantly influenced by the realistic epical characters, episodes as well as the philosophical thoughts espoused by the ancient mythic narratives.

As various scholars dealing with the ancient epics and mythical legends of India have noticed, gender is one of the most central and most contested issues in the epics and discussions regarding gender are manifested in multiple ways without the texts providing one consistent and definitive view. These multi-layered complexities inherent in the epics are quiet appropriately adapted by the postcolonial contemporary retellings that radically re-address and re-posit the problems involving the conflicting ideas of gendered identity, subversive sexuality and violent assertion of the dislocated self in the tumultuous politico-socioeconomic context of today's world. New readings and interpretations of the mythological stories thus help us to find 'a new image and a new way of saying the most ancient and eternal truths'[4], while enabling us to interrogate and re-evaluate the complex structures constituted by the contradictory dualisms like the chaste and the impure, the righteous and the decadent, the divine and the unholy, the victor and the vanquished. These dualisms directly comment on the multi-dimensional history of the indigenous culture and society with its changing social, racial and ideological configurations while enabling the writers to use 'the mythic sign' to indicate the underlying meaning of a literary work dealing with the issues of marginalization, subjectivity and resistance.

Hence, in the course of this work I have tried to explore the problematic issues dealing with the displacement, dispossession, and marginalization of the gendered 'other' in a postcolonial

[3] Edward Said, "Figures, Configurations, Transfigurations" in Subject to Change, ed. Susie J. Tharu (Orient Blackswan, 1998), 52-72.
[4] Helene Cixous, "Conversations", in *Twentieth Century Literary Theory*, ed., K.M Newton (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988), 233.

context, as recorded in the literary revisitations of the ancient tales that are laden with the problematic discourses of gender inequality, patriarchal subjugation, gender roles and relations, female agency and self-realization. In addition to this, my thesis proposes to contextualize the displaced, dispossessed peripheral being's revolting assertion of selfhood through the languages of silenced desires, fragmented memories, bodily experiences and insurgent sexuality - that offer a deconstructive reading of some of the reimagined epic women characters in the revisionist retellings.

The adverse situations faced by the prominent epic women characters and their defiant acts in those contexts often underline the 'modern' woman's battles against different forms of exploitations and injustices, while addressing the socio-cultural problems lying at the heart of the Indian society. Hence, Draupadi's raging desire of avenging her public humiliation and her fierce battle for justice, Sita's ultimate insurgence through her refusal to undertake another fire trial and return to Mother Earth, Gandhari's subversive act of blindfolding herself in an attempt to protest against the way in which she was compelled to marry the blind king of Hastinapur, Kunti's immense mental strength and strategic intelligence through which she unites her sons and establishes them as the rightful heirs— all these remarkable characters and their phenomenal acts, words and decisions have always been a source of endless inspiration for oral/folk narratives, literary/scholarly retellings, as well as artistic/theatrical/cinematic adaptations. Thus, Shalini Shah notes in her article "Articulation, Dissent and Subversion: Voices of Women's Emancipation in Sanskrit Literature"— "If the various pativrata samvada in the two epics reflect the feminine voice kowtowing to masculinist expectations of women, there is also the feminist voice of dissent and subversion in the vast treasure-trove of Sanskrit literature which articulates against the pervasive pattern of subordination and limitation that have hampered women through the ages." (Shah, 2017, 80)

Historical Development of the Idea of Remythification

The monumental Sanskrit epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* that are often regarded as ancient repositories of social, cultural and moral values, started to be adapted, deconstructed, reframed and retold in the pre-independence era in order to raise subversive questions about the colonial as well as Brahminical/patriarchal repression of the local retellings and the aboriginal narratives. These epical reworkings of the colonial period that articulated a prominent resistance against the subjectification of Indians by the colonial system of education, continue

to influence many postcolonial literary works that seek to construct an alternative form of native historiography by revisiting the mythical epics and reinterpreting them. As noted by various postcolonial critics and theorists, colonialism often indulges in textual appropriation of the pasts of indigenous communities, while largely objectifying the cultural, social, and political historiography of the colonized. Frantz Fanon elucidates this point in *The Wretched of the Earth*: "Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's head of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it.[5]" (161). This colonial degradation of the native culture was vehemently opposed and contested by numerous authors, poets and thinkers of the pre-independence era who started revisiting and reappropriating the ancient mythical tales in order to develop a particular kind of indigenous literary tradition which was completely free from the effects of the western culture largely promoted by the British colonizers.

As the phenomenon of colonialism started affecting the social, political and cultural dynamics of the colonized India, the gradual and effective formation of the discrete and homogenous discourses on identity started complicating the literary dimensions. The quest for a distinctive national or, literary identity in the context of colonial modernity became entangled with the belief in the commonalities of ancestral, cultural, and historical experiences that raise several perplexing questions about race, nation, and ethnicity. This invocation of the cultural and historical past, in the efforts of rebuilding a modern literary identity, fuses with the intention to question the glory of the legendary past, in the works of some skilled literary artists who played pivotal roles in the nineteenth century Bengal Renaissance, namely Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Toru Dutt, Rabindranath Tagore and others. Their works articulate a particular kind of resistance against the internalization of 'the occidental hegemony' and negation of the ethnocentric cultural and social identity. These authors of the colonial period chose to stand up against the diverse forms of cultural and educational imperialization, through the act of revisiting and rewriting the mythological and epical tales of the ancient times that played an important role in constructing the indigenous identity, largely depending on the ideas and experiences of the legendary characters of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. This notion becomes clearer if we look at Ngugi WA Thiong'O's assertion in his ground-breaking work *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, that colonialism's most important area of domination was— "the mental universe of the colonized, the control, through

[5] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of The Earth*, (New York: Grove Press,1963).

culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world. Economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control. To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others." (16)

On one hand the colonial rulers in India attempted to strengthen the western imperial structure by suppressing and degrading indigenous culture, and on the other hand, this cultural colonization of the nineteenth century young minds had an irreversible impact on the literary field of the colonized India. The colonial education policy of the British Raj materialized in the form of Thomas Babington Macaulay's *Minutes on the Indian Education* in 1835. As a result, the anglicized, western educated faction of the Indian population came to possess an important part in the enormous social and cultural reformations during that period. The radical rebellion of the overtly anglicized 'Young Bengal' led by Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, against the orthodox Hindu customs and ideals had an inexplicable effect on the young intellectuals who were already greatly affected by the colonial glorification of the magnificence of the English masters like Byron, Milton, Keats, Wordsworth. Michael Madhusudhan Dutt who was greatly influenced by these Eurocentric ideals of poesy and reason in the context of modernist enlightenment, radically revolted against the religious conservatism of the nineteenth century Hindu Society in his poetical masterpiece, *Meghnad Badh Kavya* (1861). This epic poem subversively retells the story of the killing of Ravana's son Meghnad, while questioning the ideal divinity and demonic villainy that are respectively attributed to Ram and Ravana in the ancient epic, *Ramayana*. This pathbreaking poetic adaptation of the epic tale seeks to reverse the Brahminical degradation of the non-Aryan culture by highlighting the valour and integrity of the antagonistic Ravana as well as the helplessness of the dispossessed people of Lanka. Here Michael creates an analogous relation between Homeric epic traditions, Milton's biblical myths and the mythological stories of India's 'glorious' past, and this conflation of the East and the West radically challenges the idea of the occidental superiority upheld by the colonial system.

According to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's claim in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1948), the newly emerging idea of the modernist reason often opposed the myths as an archaic form, but these views entrapped modern enlightenment into the web of an oxymoronic, self-contradictory primitivism as the myths continue to rise from the dynamics of modern enlightenment itself and unsettle the established views of self-expression. The paradoxical relation between the influence of the Eurocentric ideals of poesy and reason in the context of the modernist enlightenment and the unavoidable need to rediscover the disgraced

national identity through the glory of the golden past can be most prominently seen in Michael Madhusudhan Dutt. His radical revolt against the religious conservatism of the nineteenth century Hindu Society found a liberal form of expression in the Miltonic mode of revisiting the epics, in his poetical masterpiece *Meghanad Badh Kavya* which attempts to question the established divinity of the epics and find a voice of subversion while delving into the depths of human psyche depending on the universality of the ancient tales and their characters. The rebelling poetic voice which once yearned to attain the brilliance of Milton, Byron or, Shelley by using the language of the colonizer which was seen as a superior cultural apparatus, ultimately finds the long-lost originality in his mother tongue, which he previously deplored. His previous devotion towards the act of reshaping the self in the mould of the British rulers amalgamates with the emergence of his new identity as one of the pioneers of Bengali literature when he creates an analogous relation between Homeric epic traditions, Milton's biblical myths and the glorious stories of India's past. In doing so he had brought the East and the West together quiet radically. In a letter to Raj Narain, Dutt wrote that – "It is my ambition to engraft the exquisite graces of the Greek mythology on our own, in the present poem, I mean to give free scope to my inventing powers (such as they are) and borrow as little as I can from Valmiki. I shall not borrow Greek stories, but write, rather try to write as a Greek would have done (529)." Similarly, William Radice also observes in his article "The Significance of Madhusudan Dutt and his Epic" that the recalcitrance of Dutt's reiteration is unparalleled in his contemporary literary context— "In subject matter too, Madhusudan's influence lies not so much in his use of material from the *Ramayana* as in the fact that he took it from the all-Indian classical heritage and used it in his own way. Given the importance of the *Ramayana* to Hindu religious tradition, his approach was daringly iconoclastic and secular. He made Rama frail and human; he turned the Rakshasas into tragic heroes. He made Meghanad die through Lakshman and Vibhishan's dastardly *kausal* or 'trick' of surprising him while he was defenseless and unarmed, and engaged in performing a puja to his *istadeva* (diety of the clan), Agni." (Radice, 78)

Thus, it can be exclaimed that, Dutt's originality lays in his marvellous handling of the literary device of tragedy and the extraordinary act of incorporating it into the rewriting of the epic. In the course of redefining the established Hindu notions of justice, valour, purity and devotion he brilliantly portrays the complicated issues concerning the tragic figure of the defeated hero Meghnad, the elegiac lamentations of Ravana's wife Chitrangada for the death of her sons, the deceptive ways adapted by the so called 'divine' protagonist, Ram, the grand nobility and

generosity exhibited by the 'villainous' anti-hero, Ravan and the self-sacrifice of Pramila. This characteristic hybridity of Dutt's epic venture startled the contemporary as well as the postcolonial readers as it asserted itself as the source of narratives that are paradoxically private and public, individual and collective, conforming and rebellious. He undertakes a secularist approach rather than a religious one when he interprets the antagonism imposed upon Ravana as an example of patriotic heroism battling against the imperial ambitions of the Aryans represented by Ram and Laxman. Thus the inherent spirit of rebellion in Dutt leads him to express the complexity of his own subliminal identity as a converted Christian in the nineteenth century colonial India through the assertion of the subversive subjectivity of the marginal and denigrated characters of the epic which is a prevalent part of the dominant religious and spiritual consciousness."

Toru Dutt who becomes the first woman poet in colonial India, formulates another way of re-reading the epics as she places her poetic gaze on the emotions and miseries of the mythical female characters like Sita and Savitri. In her emotionally enriched poem, 'Sita', the epical tale of the abandonment of Sita by her husband, Ram, 'the divine king' of the *Ramayana*, fuses with Dutt's dramatic employment of her own painful memories of familial love and togetherness. This exceptionally beautiful mythopoeic poem by a Christian Indian woman poet writing in English in the colonized society shows how Sita and nature intermingle to give voice to the profound emotions of the young girl (Toru) who subconsciously seeks to go back to the ethnocentric cultural roots[6]. Toru's another exemplary epic poem, 'Savitri' deals with the notions of femininity, nationality and divinity, as the legendary mythical character of Savitri becomes an emblematic representation of the 'modern' nation and its women. Savitri's bold articulation of her desires in front of her parents and the divine sage, Narad, can be interpreted as Toru Dutt's rebellious questioning of the segregation, marginalization and domestication of women in the late nineteenth century colonial India. This yearning to interrogate the conventional ideas of gender roles and to subvert the patriarchal glorification of the self-denying, sacrificing female characters, reaches another extent in the concluding part of the poem when Dutt's reimagined mythical heroine indulges in a symbolic battle with death with sheer courage and determination.

[6] See K.R. Srinivasa Iyenger, "Toru Dutt", in *Indian writing in English* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2008), 55-73.

The tenderness, purity and vividness of imagery with which Toru Dutt portrays the character of Sita and Savitri, bring her close to the exquisite poetic imagination employed by Rabindranath Tagore in his artistic retellings of the Indian epics. Several poems written by Tagore who is often seen as one of the greatest Indian poets of all time, are frequently laden with the images borrowed from the two great epics. Tagore's poems like, 'Kacha and Devayani', 'Karna Kunti Sambad' (1900), 'Gandharir Abedan' (1891) and his dramatic adaptation of Chitrangada's tale from the *Mahabharata*, *Chitra* (1914)- announce a digression from the conventionally mainstream retellings of the myths and epics- that were quite common at that time. These mythopoeic works depict how Tagore explores the untrodden regions of the human mind by critically analysing the mythological stories while focusing on their intrinsic relations with the modern understanding of the cultural, historical and literary legacy of the nation. In his radical poem, 'Gandharir Abedan' (Mother's Prayer) (1919), Tagore emphasizes upon the exceptional strength and firmness of the legendary character, Gandhari, the mother of the antagonistic Duryodhan in the *Mahabharata*. Here, Tagore's Gandhari who rebelliously articulates startlingly bold protestations against the injustices and oppressions faced by Draupadi, brings attention to the marginalized position and fragmented identities of the subjugated sexual 'other' in the contemporary world. Paradoxically, Gandhari's rigid devotion to truth and inflexible ethical ideas sharply contradicts the emotional weakness and vulnerability of Dhritarashtra.

Another poetic retelling by Tagore, 'Karna and Kunti' ('Karna Kunti Sambad') (1900) which reimagines and reconstructs a crucial part of the *Mahabharata*, entails the story of a tumultuous emotional encounter between an abandoned son and a repentant mother, while reflecting on the peripheral position of Karna, the charioteer's son, in the hierarchical social system stratified in terms of caste and creed. This sense of displacement experienced by the peripheral epic character, Karna, can be linked with Chitrangada's sense of fragmented selfhood in *Chitra*, Tagore's theatrical adaptation of another epic episode from the *Mahabharata*. In this poetic drama, the eponymous heroine's manlike body and unconventional sexuality directly challenge the conventional ideas regarding gender identity and sexual roles. An analytical reading of this lyrical revisionist drama which entails the silenced tale of the marginalized sexual 'other' while delving deeper into the internal conflicts of the subconscious, reveals that the theoretical views on female sexuality, gender ambiguity, corporeal desires, sexual identity crisis etc. were never addressed in such an uninhibited way by Tagore before *Chitra*. Eminent philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer claim in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1948) that, at the

advent of modernity the newly emerging idea of modernist reason often opposed the myths as an archaic form, but these 'modernist' views often proved to be oxymoronic as the myths continue to rise from the dynamics of modern enlightenment itself and unsettle the established views of self-expression. This idea seems to be relevant as we look at these modern reworkings of the epic tales written in the colonial period that persistently allude to the complicated binary systems of temporality and timelessness, permanence and change, myth and reality, while challenging the oppressive systems of cultural imperialization and traditional conservatism.

These revisionist works written at the advent of colonial modernity immensely influenced many nationalist leaders, scholars and thinkers who frequently returned to the ancient mythical past of the country in order to explore new dimensions of the collective sense of historicity and nationality. The efforts employed in revisiting the mythological tales through extensive analysis, questionings and adaptations, are directly related with the nationalist intention of educating the masses and glorifying the cultural heritage of the nation. These nationalist attempts at recounting the epics in various forms had become an effective instrument for exposing young minds to the philosophical and spiritual superiority of Indian culture as opposed to the imposed superficial and materialistic western culture and to generate a sense of national unity among the people of the colonized nation. Partha Chatterjee thus relevantly contends in his essay, "Colonialism, nationalism, and Colonized Women: The Contest in India"— "But in the entire phase of the national struggle, the crucial need was to protect, preserve and strengthen the inner core of the national culture, its spiritual essence."[7] (Chatterjee, 624) The legendary mythological tales recorded in the great epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, thus become a symbol of the national cultural identity which was greatly used as a weapon in the anti-colonial nationalist movements. Similarly renowned scholar. C. Rajagopalachari realizes the importance of the epics in the act of unifying the prejudiced, guarded and puzzled minds of the heterogenous population of India – "Let us keep in our minds the fact that it is the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* that bind our vast numbers together as one people, despite caste, space and language that seemingly divide them.[8]" These startling ideas possess a pertinent connection with the ideological arguments denoted by another scholar who undertook the task of interpreting Indian art, literature and metaphysics in the light of the

[7] Partha Chatterjee, "Colonialism, nationalism, and Colonized Women: The Contest in India", American Ethnologist 16, no. 4 (Nov., 1989): 624. http://link.jstor.org/sici.

[8] C. Rajagopalachari, Ramayana, (Mumbai: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 42nd ed. 2005), p. X.

nationalist ideas, Ananda Coomaraswamy. In his Essays in *National Idealism* (1909), Coomaraswamy claimed that artistic intervention, literary pursuits and cultural re-readings were the signs of a true liberation of selfhood in a colonial/postcolonial context, and he also exclaims that the oral, folkloric, tribal literatures that largely deal with the invisible intricacies of the ancient myths and epics, are the most efficient tools to reach the minds of both literate and illiterate people irrespective of race, caste, class, and gender boundaries. Shri Aurobindo Ghosh whose contribution in the process of theorizing 'Indianness' at the beginning of Indian nationalism is undeniable, also claims that the ancient mythical epics play a crucial role in the formation of the intimate relation between the Indian psyche and the cultural entity of the nation, while posing as repositories of knowledge in terms of national thought, politics, religion and ethics[9].

His poetic magnum opus 'Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol' (1940) which adapts the mythological story of Savitri from the *Mahabharata,* associates the nationalist concepts of identity with the questions of postcolonial existentialism, while introducing the poet-philosopher's sense of spirituality and self-realization through its transcendental artistic investigation. As the nationalist movement in India advanced, the development of this ethnocentric gaze on the cultural history became more and more necessary as a mode of anti-colonial resistance. The yearning to fashion a specific model of a national as well as cultural identity that rebel against the western ideals, significantly depended on the amalgamation of the historical and religious experiences. As a result, the idealized image of 'Ramarajya' corroborated by Mahatma Gandhi in his revolutionary work *Young India*, appealed to many Indians as a nationalist utopia which held out the promise of a glorious escape from the colonized society. Gandhi emphasized on the non-violent and peaceful atmosphere of the 'rajya' (state) governed by the 'half-mythic', 'half-historic' figure of the 'ideal' king from the great epic, *Ramayana*, as the key to fulfil the nationalist dreams. After reading his essays it can be easily noted that, he found an appropriate model for democracy in the political, social and economic strategies employed by the mythological hero, Ram. He openly admired the 'divine' King Ram's act of placing the benefits of his kinsmen above his own familial responsibilities or, emotional burdens. Although these ideas imparted by Gandhi were faithfully followed by many nationalist thinkers and writers like Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru

[9] See Sri Aurobindo, "The Renaissance in India and Other Essays on Indian Culture", in *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Dept, 1997), p.20.

and others, they were inadvertently questioned and challenged by later feminists, postcolonial and postmodern critics.

As the Gandhian movement became a dominant theme in the contemporary nationalist literature and scholarship, Raja Rao emerged as a remarkably talented literary artist who played a pioneering role in the act of reshaping the Indo-Anglican fiction. His use of the mythical techniques in his novel *Kanthapura* (1938), to give a detailed graphic description of the Gandhian freedom struggle explicitly addresses the idea of revisiting the 'glorious' past to examine the troubled present. *Kanthapura* which is often heralded as a classic example of 'Gandhi Purana or, Gandhian Epic' shows that by invoking the detailed images adapted from the Puranas and the epics, Rao goes back to the religious and mystic roots of India and combines them with a romantic mythification of 'the Gandhian aura'. In Rao's revisionist novel, the Harikathas recited in the village point at the symbolic juxtaposition of the mythic and the realistic, the past and the present, the religious and the political. Here in the Harikathas Gandhi is depicted as a reincarnation of Lord Shiva and his mesmerizing effects on the masses is interpreted as the supernatural powers of Lord Krishna whose glorious story is narrated and celebrated in the *Mahabharata*. Achakka's narrative significantly creates a parallel between Ram and Gandhi, where 'the Mahatma' invades 'the Red Man's Country' (England) as Ram invaded Lanka, and frees 'Swaraj' or, Sita. This kind of analogy between the religious consciousness of the people and the historical/political turmoil of the contemporary world, critically comments on the entire trope of adapting the legendary epic stories in a quest for an identity which transcends the boundaries of marginality. The Nationalist ideas of the early twentieth century that were based on the veneration of the cultural facets of the ancient scriptures and epics, were made popular by the social reformers like Vivekananda, Aurobindo, and Gandhi. These inspirational reformers who played significant roles in the social, cultural and political awakening of the nationalist consciousness, sought to connect this newly emerging sense of national identity with the universality of the ancient epics.

However, the nationalist reformations based on the Vedic ideologies as well as the Gandhian concept of 'Ramarajya' which extensively talked about equality, often tended to avoid the problematic sphere of caste discrimination. It was a pioneering act on the part of Bhimrao Ambedkar to voice the unspoken complications ingrained in the issue of untouchability which is an inherent part of the conservative casteist Indian society. Ambedkar depicted how the exaltation of the ancient Vedic/Brahminical views by the nationalist discourses is paradoxically linked with the exclusion of the Dalits or, 'Harijans' from the mainstream of the society. He

claims in his monumental work, *The Annihilation of Caste* (1937), that the entire edifice of Hinduism is surrounded by the strict boundaries of caste system, hence the rejection of caste inevitably hints at the collapse of Hinduism. He subversively questions the social, political and cultural exaltation of the Upper caste conventions and ideologies, while radically bringing attention to the tales of Shambuka in the *Ramayana* and *Eklavya* in the Mahabharata that exemplify the tremendous injustices practiced on the basis of 'Varnashram' (the caste system). Shambuka, the Shudra ascetic is beheaded by the 'ideal' King Ram because he exhibited 'blasphemous' audacity in undertaking the rituals of penance, and threatened to defy the Brahminical norms and regulations that kept the Shudras on the verge of the society by stating that the people belonging to 'the lower caste' were not entitled to any kind of education whether textual or, spiritual. This episode of 'the Uttaraparva' of *Ramayana* often acts as the bedrock of the revolting arguments against the authoritative structure of the traditional retellings of the sacred texts and their normalization of discriminatory practices. Ambedkar also alludes to the startling tale from the *Mahabharata* which talks about the disillusionment of Eklavya, a hunter and a forest dweller (a Vyadh) whose caste and racial identity prevented him from attaining the well-deserved position of reverence as one of the greatest archers of his time. By focusing on Guru Dronacharya's ruthless act of forcing Eklavya to cut off his thumb in order to prevent him from becoming a warrior as great as the Kuru Prince, Arjuna, Ambedkar sought to highlight the plight of the downtrodden beings residing on the margins of the casteist Indian society. Depending on these nonconformist interpretations introduced by Ambedkar, many contemporary reworkings of the epics tend to focus on the untold sufferings and torments faced by the peripheral characters in the epics, like Ravana's sister Soorpanakha who was brutally mutilated and tortured for her uninhibited assertion of female sexuality, Bheem's Rakshashi/non-Aryan wife, Hidimba who along with her son Ghatotkacha got abandoned because of their racial identity, or, the Vanara king, Vali's wife, Tara who criticized the conventional ideas of right and wrong by cursing the 'divine' Aryan hero, Ram for killing her unarmed husband by treachery.

The Question of Gender

The reimagined mythical epic tales of the peripheral, muted characters of the postcolonial period reveal that, most of the conformative retellings of the epic narratives tend to disregard the underlying concerns of gender and sexuality that remain an integral part of the multifaceted

reading of the epics. These problematic discourses regarding patriarchal subjugation of the gendered 'other', sexual exploitation and oppression, gender identity and unuttered desires—remained largely unacknowledged in the mainstream epic reiterations that mainly focus on Brahminical idealization of the concepts of purity, chastity, sacrifice, devotion, righteousness etc. or, nationalist adulation of the antiquated past of the native culture. In this context it can be claimed that the yearning to recover and restore the histories and perspectives of the marginalized section of the society originates from the presupposition that the feminist and queer perspectives always dwelled on the margins of the dominant narratives and never attained a central focus. Sharada Sugirtharajah observes in her essay, "Hinduism and Feminism: Some Concerns" that – "There is also a tendency to see Hindu patriarchy in monolithic categories. My point is that there are both redeeming and enslaving features in patriarchal texts. There are ambivalences and contradictions even within a single text. For example, both Sita in the Ramayana and Draupadi in the Mahabharata, figure as devoted wives to their husbands, yet their actions, when wronged by their husbands, challenge conventional patriarchal notions of wifely behavior. While in classical versions of the epic there are instances of disruption of conventional patriarchal norms, in most women's retellings of the Ramayana, disruptions are the norm rather than the exception." (Sugirtharajah, 100)

In the context of the 19th century western orthodox perspectives regarding women's position in the family and society, and their bodies and sexuality, Indian men and women whose spiritual and ideological stance was largely influenced by the mythological and epic tales, were ironically considered to be 'primitive' and 'uncouth'. The ancient liberal views about sexuality and physicality, as well as some sections of the Indian population's unquestioning devotion towards 'the Eternal Feminine'/Mother Goddess- were degraded as symbols of backwardness of the Indian civilization in an attempt to establish occidental hegemony — "Hindu devotion to the divine feminine shocked the Victorian morality and Puritan sensibilities of colonial administrators and missionaries, who not only derided it but perceived it as a sign of degeneration. Bengali Hindu men who worshiped the feminine were seen as effeminate, weak, miserable, vulnerable, passive, and lacking in martial skills and rationality. Such effeminate men, in the view of colonialists and missionaries, lacked a strength and toughness which only British masculinity could provide. While colonialists and missionaries saw little virtue in the worship of feminine deities, for Hindu men and women who were under colonial rule the feminine force or shakti was a source of empowerment. In fact, in the later stages of colonialism, British rule of India itself came to be seen as a violation of the feminine principle,

and both men and women were involved in liberating Mother India (Bharat Mata) from foreign rule." (Sugirtharajah, 103) In another attempt to answer the typical western presuppositions about the particular kind of patriarchal exploitations and oppressions visible in the indigenous society, many third world theorists and scholars often exclaim subversively, that in Hinduism it is often seen quite prominently, that the male and female divinities are coupled together to represent the specific power for which they are revered. For example, the legend of the divine figure of the half man and half woman, 'Ardhanariswara' continues to give birth to many debates and discussions regarding the ideas of 'sex' and 'gender' in the context of the Indian society. This androgynous form of Shiva and Parvati depicts the inseparability between the male and female principles (Purusha and Prakriti), and at the same time it symbolically represents how the man and woman together create 'the perfect homogeneity in the universe'. This myth of the androgynous divine figure indirectly highlights the fact that traditional cultural ideologies often assert the idea that 'the male' is incomplete without 'the female'. This idea is elaboratively discussed by Madhu Kishwar in the essay "Yes to Sita, No to Ram: The Continuing Hold of Sita on Popular Imagination in India", when she avers that Sita's name is inseparably attached with that of Ram in the popular greeting in North India: "Jai Siya Ram", and she also brings attention to the fact that the act of worshipping Ram cannot be completed without the presence of Sita by his side.

Mainstream patriarchal discourses often go back to the epics in an attempt to define womanhood in the context of the stereotypical ideas of the Hindu/Brahminical society and come up with an ambiguous/paradoxical viewpoint that often portray women through contrasting ideas such as- nurturing and destructive, devoted and indomitable woman, vulnerable and manipulative. Kartikeya C. Patel, in his insightful essay "Women, Earth, and the Goddess: A Shākta-Hindu Interpretation of Embodied Religion", notes that the great epic narrative of Mahabharata describes women as unpredictable and elusive as it claims, "Women are by nature mobile, difficult to provide unconditional service to, their very qualities difficult to comprehend; as are the uttered sentences of the wise men so are women" (Sukthankar 1933-39, 12: ch. 38, verse 24). This passage is important because it recognizes the difficulty of comprehending and defining woman's nature. But still, it attempts to define it, in part, in terms of mobility. This attempt has some validity because according to Hinduism, a man (purusha) by nature is said to be still, immobile, and cannot function or perform any activity without a woman (prakriti). Thus, in the Shiva Purana, Parvati says to Shiva, "With my blessings you become qualitative and embodied. Without me, you are attribute less and incompetent to

perform any activity. Being always subservient to prakriti you perform all activities" (Shastri 1970, 3: ch. 13, verses 19-20).” (Patel- 72) Patel’s observation not only underlines the obscurities inherent in the conventional portrayal of Indian women but it also sheds light on the Hindu philosophical/spiritual ideas regarding the inseparability of male and female cosmic energies (Purusha and Prakriti) that are believed to have fused with each other to form the entire universe. According to Hindu religious traditions, the masculine and feminine energies of Shiva and Shakti are an integral part of every mortal being, especially women are perceived to be an embodiment of the eternal feminine energies (Shakti) and ‘religious acts and events attain fruition only when performed as worship of the female body of the women-earth-Goddess’[10].

Similarly, in “Women and the Hindu Tradition”, Susan S. Wadley emphasizes on the inherent and indisputable links between the divine feminine energies and ordinary women — “The concept of the female in Hindu ideology presents an essential duality: on the one hand, she is fertile, benevolent-the bestower; the other, she is aggressive, malevolent-the destroyer. As a popular statement about the goddess suggests, "in times of prosperity she is Laksmi, who bestows prosperity in the homes of men; and in times of misfortune, she herself becomes the goddess of misfortune, and about ruin.” (Wadley, 113) This duality resembles with the paradoxical representations of mythological women characters in the hegemonic discourses, as figures like Sita and Savitri are often projected as exemplifying the idealized virtues of docility, devotion, and self-sacrifice, whereas fiery mythical characters like Draupadi, Kali and Durga are often associated with the more powerful destructive side of the eternal feminine. As Wadley elaboratively talks about the Hindu perceptions regarding the spiritual association of women and goddesses with different elements and forces of nature while constructing the definition of ‘femaleness’ or, ‘feminine energy’, we can find a striking resemblance between her contention and Patel’s findings— “The female is first of all sakti, Energy/Power, the energizing principle of the Universe; she is also prakrti, Nature, the undifferentiated Matter of the Universe. In Hindu cosmology all beings emerge from brahman, the universal substratum which is "invisible, inactive, beyond grasp, without qualifications, inconceivable, indescribable," through the creative tension of cohesion (Visnu) and disintegration (Siva), that defines sakti. Sakti underlies both creation and divinity and is female. Although there would be no power or energy in the universe without the female, all beings have their share of sakti, a share with

[10] Kartikeya C. Patel. “Women, Earth, and the Goddess: A Shākta-Hindu Interpretation of Embodied Religion”, *Hypatia* 9, no. 4 (Autumn, 1994): 70. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810423.

which they are endowed at birth but which original Energy of the Universe. Woman is also prakrti, Nature, the active female counterpart of the Cosmic Person, purusa, the inactive or male aspect. But whereas prakrti represents the undifferentiated matter of Nature, purusa provides the Spirit, which is a structured code. Thus purusa (Cosmic Person) is code (differentiated Spirit), as opposed to prakrti, which is Nature (undifferentiated Matter). The union of Spirit and Matter, code and noncode, inactive and active, leads to the creation of the world with all of its differentiated life forms; no life exists without both Matter and Spirit, prakrti and purusa." (Wadley, 114)

In addition to that, Indian women are traditionally expected to dutifully play the role of the subservient wife completely devoted to the husband without even acknowledging their own individual desires. These prejudiced ideas are commonly found in many religious and mythological discourses including the *Ramayana* and Mahabharata. Therefore, Satya Chaitanya relevantly notes in his article "Female Subversion: The Spirit of Lilith in Indian Culture"— "Like the Semitic cultures, the Indian culture too insisted that women play a secondary role to men. Our culture insisted that a woman should live her life to fulfil the purposes of her man and serving him is her highest duty. Thus, in Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Rama tells his mother Kausalya: "Even the best of women, constantly engaged in religious vows and worship, will be walking the path of sin if she is not obedient to her husband. A woman obtains the highest heaven merely by serving her husband even if she completely abstains from worship of the gods and does not pay obeisance to them. With her only interest the welfare of her husband, a woman should constantly serve him—this has been the dharma of women from the ancient times, this is what the Vedas and the Smritis say." (Chaitanya, 180)

The traditional glorification of the exemplary acts of self-denial, self-sacrifice, virtue and piety performed by the legendary female characters portrayed in Valmiki's *Ramayana* or Vyasa's *Mahabharata*, immensely influence societal concepts of womanhood and feminine identity. Several theorists, scholars and literary critics starting from the time of the colonial period to the contemporary era of postmodern feminism, interrogated these conventional ideas regarding feminine identity, female chastity and inflexible gender roles, while analysing, interpreting, reframing and reimagining the major or minor episodes from the mythologies, puranas and epics that illustrate the problematic positioning of women. For example, A.k Ramanujan's widely controversial essay, "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation" (1992), compares the diverse interpretations and re-readings of the Sanskrit *Ramayana* written by Valmiki. This essay asserts a revolting resistance against the mainstream

epic retellings by emphasizing upon the undertones of sexuality and marginality that prevalently exist in these socially, culturally and ideologically different versions of the epic. These self-reflexive discourses that frequently involve in a dialogic relation with one another while challenging the traditional stereotypical views regarding the legendary characters especially the women of the epic, seem to occupy the central position in this essay.

Ramanujan describes the similarity and contradiction existing between the representations of the Ahalya episode in Valmiki's *Ramayana* and Kantam's *Iramavataram* which was written in the 12th century. Whereas Valmiki's Ahalya turns into a stone for being transgressively vocal about her sexual desires, *Iramavataram* sees Ahalya as an epitome of 'Bhakti' (devotion) who transforms into a 'human' when touched by the divine spirit, Ram. In another instance of empowering the dispossessed women characters of the epic while critically questioning the established notions of righteousness and chastity, Ramanujan draws our attention to the daughter of the tormented and mutilated 'Rakshashi', Surpanakha. This sidelined, invisible character attains a sense of subjectivity through her vengeful act of making Sita draw a portrait of Ravana, which subsequently leads Rama to banish Sita from Ayodhya. This kind of deconstructive reinterpretation of the *Ramayana* can also be seen in C.N. Sreekantan Nair's multidimensional dramatic adaptation of the epic tale, *Kanchana Sita* (1958), where several minor characters are provided with a voice of their own. For example, Lakshmanan's wife and Sita's sister, Urmila, vehemently rebels against the torments inflicted on Sita by the 'ideal' King, Raman, then Kausalya (Raman's mother) persistently requests her son to bring Sita back from exile, whereas Raman's greatest devotee Hanuman boldly states that Sita and the kingdom stand for one another while problematically raising startling questions about the remote, subliminal existence of the Queen as a metal statue. Nair's disruptive reading of the epic story depicts how on one hand, Sita's golden statue symbolizes the objectification and dehumanization of Indian women in the patriarchal/Brahmanical social structure, and on the other hand it hints at the ironic sublimation of the ideal image of the virtuous, devoted, pious woman.

There are many other epic retellings and adaptations that link the struggles, experiences and sufferings of the mythical heroine of the *Ramayana*, Sita, with that of the gendered subaltern of today's world, in an attempt to underline the subjugation and marginalization of the dispossessed, displaced and voiceless beings. Sita's mysterious origin from the furrowed earth, the incredible strength with which she lifts up the divine bow of Shiva, her dauntless decision of accompanying her husband to the forest, the commendable patience and bravery with which

she waits for her husband to come and liberate her from Ravana's Lanka, her exceptional act of undertaking the trial by fire after the great war, the inexplicable strength and tenacity with which she bears the pain of being banished by her beloved husband, and subsequently her radical refusal of going through another trial by fire in order to prove her chastity— all these aspects of her character are often revised, reiterated and celebrated in some of the subversive mythopoeic works that critically question the mainstream glorification of Sita's acts of sacrifice and self-denial. For example, Sarah Joseph's feminist short story "Ashoka" (from her remarkable mythopoeic work *Ramayana Stories*) which records Sita's psychological turmoil and anguish as she followed Ram's cruel instructions in order to prove her chastity by undertaking a trial by fire, Nina Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues*, a postmodern cinematic adaptation of the epic tale of Sita's exile and her liberating journey towards self-awareness and subjective autonomy, *Volga's The Liberation of Sita*, an anthology of subversive short-stories that not only provide Sita and other epic characters like Ahalya, Surpanakha, Urmila with a subjective voice of their own, but it also interrogates the conventional ideas of good and evil, virtue and sin, righteous and unrighteous, moral and immoral etc. Similarly, various other feminist deconstructive retellings of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* revisit the tales of other legendary women characters such as Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, Amba/Shikhandi, Chitrangada, Ahalya, Tara, Surpanakha, Mandodari as these epic characters have always been an integral part of the collective consciousness of the Indian society which is largely influenced by these widely celebrated tales of passion, envy, disgrace, despair, sacrifice, betrayal, vengeance etc. Thus, in the course of this thesis, I have tried to look into some of these remarkable women characters from and Ramayana, precisely- Draupadi, Gandhari and Kunti from the *Mahabharata* and Sita from the *Ramayana* (with specific references to two other exceptional characters, Ahalya and Surpanakha).

Draupadi's fiery disposition, dauntless assertiveness, remarkable intelligence, inflexible perspectives and unforgiving viewpoint make her stand out as the most uniquely dynamic character among all the iconic women of the *Mahabharata*. Hence various contemporary revisionist works focus on Panchali's intriguing tale of rootlessness, heartbreak, humiliation, dispossession, vengeance and grief, such as- *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *Yajnaseni* by Pratibha Ray, *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch* by Irawati Karve, "Draupadi" by Mahasweta Devi, *Five Lords Yet None a Protector* by Shaoli Mitra.

Another dynamic character from the *Mahabharata*, Gandhari, renowned for her unflinching sturdiness, remarkable dedication, exceptional spiritual and intellectual prowess as well as her

inability to prevent her sons from following the destructive path of 'Adharma' (unrighteousness) or her raging act of cursing the diving being. These contradictory elements in her character are focused on, analysed and interpreted in the contemporary context in a few deconstructive retellings of the Mahabharata, such as— Aditi Banerjee's revisionist novel, *The Curse of Gandhari*, Tagore's dramatic poem, 'The Mother's Prayer' (translated from the Bengali poem, 'Gandharir Abedan'), Dharamveer Bharati's existentialist play Andha Yug and Iravati Karve's *Yuganta*.

Similarly, Kunti's remarkable strength and self-control visible through her lifelong struggle against her own desires and emotions, her incessant miseries and battles as a widowed mother bringing up her sons singlehandedly, her wise calculative measures to shield her sons and ensure their victory— make her an intriguingly multifaceted character. On one hand, Kunti's sense of rootlessness as an adopted girl, silent repression of her own desires, naïve curiosity and fear of social defamation, place her in the contemporary context as an immensely relevant figure, and on the other hand, her strict prudence, resolute choices, unscrupulous strategies and stern ways of persuading her sons to avenge the humiliation of their wife, unveil the unyielding side of this legendary character. As a result of these contradictions and paradoxes inherently found in Kunti's character, there are many deconstructive adaptations and revisions of the *Mahabharata* that attempt to examine the diverse shades of Kunti's complex character, such as— Iravati Karve's *Yuganta* which provides a psychological commentary on Kunti's character, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* which focuses on the remarkable courage and forbearance displayed by the mother of the Pandavas, Koral Dasgupta's *Kunti* which delve into the deeper regions of her dreams and desires throughout the vicissitudes of her life, and 'Karna and Kunti', Tagore's poetic adaptation of the epic episode from the *Mahabharata* which revisits Kunti's emotional encounter with Karna.

Along with these prominent Aryan women, there are some Non-Aryan epic women characters like Surpanakha, Tara, Mandodari and Hidimba whose individual tales of despair, displacement, marginalization, revenge and resistance have been recurrently revisited and reiterated in an attempt to discover new feminist narratives that question and subvert dominant interpretations. For example, the miserable condition of the marginalized epic characters from the *Mahabharata* Hidimba and Ghatotkacha who uncover the hypocrisy of the Aryan/Brahminical society and its exploitative customs in Manohar Mouli Biswas's radical revisionist poem, 'Ghatotkach and Hidimba: A Dialogue'. The phenomenon of the Dalit women's double marginalization on the basis of caste and gender is quite effectively underlined

in this postmodernist dramatic poem, which also presents an alternative mythic history by giving a subjective voice to the long silenced 'Rakshashi' who was abandoned in her pregnancy by her Aryan husband. It is often claimed by the postcolonial feminist theorists that the issue of women's individual subjectivity is directly addressed with a greater authenticity when women themselves acquire the position of the writing or speaking subject.

Many postcolonial women writers and thinkers like Mahasweta Devi, Pratibha Ray, Sarah Joseph, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Volga, Kavita Kane, Koral Dasgupta and others revisit and reframe the epic narratives in order to articulate a rebellious voice against various forms of gendered violence– social, physical, sexual, cultural, and institutional. Some of these authors employ intermedial narratives to comment on the nuanced interconnections existing between the gendered subaltern residing on the margins, and the postmodern world which is laden with different forms of art, and technology. For example, Samhita Arni's graphic novel, *Sita's Ramayana* undertakes the task of reframing the legendary tale of the Ramayana through the 'Patua' illustrations that try to excavate the buried tales of the indigenous folk-art forms. Likewise, Nina Paley's 2009 film, *Sita Sings the Blues* creates an exquisite parallel between the melancholic theme of the songs sung by the American Jazz singer, Annette Hansaw, and the autobiographical narrative mode which unveils the internal psychological conflicts of Sita, the mythic heroine of Valmiki's *Ramayana*. Arni's poststructuralist text largely deals with the graphic representation of Sita's perspectives about the other women characters in the epic, like Mandodari, Kaikeyi and Surpanakha and quite subversively reimagines Trijatha, Vibhishana's daughter as an authorial voice who narrates the events of the war to Sita. Whereas in Nina's cinematic venture, the use of Jazz music and the animated caricatures of the epic characters, the autobiographical story of her own breakup with her husband Dave, the tragic tale of Sita's misery and her ultimate discovery of selfhood – all these merge to create an artistic, postmodern, feminist retelling of the epic. It can also be noted that, most of the postmodern fictional works written by feminist writers that undertake the task of revisionist mythmaking, tend to focus on the sexed body of the gendered subaltern that unveil the suppressed, forgotten tale of the tangential beings of the contemporary world. As observed by Helene Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa"— "By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display-the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time." (Cixous, Keith and Paula Cohen, 880)

This idea becomes extremely relevant as we look at the path-breaking revisionist works of Mahasweta Devi, Divakaruni or, Joseph. The Naxalite setting of Mahasweta's short story "Draupadi" connects the widely discussed and debated episode depicting the public disrobing of Draupadi with the mass-rape of the tribal Dopdi Mejhen. Similarly, Sarah Joseph, in her ground-breaking short stories, "Asoka" and "Mother Clan", seeks to delve into the darkest regions of the mind of the silenced sexual other (Sita and Surpanakha), while enabling the peripheral beings to assert a rebellious resistance against the phallocentric ideals through their mutilated, humiliated bodies and tempestuous sexuality.

Divakaruni's postmodern mythopoeic novel, *Palace of Illusions* also brings attention to the injustices borne by the sexual other in the patriarchal society, while positing the peripheral being in the authoritative position of the first-person narrator whose unrestrained desires and overarching sexuality threaten to reverse the masculinist conventions of chastity and rectitude. The assaulted, mutilated body and dissenting sexuality of the gendered 'other' that become a mode of resistance against the patriarchal and neo-colonial oppressions, thus become an extremely important thematic aspect in many contemporary feminist mythopoeic works. The issues of haunting recollections of the traumatic as well as nostalgic past, and indomitable desires, both corporeal and psychical, emerge as equally significant thematic aspects in several postcolonial literary works that take up the task of re-mythification. For example, in C.N. Srikantan Nair's exceptional play, *Kanchana Sita*, the side-lined and silenced mythical character from the *Ramayana*, Urmila, defiantly questions Raman's act of banishing her sister, Sita, by alluding to the picturesque images of the past when Raman and Sita were together in the Panchavati forest, and at the same time she voices her indomitable desire to be united with her dispossessed sister. Divakaruni also depicts in their novels, how Shikhandi's traumatic reminiscences about the past life when s/he experienced intolerable pain and humiliations as Amba, are inseparably attached with the unquenched desire for revenge.

Thus, after an analytical reading of the texts that involve in the process of revisionist mythmaking, it can be claimed that these deconstructive works effectively point out that the mythological epics of ancient India often appear to be critically commenting upon the human condition while formulating a discourse which is formative of, as well as formed by, social behaviours and self-understandings. In a similar way, the modern and postmodern literary works that indulge in the task of reappropriating and reimagining the epics, tend to reflect upon the complex questions of Memory, Desire, Body and Sexuality. These issues that are inseparably attached to the inner self's unconscious attempts to cling on to the sense of an

unfragmented identity, present a psychological investigation into the mythical characters who mirror the complicated problems experienced by the downtrodden, excluded entities of today's world. We can also find that these recurrent themes and motifs are constantly used by the poststructuralist, postmodernist and feminist revisions of the epics in an attempt to erase the boundaries between fiction and reality, myth and history, private and public while facilitating a discursive reading of the untold tales of the downtrodden, objectified individuals. Thus in the course of the three chapters of this dissertation I propose to look at these following ideas– 1) The problematic equation existing between the subliminal gendered other and the mythical characters belonging to the epic narratives that are traditionally idealized by the Hindu/Brahminical ideologies. 2) The roles of memory and desire in enabling the displaced individual to attain a particular kind of subjectivity. 3) The symbolic use of the gendered subaltern's body and sexuality to assert a transgressive resistance against the social, political, cultural and religious institutions.

Following the idea conveyed by some imminent feminist thinkers like Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson that the 'feminine' fictions try to redefine and sexualize the external and internal experience of an individual , we can suggest that these fictional retellings of the Epic tales radically recreate a space for interrogating all the dominant ideologies that hinder the path of subversive deconstruction of the domineering patriarchal and neo colonial structures through a rebelling form of self-assertion. Simultaneously these reconstructed and reframed tales address the impossibility of recuperating the gendered subaltern voice from within layers of canonical and traditional interpretation of the myth which foregrounds the relationship between national, social and communal identities largely dependent on the mythical past of the nation and female representation. This subversive act of questioning the authoritative mythical historiography finds a particularly startling voice in many contemporary insurgent works like Mahasweta Devi's short story Draupadi (first appeared in Agnigarbha 'Womb of Fire' in 1978), Sarah Joseph's short stories "Ashoka" (in *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala*), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel The Palace of Illusions, C.N Srikantan Nair's rebellious drama Kanchana Sita which radically interrogates the idea of 'the Maryadapuroshottam' and Nina Paley's postmodern cinematic venture Sita sings the blues . These intriguing works tend to problematize the established notions of selfhood and individuality quite strikingly by addressing the complex discourses dealing with psychological upheavals and multi-layered identity crisis, violent subversions projected through language and sexuality, rebellious memories and dreams resisting oppressive barriers of caste, class and gender.

Chapter I: Draupadi

"Draupadi's fire still rages
to purify and equalize.
She still remains unbeaten
in the flow of her black tresses
In the chronicles of her womb,
In the milk of her womanhood
defying the spineless, dying patriarchs."

--Laksmishree Banerjee[11]

Draupadi who is often considered to be the boldest, bravest and most outspoken epic female character because of the fearless assertion of her individual opinions, and her defiant criticisms of her husbands and other great warriors in the timeless epic tale of *Mahabharata*, is frequently revisited, reimagined and reinterpreted in several oral, folkloric and literary narratives. Although the heroine of the *Mahabharata* is traditionally venerated as an exceptionally virtuous woman, the name 'Draupadi' is still stigmatized as she is often considered to be the main cause of the apocalyptic war of Kurukshetra. Mainstream retellings of the *Mahabharata* that echoes the ancient Vedic concept which often accuses women to be responsible for corrupting men through seduction and bringing about destruction as 'Kritya' (evil woman who leads mankind towards devastation), depict Draupadi as the extremely beautiful yet dangerous woman who not only caused the downfall of those who desired her wrongly but her raging desire to avenge her humiliation ruined almost the entire Aryavarta (Indian subcontinent).

Pradeep Bhattacharya, in his essay, "Panchakanya: Women of Substance", observes that although Draupadi along with Kunti, Ahalya, Tara, and Mandodari are idealized and celebrated as the five sacred 'virgins' (Panhakanya) in some traditional verses, paradoxically they are often excluded from the group of 'chaste' wives or 'Satis' because of their sexual encounters with more than one man. This intriguing observation reflects upon the problematic socio-cultural positioning of these mythic female characters as exemplary paragons of virtuous femininity in the contemporary Indian society. In addition to that Draupadi's image as a fiery, bold and rebellious woman threatening to dismantle the patriarchal power structures by her

[11] Laksmisree Banerjee, 'Draupadi', Indian Literature 57, no. 1 (January/February 2013): 117-118. Sahitya Akademi. https://www.jstor.org/stable/43856723.

unavoidable questions and defiant protestations against unjust oppressions—make the mainstream glorification of the epic female characters furthermore complicated. Bhattacharya's contention also shows how the questions regarding female sexuality, polyandry and physical desires that are often overlooked or, silenced in the mainstream retellings of the epics potently address the problematic marginalization of the gendered 'other' in the contemporary Indian society. Draupadi's stigmatized position in the contemporary cultural and political context of India draws attention to the fact that specific mythological tales and characters are often sidelined in the mainstream retellings of the ancient epic tales as they tend to challenge the traditionally idealized concepts of purity, righteousness, self-abnegation, devotion and subservience. In her radical essay "When Bodies Speak", Githa Hariharan contends that Draupadi is often perceived as an 'untouchable idol' by the conservative Hindus and right wing politicians as there is a deep-seated fear that the dissenting spirit of Draupadi can potently inspire the silenced marginalized beings to assert resistance against patriarchal oppressions— "The right wing wants to tie a chastity belt on all the stories—in fiction or real life—that may question a woman's place in society or challenge the woman's body as a site for the exertion of power. Most of all, they object to making a story our own, mining it for meaning in our lives today. It's not surprising that the thought police would want literary chastity in a story in which a woman has to marry five husbands and is stripped in public. How do they censor the multiple readings of such a story? By making the woman a chaste goddess. Allowing her to be human, a real woman, even in a novel or a poem or a painting, may mean questioning the continued belief in the husband as the god of the ideal Hindu woman— whether in art or in real life."

Like Draupadi several female figures from the myths and epics are deified and idealized in an attempt to dissociate the marginalized gendered 'other' from human emotions and bodily desires that are often looked down upon as 'lowly' and 'irrelevant' in the Hindu/Brahmanical philosophy, similarly the mind which is traditionally associated with masculinity is often prioritized and valued more than the body which is associated with femininity. Shalini Shah's contention in her essay "Engendering the Material Body: A Study of Sanskrit Literature" relevantly investigates into this idea—

"Moreover, the patriarchal ideology has constructed/represented women simultaneously as weak (*abala*) and concupiscent (*pramada*), a site of unruly passions and appetites which are disruptive and therefore in need of control and disciplining. Masculinist thought, instead of allowing women an autonomous and active form of corporeal specificity, judges them in terms of a 'natural inequality', as if there were a measure for the value of bodies independent of either

'sex' or the ideology about that 'sex'. In other words, it is not biology *per se* but the ways in which the social system organizes and gives meaning to the biological body that is oppressive to women. It is precisely because of this reality of women's lives in history that feminists like Sherry Ortner have talked in terms of a nature–culture divide. While women living through their bodies occupied the sphere of nature, men could transcend their bodies and inhabit, rather construct, the cultural world in their masculine mould." (Shah 32)

Contemporary feminist ideas that radically challenge the patriarchal perceptions that often portray the female body as either weak or, lustful, also focus on the necessity of celebrating the reproductive body of the gendered 'other' as a source of subjectivity and power. Thus, in some subversive retellings of the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi's publicly disrobed and disgraced body which originated from the sacrificial fire becomes a symbol of agency and resistance. In addition to that, Draupadi's unconventional polyandrous marriage with the five Pandavas, her unapologetic voice criticizing others, and her 'unwomanly' thirst for revenge, challengingly interrogate the conventional glorification of the feminine virtues like chastity, subservience and self-sacrifice. Sally J. Sutherland who critically examines different episodes from the epic in her article "Sita and Draupadi: Aggressive Behavior and Female Role-Models in the Sanskrit Epics", specifically focuses on Draupadi's uninhibited expression of her rage and disillusionment especially in terms of her husbands' failure in protecting her honour—"Draupadi's aggressive and outspoken manner serves to fuel the tension that is created among the brothers by this conflict of interest-duty toward one's wife versus duty toward one's elders. The theme of victimization surrounds these three central episodes, and it is their differing resolutions that demonstrate to the audience patterns of acceptable behavior. The aggressive behavior of Draupadi can be seen as a powerful defense mechanism, a means by which she can express feelings of rejection and depression that have developed out of her frustrations at the inability or unwillingness of her husbands to act in her defense." (Sutherland, 72)

At the same time, her significant role in saving her five husbands in the royal court of Hastinapur after the game of dice overturns stereotypical ideas about gender roles. Thus, Karna who becomes the mouthpiece of the patriarchal society, degradingly scoffs at the Pandavas for being saved by a woman as he states that in the fathomless ocean of disgrace and humiliation Draupadi becomes the boat of salvation for the sinking, drowning Pandavas[12]. Iravati Karve also observes in her ground-breaking work, *Yuganta* how the Pandava's marital bond with the

[12] Vishnu S. Sukthankar and S. K. Belvalkar, "The Sabhäparvan", in *The Mahabharata for the First Time Critically Edited* II, edited by Franklin Edgerton (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1944): xxviii.

princess of Panchal not only unites the five brothers irreversibly but Draupadi's arrival as the bride also brings power and protection for the exiled princes — "Till the day they married Draupadi the Pandavas were moving incognito from town to town. They had escaped from a horrible death planned for them by the Kauravas, and were afraid of letting their enemies know that they were alive. In the court of Drupada they sat, under assumed identities, among a group of poor Brahmins. Arjuna's sucess in the contest won for the Pandavas not only a beautiful wife but also powerful allies. With these and the Yadavas to back them they could ask for their share of the Hastinapura kingdom. Through their marriage to Draupadi they got a wife, status, and a kingdom." (Karve 46)

In the ancient Hindu Brahmanical society which often perceives women to be powerless, helpless and voiceless beings dependent on men for protection and survival, Draupadi not only emerges as an independent rebellious figure who repeatedly points at the marginalization and oppression of women, but she also radically transcends the gender boundaries by rescuing the Pandavas from impending slavery in the royal court of Hastinapur, although her husbands who are known to be the greatest warriors of the kingdom, fail to protect her during the 'Vastraharan'. The fact that Draupadi is attacked, harassed and humiliated repeatedly because of her polyandrous marriage with the Pandavas underlines patriarchal double standards regarding chastity, gender identity and female sexuality. During the game of dice when Draupadi was staked by Yudhishthir, the shocked and infuriated empress of Indraprastha questioned the extent of Yudhishthir's right over her as she was the common wife of all the five Pandavas and not just his own to be gambled away like a commodity. However, this question ironically puts Draupadi in a much more complicated and vulnerable position in the court of Hastinapur as her husbands had also been staked by Yudhishthir and turned into defenseless slaves by then, hence she finds herself completely unprotected and helpless as Dusshashan attempts to disrobe her in the court of Hastinapur. Sally J. Sutherland's article "Sita and Draupadi: Aggressive Behavior and Female Role-models in the Sanskrit Epics" relevantly observes that— "The staking of Draupadi is meant to bring final and utter ruin to the Pandavas. And as she is displayed in front of the assembly, the brothers are humbled. From the outset Draupadi has realized that her husbands will take no stand in her defense. Her embarrassment at being dragged before a public assembly quickly turns into rage-a rage directed not only against her husbands but against all those gathered at the dicing match. For her presence is more than just a final and utter humiliation of the Pandava princes. More poignantly, it proves to be a humiliation for all the men present. The episode is ironic, though.

During the scene we are made aware that the beautiful Drau- pad! is possessed also of quick wit and a clever tongue. Her ability at debate is soon demonstrated, and at the conclusion of the episode, we realize that her wit has saved her husbands from impending slavery. The Western reader may feel a sense of sympathy and compassion for the luckless Yudhisthira who tries desperately to carry out the letter of the law, and take a small bit of pride in Bhima for his emotional, though ineffective, outbursts in her defense, but our sympathy reaches out most strongly towards her, this hapless woman, who must look to her own resources to save not only herself, but her husbands, and finally her sons." (Sutherland, 66-67)

This episode from the *Mahabharata* relevantly depicts how independent women who are not bound by the strict confines of monogamous marriage are thus often judged harshly and looked down upon as impure and unchaste beings unworthy of being honoured. Ania Loomba, a feminist scholar, argues in her article, "The Draupadi Episode could have Questioned Biases" that— "Instead of pointing to the 'failure' of any particular set of men, the 'vastraharan' sequence could have been made to underline the fact that the promise of 'honour' and 'protection' in exchange for a woman's independent status leaves her susceptible to harassment. It also means that a woman who is not her own, who is no man's is not worth respecting[13]."

Several dissident retellings of the epics that underline the issues of gender often puts the main focus on Draupadi because of her paradoxical position as both one of the most venerated epic female characters as well as the most stigmatized woman of the *Mahabharata*. Contrastingly, in the mainstream reiterations of the epic, she is frequently presented as the self-sacrificing, devoted ('pativrata') wife who can effortlessly assuage all her five husbands. Thus, Shalini Shah pertinently draws attention to Draupadi's adherence to 'the pativrata ideal' as depicted in the main epic narrative of the Mahabharata in her article "On Gender Wives and Pativratas"— "The transition of wife from patni to a mere pativrata - a process that can be termed as 'pativratisation', is most apparent in the portrayal of Draupadi, one of the central female characters in the Mahãbhãrata. A fearless and wise Draupadi with a mind of her own is ingeniously introduced by Yudhisthira as both pandita and pativratã in the Aranyaka Parva. In the same parva Draupadi is coopted into the rarified community of great pativratãs when she suddenly engages in a vapid, inane dialogue with Satyabhãmã. and in the process richly

[13] Suddhabrata Sen Gupta, "Sexual Politics of Television Mythology", *Economic and Political Weekly* 26, no. 45 (Nov. 9, 1991): 2558-2560

elaborates on the constituent features of pativratã dharma. She states: 'to live under the husband's protection (patyãsrayo) is the eternal law (sanãtana dharma) for women. The husband is god, he is the only refuge. So, what woman could displease him.'" (Shah, 2012, 80) However, in the radical revisionist works, Draupadi's dynamic character and dissenting voice effectively address the unspoken tales of the marginalized beings of the contemporary world. Suddhabrata Sen Gupta observes in his article, "Sexual Politics of Television Mythology"—"Each rewrite or, interpretation of the epics, lent to them an added richness in flavour, and new layers of meaning. Since all sections of society found their reference points within the epics, and since theirs was an active relationship with the epics, they naturally imparted something of their view of the world. So, it is possible to locate voices within the epic that are definitely subaltern in character and voices that are definitely elitist. Voices of rebellious, angry women and voices of powerful patriarchs. With time the elitist voice came to predominate. But it was not as if the subaltern voices could not be heard, theirs was a subdued but persistent chorus that renewed itself with each reinterpretation." (p. 2558)

These subaltern voices take up the central position in the dissident narratives that revisit the epic tales in an attempt to unveil the untold tales of the dispossessed beings who are oppressed and marginalized on the basis of caste, class and gender divisions, for example, Mahasweta Devi's revisionist short story "Draupadi" which raises problematic questions regarding caste and gender identities. In this story, like Mahabharata's legendary heroine who got publicly humiliated and molested in the court of Hastinapur, Dopdi, the tribal rebel braves brutal physical oppressions and sexual torments while violently opposing to the neo-colonial male leadership by refusing to be clothed and defiantly exhibiting the horrible wounds of her mass-raped body. Another iconoclastic retelling of the *Mahabharata*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel, *The Palace of Illusions* where on one hand the tale of the *Mahabharata* is narrated from the point of view of Draupadi who is provided with a radical subjective voice of her own and on the other hand the objectification of Draupadi's body and violent suppression of her individuality relevantly focus on the discriminative subjugations and exploitations of the silenced peripheral beings in contemporary world. In another subversive dramatic retelling of the epic tale of Draupadi, *Five Lords Yet None a Protector*, playwright and actor Shaoli Mitra deconstructs the patriarchal hegemony as she raises complicated questions regarding the unjust and incoherent perceptions about polyandry and polygamy. The ancient epic subjects Draupadi to a lot of moral judgements and humiliations because of her polyandrous marriage with the five Pandavas, but at the same time numerous marriages of Arjuna, Krishna and other male characters in the *Mahabharata* are presented as valourous acts of political or, spiritual

achievement. Similarly, Pratibha Ray's novel *Yajnaseni* retells the story of the Mahabharata from the fire born princess Krishnaa's (Draupadi) perspective while focusing on her sufferings, sacrifices, struggles and bold resistance against several forms of injustice. Here Pratibha Ray depicts Draupadi as a sacrificing, affectionate and wise woman who not only plays the role of a devoted wife and mother almost perfectly but also gives valuable advices to her husbands in the matters of politics and governance.

The novel, *Yajnaseni* starts with the final episode of the great epic where the dying Draupadi ruminates about the struggles, achievements, regrets and disappointments of her life in her last letter to her 'Sakha', Lord Krishna. Her birth from the sacrificial fire for the purpose of avenging her father's humiliation and establishing dharma, her unconventional marriage with the five Pandava brothers, her public disrobing in the royal court of Hastinapur, and her subsequent thirteen years long exile with her husbands– Draupadi revisits every episode of her life while raising complicated questions about subjectivity, identity and desire in this revisionist novel which radically connects the experiences of the common women in the contemporary world with those of the legendary mythical character. In her essay "Clearing Sacred Ground: Women-Centered Interpretations of the Indian Epics"[14], Rashmi Luthra rightly observes that Ray's eponymous heroine uses— "…her powers of intelligence and elocution, to confront injustice, in however circumscribed an arena. On women being used by patriarchal agendas not in their own interest, Ray's Draupadi asks: "Should only woman be forced to be the medium for preserving dharma and annihilating evil throughout the ages?" (8). In other words, should women be made pawns in the designs of a patriarchal world?" (Luthra, 148)

Draupadi's undaunted criticism of the oppressive structure of the Hindu patriarchal society which often uses women as instruments to wage war, invade territories, appease gods and sages or, avenge past insults— draws attention to the problematic position of the idealized women like Sita, Kunti, Tara, Gandhari and others in the ancient world of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata.* She not only underlines the forms of subjugation and exploitation of women but she also defiantly challenges the biased perceptions regarding female sexuality, chastity and morality— "Chaste woman! Unchaste woman! In the same way why don't the scriptures speak of chaste men and unchaste men? Are men's hearts made of gold that sin cannot tarnish them?" (Ray 94).

[14] Rashmi Luthra, "Clearing Sacred Ground: Women-Centered Interpretations of the Indian Epics", in *Feminist Formations* 26, no. 2 (Summer 2014):135-161, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43860745, The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Ray's Draupadi not only focuses on patriarchal double standards regarding righteousness and purity but she also radically questions the idea of asserting resistance through silent self-abnegation like Sita and chooses to voice indignation against injustice. She says to Krishna: "When that wicked man [Dushasan] was stripping me, helpless like chaste Sita I could have disappeared into the depths of the earth to hide my shame. If I had prayed, would not the earth have opened? But I did not do so. If I had done so my modesty would have been protected but the wicked would not have been punished. In the future this problem would remain unresolved for women." (Ray 148) This statement emphasizes on the significance of vocal protest in order to fight against any form of injustice, oppression and exploitation. Through Draupadi's dissenting discourse the author attempts to remind contemporary women of their self-worth so that they can firmly stand up against sexual violation rather than emulating the idealized concepts of silent-endurance and self-sacrifice. In the traditional Indian society women are often found to be repressing their voice and desires in order to accommodate themselves in the mainstream of the society which expects women to be demure and subservient. In this context Stanko's argument that women "learn to define their worlds and thus their experience are less important than men's" seem to be quite relevant as women often tend to "internalise and silence many of their experiences of sexual and/or physical intimidation and violation" (1985:17)[15].
In addition to that, through her unquenchable thirst for knowledge and wisdom, and her artistic and poetic efficacies, Ray's Draupadi emphasizes on the importance of education for women to empower themselves and attain subjectivity. In the novel Draupadi often expresses her rebellious ideas and opinions against the unjust objectification and exploitation of women especially through the institutions of marriage and family. She radically criticizes the concept of 'Swayamvar' which is commonly designed for the purpose of choosing a suitable groom for the bride, however throughout the occasion the bride is displayed as a beautiful 'voiceless' prize to be won— "Bees they were, but how sympathetic! I was grateful for their generous consideration. Only they could feel how painful it was for a woman to have her beauty on display in an assembly hall. Strangely enough, scholars and priests were incapable of sensing this." (Ray 39) Through the voice of her protagonist, Ray tries to focus on the complex relationship existing between the oppressive male gaze and the objectified female body. The mythopoeic narrative underlines the intriguing ways in which the lived experiences of the female body interact with the patriarchal/social perceptions about femininity. Draupadi's

[15] Elizabeth A. Stanko, *Intimate Intrusions Women's Experience of Male Violence*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London: 1985.

experiences depict how the socially constructed female body thus often transforms into a 'body-for others' which loses its subjectivity as it is perceived as a consumable commodity and placed under the voyeuristic male gaze.

Draupadi's marriage with the five sons of Kunti reaffirms this idea as Draupadi is compelled to become their common wife in an attempt to reestablish the bond of unity among the Pandavas. Although Arjun (the third son of Kunti) through his exceptional archery skills won her hands in marriage in the swayamvar, Draupadi had to accept the other four Pandavas as her husbands because Kunti wanted Arjun to share the 'gift/alms' with his brothers as she supposedly didn't know what or, whom Arjun brought home. Ray's Draupadi bravely accepts her destiny as Lord Krishna convinces her that she can serve as the unifying element for the five brothers and increase their strength in the combat against the unrighteous Kauravas. Hence Draupadi agrees to sacrifice her body as well as her personal choices and desires, however through her difficult decision to be entangled in the bonds of the polyandrous marriage with the Pandavas, she raises several problematic questions regarding the female body and its connections with the Hindu philosophical concepts on physicality and spirituality—

"I, Yajnaseni, born of the sacrificial alter for the preservation of dharma! If, impelled by greed for this mortal body, heroes like the Pandavas had found themselves by a vow to their mother, then in their dharma-yajna let this body become an oblation! In reality what was this body? From where did it come and where will it go? What did I know? For I was not that body. My hands, feet, limbs were not Krishnaa, No one part of my body was Krishnaa. So let everyone be happy getting this body. Let them be united. Why should I be an obstacle? This body made up of five elements— Fire, water, earth, air, ether—after offering it to five husbands would I be able to remain a Sati?" (Ray 63)

The issues of sexual chastity, sanctity of monogamy, undivided devotion towards the husband, complicated relationship between body and soul are subtly problematized and underlined in this context through Draupadi's assertion. These ideas can be paralleled with the postmodern feminist concepts that focus on the body as a realm of underlying truth and refute the orthodox patriarchal viewpoints that prioritize the experiences and abilities of the mind over those of the body. Barbara A. Holdrege in her essay "Body Connections: Hindu Discourses of the Body and the Study of Religion" radically exclaims—

"The distinction between mind and body, spirit and matter in its various formulations in western philosophy from Plato to Aristotle to Descartes, is a historical and gendered dichotomy: the mind, characterized as the nonmaterial abode of reason and consciousness, is correlated with the male and is relegated to a position of superiority over the body, which is

characterized as the material abode of non-rational and appetitive functions and is correlated with the female. Thus, one aspect of the feminist project involves challenging the tyranny of male reason by revisioning the female body and ultimately dismantling the dualisms that sustain asymmetrical relations of power."

Here in the novel *Yajnaseni*, although her sexualized body gets distributed among the five Pandavas, Draupadi paradoxically takes up a position of power and authority through her body as she becomes the common wife of the five brothers and destroys any possibility of fraternal rift stemming from sexual envy. Thus, the body of the fire-born princess significantly problematizes the concept of 'Sati' (the chaste, sacrificial and devoted wife) and her promiscuous relationship with the Pandavas interrogates the age-old ideas of sexual chastity and sanctity of monogamous marriage. At the same time Draupadi's marriage with the five brothers even though she accepted Arjuna as her husband in the Swayamvar, points at the process through which Draupadi was robbed off her subjective voice and compelled to serve as the unifying factor among the Pandavas.

This polyandrous marriage also raises several complicated questions about the role of the older women as patriarchal instruments of subjugation and control as Ray's Draupadi boldly criticizes Kunti's act of placing her in the problematic position where she had no other choice but to marry the five Pandavas. Draupadi underlines the sense of guilt and shame that Kunti might have experienced as her impotent husband King Pandu compelled her to indulge into sexual encounters with different men in order to beget male heirs. The insecure fear of being defamed as the only promiscuous 'impure' woman in the Kuru dynasty and the overwhelming desire to take up the most powerful position in the royal household of Hastinapur, must have influenced Kunti's act of binding her five sons and Draupadi through the bonds of matrimony. Therefore, Ray's protagonist exclaims—

"Even though she had had sons through different gods at her husband's request, mother's own conscience must at times have been weighed down with a sense of sin, shame and hesitation. She would have felt guilty. Perhaps even at such times she would have become the target of scorn and ridicule. In case the mother was shamed before the daughter-in-law and looked small, she had deliberately compelled the daughter-in-law to accept five husbands." (Ray 66)

Kunti had to go through the process of 'Niyoga', a well-established custom found in many ancient texts (including the *Mahabharata*) which allowed women to have children with other

men if the husband was diseased, infertile or, incapacitated[16], as her husband, King Pandu persuaded her to use the mantra/boon by which she could call upon any god to come and father children with her. This practice which was sanctioned by both mythical tales and traditional notions somehow overlooks the rigid boundaries of morality and sexual chastity in an attempt to prioritize the necessity of protecting the lineage. This customary process thus became a patriarchal system of oppression and exploitation as women like Kunti or, Ambika and Ambalika were not only deprived of a subjective voice of their own but they were also compelled to have sexual intercourse with other men (sometimes against their will) in order to beget healthy and intelligent male heirs suitable for the throne. Draupadi's marriage with the five Pandavas bear a stark resemblance with the ways in which Pandu compelled Kunti to produce children through 'Niyoga' or, Satyavati manipulated her daughters-in-law to be impregnated by her illegitimate son Ved Vyasa, the wise ascetic who authored the Mahabharata. According to the orthodox ideas of the patriarchal society, women are not only perceived as the voiceless 'other' always ready to sacrifice individual will and desire for the sake of the family and society, but they are also seen as just sexual bodies that can be objectified and exploited for the gratification of men or, continuation of the lineage. Thus, in the introduction to her pioneering work *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoire asserts: "What is a woman? And in answer to this question, she herself replied: Many would say 'woman is a womb'."[17] On one hand a woman is thought to be incapable of transcending the limitations of the temporal world and gross physicality, and on the other hand she needs to fulfil her 'feminine destiny' by begetting and nurturing children and granting sexual pleasures to men without any question or, protestations. Hence the legendary epic characters like Draupadi, Kunti, Ambika and Ambalika are also perceived as nothing but just reproductive bodies and like ordinary women of the contemporary society they also end up being subjugated, oppressed and exploited in the name of honour and duty.

Ray has also underlined the suppression of individuality, subjugation and familial domination experienced by numerous women in the contemporary Indian society through the sense of painful loneliness that Draupadi experiences. As the princess of Panchal was married to five husbands with contrasting characteristics, she found it to be immensely difficult to 'satisfy' all

[16] "The Subversive Nature of Virtue in the Mahaharata: A Tale About Women, Smelly Ascetics and God" by Arti Dhand, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72, no. 1 (Mar., 2004): 33-58.

[17] Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), 13.

her husbands by performing diversely different wifely duties. Thus, in Yajnaseni, on one hand, she can be seen taking up the role of a learned political advisor when she is with her husband, Dharmaraj Yudhisthir, and on the other hand she plays the role of a docile, subservient wife who gratifies her temperamental husband Bhimsen by cooking delicious meals. However, Draupadi is often abandoned, ignored and disrespected because of her position as the common wife of the Pandavas—

"These tears were not the molten form of agony, not born of the pain of insult, nor emerging from physical weariness. They had sprung from helplessness and loneliness. The woman who was mocked at every step for being loved by five husbands— how lonely she was, how friendless! Who would understand that!" (Ray 138)

Unlike other women in the myths and epics, Draupadi boldly questions the reasons and conditions that lead her towards painful loneliness and anxiety. In this novel, we can see Draupadi arguing with her husband, Arjuna/Phalguni as he breaks the rule which forbade the Pandavas to enter the room when Draupadi spent time with one of her husbands, and prepares himself to be exiled in the forest for twelve years. As Draupadi expresses her desire to accompany Arjuna just as Sita did in the *Ramayana*, she is harshly reminded of her commitment and loyalty towards her other four husbands. In this context, not only does Ray's heroine assert her subjective voice by refusing to accept her husband's decision, but she also protests against the prejudiced judgements and accusations heaped on her because of her polyandrous marriage when she exclaims— "I did not accept five husbands on my own. So, why are you bringing up that topic? You are my husband. If you are king, I shall be queen. If you are a forest dweller, then so shall I be. There is no alternative to this." (Ray 167)

This statement defiantly interrogates the complicated ideas associated with the normative concepts of 'Pativrata' (the wife who is religiously devoted to her husband) and 'Stridharma' (wifely duties) that are often shown to be laden with numerous contradictions in the *Mahabharata.* Ray's Draupadi underlines the fact that phallocentric discourses often tend to devalue female desires while ironically blaming a woman's independent assertion of selfhood for the emerging problems in the family as her silent sacrifices and subservience are upheld as the 'ideal qualities' that play the most important role in maintaining familial bonds of love and peace. Thus, renowned feminist thinker Madhu Kishwar says— "In India, most of us find it difficult to tune in to the extreme individualism that comes to us through feminism. For instance, most women here are unwilling to assert their rights in a way that estranges them not just from their family, but also from their larger kinship group and community." (Kishwar 272)

In Ray's reconstruction, Draupadi's subversive assertion also problematizes the patriarchal definition of 'the ideal woman' which differs depending on the changing situations, relationships and perceptions. Hence Draupadi's raging questions directed at the elders of the Kuru dynasty in the royal court of Hastinapur as Duhshasan brutally dragged her by her hair even when she was 'single-garmented and menstruating', were perceived as an example of 'outrageous audacity' unsuitable to a woman. Thus Shakuni, the inventor of the abominable plan of entrapping the Pandavas through that notorious game of dice states-– "The greatest offence a woman commits is to try to be learned. It is because she became wise and scholarly that her condition is thus! If she had grovelled at our feet and begged, perhaps she might have escaped such a gross insult. Just as knowledge and power enhance a man's attraction, similarly ignorance and helplessness increase the charm of a woman. However, Draupadi strengthened by pride in her learning and wisdom, is like a burning tongue of flame. Can anyone have pity on her?" (Ray 238)

Shakuni's statement points at the archaic ideas that the ancient Hindu/Vedic society often emphasized upon in order to maintain the balance in the hierarchical power structure that depends largely on the systems of inequality and discrimination. According to these rigid conventions and traditions, the procedures of edification and tutelage were not supposed to be accessible to women and other marginalized beings, as knowledge enlightens and empowers the mind while providing the peripheral 'other' with a subjective voice of their own. By preventing women from being formally educated or, participating in the public sphere, the patrilineal society of ancient India tried to control female sexuality which often threatens to dismantle the configurations of hierarchical power.

In her insightful essay "Hinduism and Female Sexuality: Social Control and Education of Girls in India" Karuna Chanana thus exclaims— "Further, the development of a social hierarchy based on notions of relative purity has had a doubly unfortunate effect on the lives of Hindu women. On the one hand, they are impure and a source of pollution because of menstruation and childbirth and are assigned lower social worth. On the other, they are venerated as pure beings and their condition reflects on the honour and status of their menfolk. According to Engels, the contradiction between pollution and power is vital to the understanding of the practice of female seclusion or pardah (1999:73). The view of the Hindu woman as the pure, who is in danger, and as the impure one, who is dangerous (Mukherjee 1978), led to loss of autonomy, male control and management of her sexuality." (Chanana, 42)

In the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi is often portrayed as an immensely wise woman possessing significant knowledge about statecraft, politics and morality although she didn't get the opportunity to be formally educated like many other women in the ancient patriarchal society, hence she quickly learnt about the important aspects of 'dharma' from the conversations of her father and husband with other men. Thus, renowned author and scholar Brian Black observes in his essay, "Eavesdropping on the Epic: Female Listeners in the *Mahabharata*"— "When Draupadi delivers her counter argument, maintaining the need for action, she cites Manu, indicating that she is literate in the discourse of dharma. At the end of her argument, she once again brings attention to how she has acquired her knowledge: "My father once lodged a learned brahmin in our house; and he told my father of this matter, bull of the Bharatas. He taught this same policy, which was first propounded by Brhaspati, to my brothers at the time; and I listened to their conversations at home. He talked to me comfortingly, when I came in with an errand, or was sitting on my father's lap, listening eagerly, King Yudhisthira." (Black, 53)

This revisionist work significantly reflects on the contradictions that are often associated with the complex character of Draupadi- how on one hand she is often venerated for her remarkable wisdom and intelligence and on the other hand, she is recurrently criticized for her unjust treatment towards Karna in the 'svayamvar' where she prevented 'the charioteer's son' from participating in the contest because of his caste identity. Panchali's actions are harshly questioned through Karna's voice— "Then if you feel that the insult of a woman is unjust and against dharma, has this woman not violated law and dharma? The condition of the svayamvar was piercing the target, that is manly prowess and ability. Why did questions of race, birth, history and family background arise there? Was that not unjust and devoid of dharma?" (Ray 240)

Here the questions of caste and identity problematically intersect with the issues of gender violence and sexual oppression as Karna talks about the unfair system of caste discrimination in the context of Draupadi's public disrobing. Draupadi's reluctance to accept Karna, a 'Sutaputra' as her husband can however be comprehended from the perspective of the casteist-classist ideas that were an integral part of the Vedic society where the institutional system of marriage played an important role in maintaining 'the brahmanical social order'. Hence an inter-caste marriage especially where a Brahmin or, a Kshatriya marries a Shudra, was perceived not only as a transgression of the customary conventions and boundaries, but also an attempt to break down the social and religious structures— "Marriage is integrated with caste which is at the basis of a Hindu's primary status position in the society. A man's caste is first

of all decided by the status of his parents, subsequently maintained or modified by his own marriage and sexual encounters." (Tambiah, p. 223)

However, Karna's inspections about the actual meaning of 'dharma' stands in sharp contrast with the conventional idea upheld by the ancient Hindu society which exclaims that it's the duty of the man to protect the honour of women, as the female body and the universe constitute one divine being. Thus Kartikeya C. Patel observes in his essay, "Women, Earth, and the Goddess: A Shākta-Hindu Interpretation of Embodied Religion"— that according to traditional Hindu belief system "..if an individual's dharma is not respected, chaos and possible destruction follow. In this sense, respect for, and observance of, a woman's own nature would lead to the attainment of human goals; conversely, if it is not respected, chaos and total annihilation may follow. For example, when brought into the assembly hall while still menstruating, Draupadi asks, "If you permit these faults in the presence of the elders, my father-in-law, will the rain fall? Will the world survive?" (Hiltebeitel 1988, 265)." (Patel 73)

The conventional ideas about the intricate connections existing between the feminine and the cosmos are reaffirmed in this statement as it depicts how the female body is perceived as a manifestation of the eternal divine being, 'Shakti'. This idea about the universality of the female body can also be noted in the fierce assertion made by Draupadi in the reconstructed court-room episode in Ray's novel— "Such a gross outrage on womanhood will never be wiped out in history. The descendants of this country will blame the Kuru king for this. This lawless, gross injustice and tyranny of the Kuru clan will demean the male sex for all time. It will outrage all the chaste woman of Bharat dynasty and the entire female sex on earth. For this insult there is no forgiveness, for this sin there is no expiation." (Ray 242)

Although Draupadi reflects on the significance of vengeance and just punishment, she also ponders on the grave consequences of the war which always brings destruction and death, grief and loss, separation and pain. Thus, in the culminating moments of her life, Ray's Yajnaseni asks Krishna to give her an opportunity to be reincarnated again so that in her next life, she can lay out the message of peace and harmony and escape the defamation and stigma that are often associated with her name.

This outrage and fury with which Draupadi responds against the oppression and exploitation experienced by women, can be found in other retellings of the epic as well. For example, in a feminist-humanist theatrical adaptation of the tale of Draupadi, *Five Lords, yet none a protector,* Saoli Mitra's outspoken Draupadi defends her desire for revenge by saying that her public disrobing can be used as a precedent for subjugating and tormenting other women, hence

appropriate punishment for this disgraceful act is immensely important, thus she asks Krishna— "If I forget the humiliation inflicted on me, dear friend, will it usher a Dharmarajya, the rule of Virtue, into this world? Can you promise that in the future no woman will ever be persecuted and demeaned like I was?" (Mitra 60). These lines problematize the connections between sexual oppression and female vengeance while raising problematic questions regarding 'Dharma', duty and virtue. Mitra's protagonist radically interrogates the Brahminical notions of virtue and righteousness that often tend to project the self-sacrificing, docile and voiceless woman as 'ideal', whereas the rebellious woman who resists against different forms of patriarchal subjugation and oppression, is frequently portrayed as an immoral and malicious being. However here in this path-breaking retelling, Saoli Mitra who plays both the roles of Kathak and Draupadi, sarcastically comments on the patriarchal prioritization of pretentious righteousness and logical composure while suggesting that the disgrace that Draupadi experiences during the game of dice could only be avoided through violent protestations— "Gentlemen, could hair-splitting debates save Draupadi in this situation? What was needed to save her was anger. And arms." (Mitra, 37)

Thus, Mitra's narrator indirectly refers to the possible outcome of this unjust act of sexual violation while reminding the audience about how violence and vengeance take the center stage in the devastating war of Kurukshetra where the boundaries between right and wrong, dharma and adharma, truth and deception are unconventionally challenged and transgressed. Contemporary mythologist and author, Devdutt Pattanaik aptly observes – "Everyone in the gambling hall knows that disrobing a woman in public is just not done. Yet no one — neither the wise Bhisma or Drona — come to Draupadi's rescue. They argue on the letter of the law and ignore its spirit. In the war, Krishna therefore shows them no mercy. They may be old and wise but they have to be killed by fair means or foul. It was they who allowed the law of the jungle to permeate and pollute human culture. So, they die by the effects of their own misdeeds. The law of the jungle which was used to abuse Draupadi turns around to kill them. When law does not protect man, man rejects the law."[18]

As the narrator mockingly criticizes the marginalization and subjugation of the peripheral 'other' on the basis of class and gender, Draupadi's rage and anguish merge with the voice of the narrator ('the kathak') and vividly underlines patriarchal double standards and hypocrisy. In several episodes in the play, the kathak/narrator strongly disapproves of the complacency

[18] Devdutt Pattanaik "The Clothes of Draupadi", First City, New Delhi, Mythos in April 2006.

and nonchalance of the sexist and classist social structures when it comes to dealing with the injustices and discriminations faced by the subaltern. For example, after Yudhishthir's controversial act of staking Draupadi during the dice game, the narrator/kathak dramatically covers her ears with both hands in an attempt to express her fear about the horrible outcome, however eventually as the kathak witnesses the disgraceful silence and inaction of the great warriors and elders of the Kuru clan, her fear transforms into outrage and disgust. She then directly addresses the audience by saying— "Good sirs, there are times when the wise and the learned keep mum, while the weak go on being tortured endlessly! Endlessly!" (Mitra 32). By talking about the problematic silence of the Kuru warriors at the court of Hastinapur, Mitra focuses on the usual hypocrisy and passivity of the privileged people when it comes to assert resistance against several forms of injustice, discrimination and marginalization.

In this play which tries to look at the experiences of the epic heroine from the humanist point of view of an ordinary woman, playwright and actor Saoli Mitra goes on depicting how queens and princesses are robbed off their subjective voice and are often incarcerated in their own palaces without any subjective authority to take any significant decision or, transcend the conventional boundaries. In the 'Swayambar' arranged by King Drupad to find the most eligible husband for Draupadi, like all other princesses, Panchali (the princess of Panchal) is also presented as an object to be lusted after and to be won as a trophy by the most valiant man. The narrator/Kathak ironically points out how the physical prowess and archery skills of the suitors are considered to be much more significant than the will and desire of the princess and how the 'Swayambar Sabha' becomes an occasion for the kings and princes to prove themselves as mightier than the other. This lack of a subjective voice of the sexual 'other' can also be noted in the episode where Draupadi is compelled to marry all the five Pandavas as Kunti unknowingly asks 'the brothers to divide their acquisition among themselves[19]' and through Kunti's eyes Draupadi's helpless confusion is portrayed in a detailed manner— "Kathak Kunti: This poor girl, so innocent… what a price to pay! [In anguish] I don't know, I don't know what I've said, my son. Perhaps I've made a mistake. Perhaps I've committed a sin. This is something for you to decide among yourselves." (Mitra 23)

Here Kunti seems to be much more sympathetic and humane as she distances herself from the complex predicament created by her words, however Kathak also focuses on the ambition of

[19] Saoli Mitra, *Five Lords, Yet None A Protector*, translated by Rita Datta, (STREE, 2006), 23.

the mother of Pandavas to reinstate her sons as the rightful heirs of Hastinapur and unifying them through the polygamous marriage with Draupadi— "She knows that disputes arise mainly over property and over women. If her sons were to fall out with each other over a woman, how would they recover their lost kingdom?" (p.23)

Iravati Karve rightly observes that like a shrewd politician, Kunti tries to bind her three sons and the two sons of Madri into an unbreakable bond through their polyandrous marriage with Panchali so that they can face their enemies in a stronger, unified manner[20]. Pradip Bhattacharya also discerns in his article "One in herself: Why Kunti Remains a Kanya" — "Kunti knows that the only way to forge an unbreakable bond among the five is not to allow them to get engrossed in different wives. Up to then, their lives had been governed by her and revolved only around her. If that unified focus is to persist, only a single woman can replace her, not five." (Bhattacharya, 30-31)

Through Draupadi's struggles and sufferings that are highlighted in the play, the trials and tribulations experienced by the women of the contemporary world are unveiled and underlined. The princess of Panchal becomes the queen of Indraprashtha yet she gets publicly disrobed and dishonoured, then spent long years in exile with her five husbands, in addition to that she recurrently faces sexual harassment and molestation. Saoli Mitra relevantly depicts how Draupadi's difficult journey of life reflects on the problematic experiences of contemporary Indian women who are subjected to various forms of subjugation and injustice throughout their lives. Draupadi, the daughter of the King of Panchal is presented as a sexual object to be won through an archery contest in her Swayambar, as the wife of the five Pandava heroes she experiences humiliation and dehumanization as she is staked as a pawn in the game of dice by her husband, as a lover she gets disillusioned and heartbroken when her beloved Arjun marries several other women and eventually fail to save her from the utter disgrace during the dice game, as the queen of Indraprastha she is tormented, dishonoured and disrobed at the royal court of Hastinapur before getting exiled for thirteen years along with her husbands, and subsequently she suffers as a mother when her five children are murdered in sleep by the vengeful Ashwathama at the end of the Kurukshetra war. Accordingly, the Kathak says—

"…A queen - yet not a queen. An empress - yet not an empress. Mistress of a kingdom. Yet a queen without a kingdom. The tale of a hapless woman who had everything yet nothing…." (Mitra 9).

[20] Iravati Karve, "Kunti", in *Yuganta* (Orient Blackswan Private Limited: Hyderabad, India 2007), p-50.

These contradictions can always be found in Draupadi's tale as she refuses to accept the oppressive torments that she is subjected to and boldly chooses to counter the inaction and silence of her husbands during her public disrobing. Instead of following the idealized virtues of subservience, docility and silent endurance, Draupadi chooses to raise her voice to protest against the atrocities faced by her. She harshly questions her husbands for their inaction and silence while rebelliously criticizing the prescribed directions of Vedic Dharma and the notions upheld by the religious scriptures that are only designed to embolden patriarchal power structures. Thus, Mitra's iconoclastic protagonist asks Yudhishtir — "Raja, aren't you a Kshatriya? Have you no anger? No inner fire? When they dragged me into the assembly while I was menstruating, draped in a single cloth, and when they flung me down on the floor, didn't you look at me? Wasn't my dishonour your dishonour too? Bhimsen, and only he was enraged, but what about the rest of you? What sort of men are you?" (Mitra, 47)

Draupadi, shocked at the passive nonchalance and 'righteous' complacence of Yudhishthir, persuades him to avenge the injustices heaped on her while denouncing the greed of the Pandavas for kingdom. Saoli Mitra's heroine radically disapproves of the much talked about difference between the Pandavas who are conventionally regarded as the epitome of Dharma and the Kauravas who are traditionally perceived as 'Adharmic' (one who doesn't follow the path of dharma) and exclaims that both the parties value the pursuit of acquiring power more than their moral responsibilities or, struggles for justice. Even during their exile, Draupadi refuses to accept the deep anguish of humiliation as a helpless victim of unjust oppression and reminds her husbands of the day when their wife had been assaulted, abused and stripped at the royal court and they had to lose everything including their kingdom, might and honour. Thus Sally J. Sutherland's observation in her article, "Sita and Draupadi: Aggressive Behaviour and Female Role-models in the Sanskrit Epics", seems to be immensely relevant in this context— "The character of Draupadi has a special appeal, I feel, for coupled with her actual victimization is a strong realization of her victimization. On the other hand, it is this same aggressive behaviour and outspokenness of Draupadi - coupled with the inability of her husbands to protect her - that prevents her… from being 'idealized' as the perfect woman." (Sutherland, 1989, 72-73)

In Mahasweta Devi's recalcitrant short story, "Draupadi", the epic tale of Draupadi is questioned and subverted in an attempt to unveil the intriguing interconnections existing between the patriarchal, brahminical and neo-colonial systems of marginalization and oppression. Here the epic tale of Draupadi's public disrobement is revisited and reversed by

relocating the episode in the tumultuous context of the Naxalite movement. Mahasweta's Santhal protagonist, Dopdi Mejhen along with her husband Dulna, join the violent Naxalite struggle for equality and liberty by murdering the oppressive landlord Surja Sahu who prevented 'the untouchables' to take water from the 'upper caste' wells and tubewells during the drought. Like the legendary heroine of the *Mahabharata*, rebellious Dopdi Mejhen bravely stands up against all kinds of atrocities and faces ruthless harassments with unwavering courage and defiance. Her brutal mass-rape by the army men problematically alludes to the mythical tale of the polyandrous marriage of Draupadi with the five Pandavas and at the same time this episode where the 'intellectual' Senanayak (leader of the battalion) instructs the soldiers to 'make her', critically examines and interrogates Draupadi's public disrobing in front of her valiant 'Kshatriya' husbands who silently witnessed her disgrace in the name of 'Dharma'. This deconstructive story thus disrupts the structural binaries of the contemporary power politics and underlines the hierarchical dualism between the dominant and the residual, the elite and the subaltern, the mainstream and the aboriginal. On one hand, the ferocious tribal rebel, Dopdi becomes one with the dark, dense and unknown forest/nature while posing a challenge to the masochistic nation-state which seeks to control and dominate the forest with their modern technologies and weapons, and on the other, "the state consequently sees her as an embodiment of anti-state insurgency that must be contained and crushed— epistemologically, culturally and bodily."[21]

The name Dopdi abbreviated from the legendary epic character Draupadi's name, ironically hints at the intertextual and paradoxical relationship between the mythical heroine whose public disrobing at the court of Hastinapur causes the great war of Kurukshetra, and the tribal rebel who fearlessly fights her own war even after getting brutally mass-raped by the soldiers. Devi's tribal protagonist Dopdi Mejhen, a fierce comrade in the Naxalite rebellion, does not have the privileges like that of her epical counterpart, Draupadi, to rely upon a divine figure like Krishna or, the five heroic husbands like the Pandavas who saved her from sexual harassment on several occasions. Dopdi emerges as a fiery independent woman who faces her oppressors with immense courage and bravery even after losing her husband and companions in the violent struggle. While roaming around the dark and dense forest with just a handful of rice tied around her waist, she constantly thinks about protecting her accomplices from the

[21] Rekha, "Embodiment, Sexuality and Articulation", in *Gender, Space and Creative imagination: The Poetics and Politics of Women's Writing in India* (Primus Books, Delhi, 2015), 79.

hidden traps laid out by the soldiers and cops, rather than caring about her own life and wellbeing. Dopdi stakes her hopes, desires, physical sanctity and even her family for the sake of the revolution that she chooses to be a part of. Her intense passion for the Santhal uprising is prominently visible in her contemplation about biting her tongue off for the secrecy of their mission and the way she prepares herself to endure extreme forms of torture and subsequently sacrifice her life— "If mind and body give way under torture, Dopdi will bite off her tongue. That boy did it. They *kountered* him. When they Kounter you, your hands are tied behind you. All your bones are crushed, your sex is a terrible wound." (Devi, 29)

Although Draupadi's remarkable protests and interrogations during the public disrobing have influenced and shaped numerous feminist and deconstructive retellings of the epic, this subversive short story by Devi depicts the narrow confines of Draupadi's protests and questions that needed a particular kind of power and subjectivity which the 'Kulabadhu' of the Kuru clan (Draupadi) was already equipped with. In the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi escapes her impending public humiliation through miraculous divine intervention because she has proven to be a 'pure', 'chaste' and 'virtuous' wife, contrastingly Mahasweta Devi's tribal protagonist fails to protect her 'honour' or, 'chastity' and eventually she is sexually violated by a large number of soldiers following the instructions of the 'intellectual' Senanayak. On one hand, the Kauravas could not disrobe Draupadi because of Krishna's protection, and on the other hand Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi refuses to cover her ravished body and through the grotesque physical wounds on her body directly questions the patriarchal codes of honour and modesty—

"Draupadi stands before him (Senanayak), naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds. 'What is this?' He is about to bark. Draupadi comes closer. Stands with her hand on her hip, laughs and says, The object of your search, Dopdi Mehjen. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me?"" (Devi, 269).

Here, the tribal protagonist of this radical short story not only underlines the oppression and double marginalization that most of the peripheral women must go through, but she also raises complicated questions regarding various forms of patriarchal, brahmanical and martial (state sponsored) subjugation and violence. Dopdi's audacious attempt of transgressing the boundaries of gender, class and caste by aggressively involving in the Naxalite struggle is seen as a terrible threat to the patriarchal social norms and oppressive state policies, thus she is subjected to unimaginable viciousness and tyrannical cruelty because in the Aryan/Brahmanical patriarchal structure, women have always been controlled and intimidated through violence. Hence Uma Chakravarty exclaims in her ground-breaking essay "The

Formation of Patriarchy and the Subordination of Women" that— "Women's impulses can be contained through recourse to intimidation- the threat of using force, or its actual use; the euphemism for 'impulse control' in the *Arthashastra* is the 'inculcation of modest behaviour'. The text both regulates physical chastisement and permits it in a variety of situations." (*Gendering Caste*, 73)

The striking differences between Draupadi and Dopdi address the stereotypical and problematic ideas regarding the 'good' and 'bad' woman, the 'chaste' and 'unchaste' woman, the upper caste Kshatriya and lower caste tribal woman. Hence Rajeswari Sundar Rajan observes in her essay, "The Story of Draupadi's Disrobing: Meanings for Our Times"— "It is, of course, [the epic] Draupadi's virtue as a chaste wife that produces the miracle… But the tautology of the virtuous woman who is saved because she is worthy to be saved has its inexorable logic: raped women, that is, those that are not saved, were unworthy. We can admire the feminism of Draupadi's exceptional salvation only at the cost of the misogyny of that logic." In the *Mahabharata* the fire born princess, Draupadi's chastity and purity as a devoted wife of the five Pandavas guarantees her salvation, similarly the tribal rebel, Dopdi's class and caste identity becomes a significant factor in her horrific mass-rape. The act of brutal torture and sexual oppression that Dopdi is subjected to, is not just an attempt to silence and punish the individual rebel, but it also tries to threaten and disarm the Naxalite rebels and tribal revolutionaries by violating their women who are conventionally seen as the symbol of communal honour in the Brahmanical system of patriarchy. This idea can be linked with Uma Chakravarty's relevant contention that many ancient texts recommend that women of all castes must be guarded 'more carefully than wealth' as the 'izzat'/honour of the community or, family depends largely on the sexual chastity of its women— "Manu enjoins that day and night women must be kept in dependence (and be well guarded) by the males of their families. If they are not guarded, they bring ruin to two families, the one into which they are born and the one to which they are given." (Gendering Caste: Through a feminist lens, 73)

Although like her mythical counterpart (Mahabharata's Draupadi), Dopdi's class or caste associations do not help her escape the violent torments that she experiences, Mahasweta Devi's narrative provides her with a distinctive sense of subjectivity and dignity despite being disrobed and raped by the soldiers. After being 'apprehended', several soldiers repeatedly rape Dopdi in order to teach her and other rebels 'a lesson' for creating chaos in the 'peaceful' forests and challenging the system of law and order of the 'democratic' nation-state, but the

irrepressible Dopdi refuses to yield while defiantly advancing towards Senanayak and furiously asking him to 'kounter' (kill/encounter) her.

Through her ravished and disfigured body, she brazenly expresses her grief and fury while startlingly subverting the dominant power equations, as Helene Cixous observes in her landmark essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa", that 'the impenetrable language of the gendered body seems to be potent to demolish all kinds of rhetorical boundaries, class partitions and regulatory codes'[22]. The dominant patriarchal systems of language and theoretical knowledge are critically interrogated through the 'un-knowable', 'un-objectivized' discourses of the tormented body of the marginalized 'other'. Mainstream phallocentric ideas that often associate the mind with purity and sanctity and the body with impurity and frivolity, tend to devalue the body of the silenced being as a mere object or, organ unnecessary in the 'superior' intellectual pursuits. However, in the postmodern subversive narratives the objectified, dehumanized beings find a subjective voice through their physicality and sexuality.

Thus renowned postcolonial thinker and author Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who translated Mahasweta Devi's defiant short story, "Draupadi" exclaims in "Translator's Foreword" that— "It is when she crosses the sexual differential into the field of *what could only happen to a woman* that she emerges as the most powerful 'subject', who, still using the language of sexual honour, can derisively call herself 'the object of your search', whom the author can describe as a terrifying superobject— 'an unarmed target'." The unarmed, naked body of the dehumanized 'object' transforms into the most powerful weapon of resistance which stuns and terrifies the hypocritical leader of the army men (Senanayak) by unveiling the inefficiency and fragility of the shackles of institutional control. Dopdi's ferocious refusal to follow the orders of the Senanayak (symbolically representing patriarchal and neo-colonial authority) to cover her mass-raped body bearing the marks of inhuman torture and cruelty, attempts to reverse the hierarchical power configurations and at the same time Dopdi's untamed screams and loud 'ulutation' give another intriguing dimension to Mahabharata's Draupadi's futile protestations and pleadings in the court of Hastinapur.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak also observes that Dopdi's startling emergence as 'an objectified subject' while intimidatingly confronting her 'politico-sexual enemy', ultimately reverses the subject-object equation by placing the stupefied Senanayak on the margins and robbing his authoritative voice off. While fiercely advancing towards Senanayak, the naked unarmed

[22] Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", in *Reading Rhetorical Theory*, ed. Barry Brummett (New York: Harcourt, 2000), 879-893.

'target', Dopdi attains a specific kind of subjectivity through the experiences of her lived body and eventually she potently transcends the imposed boundaries of passivity that are conventionally associated with the female body. Through her mangled breasts, bloody lips and violently ravaged body she attains a raging subjective voice which enables her not only to speak up against the brutal sexual oppression that she is subjected to, but also to underline how the bonds of political control often transform into shackles of gender violence—

"Draupadi's black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply can't understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is terrifying, sky splitting and sharp as ulutation, What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but can you clothe me again? Are you a man?" (Mahasweta Devi, "Draupadi", 37)

As Dopdi refuses to be clothed after the mass-rape and audaciously advances towards her oppressor while exhibiting the grotesque wounds on her naked body, she radically thwarts the bondages of male dominance and occupies a powerful subjective position through her act of repudiation, just as Judith Butler observes in "Bodies that Matter"— "The forming of a subject requires an identification with the normative phantasm of 'sex', and this identification takes place through a repudiation which produces a domain of abjection, a repudiation without which the subject cannot emerge. This is a repudiation which creates the 'valence' of abjection and its status for the subject as a threatening sphere."[23] Hence her state of despondence and disgrace paradoxically changes her position from that of the subjugated and tormented peripheral being to that of the fiery sexual 'other' whose defiant black body bearing the marks of mass-rape make her an extremely powerful subject resembling the destructive figure of the Hindu goddess Kali.

In many other revisionist retellings Draupadi's dark skin colour is frequently focused on as a significant metaphor pointing at the problematic interconnections existing between class/caste identity, female sexuality and patriarchal notions of beauty. In the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi's dark complexion is also associated with her gloomy destiny and it projects her to be the ominous cause of the devastating war of Kurukshetra. Thus P. Pratap Kumar writes in his article "Centrality of Draupadi in the Mahabharata Narrative" that when Draupadi originates from the sacrificial fire with her brother Dhristadyumna, she is described to be 'a bigger threat

[23] Judith Butler "Bodies that Matter", in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, ed. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 235.

to the Kshatriyas in general and the Kauravas in particular, as if the darkness of her complexion hints at the greater threat to the Kauravas'.[24]

However, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's mythopoeic novel, *The Palace of Illusions* which provides Draupadi/Panchali with the opportunity to attain a subjective voice with which she unveils her struggles, desires, disillusionments and discontents, also highlights how because of her dark skin colour the famous beauty of Panchal was also considered to be an 'unfortunate' being. In the chapter called 'Blue', Draupadi narrates how she was compelled to use several kinds of 'skin-whitening unguents' to make her skin fairer and whiter, as fair skin is conventionally seen as an essential aspect of beauty in the Indian society— "In a society that looked down its patrician nose on anything except milk-and-almond hues, this was considered most unfortunate especially for a girl. I paid for it by spending hour upon excruciating hour being slathered in skin whitening unguents and scrubbed with numerous exfoliants by my industrious nurse." (Divakaruni, 8)

The body of the gendered 'other' is thus trained to follow the socially constructed ideas of beauty in order to attain a particular kind of power and privilege in the patriarchal society which has normalized the objectification of the female body either as an attractive 'sexualized' being able to satisfy men or a maternal body able to produce 'male heirs'. Hence the notion of the idealized woman is intricately associated with the act of conforming to the social norms and standards as one of the contemporary scholars of Indian Feminist works, Rekha rightly observes in her essay "Woman, Space and writing" — "As a representational and conceptual category, woman is caught as an ironic ambivalence within patriarchy. On one hand she is seen as an essentialized 'being', a fixed state and on the other, she is constantly manipulated into 'becoming', i.e. a condition or, an identity actively under construction. But patriarchy glosses over this ambivalence by positing both being and becoming as integral aspects of 'womanhood'— becoming being a mere acculturation process/tool for her notional being. This becoming is directed through various paths, often violent and torturous to turn 'woman-as-a-living-entity' into 'woman-as-a-conforming entity'."[25]

Divakaruni's Draupadi vividly depicts this ceaseless struggle of 'being' and 'becoming', as she indulges in her quest for selfhood while aspiring to fulfil her duties as an ideal daughter, wife and queen. Conventional Brahmanical/Vedic ideas associate the concept of ideal womanhood

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[24] P. Pratap Kumar, "Centrality of Draupadi in the Mahabharata Narrative", *Indian Literature* 60, no. 4 (July/August 2016): 165-178, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44479551. Sahitya Akademi.

[25] Rekha, "Women, Space and Writing", in *Gender, Space and Creative imagination: The Poetics and Politics of Women's Writing in India* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2015),11.

with not just a specific kind of skin colour or, physical demeanour, rather these age-old beliefs often emphasize upon the glorified attributes of chastity and virginity as substantial virtues of an ideal woman or, 'Sati' (an epitome of purity and devotion). Divakaruni's reinterpretation of the epic tale of *Mahabharata* also focuses on the polyandrous marriage between Draupadi and the five Pandava brothers in an attempt to uncover diverse facets of gender based coercion which is integrally attached with the conventionally valourized idea of 'sexual purity'. Thus when Vyasa presented her with the boon that would make her a virgin every time she consummated her marriage with a new husband, Draupadi radically questions the efficacy of that boon— "Nor was I particularly delighted by the virginity boon, which seemed designed more for my husbands' benefit than mine. That seemed to be the nature of boons given to women— They were handed to us like presents we hadn't wanted." (Divakaruni, 120)

This assertion not only underlines how through the sublimation of the idea of feminine chastity, women are often subjected to gendered subjugation and oppression but it also critically interrogates the mythical tales of Satayavati, Kunti and other epic characters who attained miraculous boons like Draupadi and are showcased as ideal women who regained their chastity even after begetting children. 'The docile body'[26] of the sexual 'other' is thus often governed by the social and cultural norms that define the boundaries of ideal femininity while repressing individual desires and expressions. In this context, Meenakshi Thapan's contention seems to be quite relevant—

"The body is, clearly, a medium of culture, in the sense in which we take care of it and maintain it, eat, dress, and adorn ourselves, communicate with others, and so on. However, the body as Susan Bordo points out is also more directly, "a practical... locus of social control" so that we are in a sense not what we want to be but we are made through culture."[27]

Draupadi's identity as the princess who originated from the sacrificial fire and her idiosyncratic marriage with the five Pandavas place her in a distinctive position where she is perceived as a pure, sacred and fiery figure who is able to transcend the rigid peripheries of Brahmanical/patriarchal perceptions and establish a new form of dharma/righteousness by abolishing the redundant and outdated structures. Thus when Draupadi asks whether Bhisma

[26] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Routledge,1975)

[27]Meenakshi Thapan, "Images of the Body and Sexuality in Women's Narratives on Oppression in the Home", *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, no. 43 (Oct. 28, 1995): WS72-80. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4403369.

said anything about her to his mother, the divine river, Ganga, he responds by saying that—"she said you were a great flame, capable of lighting our way to fame- or destroying our entire clan." (Divakaruni 136)

Perundevi Srinivasan discerns in his article, "Nationalist Fabric, Gendering Threads: Notes on Subramaniya Bharati's Draupadï" that in many main-stream devotional retellings of the epic, the fire-born princess of Panchal is considered to be an 'untainted' divine being whose 'tavam' (austerity) and fierceness enhance her feminine chastity —

"Draupadi, who is often referred to as "aivar pattini" meaning "the chaste wife of the five," is said to be born from the altar of fire. Moreover, considering the signification of chastity veering toward "virginity," which is much more than wifely devotion in the Tamil discursive realm (Shulman 1980: 148), perception of Draupadï as a "virgin" in her Tamil cult despite her being the wife of the five Pändavas (see Hiltebeitel 1991: 362-64) is also pertinent in this context: because, virginity, as David Dean Shulman has observed, is understood as a "kind of tapas" and its loss equated with "squandering of accumulated energy" or heat in Tamil mythologies (1980: 148).7 The heteronormative frugal sexual economy, built along the notion of chastity-as-virginity and interpreted as tavam and fire, produces the feminine as a source of potential power."[28] (p-7) This assertion makes it very clear that there is a stark contrast between the ways in which Draupadi's image is perceived in the contemporary social and cultural context where on one hand she is frequently envisioned as a goddess epitomizing purity, chastity and fierceness like the fire that she originated from, and on the other she is traditionally viewed as the unconventional and illustrious mythical heroine whose desire for vengeance became one of the primary causes of the devastating war of Kuruksetra.

However, Divakaruni not only transcends the boundaries of conventional perspectives about Draupadi's character and her role in the inception of the Kurukshetra war, she designs her protagonist as an immensely powerful woman who reconstructs the destiny of the Pandavas who were hiding in disguise after Duryodhan's attempt to annihilate them by burning the palace of Varnavat. Her polyandrous marriage with the Pandavas provides them with the much needed political support and at the same time, Draupadi's effective advices, guidance and provision enable the five brothers to achieve their desired goals and fight against the obstacles unitedly—

[28] Perundevi Srinivasan, "Nationalist Fabric, Gendering Threads: Notes on Subramaniya Bharati's Draupadï", *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 18, no. 1, (April 2014): 1-31, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24713737. Springer.

"I'd played a crucial role in bringing them to their destiny. I'd shared their hardship in Khandav. I'd helped them design this unique palace which so many longed to see. If they were pearls, I was the gold wire on which they were strung. Alone, they would have scattered, each to his dusty corner" (Divakaruni, 134).

Divakaruni's Draupadi attempts to go beyond the stereotypical perceptions and mainstream interpretations of the epic narrative while interweaving some significant postmodern feminist ideas with the revisited epic tales. For example, when Yudhisthir loses everything in the game of dice including his brothers, himself and even Draupadi, the startlingly critical questions asked by Draupadi not only challenge the normative ideas of 'duty' and 'righteousness', but they also brazenly address the complicated issues regarding patriarchal/familial control over women's bodies and repression of the subjective identity of the gendered 'other'. Draupadi's bold assertion of her identity which is intricately associated with her self-esteem and individuality, raises numerous questions regarding the peripheral position of women within the patriarchal structures of family and society. Divakaruni invites contemporary Indian women to recognize their self-worth and rebel against the repressive and exploitative norms, regulations and rituals through Draupadi's recalcitrant contemplations at the time of the notorious dice game— "I'm a queen. Daughter of Drupad, sister of Dhristadyumna. Mistress of the greatest palace on earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins, or summoned to court like a dancing girl." (Divakaruni 190)

This proud self-assertion by Draupadi creates a unique space for her where she confidently defines her identity as a resilient woman equipped with powerful political connections while attempting to reclaim her eminence and agency. Although Divakaruni's heroine remarkably raises her voice against different forms of gendered oppression, a classist/casteist undertone becomes vividly noticeable in this statement when she emphasizes on the positional difference between her and 'a dancing girl'. The well-read and quick-witted protagonist of this revisionist novel, further refuses to be subjugated and controlled by the whimsical commands of the paternalistic system and recollects the words from the Nyaya Shastra— "If perchance a man lost himself, he no longer had any jurisdiction over his wife"[29]. She then instructs the servant to go to the royal court of Hastinapur and ask the elders of the Kuru clan whether Yudhisthir had any right to wager Draupadi as he himself had already become Duryodhan's property.

[29] Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions*, (Doubleday Broadway Publishing Group, New York, 2008) p-190.

In the chapter called "Sari", Draupadi's public disrobing and her subsequent subversive interrogation of the ideas of 'disdain' and 'duty', 'offence' and 'justice', 'disgrace' and 'vengeance', depict how the sense of fragmented selfhood of the tormented sexual 'other' often gets entangled with the problematic discourse of the lived body. As Dussasan tries to unclothe Draupadi in front of the great warriors at the royal court of Hastinapur, Panchali prays to Krishna for protection while remembering Krishna's profound words that the ability of humiliating and shaming an individual does not lie in the hands of the perpetrator, rather it depends upon that person's willingness to allow it. Draupadi thus robs the Kauravas off their power by detaching herself from the corporeal experiences of dishonour and degradation through an act of spiritual transcendence—

"Let them stare at my nakedness, I thought. Why should I care?
They not I should be ashamed for shattering the bounds of decency." (Divakaruni, 193)

Here Draupadi's radical act of liberating herself by rising above her mortified and tortured body, raises dissident questions against the conventional concepts of propriety, morality and shame with which the patriarchal society often attempts to subjugate and oppress the gendered 'other'. At the same time this act of transcendence focuses on complicated questions regarding the intricate connections existing between spiritual sensibility and physical experiences. Susan Wendell's essay "Feminism, Disability and the Transcendence of the Body", relevantly explains how forms of bodily transcendence are 'ways of interpreting and dealing with bodily experience' and they provide the individual with the opportunity to address 'the degrees to which consciousness and the sense of self may be tied to bodily sensations and limitations'[30].
Later in this chapter, after the Kaurava's horrific attempt of stripping her in public, Draupadi emerges as the defiant figure whose overwhelming desire for vengeance radically changes her position from that of the distressed marginalized 'other' to that of a fiery rebellious woman whose raging voice threatens to destroy the perpetrators and their lineages— "Not one Kaurava heir will be left to offer prayers for the dead. All that will remain is the shameful memory of today, what you tried to do to a defenseless woman." (Divakaruni 194)
Here Draupadi not only becomes the voice of the powerless, peripheral beings who are often exploited, violated and tortured by different institutions and sociopolitical structures, but

[30] Susan Wendell, "Feminism, Disability and the Transcendence of the Body", in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, ed. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (Edinburg: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 332.

through her blazing words she also reminds the oppressive patriarchal society that the repressed gendered 'other' will rise up one day to revolt against all forms of atrocity and marginalization, and eventually demand for equality, liberty and justice. This contention can be relevantly linked with Helene Cixous's radical assertion— "When the "repressed" of their culture and their society returns, it's an explosive, utterly destructive, staggering return, with a force never yet unleashed and equal to the most forbidding of suppressions. For when the Phallic period comes to an end, women will have been either annihilated or borne up to the highest and most violent incandescence. Muffled throughout their history, they have lived in dreams, in bodies (though muted), in silences, in aphonic revolts."[31]

The Palace of Illusions also focuses on the trials and tribulations of the dispossessed beings attempting to attain an unbroken sense of selfhood, through the vivid portrayal of Draupadi's excruciating experiences of displacement and disillusionment. The mythopoeic narrative of this postmodern work depicts how the much-desired palace of illusions built at Indraprastha gets intricately entwined with Draupadi's dreams and desires, and eventually Draupadi's separation from the palace symbolically represents the rootlessness and displacement of the dispossessed 'other'.

Divakaruni's Draupadi nurtures her desire for revenge by ceaselessly reminding her innermost self of the terrible humiliations and oppressions endured by her during that infamous game of dice at the royal court of Hastinapur. Draupadi refuses to forget the agony and torments that her mind and body experienced and she does not 'let herself be driven away from her body'[32] even while facing numerous hardships during the exile. Her raging voice thus exclaims— "As we moved through the forest, I carried a pouch of salt in honour of my lost palace. At night I let the grains run through my fingers, over skin scraped raw by rocks and branches, and welcomed the sting. It would help me not to forget. In my dreams, the palace came back, at once grander and more exquisite than in life. I knew I would never find another home where I belonged in the same way." (Divakaruni, 198)

Here Draupadi's bruised skin and flesh constitute a powerful language which on one hand breaks down the rigid boundaries of phallocentric discourses that often focuses on the mind and overlook the body, and on the other hand it vividly entails the story of her pain and misery. Her bodily experiences get entangled with her unfulfilled desires and displaced selfhood and

[31] Helene Cixous, Keith Cohen, Paula Cohen, "The Laugh of the Medusa", *Signs* 1, no. 4 (Summer, 1976): 875-893, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239. The University of Chicago Press.

[32] Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Write Your Body and The Body in Theory", *Feminist Theory and the Body*, eds. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 258.

her public disrobing becomes a crucial reason for the political war between Pandavas and the Kauravas, just as Trinh. T. Minh-ha points out in her essay "Write Your Body and The Body in Theory"— "Touch me and let me touch you, for the private is political. Language wavers with desire. It is 'the language of my entrails', a skin with which I caress and feel the other, a body capable of receiving as well as giving: nurturing and procreating." (Price and Shildrick, p-259)

Draupadi inflicts new wounds on her body to keep the rage and pain of the past humiliations alive, so that those traumatic memories of her assault, degradation and displacement intensify the fire ignited by the desire for revenge. Her individual feelings of anguish and fragmentation merge with the collective sense of loss experienced by the Pandavas as they had to give up their kingdom and palace after losing in the game of dice. However, just as the subjugation and oppression of the peripheral being is often used as an instrument in socio-political power structures, Draupadi's sufferings are underlined as one of the greatest causes of the war as her experiences are only considered to be a significant tool of restoring the lost glory and honour of the Paandavas. Thus through Draupadi's voice, Divakaruni critically comments upon the deprioritized distresses of the sexual 'other' and patriarchal glorification of the ideas of heroism and valour— "But now I saw that though they did love me— as much perhaps as any man can love— there were other things they loved more. Their notions of honour, of loyalty toward each other, of reputation were more important to them than my suffering. They would avenge me later, yes, but only when they felt the circumstances would bring them heroic fame." (Divakaruni, 195)

Draupadi's intriguing questions regarding dharma, valour and manhood subverts the paradoxical Brahmanical/patriarchal discourses that often normalize and overlook gendered subjugations and different forms of violence against women in the name of societal or, familial honour, while hypocritically idealizing chivalrous acts of protecting the 'weak' and 'helpless'. The atrocities and injustices that Draupadi resists, the vivid depiction of her tumultuous psychological upheavals, her furious and rebellious protestations as well as her unapologetic thirst for revenge intriguingly lead the contemporary reader of this revisionist retelling to interrogate the mainstream reception and reading of the great epic tradition of *Mahabharata*.

Divakaruni attempts to subvert the patriarchal portrayal of Draupadi's character by enabling her to interrogate all the dominant perceptions about her character, thus Draupadi says— "it seems that everything I'd live until now had been role: the princess who longed for acceptance, the guilty girl whose heart wouldn't listen, the wife who balanced her fivefold role precariously, the rebellious daughter-in–law, the queen who ruled the most magical of palaces,

the distracted mother, the beloved companion of Krishna, who refused to learn lessons he offered, the woman obsessed with vengeance none of them were the true Panchaali" (Divakaruni, 229)."

Most of these reformist and revivalist modern retellings of the epic narratives that concentrate on different issues of the cultural, social or political phenomena, quite startlingly emphasize on the underlying concerns dealing with sexuality and gender that remain an integral part of the multi-layered, diverse readings of these ancient tales. As a result, these problematic discourses that remained largely unacknowledged or, hardly talked about in many previous authoritative discussions regarding the epics and mythical legends, attracted the notion of many postcolonial and postmodern thinkers because of their efficiency in addressing the problematic questions dealing with the position of the Indian women who are caught in the cobwebs of the cultural past and ideologies, political and religious institutions, mythical idealizations and ethical obligations. Rashmi Luthra thus states in her essay, "Clearing Sacred Ground: Women-Centred Interpretations of the Indian Epics" – "Loomba notes that the legacy of colonialism complicates the relationship between feminisms and women who do not identify as feminists, women of lower castes and classes, and women of minority religions. This is quite true of Indian feminisms (M. Chaud- huri 2004; Kumar 1993; Omvedt 1980). As Indian feminists negotiate these key forces, the appropriation of epic narratives is one of the resources they can use to position themselves. By interjecting themselves into the contest over tradition, not only do feminists make this resource available for their own projects, but they also make visible the selective appropriation of traditional narratives and constructs by nationalists, the religious Right, and others." (Rashmi Luthra, 137)

These conflicting issues are unequivocally addressed by the re-mythification process which radically exposes these discontents of the contemporary world as these retellings explicitly talk about violence, vengeance, dreams, memory, desire, identity, language, resistance, sexuality etc as transgressive modes of attaining subjectivity and projecting resistance. We can find that these recurrent themes and motifs are constantly used by the poststructuralist, postmodernist works in an attempt to erase the boundaries between fiction and reality, myth and history, private and public while facilitating a discursive, reading of the untold tales of the downtrodden, objectified individuals.

Chapter II: Gandhari

“She had wrapped them, her eyes
So light wouldn't invade them
And she would have to say nothing
For words are eyes
Our dilated pupils
Looking at history
Judging time
Our words that rhyme
Pal-vipal-anupal
On our tongues
Red and firm like quartered tomatoes
But surely there came a time when Gandhari grew a stare
That seared through the tatters of haze
On her eyelids' surface, the clutter and

Bogs of apparent benevolence

Because eyes alone guarantee

We have spoken

To sleeping gods

And our own kinds, she too knew." – 'Gandhari's Eyes'[33] by Nabina Das

This deconstructive poem depicts how the epic tale of Gandhari's self-imposed blindness symbolizes the silence of the gendered 'other' and just as her eyes gained 'the divine sight' after years of sufferings and penance, the subjugated peripheral beings also attain the ability to see through the complex systems of exploitation and oppression. Subsequently Gandhari's rebelling voice with which she dares to curse a god (Lord Krishna) for all the injustices and deceptions, becomes one with the long-suppressed voice of resistance acquired by the marginalized individuals in the contemporary context. Among the legendary epic female characters, Gandhari stands out as a remarkably brave woman whose enigma, ambiguity, dedication and resilience make her more human and relatable than most other mythological/epic characters. The princess of Gandhar who was compelled to lead a life full of hardships and difficult choices by marrying Dhritarashtra, the blind prince of Hastinapur, seems to be immensely relevant in the context of contemporary patriarchal society where women are often directed or, manipulated to sacrifice their desires and contentment for the sake of their families. The radical queen-mother of the Kauravas, who steadfastly remained in blindfolds to follow her husband in his blindness, apparently seems to be a symbol of self-denial, sacrifice and subservience, however she radically asserts bold resistance against the horrible humiliations and oppressive torments that her own sons inflicted on Draupadi during the infamous game of dice designed by her brother, Shakuni. She, in her uncontrolled rage, overcomes the boundaries of motherly affection and furiously curses her own son for demeaning and assaulting Draupadi, the 'Kula-badhu' of the Kuru clan. This idea is relevantly addressed by Jayanti Alam in her insightful essay, "Gandhari, the Rebel", where she observes that— "We cannot also forget how she had pleaded with and begged of her husband to forsake his son for the sin he has committed against womanhood; she had gone to the extent of saying that mother's pride will be restored only when such a shameless son is forsaken." (Alam 1519)"

[33] Nabina Das, 'Gandhari's Eyes', *Indian Literature* 53, no. 6 (November/December 2009): 159-160, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23348142. Sahitya Akademi.

This strong sense of justice which she depends on while protesting against the unrighteous acts committed by her sons, repeatedly dictates Gandhari's choices and decisions, although it can be noticed in several episodes in the *Mahabharata* that she often fails to protest against the injustices that she herself faces throughout her life. On one hand, she silently accepts her fate when she is separated from her family and married off to Dhritarashra who seemed to be unsuitable for her in both physical and intellectual capabilities or, when her sons audaciously challenge and demean the ideas of righteousness, kindness and duty, and on the other hand she furiously curses Lord Krishna for his biased use of the rules of Dharma. These paradoxical elements in Gandhari's character are focused on, analysed and interpreted in the contemporary context in a few path-breaking retellings of the Mahabharata, such as— Aditi Banerjee's revisionist novel, *The Curse of Gandhari*, Tagore's poem 'The Mother's Prayer' (translated from the Bengali poem, 'Gandharir Abedan'), Dharamveer Bharati's existentialist play Andha Yug and Iravati Karve's *Yuganta*.

Aditi Banerjee's exceptional retelling of the epic tale of *Mahabharata* from the point of view of the iron-willed queen of Hastinapur, *The Curse of Gandhari*, attempts to unveil the story of devotion, rebellion, ambition and disillusionment of the mother who is often criticized for her failure in positively influencing her sons or, for being the defiant queen who furiously cursed a god. Through a vivid portrayal of Gandhari's desires, hopes, fears and miseries, Banerjee invites the readers to look beyond her blindfold which is on one hand, traditionally perceived as a symbol of her self-sacrificing devotion towards her visually-impaired husband and on the other hand her wilful blindness is perceived as an act of insurgence— "She has been reduced from a complex, nuanced woman to the symbol of her blindfold. So much of the discussion about her centres on whether blindfolding herself was an act of devotion or, spite, as if answering that would be enough for us to understand and judge her[34]." This revisionist novel thus depicts Gandhari not as an epitome of purity, sacrifice and righteousness, rather as an amalgamation of several contradictions like an ordinary human being full of emotional intricacies and realistic imperfections. Banerjee's reimagined Gandhari appears to be immensely assertive, strong and brave especially towards the very end of her life when she loses all her hopes and fears, thus she not only takes pride in her spiritual achievements, but also unapologetically confronts all judgements and criticisms by rebelliously questioning the conventional ideas of right and wrong, truth and falsity, 'dharma' and 'adharma'. Hence when Kunti sarcastically exclaims that 'a queen who has cursed a deva' can never be guarded by any

[34] Aditi Banerjee, 'A Note to The Reader', *The Curse of Gandhari* (Bloomsbury India, 2019), p-viii.

spiritual power of penance and prudently interrogates about the nature of afterlife awaiting that radical being, Gandhari doesn't hesitate to remind Kunti of the dubious acts committed by her in the problematic situations of her own life and responds– "Perhaps the same afterlife that awaits the mother who abandoned and renounced her firstborn son." (Banerjee, 10)

This assertion shows how the queen of Hastinapur refuses to be mortified and subdued for the truthful expression of her anger and agony after losing her sons in the destructive war of Kurukshetra, and in addition to that through her castigating response to Kunti, she fearlessly points out the hypocritical double-standard practiced by the patriarchal/brahmanical society while trying to restrict the peripheral 'other' with the rigid boundaries of shame, prejudice, meekness and unquestioning devotion. This penchant for challenging the widely accepted perceptions and conventions can be repeatedly seen in Gandhari, especially when she takes the ground-breaking vow of blindfolding herself— "I will not see the world my husband cannot see. He will never be at a disadvantage to me. As his wife, I will be deprived of sight by choice of my vow, as he has been deprived by the fate of his birth." (Banerjee 35)

In this postmodern retelling of the epic, several multifaceted questions are raised about this startling vow taken by Gandhari as it paradoxically hints at the contradictory emotions and complicated psychological turmoil that might have influenced its formation— firstly, Banerjee contends that the forceful compulsion with which Gandhari was robbed off her subjective voice while being compelled to marry the blind prince Dhritarashtra, could have initiated an overwhelming sense of bitterness which might have led her to dissent against this atrocious arrangement by choosing voluntary blindness, secondly, it can be interpreted as a reflection of her will to place herself in an equal position as her husband so that their physical differences fail to create any insecure hostility between them, and thirdly her vow can be symbolically connected to her ambitious desires to be counted among the great sages known for their extensive and challenging penance.

In an attempt to focus on the diverse forms of gender bias that are prominently found in the myths and epics, the author of this revisionist novel further underlines how although Gandhari's vow is revered as a remarkable act of sacrifice, devotion and piety, it fails to transform her into a superhuman being like Devavrata whose unparalleled vow of celibacy for the sake of his father changed him into Bhishma, an emblem of unquestionable loyalty and self-abnegation— "Perhaps for a man to do something so extraordinary, he became different and transformed by it. For a woman, to do something extraordinary was just an attestation of

the powers of womanhood, her inherent femininity. Extreme piety, purity and devotion were not extraordinary to women but inherent to them." (Banerjee 37) This statement unveils how on one hand, the patriarchal brahmanical society glorifies the qualities of self-sacrifice and piety as sublime attributes fit to be emulated, and on the other hand it paradoxically tends to consider these virtues as a common inherent aspect of 'ideal womanhood'- thus Gandhari's wilful blindness for the sake of her marital relationship is not seen to be as an extraordinary phenomenon as the great grandfather, Bhishma's celibacy. As all Indian women are traditionally expected to follow the glorified ideals of 'Pativrata' and selflessly devote themselves to the service of their husbands and families, Gandhari's sacrificial act of embracing blindness is often perceived as an outstandingly brave but common phenomenon that can be frequently found in the mythical tales that often epitomize the struggles, endurance and sufferings of the legendary characters like Sita, Savitri and others. In this context Shalini Shah's assertion in her essay "On Gender, Wives and 'Pativratās'" seems to be immensely relevant— "Jayal, in her book *The Status of Women in the Epics* (1966), has commented on the transition of the concept of wife from 'sahadharmini', one who is a true friend and confidante of her husband, and who reserves for herself the right to independent judgement, to 'pativratã', who is but a mere devotee of that exalted, all-wise and all-powerful God called 'pati' (bhartã me daivatam param). And the only aim of a wife's life was single-minded worship of this lord and master. 'Pativratã dharma /pãtivratya' became the only duty enjoined upon the wife, and the epics were the vehicle for the popularisation of this dharma." (p-80)

Nevertheless, through Gandhari's character, Banerjee interrogates these glorified ideas of 'pativrata' that tend to place the gendered 'other' in a never-ending cycle of subjugation and exploitation, as she emphasizes on the immense pressure of begetting a suitable male heir for the throne of Hastinapur that Gandhari experiences and the grand expectations from her to fulfil all the duties of the royal family as the devoted wife of the blind prince— "She was bristling against the stifling life of the palace where she had been firmly side-lined, where she did nothing but cook and tend to guests and her husband, where the only decisions she was charged with were what outfit to wear and how to dress her hair— and even that she could not do herself; she was dependent on servants by her blindfold and by her position as a princess." (Banerjee, 101) By focusing on Gandhari's suffocating frustrations for her lack of independence and authoritative power in the household, Aditi Banerjee thus attempts to underline the struggles and sufferings of the marginalized women who dedicate their lives for

the wellbeing of their families yet they remain voiceless and invisible, incarcerated within the peripheries of the household.

In this mythopoeic novel, the reimagined Gandhari startlingly asserts her selfhood by using these ideals glorified by the patriarchal society in order to showcase her strength, determination and passive protestations against the unjust compulsions and oppressive regulations that are heaped on her through her marriage with Dhritarashthra. Thus, as the ambitious matriarch of the Kuru dynasty, Satyavati bluntly asks Gandhari about the reasons behind her 'melodramatic act' of blindfolding herself, Gandhari boldly states— "It is not melodrama. It is part of my pativrata, my vow of marriage and devotion to my husband to sacrifice my eyesight in honour of he who has been blind since birth. I am sure this sacrifice of mine will bring blessings for him and the entire family." (Banerjee, 52) This blazing response unveils a different side of her character and Satyavati who herself has struggled excessively and extensively for the continuation of her lineage finds a striking similarity between her own sturdiness and the dauntlessness of the new bride— "I think, princess, you are like me. We know how to survive, how to be tough, how to be ruthless in this world when we need to be. We are strong." (Banerjee, 62)

Satyavati, a fisherwoman who transcended the class and caste boundaries to become the Queen of Hastinapur and then desperately attempted to safeguard the Kuru dynasty with all her complex strategies, sees the similar kind of persistence and obstinacy in the young Gandhari who attempts to subvert patriarchal subjugation through her remarkable vow of blindfolding herself. However, Gandhari's blindfold not only underlines her strong determination and wifely devotion but it also metaphorically represents her inability to perceive and endure the characteristic shortcomings and weaknesses of her husband, King Dhritarashthra whose indecisive helplessness, insecure fears and biased affection towards his sons are often discussed in many retellings of the *Mahabharata*. Thus in this deconstructive novel Banerjee depicts— "She (Gandhari) despised weakness in any form and though she understood his physical disability, she found it hard to respect someone who relied on his brother for courtship. It disgusted her— a man who had to depend on his brother for romance, who was content with second hand accounts to form his opinion of her, who was not man enough to fall in love with her on his own." (p-65)

Similarly, in her insightful essay "Gandhari, the Rebel", Jayanti Alam asserts— "Gandhari's inner eyes must have been 'Krantadarshi', i.e. perceiving beyond the horizon. (In Sanskritic

tradition, both the poet and the philosopher are called 'Krantadarshi'.) So, she feared to see the day-to-day play of Destiny. She, obviously, did not also want to see the proof of her apprehensions about her ambitious but weak, thoughtless and unwise husband by seeing his day-to-day actions and short-sightedness. She preferred to keep herself ignorant and oblivious of the calamities that were bound to shake the very foundation of Hastinapur. She was too wise not to have a sneaking fear about the destruction of her own family. Above all, Gandhari was worried about her own capability of keeping her mental cool and balance towards her handicapped husband who, she knew, was inferior to her in every respect-not merely in his inability to see. She also wanted to block the possibility of pity that might germinate in her mind for her blind husband if she too were not disabled." (Alam, 1519)

Gandhari's intelligence enabled her to understand that Dhritarashtra's frustrations and hopelessness for not being chosen as the rightful king of Hastinapur created multi-layered complications in his mind, thus she chose to pacify this psychological turmoil by giving up her own eyesight and positing herself in the same deprived position as her husband. Hence in this fictional retelling of the great epic, on one hand Gandhari redefines the concept of 'Stri-dharma' (duty of the wife) through her sacrificial act and firm decisions, and on the other hand she recurrently challenges Lord Krishna's divine status and ideological position as she believes that Krishna's strategies and policies caused the destructive war and eventually led to the death of her sons through unfair means. Thus, even many years before the Kurukshetra war through an ominous premonition, Gandhari gets terrified as she foresees the intricate connections existing between Krishna and her future misfortunes— "The very sound of his name inspired horror and revulsion within her, as if he would be the source of destruction of herself and all she held dear. She moved to cover her ears as if that futile gesture would remove the sound of the name from her consciousness, eradicate it from her memory." (Banerjee, 82) This episode paradoxically unveils a specific kind of vulnerability in Gandhari's character who appears to be quite sturdy and formidable in most other occasions in the epic and in a quite startling manner, here Gandhari's overwhelming fears reflect on her obsessive attachment with the future of her sons and the kingdom. Her dreadful worries about her near and dear ones make her more human and relatable as they echo the fears of the mothers and wives of the soldiers, and at the same time they raise complicated questions against the idea of 'Dharma' propagated by Lord Krishna who is venerated as a divine figure by everyone.

Gandhari's sensitivity and thoughtfulness lead her to critically interrogate the conventional binaries of righteous and unrighteous, auspicious and ominous, good and evil, as she

dismayingly raises questions about Vidura's prophetic perception about her newly born son's gloomy future – "Gandhari choked back a sob but forced herself to remain controlled. She had felt her baby's face with her own fingers and all she had sensed was beauty, innocence. How could a baby be evil?" (Banerjee,141) Thus while desperately attempting to protect Duryodhana and his brothers from the foreboding darkness of envy and malice through her profound motherly love, she also sternly stands up against her brother Shakuni who spitefully poisoned the mind of her sons in order to take revenge against the Kuru clan— "You must know they will destroy themselves in their quest to destroy the sons of Pandu. The sons of Pandu are the sons of the *devas*. My sons stand no chance against them. Yet you are forcing them again and again to fight the Pandavas. You are prodding them on, encouraging their father's flights of fancy, his delusions about the throne, their dreams for the crown. You are pushing them on the path of their destruction." (Banerjee, 188) Here Gandhari attempts to take back her lost authority and influence over her sons who have been incited by their maternal uncle to participate in a destructive rivalry against their cousins. On one hand she reprimands Shakuni for encouraging her sons to lose themselves in the futile dream of fulfilling their father's incomplete ambition, and on the other hand she brazenly asserts her maternal claim over her sons while challenging the patriarchal system which prioritizes the father's or, the paternal family's right over the progeny more than that of the mother. Gandhari's vehement attempt to protect her sons can be connected with her frustrations for not being able to pass on her teachings, values and ideals to her children during her pregnancy or, in their childhood, as her husband Dhritarashthra incessantly fulminated about his disappointments, bitter complaints and insecurities— "She wanted to tell him about the values by which to live, how to care for and win the favour of the people, the duties of a king. But in this too she was thwarted by Dhritarashthra. He would lie next to her in bed for hours, whispering bitterly into her belly, how he had been deprived of the throne by fate, how all of his hopes were vested in him, this baby boy who would finally win for him the throne he was denied, how he would do anything to make him succeed and secure his interests; he would lie, scheme, steal, kill if he had to, to make sure his boy sat on the throne of Hastinapur." (Banerjee, 130) This episode hints at the patriarchal suppression of the mother's role in the process of childbearing and child rearing, as Gandhari's subjective voice is deliberately silenced in order to uphold the paternal control over the lineage, and Dhritarashtra's bitterness and vengeful ambition seem to start corrupting his sons even before their birth. Shalini Shah thus relevantly states in her book The Making of Womanhood: Gender Relations in the Mahabharata that "The Adi-Parvan states that the 'Son (child) is his father's being, generated by him; the mother is merely a leather bag or, serves as

an incubator." (Shah, 1995, 118) In her article "Motherhood in Ancient India" Sukumari Bhattacharji also contends that– "She (the mother) frequently went through pain of forced intercourse, the suffering of the long months of gestation, the excruciating labour pain, the care, anxiety and service of suckling and feeding the infant, of tending it in sickness and accidents; but in the ultimate analysis, the child did not belong to her but to her husband and/or master." (Bhattacharji, 1990, WS-54)

Like many mothers in the contemporary world, the epic character, Gandhari also emerges to be an individual full of contradictions- on one hand, Banerjee's reimagined Gandhari is seen fiercely battling for the wellbeing of her sons and on the other, she appears to be a petrified and protective mother often overlooking her ethical responsibilities while being occupied with her concerns about her sons. This incongruity seems all the more evident when Gandhari fails to protest against her son's atrocities during the game of dice at the royal court of Hastinapur, nonetheless tries to fling herself in front of her sons to protect them from Krishna's wrath when Krishna emerges as Draupadi's saviour during her public disrobing, and reveals his divine form exclusively to the mother of the Kauravas. Through this episode the author of this retelling points at the flaws and imperfections of the legendary character who is often traditionally upheld as an epitome of sacrifice, chastity and strength— "It was then that Gandhari realized that it had not been her sons that were being tested at that moment; it was she. She had moved to save her sons when she did not move to protect Draupadi. She had forsaken Dharma for her flesh and blood. She had moved to oppose Krishna instead of supporting him. She had chosen the vile deeds of her sons over the innocence of her daughter-in-law. She had failed." (Banerjee 214) Here Banerjee depicts how the destructive divine form of Krishna symbolically represents Gandhari's conscience which compels her to face the ambiguities and flawed emotions that prevent her from distinguishing right and wrong or, raise her voice against the oppressive humiliation faced by another woman.

The queen's inability to protest against her sons' cruel and perverse behaviour towards Draupadi, can be associated with the silent apathy of the mothers-in-law who either become distant spectator witnessing the misconducts of their family members, or, they themselves become active instruments in the patriarchal subjugation and oppression of the daughters-in-law. This detachment and indifference with which Gandhari treats Draupadi, the daughter-in-law of the Kuru dynasty, can be linked with her own traumatic experiences of being compelled to marry the blind prince of Hastinapur, of sacrificing her eyesight for the sake of her husband, of being immensely pressurized to beget male heirs, of enduring the long painful pregnancy,

or, of seeing her sons being disregarded as compared to Kunti's sons. However, Draupadi's scorching questions directed at the elders present at the court soon transforms Gandhari's apathetic silence into a profound sense of guilt and shame that the queen starts to feel as she fails to stop the outrageous act of disgrace— "Gandhari felt the sting of each word as an arrow aimed at her. *I should have known better. I should have acted.*" (Banerjee, 217) Subsequently, after hearing the ominous howling of the jackal, Gandhari foresees the destruction of the kingdom while choosing to stand up for another woman who got oppressed and humiliated in the hands of her own sons, and desperately pleads to her husband, the king of Hastinapur to put an end to the horrible episode of injustice — "Say something before it is too late. Our ruin is upon us." (Banerjee, 217)

Here Gandhari, well versed in the Vedas and other doctrines, wisely comprehends the severity of the situation and foresees the possible conflict and destruction that can be caused by Draupadi's disgrace. She advises the blind king to intervene and protect the honour of the wife of the Pandavas as she knows how this audacious act of dragging a menstruating woman by her hair through the royal court, can instigate the Pandavas to wage a violent war against the Kauravas in order to quench their thirst for revenge. Draupadi's public disrobing becomes one of the central causes that starts the destructive war of Kurukshetra and in addition to that, several main episodes in the epic revolve around this catastrophic incident as Draupadi is often considered as 'Sri' representing splendour and honour of her husbands, hence her disgrace directly assaults and humiliates the Pandava brothers. Mahabharata scholar David Gitomer thus denotes in his article "King Duryodhana: The Mahabharata Discourse of Sinning and Virtue in Epic and Drama"— "Since Draupadi is emblematic of Sri, the splendour of legitimate sovereignty, her sexual humiliation and eventual restoration parallel the fortunes of Pandava royal status and measure its vigor." (Gitomer, 1992, 222-232)

However, Gandhari's wisdom makes her understand that her attempts to salvage the situation cannot prove to be successful as her side-lined position in the royal court of Hastinapur never allowed her to participate in the decision making processes, and in addition to that she could never prevent her sons from submerging themselves in the destructive quagmire of greed, ambition and revenge. Banerjee's reimagined Gandhari who is shown to have profound knowledge in the ancient doctrines and philosophies, thus not only foresees the impending devastation caused by the unrighteous act of her sons, but she also realizes how she herself involuntarily gets entangled in the cycle of sin and karma by the acts of her sons through 'paraiccha prarabdha' (second-hand karma)— "She was stymied by her husband and her sons,

caught in the webs of their karma and ill intent. Even her own efforts, her paltry attempts to make things right, could not extricate her from the noose of destruction they tightened around themselves." (Banerjee 221)

Gandhari's maternal love and strong sense of morality place her in a problematic position of dilemma which compels her to prioritize the path of righteousness/dharma over her individual desires and aspirations. Thus, Jayanti Alam observes in her essay "Gandhari, the Rebel" that Gandhari's passion for justice prevailed over her motherly affection and "not a single time she was carried away by emotion when Duryodhan came for her blessings before going to war. However, much her mother's heart pined and wept- for she, too, cherished the grand idea of being the Rajmata (the king's mother)- she could not give the blessing of Vijayshree (victory). She knew only 'dharma' can win. She also earnestly believed that 'dharma' alone should. But did she really believe that her erring sons should perish at the altar of justice or morality?" (Alam, 1518) This question with which Alam ends this statement, rightly addresses the psychological conflict faced by Gandhari as she finds herself in a problematic juncture of contrasting opposites – the boundless love for her decadent sons and her persistent faith in truth and justice. Hence, in an attempt to end the dilemma troubling her, she advises her son Duryodhana to reconcile with his cousin brothers and follow the path of righteousness as she knows that anyone who prioritizes personal ambition over morality and justice will certainly perish in the process of attaining their goals — "Son, it is the righteous who will prevail. Turn away from this path of adharma. Desist. Give the Pandavas their five villages. Still you will enjoy the earth; still you will be king. That will bring you the victory you seek. War will not end well for you or, for us." (Banerjee 249)

As the novel progresses, the author also goes on depicting how during the great war Gandhari's patience and resilience, insecurities and doubts, conviction and disbelief emphasize on the untold tales of the agonizing wait and heartbreaks of those women whose sons, brothers and husbands go to war — "The women left behind— they go to war too. They are the ones who nurse their men, who prepare them, who anoint them with sacred vermilion powder, who comfort them, who prod them when they are afraid, who sew and clean their uniforms, who have to wait for word whether they die or, live." (Banerjee 253) Through these lines the author creates a striking parallel between the experiences of the widows and mothers of the deceased warriors in the ancient world and the hardships faced by the women who are labelled as 'home-makers' in the contemporary Indian society where their selfless sacrifices and dedicated contributions are often overlooked and belittled. Sukumari Bhattacharjee's contention in her

article “Motherhood in Ancient India” relevantly addresses the patriarchal subjugation and marginalization of wives and mothers who are taught to live for others by refusing to prioritize their own happiness or, wellbeing. She denotes how different rituals described in various ancient texts like Atharvaveda, Jaiminia Grhasutra or, Shankhayana Grhasutra etc. depict how an ideal pious wife should mainly devote herself in praying for male children and her husband’s long life, without focusing on her individual desires— “Nowhere in the scriptures is there a prayer for the long life of the bride or of the prospective mother. And this at a time when parturition mortality rate was much higher than it is now. We only hear of prayers for the husband's long life. The explanation may lie in the prayer for 'wives' in the plural; if a wife died at child-birth another can be married, as the scriptures lay down that after the cremation of the wife the husband should marry the very next day.”[35] (Bhattacharjee,WS 50)

Gandhari’s maternal love however does not limit itself in just worrying for her sons’ wellbeing or, passively hoping for their success, rather she actively participates in the war by trying to make her son, Duryodhana invincible in the war through her divine powers that she acquired as a result of her lifelong penance and sacrifice. Although Gandhari knew that as her sons refused to follow the ideals of morality and committed numerous atrocities, they were already at a disadvantageous position as compared to the righteous Pandavas, her maternal love compels her to ensure victory for her first born son. Therefore, she decides to take off her blindfold in an attempt to protect Duryodhana from any harm and summons him to come naked in front of her so that his body could be made invincible through the power of her spiritual energy and inner strength. However, Duryodhana fails to follow his mother’s commands and covers his private parts along with his thighs as Krishna instructs the eldest Kaurava to cover himself in order to show respect towards his mother. As a result, Gandhari’s miraculous shield turns out to be partially ineffective and subsequently Duryodhana is fatally wounded when his inner thighs are unethically struck by Bhima (following Krishna’s directives) in the final mace fighting at the end of the Kurukshetra war. Gandhari’s profound knowledge in the doctrines of dharma fuses with the anguish of the enraged mother when the queen of Hastinapur furiously questions Krishna about the blatant breach of moral boundaries in the mace fighting, and the unfair means through which Duryodhana was killed — “It is against the rules of combat. That was cheating. The thigh was not a fair target in the rules of mace fighting.” (Banerjee, 270)

[35] Sukumari Bhattacharji, “Motherhood in Ancient India”, Economic and Political Weekly (Oct. 20-27, 1990, Vol. 25, No. 42/43), pp. WS50-WS57. https://www.jstor.org/stable/4396892.

The protective mother who once piously dedicated herself to an unquestioning belief in the gods and goddesses thus transforms into a crestfallen enraged woman as she hears about the unfair means employed in vanquishing her firstborn Suyodhana/Duryodhana. As Gandhari comes to know about Duryodhana's unfair death in the battlefield, her frustrations, shock and fury lead her towards uttering the vengeful curse against Krishna, the deified cousin of the Pandavas who guides the Pandavas throughout the epic tale and persuades them to use numerous unscrupulous means to overthrow Duryodhana and his brothers. The disillusioned mother of the Kauravas cannot help but see Krishna as another human being who is also led by his ambition, bias, and vengeful desires like ordinary people. David Gitomer's contention echoes Gandhari's perception while radically interrogating the unquestionable divine status of Krishna that— "The Pandavas themselves, however, are also authors of vicious misdeeds, largely tricks committed in battle through the urgings of their cousin, the warrior-hero Krishna. This is, strikingly, a kind of evil less frequently practiced by Duryodhana and his allies. As Krishna becomes a god, and as the Vaisnava editors who glorify him try to establish a pro-Pandava moral valence in the face of immoral actions on both sides, the wrongdoings of Duryodhana tend to be subsumed under a single flaw which is trans-ethical. Those who have read Rudolph Otto's *Original Gita* or Alf Hiltebeitel's *Ritual of Battle* know that that flaw is not Duryodhana's ruthless usurpation of the kingdom, which includes the humiliation of Draupadi; it is not even his opposition to the Pandavas per se-in the received versions of the text, all these become expressions of his subsumptive sin: opposition to Krishna Vasudeva." (Gitomar, 1992, 224)

In addition to that, through Krishna's subsequent response to her angry outburst she was finally able to see her own flaws and shortcomings clearly and accept her sufferings as a part of her destiny-- "She banished the devas from her consciousness. What was the point anymore, after the judgement of Krishna, which had so obviously found her lacking? She accepted his judgement passively; She was resigned to her fate and never again sought to change it. She was stoic to the prospect of unending suffering." (Banerjee,177) Through this detachment from her earlier self, Gandhari who has always quietly played the role of a virtuous queen, dedicated wife and affectionate mother not only asserts unflinching resistance against the Brahmanical ideas of divinity and piety but through her act of cursing Krishna for twisting the ideals of dharma in the Kurukshetra war especially during the battle between Bhima and Duryodhan, she also draws attention to her remarkable sense of justice and fiery motherly disposition. However, in this revisionist novel Gandhari's astonishing fierceness is often devalued through

the ambiguities and inconsistencies that can be recurrently found in her character. Thus in Banerjee's retelling, after her dauntless outburst, on one hand Gandhari is seen losing herself in bouts of self-doubts and self-criticisms as Krishna reminds her about her failure in effectively raising her voice against the atrocities faced by Draupadi, and on the other hand Gandhari's turbulent mind finds solace in Krishna's consoling voice which compels her to recall how she placed dharma over her motherly affection and reprimanded Duryodhana by saying— "O foolish one! Victory goes to the righteous!" (Banerjee, 271)

Instead of ambiguously protesting against certain atrocities as depicted in Banerjee's mythopoeic novel, in 'Gandharir Abedan' (The Mother's Prayer, 1891), Tagore's poetic retelling of an episode from the Mahabharata, Gandhari attains a subjective voice and unabashedly raises her voice against the unrighteous acts of her son Duryodhan. Here Gandhari's unfaltering commitment to truth and morality sharply contradicts the emotional weakness and vulnerability exhibited by Dhritarashtra's character. This contrast between the queen and king startlingly questions and subverts the stereotypical equation of gender roles which often projects men as stronger and braver than women. Gandhari rises above her maternal affections and prioritizes her moral duty by pleading for appropriate punishment for her son, Duryodhana who subjected Draupadi to utter humiliation at the royal court of Hastinapur and then banished her along with her five husbands. She also underlines her problematic dual role as the mother and the queen that puts her in a conflicting situation, as she beseeches Dhritarashthra to stand up for justice— "Am I not his mother? Have I not carried him under my throbbing heart? Yes, I ask you to renounce Duryodhana, the unrighteous." (Tagore, 1919) Here Gandhari occupies the position of a bold, recalcitrant woman who courageously crosses the boundaries of maternal affections in an attempt to protest against the disgraceful incident that took place during the notorious game of dice. Tagore's Gandhari not only raises her voice against the sexual oppression of another woman, but she also insistently reminds her husband, Dhritarashthra to prioritize his ethical duty as the king so that the common people of the kingdom do not lose their faith in the idea of 'dharma' or, 'justice'— "Sire, the punishment imposed on our son will be more ours than his. A judge callous to the pain that he inflicts loses the right to judge. And if you spare your son to save yourself pain, then all the culprits ever punished by your hands will cry before God's throne for vengeance, had they not also their fathers?"

Gandhari's pleadings for justice are overlooked and disregarded by the king who blatantly talks about his inability to transcend the boundaries of the overwhelmingly obsessive paternal

affections. King Dhritarashthra responds by stating that as he cannot alter the path of inevitable doom designed by the unrighteous acts of Duryodhana, he cannot help but accompany his son through that dark path which is devoid of truthfulness or, divine blessings— "Our son is abandoned of God: that is why I cannot give him up. To save him is no longer in my power, and therefore my consolation is to share his guilt and tread the path of destruction, his solitary companion. What is done is done; let follow what must follow!" (Tagore, 1919)

Tagore's revisionist poem not only depicts how the father often tries to fulfil his unattained dreams through the actions of the son, but it also focuses on how Gandhari, the queen, appears to be a wiser and more efficient ruler potently able to establish the ideals of equality, morality and justice. At the same time, Tagore's Gandhari realizes that her position as the queen consort does not permit her to take major decisions like banishing the unrighteous prince of Hastinapur, hence she sceptically anticipates that only a destructive, apocalyptic war can establish 'dharma' and bring peace. In addition to that, the culminating lines of the poem delve into the inner regions of the queen mother's heart which prepares itself for the inevitable sacrifices and sufferings in future— "Be calm, my heart, and patiently await God's judgment. Oblivious night wears on, the morning of reckoning nears, I hear the thundering roar of its chariot. Woman, bow your head down to the dust! and as a sacrifice fling your heart under those wheels! Darkness will shroud the sky, earth will tremble, wailing will rend the air and then comes the silent and cruel end, -that terrible peace, that great forgetting, and awful extinction of hatred- the supreme deliverance rising fire, the fire of death." (Tagore, 1919)

This amalgamation of profound wisdom and intense grief found in the character of Gandhari as reimagined in Tagore's poem, can be directly linked with the never-ending anguish and subsequent hopelessness experienced by Iravati Karve's Gandhari in the path-breaking mythopoeic work *Yuganta*. However, unlike in Tagore's poetic retelling, in this critically acclaimed deconstructive work, the queen's motherly emotions seem to overpower her wisdom and sense of morality. Here through Gandhari's words, Karve shows how the mother often obsessively attaches herself with the achievements and failures of her sons as the patriarchal society rigidly restricts the gendered 'other' to her sole identity as the mother, especially of a son. Gandhari's emotional outburst after losing her sons at the end of the war points out how on one hand, the mother is expected to sacrifice her individual desires for the sake of begetting more children, and on the other hand, her hopes and happiness, pride and insecurities, ambitions and disillusionments are supposed to be revolving only around her sons — "After I had many children you thought that your Gandhari would at last be happy. But it was never so.

If they were hurt, my heart would start to pound; if I heard them crying, I used to get grieved, flurried. If I heard that they didn't win in the chariot race, I would get dejected. The day they came back humiliated from the ill-fated trip for inspecting the royal herds I felt sadder than they themselves. When the Pandavas were being sent to a small town on the border, those helpless children came to say farewell. Outwardly I gave them my blessing, but in my heart I was thinking, 'Good, now my children's way is clear.' Before the war it was only at your urging that I went into the assembly and advised them not to fight. Inwardly I was telling myself that if they fought the kingship of Hastinapura would remain with my sons." (Karve, 25)

Karve thus portrays Gandhari as an ambitious individual who is compelled to play the dual role of an emotionally invested mother constantly concerned about the well-being of her sons, as well as that of an unbiased queen who treats all her subjects equally. Gandhari's gloomy envy, overarching ambitions and sadistic sense of triumph make her more human and realistically relevant in the contemporary context, as through her character Karve subversively questions the commonly glorified attributes of 'the ideal woman'. At the same time, this apparent dark ambition deeply nurtured in her heart shows how the dispossessed mothers often get too attached to the success of their sons, as it often emboldens the mother's position in the patriarchal society which generally marginalizes and subjugates the gendered 'other'. Immense glorification of motherhood in the Indian society often conditions and manipulates women to dissociate themselves from their individuality and subjectivity, while intensely focusing on the act of giving birth to sons and then rearing her children as venerated members of the society. Sukumari Bhattacharjee's contention in her article "Motherhood in Ancient India" seems to be quite relevant in this context— "The social reality, meanwhile, had relegated the woman to the socially significant role of the procreatrix; she had lost her identity as woman, as a social being, as an individual with free scope for intellection, volition and emotion. She was primarily, if not solely, a mother, preferably of male children." Hence, along with the dreadful fear of losing her children, the apprehensive anxiety of losing the elevated and empowered position which is attained through the act of begetting a male heir, can be seen controlling the emotions and actions of the subdued mother. In the Hindu patriarchal society, the mother is not only taught to find glory and pride in the achievements of the son, but she is also conditioned to intricately entangle her identity with that of her son. Thus, the legendary mother of the hundred Kauravas loses all her emotions, hopes, dreams and desires as she loses her sons — "Today I have become completely calm. Now no one's success can make my heart blossom in happiness; no

one's defeat can wither it with sorrow. Now there is nobody for whom I can be anxious. My mind is now permanently at peace. There is nothing to hope for, nothing to fear." (Karve, 25)

In another part of this postmodernist retelling by Karve, Dhritarashthra unabashedly complains about the distrust, bitterness and anger that have always troubled their marital relationship because of Gandhari's voluntary act of blindfolding herself. Gandhari's defiant decision of giving up her eyesight in an attempt to protest against her forced marriage, is not only perceived as a form of punishment meant to torture the blind king of Hastinapur, but the queen's rigorous struggles to adjust with her newly acquired blindness greatly dishearten Dhritarashthra while closing down all avenues of hope for a better tomorrow— "I thought I would plead with you and be able to extinguish your anger with my love. But that was not to be. At night when you came to the bedchamber, your eyes were still bound, and you came stumbling clutching someone's hand. I was born blind. I had become used to moving around without seeing. But you had deliberately covered your eyes. Your body was not used to blindness. What a horrible night! I don't know why I didn't kill you right then." (Karve, 36)

Dhritarashthra's exclamations about Gandhari's failure at providing her blind husband with true companionship, unveils how the virtuous queen of Hastinapur masks her resentment and frustrations through her sacrificial penance and exemplary piousness while abstaining from experiencing happiness or, contentment throughout her life. A strange amalgamation of profound love, intense bitterness, rage and helplessness can be found in his expressive assertion which unveils the turbulent complexity of the relationship shared by the blind King and the blindfolded queen. On one hand, the disastrous first night harshly reminds Dhritarashthra of his limitations and inabilities, and on the other hand, Gandhari's act of embracing blindness utterly disappoints her blind husband as it robs him off his last chance to experience the joys of marital life and fatherhood. In addition to that, the blind prince's long-cherished hopes to see the world through his wife's eyes and bring up strong, intelligent heirs for the throne of Hastinapur, get shattered as Gandhari willingly sacrifices her eyesight in an attempt to passively protest against her forced marriage.

Eventually, Dhritarashthra blatantly accepts that he could not use his authoritative position and instruct Gandhari to open her blindfold because of his undisclosed desire to avenge the heartbreak and disillusionment that he experienced in the first few days after the wedding— "I had a revengeful pleasure in knowing that you would never see the face of your son. Going around with your eyes bound, you were playing the part of a devoted wife. You were chained

by the results of your actions. Never again could you open your eyes of your own accord. You could only have done it by my order. And that I would not give." (Karve, 36)

Through Dhritarashthra's voice, Karve critically comments on the Hindu/brahmanical tradition which instructs the 'pati-vrata' wife to worship her husband as a divine figure ('Pati-parameshwar') and bestow the charge of her own life to him who controls her decisions and destiny. She also focuses on women's lack of free will and subjective authority in the ancient Hindu society where the dominant patriarchal notions created a hierarchical system of inequality and injustice which placed the devoted wife in an inferior, sidelined position.

Uma Chakravarti and Kumkum Roy relevantly notes in their insightful essay "In Search of Our Past: A Review of the Limitations and Possibilities of the Historiography of Women in Early India" that many scholars and writers working on the status of women in the ancient Indian society have observed that women were considered to be intellectually inferior beings unsuitable to attain individual rights — "Assumptions about the immutable nature of women also persist, with some variations. Thus Chaudhuri (1956: 29) states that "women, owing to their conservative nature, always stick to things of time immemorial", while others such as Das (1962: 40) support Manu with evidence from Freud to argue that women lack the ability of 'true' appreciation and 'balance' of mind and do not possess much depth of reason. The stereo-type is only occasionally challenged, as for example by Jayal (1966: 253) who suggests that "many of the traits associated with women were not simply based on biological facts or organic defects... but may have been later developed due to the cultural pattern of society which denied all intellectual, educational, religious and property rights to women"." (Chakravarti and Roy-05)

However, at the end of this retold tale, Karve subverts the epic story in an attempt to underline the struggles and sufferings of the sexual 'other', as she makes king Dhritarashthra reluctantly admit that the women of the Kuru dynasty including Gandhari, Kunti, Ambika and Ambalika have always been subjected to numerous forms of injustices and atrocities. In addition to that, the author raises complicated questions regarding the conventional ideas of duty and devotion, injustice and clemency, rage and contentment by providing Gandhari with a sense of agency, as in this reimagined epic tale the blind king urges his queen to embrace life by finally taking her blindfold off— "I am pleading with you not merely to ask for forgiveness, but to persuade you to give up your fight against life. Give up your anger, not only against me, but against life itself. My injustice to you does not give you the right to do an injustice to your children, to

your whole life. How can one wrong compensate another, Gandhari? At least now take off that blindfold. Learn to look at the world, at human beings, and at your own past life objectively. Our life is nearly over. At least do not die with your eyes bound." (Karve, 28)

Here, the patriarchal system of subjugation and marginalization is challenged and subverted to some extents as the blind husband finally gets rid of his bitter vindictiveness and attempts to liberate the wife from the shackles of her self-imposed blindness. Dhritarashthra who is often conventionally seen as prioritizing personal bias over justice, startlingly talks about the ethical responsibilities of a mother and the multi-layered equation existing between right and wrong while urging Gandhari to give up her unbreakable vow. In this context Dhritarashthra's emotional assertions not only focus on his inexplicable sense of guilt and helplessness, but they also become a pathway through which Gandhari's psychological upheavals are thoroughly examined. Towards the very end of their lives as the royal couple loses all hopes and aspirations, Karve's Dhritarashthra repents over his past actions, failures and weaknesses, while eventually transgressing the stereotypical role of an authoritative husband in an attempt to provide his long oppressed wife with a sense of subjectivity. Emily T. Hudson thus rightly observes in her essay in *Gender and Narrative in the Mahabharata*, "Listen but Do Not Grieve: Grief, Paternity and Time in the Laments of Dhrtarastra"— "A close look at Dhrtarastra's lament brings to light a complicated web of emotions that lie at the heart of the loss he feels as a father: grief, fear, guilt, regret, and pride. His grief over the loss of his sons is inextricably linked to his fears of being responsible for the conflict, as well as to his regret for not having taken actions to prevent the war, and to his pride, which prevents him from facing his mistakes and their enormous consequences." (Hudson, 40)

Dharmvir Bharati's *Andha Yug*, another exceptional adaptation of a brief portion of the *Mahabharata* which allegorically connects the epic war of Kurukshetra with the disastrous partition of India while critically commenting on the meaninglessness of war and violence, shows how the blindness of king Dhritarashtra, the biased affection of queen Gandhari and the visionless loyalty of Ashwatthama towards Duryodhana - metaphorically reflect on the blind hatred and fear that started governing the postcolonial Indian society during and after the chaotic partition which claimed millions of lives. As depicted in this deconstructive revisionist drama, at the end of the catastrophic war, Dhritarashtra submerges in utter desolation, hopelessness and a dreadful fear while exclaiming that his love for his sons was the only truth in his dark world, at the same time the disillusioned and heartbroken Gandhari furiously refutes

Vidura's assertion that every frightened being must have faith and surrender himself/herself to Krishna, the divine arbitrator of truth —

> "I don't have faith!
>
> Perhaps others do.
> I don't.
> "Surrender your heart and mind to me"!
> Did he
> who lost his head completely
> when he was struck
> by Pitama's arrows say that?
> Did he
> who violated
> the code of honor
> over and over again say that?" (Bharati, 14)

In these lines, Gandhari's bitter statements and disdainful questions regarding faith, honour and righteousness showcase how the dispossessed, disillusioned being struggles to find a voice in the chaotic world of violence and death while challenging the conventional binaries of virtue and sin, honour and dishonour, devotion and dissent. She vehemently opposes Dhritarashtra's repentant proclamation that because of his blindness he could neither distinguish between right and wrong nor could he comprehend the actuality of the situations, and radically asserts that her voluntary blindness didn't prevent her from seeing the hidden truth behind the superficial concepts of honour and righteousness. Through Gandhari's defiant voice, Bharati states that in the times of crisis and urgency human beings often forego the virtuous, truthful part of their being while challenging the code of dharma in order to fulfil their dark desires and ambitions—

> "But I was not blind.
> I had seen the ways of the world
> and knew
> that dharma
> duty and honor
> were illusions.
> When the time of reckoning arrives

wisdom and honor are always useless." (Bharati, 15)

Here, Gandhari's grave questions about the traditionally glorified concepts of sacrifice, righteousness and honour underline the fact that most of the individuals try to hide their greedy, unkind and bestial side with the pretentious mask of religious piety and devoutness. In addition to that, her caustic statements focus on the disastrous reality of war and its uselessness that stand in sharp contrast with the glory and honour often associated with the slain soldiers. In "Eavesdropping on the Epic: Female Listeners in the Mahabharata", Brian black observes that even in the original text of the *Mahabharata,* the mother of Kauravas can be seen harshly criticizing war and violence while emphasizing on the unbearable pain experienced by the widows and families of the martyred warriors— "In her dialogue with Krishna she makes a number of remarks that indicate her awareness of how events are reported, pointing out the irony that warriors who were 'regularly celebrated by bards singing their praises' are now surrounded by the cries of jackals and referring to how 'clever bards would celebrate [the warriors] in the wee hours of every night'. (Black, 64)

However, in Bharati's *Andha Yug*, Gandhari doesn't restrict herself in just talking about the futility of war, rather she goes on blaming the irrepressible blood-thirsty nature of human beings that often leads them to commit violent and destructive acts. In addition to that, she also suggests that individuals often strive to attain power and fame through hypocritically masking their greed and envy with deceptive words of spirituality and acts of religious devotion. The disillusioned mother also explains how several people often choose to hide their true identity and desires in order to fit into the society which idealizes self-abnegation, purity and righteousness, and as a result, these mindless beings turn into blind puppets controlled by the unyielding feelings of hatred, prejudice and fury. Hence in an attempt to detach herself from this stereotypical sightlessness of this world of double standards and hypocrisy, Gandhari chose to blindfold herself —

"Morality, honor, selflessness,
and surrender to Krishna are mere disguises
—masks that cover our blindness.
They are like sightless eyes cut out of rags
and stitched on the faces of puppets.
That is why sick of all this hypocrisy

I chose to live with my eyes blindfolded." (Bharati, 15)

The opening scene of Act Four of the play vividly underlines how the savage desire for revenge often blurs the discriminating lines between human and inhuman, truth and untruth, moral and immoral. Here the playwright emphasizes upon the significance of conflicting perspectives, complicated psychological viewpoints and multi-layered vision as depicted through Gandhari's uncanny desire to witness Ashwatthama's brutal act of murdering the Pandava children in the darkest hour of the night. Through her startling act of glorification of Ashwatthama's heinous murders, the heartbroken mother of the vanquished Kauravas displays her gloomy desire of avenging the brutal death of her sons in the hands of the Pandavas —

"Gandhari: I beg of you!
With your visionary powers
Give me a glimpse
Of that Ashwatthama!
Sanjaya: It's a horrible sight!
He was cruel. He was dreadful.
Gandhari: But he was heroic!" (Bharati, 63)

Gandhari's disturbingly violent perception which sees Ashwatthama's decadent act as `heroic, can only be comprehended by delving deep into the inner regions of her troubled mind which is repeatedly wounded by the descriptions of the horrific deaths of her sons. The readers/audience can easily notice that Gandhari's excited inquisitiveness to know more about Ashwatthama's gruesome act is intricately linked with her repressed rage and an underlying desire for revenge. As Ashwatthama cruelly murders the unarmed children of the Pandavas who were sleeping peacefully in their tents in an attempt to vindicate his vanquished friend, Duryoadhana and avenge his father, Dronacharya, Gandhari also finds a retaliatory satisfaction through this revengeful act. In this context Barton's observation in his ground-breaking work *Getting Even: Revenge as a Form of Justice* seems to be quite relevant— "Revenge is personal retributive punishment, typically accompanied and fueled by feelings of indignation, anger and resentment for wrongs suffered." (Barton, 1999, p.86)

Bharati's deconstructive narrative raises complicated questions about the interrelations existing between justice, morality, war and revenge through the words and actions of Ashwatthama,

Duryodhana's last commander and Gandhari, the mother of the Kauravas who depict two different sides of vengeance – one who transforms himself into a brutal beast and commits unrighteous acts in an attempt to turn the tables and pay back, and another who sadistically placates herself by hearing about the details of the gruesome murders while trying to protect that vengeful warrior through her miraculous powers. On one hand, Ashwatthama bitterly recollects how the Pandavas immorally murdered his unarmed father by lying to him about his son's (Ashwatthama's) death and how treacherously Bhima defeated Duryodhana by fatally wounding him, and thus Dronacharya's son takes revenge by mercilessly killing the unarmed children and relatives of the Pandavas in their sleep, and on the other hand, Gandhari finds an unusual kind of solace in Ashwatthama's uncanny bravery and wrathful act of violence through which he attempts to appease the vanquished Duryodhana in his last few moments- hence she desperately tries to protect Ashwatthama from the disastrously enraged Krishna and the inconsolable Pandava brothers —

Sanjaya: Ashwatthama's brahmastra
has destroyed the child
in Uttara's womb.
Gandhari: He will fulfill his vow.
He will!
After a pause.
Sanjaya: But, Gandhari
Krishna will never forgive him.
Gandhari: Do not stop, Sanjaya.
Krishna will never be able to kill him.
Even if Krishna's disc
slices me into shreds
even then
I shall go to the place
where Duryodhana lies
in the sleep of death.
Let us go, Sanjaya." (Bharati, 76)

Gandhari's frantic efforts to shield Ashwatthama can be interpreted as an outcome of her desperate yearning for the fulfilment of her dying son, Duryodhana's wish, and her unfaltering support for the bestial slaughterer Ashwatthama who attempts to annihilate the Pandava clan even by committing the heinous act of infanticide - can be linked with her determination to secure a sense of victory for the Kauravas by any means. Gandhari and Ashwatthama's struggles in this path-breaking adaptation of the culminating part of the epic tale, depict that vengeance is a very significant theme in the *Mahabharata* which is fraught with numerous examples of violent acts of revenge- such as, Amba's vengeful desire of killing Bhishma whom she accuses for her humiliation, Draupadi and Bheema's revenge on Duryodhana and Dussashana for her disgraceful public disrobing, Dhrishtadyumna's act of avenging his father's humiliation by killing Dronacharya etc. This play also startlingly focuses on the complex psychological turmoil experienced by the dispossessed and overpowered characters as they undertake the task of restoring their lost glory and honour by avenging the wrongs and wreaking havoc on their enemies. Hence, we can see that the fuming, agitated mother of the fallen Kauravas blames Lord Krishna for the death of her hundred sons and eventually curses him for his deceptive acts that led the Kauravas to their ruin and the Pandavas to their victory. She dares to raise problematic yet unavoidable questions against the idealized and deified hero, Lord Krishna, by stating that Krishna willingly prompted the Pandavas to fight the destructive war of Kurukshetra, rather than trying to prevent that bloody, chaotic battle of hatred and envy.

While mourning for her son's horrible death she subversively interrogates the concepts of 'Dharma' and 'Adharma' that Krishna and other characters in the *Mahabharata* often discuss about, at the same time she relevantly points at the manipulative and biased use of these ideas depending on the specific context and convenience. She critically questions Krishna's role as the harbinger of peace and righteousness while relevantly pinpointing that Krishna biasedly guided Bhima to commit the immoral act of hitting Duryodhana on his thighs in the mace-battle and then fatally wounding him. However, Ashwatthama's unrighteous act of killing unarmed people in the middle of the night and his desperate attempts to kill the unborn child of Uttara (Abhimanyu's wife) - are not so easily forgiven and as a result of his sinful crimes, Krishna ragingly curses Ashwatthama to lead a never-ending life of anguish and extensive repentance. Gandhari not only repeatedly questions the conventional binaries of crime and punishment, justice and injustice, good and evil, but she also reminds Krishna about the destruction and hopelessness caused by the catastrophic war of Kurukshetra which left countless mothers like her with nothing but the flesh and bones of their deceased sons —

"If you wanted
you could have stopped the war.
I did not give birth
to this pile of bones.
You incited Bhima's adharma
but you inflicted a vile curse on Ashwatthama
who had committed no crime!
You used your divine power
for unjust ends."

Finally, the shattered mother mourning for the unfair death of her first born son, transgresses the conventional peripheries of honour, virtue, altruism and composure that are often imposed on women in a patriarchal society, and curses Lord Krishna in a furious, revengeful manner. Krishna gracefully accepts Gandhari's curse which prophesises his death as an ordinary wild animal while proclaiming that the tempestuous grief of the mother is as truthful and powerful as death itself. By accepting the curse, Krishna also acknowledges his responsibility in handling the course of the great war of Kurukshetra, thus Gandhari's rebellious curse not only interrogates the dichotomies of right and wrong, good and evil, fair and unfair but it also greatly intensifies the thematic complexity of the epic tale of *Mahabharata*. Krishna's response to Gandhari focuses on the paradoxical duality of realities which encompasses several interrelated combinations in between—

"He says: Mother I may be God.
I may be omnipotent.
But I am also your son
And you are my mother."
……
"If I am life then,
Mother I am also death." (Bharati, 81)

This uninhibited declaration by Krishna complicates and blurs the discriminating lines between truth and falsehood, affection and hatred, life and death- and at the same time Krishna's wilful acceptance of the curse leads the forlorn, broken-hearted mother of the Kauravas to a

significant realization that the bitter desire for vengeance cannot provide any sense of solace, rather Krishna's impending death caused by Gandhari's curse is going to be as painful and tragic for her as the deaths of her own sons. Hence it can be said that, this radical adaptation of the *Mahabharata* effectively emphasizes on the interrelations existing between the mythological, epic tales and the tropes of culture, religion, community, nation, war and violence.

Chapter III: Kunti

"I cast you away —
That curse has always made me feel
Childless even when five sons clung to me.
My arms sought you throughout the world
And I longed to draw you near.
The son whom I denied
Is the one for whom my heart
Has lit the flaming lamp.
Through long life I burnt myself
In the worship of the Lord of the world
In seeking my rejected son.
Today at last I am fortunate,
For I have found you again." (Tagore, 07)

These lines taken from the theatrical mythopoeic poem, 'Karna and Kunti' written by Rabindranath Tagore (originally published as 'Karna-Kunti Samvad' in 1900) and translated by Humayun Kabir, revisit the episode from the *Mahabharata* where Kunti finally voiced her true feelings and confessed to Karna that he was her first born son whom she had to abandon as an unwed mother. Tagore's poetic adaptation reimagines Kunti as a repentant woman who not only chooses to transcend the invisible boundary of shame and prejudice, but also blatantly talks about her stifled guilt and anguish that compel her to break down in front of her long-lost son. Kunti's unrestricted proclamations about her deepest sorrows, regrets and failures, critically question the conventional perceptions about the unfaltering idealized image of the 'mother' in the Indian society, and at the same time these assertions relevantly connect the struggles faced by the legendary women of the epics with the agonizing experiences of the marginalized, silenced 'other' of the contemporary world. Tagore's portrayal of the invisiblized mother's intense longing for the affection of her abandoned son, relevantly emphasizes on the emotional turmoil of the young unwed mothers who are often forced to give their children away in the fear of social dishonour. In this revisionist poem, on one hand Kunti's conflicting emotions reflect on the complex paradoxes and mysterious ambiguities found in the legendary

character who plays an extremely significant role in the great epic, and on the other hand these lines underline Kunti's remarkable strength and self-control that are visible in her lifelong struggle against her own desires and emotions. Kunti's unwanted pregnancy before marriage, her secret unexpressed love for her first born son, her psychological turmoil while using her miraculous boon to beget sons at her impotent husband's request, her constant sufferings and struggles as a single mother, her intelligent strategies for the protection of her sons and their victory etc. make her an exceptionally complex and multi-layered character significantly necessary for an in-depth reading of the epic narrative in the contemporary context. On one hand, Kunti's sense of rootlessness, silent subservience, immature curiosity and fear of social defamation as an adolescent girl makes her extremely realistic and relatable, and on the other hand, her strict idealism, resolute decisions, manipulative strategies and unforgiving ways of persuading her sons unveil the formidable side of this much celebrated epic character. As a result of these contradictions and paradoxes inherently found in Kunti's character, there are many deconstructive adaptations and revisions of the *Mahabharata* that attempt to examine the diverse shades of Kunti's complex character while pointing at the psychological turmoil that she undergoes as well as her incessant fight against different forms of injustices and misfortunes. This chapter proposes to look at some of these contemporary fictional reiterations of the epic tale of Kunti, such as— Iravati Karve's *Yuganta* which critically analyses Kunti's errors and achievements, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* which emphasizes on her immense strength and intelligence, Koral Dasgupta's *Kunti* which closely follows the widowed queen's struggles, desires, ecstasies, heartbreaks and disappointments, and 'Karna and Kunti', Tagore's poetic reimagination of an epic episode from the *Mahabharata* which revisits Kunti's encounter with her lost son, Karna.

Irawati Karve observes in her path-breaking work, *Yuganta* which critically analyses several characters and episodes from the *Mahabharata*, that unlike Draupadi, Gandhari, or, Subhadra, Kunti never got an opportunity to experience blissful contentment as she incessantly struggles to fulfil the grave responsibilities of her roles as a daughter, wife and mother. At first, her biological father, Shurasena gave her away to his childless friend Kuntibhoja so that he could 'use' the adopted daughter to please the legendary sage Durvasa in order to get a male heir, thus she is seen furiously reproaching her father for renouncing her at an early age— "As a spendthrift squanders his money unthinkingly, so did my father give me away when yet a girl to his friend." (Karve 41)

Then as a result of her satisfactory service to the sage, she wins the miraculous boon of summoning gods and begetting sons, however this blessing turns out to be a curse for the young curious princess who summons the Sun god and becomes an unwed mother giving birth to a radiant son whom she eventually abandons in the fear of social disgrace. This deserted son reappears later as the charioteer's son who not only bravely fights against the oppressive system of caste discrimination while transforming into the unmatched warrior Karna, but his re-emergence also greatly problematizes Kunti's life and social position, as the mother of the Pandavas fails to publicly accept Karna as her own son. Karve also contends that Kunti's immediate act of summoning the Sun god and conceiving a child after being blessed by sage Durvasa, evidently points at the possibility that the young princess was impregnated by none other than the sage himself as Kunti was instructed to devote herself in gratifying him – "Kunti was serving a Brahman for a year and that she should bear him a son was not such an extraordinary occurrence. The fact that Kunti's old nurse helped to dispose of the boy and that a lot of gold was kept with him lends support to the supposition that this eventuality was foreseen and provided for by her adoptive father when he gave her to the Brahman." (Karve 42)

This episode from the *Mahabharata* thus emphasizes on the patriarchal structure of subjugation and oppression of women in the ancient Hindu/Brahmanical society which on one hand, persuaded the daughter to be a self-abnegating being always serving others especially men, and on the other hand it normalized different forms of exploitation of the silenced daughter who was often handed over as a commodity from one person to another. As recorded in many historical and scholarly works, in the ancient Vedic society there were very few ritualistic practices that were meant for the birth of a daughter as a daughter was almost never desired, however most of the Vedic texts elaborate upon the necessity of having a son as only the birth of a son is said to have the capacity of liberating the parents while taking the family name forward. In her essay "Vedic Daughter" Uma Chakravarty relevantly denotes that— "B. S. Upadhya (1942, p.33, [1st ed. 1933]) observes on the total absence of desire for a daughter in the Rig Veda and the Atharva Veda: "We find a very frequent longing for a male child in the Rgveda.. It is surprising, however, that no desire for the birth of a daughter is ever expressed in the entire range of the Rgveda. Her birth is even deprecated in the Atharvaveda. In this Samhita, references are made to mystic charms for undoing the effect of a female foetus and for changing into male." (Chakravarty, 183)

The sense of displacement and rootlessness experienced by this unwanted daughter is vividly depicted through adolescent Kunti's problematic questions and emotional upheavals in another contemporary revisionist work, *Kunti* by Koral Dasgupta. This feminist retelling reinterprets few sections of the great epic, *Mahabharata* from Kunti's perspective while highlighting on the untold tales of her dreams, desires and disillusionments— "Koral Dasgupta unravels the lesser known strands of Kunti's story: through a childhood of scholarly pursuits to unwanted motherhood at adolescence, a detached marriage and her ambitious love for the king of the devas." (Koral Dasgupta, 2021, cover page.)

At the beginning of the novel, through Kunti's conversations with her adoptive father, king Kuntibhoja, Dasgupta raises many intriguing questions regarding the fragmented sense of selfhood of the daughter who had been given away to a childless man so that he could appease the sages and get a son. Kunti's confusions and frustrations are clearly seen as she defiantly breaks the awkward silence about her adoption and asks Kuntibhoja about the reason behind her biological father, king Shurasena's decision of giving her away. The startling questions raised by the young Kunti and her subsequent controlled reactions, not only focus on her courageous desire to know more about her true identity, but they also emphasize on her intelligence that enables her to wisely evaluate every situation without unveiling her deepest thoughts— "He wouldn't get the answers he was looking for, I was good at hiding them. There is something in the air that only adopted children can feel. You have to be one to know what I mean. Not something you can complain about." (Dasgupta, 08)

Koral Dasgupta's recreated mythopoeic narrative relevantly interrogates the complex issues regarding an adopted child's identity crisis, rootlessness and sense of abandonment while focusing on Kunti's efficiency of controlling her own turbulent emotions and reactions in adverse situations. These unexpressed feelings of loss and grief are intricately connected to Kunti's later acts of burying her secrets and emotions deep inside her mind in an attempt to protect her image and position in the royal family. Dasgupta's reconstructed epic narrative not only depicts Kunti as an intelligent, independent woman potently able to solve the familial and political complications, but here she also goes on representing those Indian women who often silently undertake the task of enforcing peace and stability in the domestic sphere, by shrouding their own desires and disappointments.

In this novel, Kunti also attempts to transcend the boundaries of gender roles as she boldly talks about her aspirations to become the greatest conqueror in the world in response to her

father's questions about her plans for her future children. Quite surprisingly Kunti emerges here as an independent self-assured woman who refuses to be just an ordinary mother dedicated only to her children's prospects, rather she challenges the conventional notions of the patriarchal/brahmanical society by ambitiously dreaming about her own glorious future as a conqueror. Her father then advises her to become a powerful administrator and this advice interestingly hint at her capabilities as a wise advisor and strategist, that are discernible later in her life when her intelligent tactics effectively protect her sons against their vicious enemies while leading them towards their long-awaited victory. Pradip Bhattacharya relevantly observes in his essay "Panchakanya: Women of Substance", that Kunti employs her profound knowledge of politics and warfare while quite intelligently advising her second son, Bhima to get married to 'rakshasi' Hidimba, so that the offspring born out of this conjugal alliance with the powerful non-Aryan tribe could prove to be beneficial for the Pandavas in the impending war against the Kauravas— "I can see no way of taking fit revenge, for the terrible injustices that Duryodhana has done us. A grave problem faces us. You know Hidimba loves you… Have a son by her. I wish it. He will work for our welfare. My son, I do not want a 'no' from you. I want your promise now, in front of both of us." (157.47-49) We know how useful the fruit of this union, Ghatotkacha, is for them in exile and as Arjuna's savior from Karna's infallible weapon at the cost of his own life." (Bhattacharya, 29-30) Through these calculated ideas and intelligent advices, Kunti, on one hand, exhibits her maternal insecurities and ambitions, and on the other hand, she draws attention to her commendable efficiency in understanding the demands of a crucial situation and designing political stratagems that turn out to be quite useful in resolving several challenging complications.

Dasgupta's reinterpretation of the mythological tale portrays the legendary epic character as a defiant and brave young woman who not only designs her own unique identity by exploring the hidden truths of the world but also raises several questions regarding the patriarchal society's efforts of suppressing women's voice by keeping them uninformed and unenlightened. Kunti's unquenchable thirst for different forms of knowledge that were mostly inaccessible to women during that period and her subsequent commendable expertise in the theories of 'rajneeti (politics), rananeeti (rules of the war) and arthaneeti (economics) after silently promising to her father that – 'she would maintain strict confidentiality about the acquired information', depict how the women of the Vedic society had to fight against numerous obstacles to attain a subjective voice through their struggle for education and awareness. It can also be noted that this revisionist/feminist narrative portrays Kunti as an

ordinary teenage girl of the contemporary world who refuses to accept the stereotypical social conventions that are often imposed on the sexual 'other' and rebelliously desires to transcend the restrictive boundaries of right and wrong, truth and falsehood, permissible and forbidden. Thus, she radically states— "burning inside me was an insatiable quest to investigate the available as well as the forbidden". (Dasgupta, 12)

This raging desire to explore the unknown and forbidden guides Kunti to critically interrogate the traditional notions regarding female sexuality and physical desires, and eventually she gets engrossed in the story of Ahalya which was narrated to her in an attempt to expound the lessons of morality. However, Kunti not only interprets the mythical tale in a drastic manner, but she also secretly confesses that her questions regarding Ahalya's assertion of her sexuality and her forbidden relationship with Indra covertly lead her towards an uncontrollable longing to explore her own body and its mysterious sensations. Like many other dissident retellings, this postmodern feminist adaptation of the epic tale also tends to focus on the sexed body of the gendered 'other' and the unspoken tale of the peripheral beings of the contemporary world. Through Kunti's fascination with the tale of Ahalya's seduction by Indra and her subsequent obsessive desire of knowing more about the romantic as well as sexual charms of the mysterious king of gods, the adolescent princess raises some subversive questions regarding the conventional ideas of virtue and sin, purity and impurity, morality and immorality. Adolescent Kunti's indomitable longing to know more about the mysteries of her sexually awakening body and that of the complex relationship existing between the male and female energies of the universe - leads her towards her outrageous act of exploring the extents of the magical 'mantra' received as a boon from Sage Durvasa. As an outcome of her experimental act, she ends up summoning Surya (the sun god) who not only reveals to her the truth of her own deepest desires but also speaks of the phenomenal consequences of their union. Although in 'Asrama Parva' of the *Mahabhrata*, Surya (the sun god) furiously threatens to curse Kunti and the Sage who gave her that boon, as he tries to compel the reluctant virgin girl to fulfil the purpose of the mantra and indulge in an amorous relationship with him, Dasgupta's fictional retelling of the epic tale portrays the Sun god in a positive light. Here, Lord Surya directly addresses Kunti's confusions, dilemmas and curious questions while reflecting on various complicated issues like extra-marital or, pre-marital sexual relationships, patriarchal society's repression of female sexuality, as well as Hindu/Vedic philosophical ideas about eroticism and its underlying connections with spirituality.

After summoning Surya through the mystical mantra, when 'virgin' Kunti puzzlingly refuses to indulge in a sexual relationship with the sun god, Surya attempts to convince Kunti to give in by reflecting on the duality of the cryptic mantra which promises greater triumphs by challenging the stereotypical notions of 'virtue' and 'dharma'. The sun god fittingly observes — "The mantra that brought you (Kunti) here is a liberation as much as it is a trap, wonderful woman." On one hand this boon liberates the young princess from the patriarchal fetters of chastity, virginity and monogamy, and on the other hand, it authoritatively ignores the idea of 'consent' while compelling the gendered 'other' to undergo compulsory sexual encounters with strangers. In this context, Shalini Shah's contention in her essay, "Women and Sexuality in the Mahabharata", seems to be reasonably relevant – "Surya says the same thing to Kunti while trying to convince her about the righteousness of a virgin's right to cohabit with a person of her choice. An unmarried girl is called kanya from the root 'kari' (to desire), as everybody desired her and she herself was free to choose anyone. Thus, she was always independent. He then tells Kunti that in cohabiting with him she was not transgressing any dharma. "What transgression is there, if people behave according to their desire? All the females are free and so are the males. This is the normal course of the world; all others are unnatural barriers."" (Shah, 1991, 139)

This statement uttered by the sun god in the *Mahabharata* radically debates about society's tabooed perception about the unrestricted sexual desires of a woman while focusing on the prevalence of promiscuity among men and women in the ancient society.

In Koral Dasgupta's deconstructive work, Surya's insightful conversation with Kunti records similarly transgressive ideas that eventually influence Kunti to fervently voice her long-suppressed desires for the king of gods, Lord Indra. As in the real world, Kunti's longings are restricted and repressed by the conventionally idealized concepts of chastity and purity, her subconscious mind confronts Indra in her dreams and she proudly declares that her fiery ambitions and extraordinary intelligence can only be matched by the king of devas— "I am inaccessible to the ordinary, Deva. The inferior cannot match up to my brilliance; their touch doesn't merit my acumen. The king that stands before me will not be constrained within the limitations of a kingdom fenced by the human. I deserve to be wedded to the king of the devas." (Dasgupta, 82)

Kunti's vehement assertion of her desire to be sexually united with Indra can be seen as her radical attempt of challenging the patriarchal power structures prevalent in the ancient Hindu

society that often overlook and devalue female sexual desires while preventing most of the women from choosing their spouses or, expressing their profound yearnings. Traditions and customary rituals prescribe certain idealized virtues that define 'good' women, for example- chastity, restraint, self-abnegation, absolute dedication towards one's husband and family. Kartikeya C. Patel relevantly discerns in his insightful article, "Women, Earth, and the Goddess: A Shākta-Hindu Interpretation of Embodied Religion" that— "Female desire is a denied space within the phallocentric frame where womanliness is equated with selfless conjugal love, rapturous romantic love and maternal urges. Culture prohibits woman from openly expressing her sexuality. It is considered unwomanly to experience the sexual act as a pleasurable act. Feminists think that the concepts of passive female sexuality and aggressive male sexuality are actually based on a patriarchal myth created to discipline women. Women play out these stereotypes for the fear of being labelled as "immoral." So the intricate mental agony and complexity that a woman experiences in her sexual life goes untold. Both Sexton and Das boldly step out of the patriarchal logo that defines female sexuality as passive and self-abnegating. They destabilize phallogocentrism by demythologizing hegemonic and essentialist conceptions of female sexuality." (Patel, 71)

Dasgupta's recreated epic heroine emerges here as a strikingly bold woman who is not only specifically aware of her self-worth and deepest yearnings, but she is also uninhibitedly confident as she announces how her union with Indra has the potential to give birth to that majestic hero who will be "potent enough to inspire love and lethal enough to trap the opponent within its masquerading grandeur." (Dasgupta, 82) Kunti, who appears to be immensely confident of her own efficiencies and qualities as a mother, very optimistically and proudly contemplates about fulfilling her dreams of conquering the world as well as the hearts of people through the great deeds of her future son with her coveted lover, Lord Indra. In a rebellious manner, she challenges the patriarchal society which seeks to control female sexuality, maternity and child birth through the institutions of family and marriage, by wishing to indulge in an adulterous sexual relationship with Indra and to become pregnant with his illustrious son. Here Kunti's voice merges with the radical feminist concept which celebrates both female sexuality as well as maternal reproductive capacity as incontestable sites of power— "As the devalued processes of reproduction make clear, the body has a propensity to leak, to overflow the proper distinctions between self and other, to contaminate and engulf. Thus women themselves are, in the conventional masculinist imagination, not simply inferior beings whose

civil and social subordination is both inevitable and justified, but objects of fear and repulsion." (Margrit Shildrick with Janet Price, 03)

Koral Dasgupta's feminist reinterpretation of the epic tale echoes these concepts as it exhibits Kunti's reproductive body as a source of indestructible power which provides the sexual 'other' with a subjective voice of her own and this voice attempts to transcend the rigid boundaries of stereotypical gender roles. Rather than becoming just an instrument of producing male heirs who would uphold the tradition of patriarchal oppression and subjugation- Kunti boldly envisions that her sons would devote themselves in changing the world for better while establishing truth and 'dharma'. Hence, she uninhibitedly announces — "I would mother nothing less than an indestructible, dauntless legacy!" (Dasgupta, 83) Here, the mother who is often ignored or, marginalized in the process of bringing up the children, attempts to retrieve her legacy by impudently asserting her maternal identity through the unbreakable bond existing between the reproductive body and the progeny.

Later on in her life, after her marriage with Pandu, Kunti, like many other women in the brahmanical/patriarchal society, faces an overwhelming pressure of producing male heirs in order to carry forward the royal family line of Hastinapur. This revisionist novel vividly depicts how in several episodes, Kunti bafflingly finds herself struggling against these compulsions and impositions while desperately trying to figure out a way to escape from the predicament created by Pandu's impotence. In one of such incidents, while roaming around the corridors of the royal palace, the newlywed queen unknowingly reaches the huge repository of weapons and then meets Bhishma who tells her that her arrival at the vault can be interpreted as an auspicious sign for the dynasty— "If the uninformed footsteps of the newlywed queen has brought her to the great house of weapons, it is destiny's indication towards a lion-hearted warrior to grace this dynasty with his holy birth." (Dasgupta, 103)

Here Bhishma's words not only focus on the overarching patrilineal desire for the progression of the Kuru dynasty, but they also underline the degrading transformation of the gendered 'other' into just a dehumanized apparatus for child-birth. Following the renowned feminist author, Simone de Beauvoir's radical contention in her path-breaking work *The Second Sex*, which explains how in a patriarchal society a woman is generally defined as nothing but a womb, Shalini Shah, in her article "Engendering the Material Body", relevantly states that in the ancient Indian society, as opposed to men who are often associated with the sublime attributes of the 'mind', women existed only through their reproductive or, sexualized

bodies that are portrayed to be inferior and less significant as compared to the mystical body of 'the cosmic man'– "Women, on the other hand, without a transcendental cosmogonic representation and thus wholly immanent, seem to live their lives within earthly families through their bodies. Caught up completely in temporal cares – whether it was giving birth, nurturing children or giving sexual pleasure to men – women were supposed to fulfil their 'feminine destiny'." (Shah, 2019, 32)

Eventually the patriarchal control over the female reproductive body becomes all the more prominent when Bhishma who seems quite aware of Pandu's physical problems, suggestively hints that in order to produce suitable heir for the throne of Hastinapur, Kunti should consider the option of 'niyoga' and indulge into a clandestine erotic relationship with Pandu's another half-brother, Vidura. This act of pressurizing the wife of an impotent man to be involved in a sexual encounter with another man other than her husband and then beget a child- is a recurrent theme in the epical and mythological tales of ancient India. Shalini Shah observes in her article "Engendering the Material Body" that the 'dharmashashtras' and other Vedic texts authoritatively suggest that because a woman's body and soul belong to her lord/husband ('Pati Parameshwar'), hence her child/son fathered by another man through the process of 'niyoga' can be claimed as an heir of her husband who is the 'owner' of her entire being, including her womb— "Furthermore, gender bias in the treatment of 'infertility' is quite pronounced in our sources. Even as vandhya is castigated, man's lack of procreative ability is glossed over. Thus, the Kuru king Vichitravirya (literally one of strange semen) and Pandu's impotence are never an issue in the Mahabharata. The practice of niyoga takes care of their succession. Their sons thus born may not be of their body (aurasa) but at least they were born from the womb (hence ksetraja) whose ownership rested with them." (Shah, 2019, 33)

However, Kunti finds Bhishma's insinuation immensely degrading not only because of her 'pativrata dharma' (outright devotion towards the husband) but also because she considers Vidura who was born of the union between Sage Ved Vyasa and a 'dasi' serving in the royal household, to be her inferior in terms of social rank and caste identity. This particular episode of the recreated tale thus draws the readers' attention towards the problematic interrelations existing between the issues of caste and gender through Kunti's contemptuous fury caused by Bhishma's attempt of coupling her with another man in order to produce suitable heirs, and in addition to that Kunti's sense of mortification triggered by the fact that the man in question didn't bear "neither the Kshatriya lineage, nor the shine of a Brahman!" (Dasgupta, 105)

This incident thus critically interrogates the long-standing discriminating notions of caste hierarchy and deep-seated prejudices regarding one's origin and familial identity by hinting at the inherent sense of superiority which is easily noticeable in the socio-cultural interactions of the Kshatriyas and Brahmins. At the same time, it focuses on the complex emotions of rage, disgust and helplessness that are experienced by the newlywed bride (Kunti) who has always been portrayed as a very composed, nonchalant and dignified character in the mainstream narratives.

In another part of this revisionist novel, Kunti's disillusionments and disappointments startlingly find a voice in Gandhari's contemplative words that harshly criticize the Kuru dynasty's thoughtless exploitation of the women for the sake of the royal family line or, for the kingdom. Gandhari asserts here how her own distress and heartbreak taught her to be passively detached from the political power struggles and complex familial equations that tend to devalue individual choices and desires— "This house doesn't understand love, Kunti, neither does it value personal commitments. Or relationships. If I may put it very bluntly, no one belongs to anyone here. Everyone has sworn fealty to the family. Decisions are sovereign, not democratic and strictly political. Nothing is excusive here, not even with your parents, nor your children. In the palace of vast inheritance and endowments, nothing or no one is truly yours." (Dasgupta, 110)

On one hand, Gandhari's assertion examines the sense of rootlessness experienced by the newlywed woman who finds herself caught within the cobweb of personal sacrifices while trying to fit into the complex dynamics of the new family after her marriage, and on the other hand it focuses on the fragility of these new relationships that are often undermined and exploited because of political ambitions and equations.

As the novel progresses Kunti's psychological turmoil regarding the abandonment of her firstborn son and her painful separation from the child becomes more and more noticeable as she frequently asks Surya about the whereabouts of her son. Kunti's pain as the invisible mother who silently and ceaselessly crave for her lost son (Karna), points at the unexpressed anguish of the unwed mothers who are often forced to abandon their children because of the fear of social dishonour, and at the same time, it strikingly underlines how the unwed mothers endlessly pine for their separated children. It reflects on the unavoidable sense of guilt and remorse experienced by these socially invalidated mothers who always remain hidden behind the cloak of shame, secrecy and anonymity— "Karn, my son with Surya! A secret kept away

from the universe, a life growing apart from me with each passing moment, since the time I had trusted the newborn in his father's care. A child I had no chances of owning again, or seeing anytime soon." (Dasgupta, 113)

Here in this mythopoeic tale, Kunti is not merely glorified as another epic character, rather she emerges as a multi-dimensional, complex woman who unashamedly talks about her flaws and mistakes, her fears and heartbreaks, her disappointments and disillusions. She grievously and repentantly declares that as it was her adolescent curiosity which led her to indulge into the sexual encounter with Surya and give birth to the radiant son whom she had to abandon, she does not have the opportunity to blame anyone else for the impending disastrous situation that she might find herself in because of her indecisiveness, fear of embarrassment and unexpressed affection for the lost son— "I didn't even have the luxury of blaming anyone for my misfortune. It was my folly. It was my own choice! The consequences that would follow, would also be for me to suffer alone." (Dasgupta, 114)

On one hand, Kunti here becomes humanly vulnerable while repenting on her bad choices, and on the other hand, in an indirect manner her voice reminds us of those discriminating ideas and prejudices that often chastise and punish women for taking independent decisions and challenging patriarchal control. In addition to that, the mythopoeic narrative critically draws the readers' attention to the ancient Hindu philosophical idea which often depicts woman as an epitome of contradictions— thus Kunti becomes both the benevolent bestower who begets and nurtures life, and the malevolent destroyer who disowns her own child in order to safeguard her interests.

However, Kunti masks the psychological turmoil regarding the separation from her long lost son through her tranquil, composed and controlled demeanour, and eventually she indulges herself in improving the structure of the royal family of Hastinapur, strengthening political allies and making her husband, Pandu a better monarch. Thus when she arranges Pandu's marriage with the extraordinarily charming and beautiful princess Madri in an attempt to establish a strong political alliance between Madra and Hastinapur while providing the usually restless and despondent king, Pandu with a sense of fulfilment, Bhishma startlingly states— "Life never ceases to prove my learning wrong and force me to relearn. Seldom have I seen a woman so secure in her space that she can share her rights so effortlessly. Such are the qualities of a king, Kunti, not just a queen!" (Dasgupta, 137)

Women who are conventionally seen as insecure and self-engrossed beings pre-occupied with their position and authority in the family, are generally not expected to act in a way which unsettles the woman's own personal ambitions and prioritizes the systematic order of the family or, the political pursuits of the state/kingdom- hence Kunti's intelligence, courage and mental strength with which she handles the difficult situation regarding Pandu's marriage with Madri- become a cause of amazement for the veteran patriarch, Bhishma. Kunti's sacrificial act of foregoing her own happiness for the sake of the royal family and her fervent dedication towards gratifying her husband even by paving the way for another queen in the royal household– are on one hand considered to be a heroic and commendable, and on the other hand, quite paradoxically Kunti's benevolence and bravery fail to stand out as remarkably astonishing as most of the women of the Vedic/brahmanical society often had to accept the whimsical decisions of their husbands or, in-laws while suppressing their individual desires for the sake of the family. Kunti's act of arranging her husband's polygamous marriage with another woman thus critically interrogates the patriarchal double standards in terms of Hindu/Brahmanical marital relationships, and at the same time it problematically underlines the silent sacrifices of the sexual 'other'. Sophie M. Tharakan and Michael Tharakan observe in their insightful essay "Status of Women in India: A Historical Perspective"— "As Percival Spear points out, while monogamy was generally practised there were conspicuous exceptions in the case of Brahmins, Rajas and higher nobles. The general observation by Engels in his Origin of Family that monogamous marriage means monogamy only for woman and not for man who still practises practically polygamy, seems to be applicable to India". (Tharakan and Tharakan,119) Although monogamy was traditionally prescribed and widely practised in the ancient society, polygamy was also commonly found among most of the noblemen, hence the Vedas, myths and epics are laden with numerous examples of men who had more than one wife. In addition to that, women who were always supposed to be monogamous and devotedly loyal to their husbands – were not only expected to magnanimously accept the polygamous relationships of their husbands, but they also needed to rise above the boundaries of 'petty emotions' while maintaining cordial relationships with the co-wives.

As predicted by Kunti, Pandu's marriage with the ever-smiling, charming and spontaneous Madri visibly transforms Pandu while waking him up from the slumber of indifference and detachment and eventually enabling him to participate in the governance of the state with much more vigour and zeal. However, this idyllic situation proves to be short-lived as during a hunting expedition into the forest, in an attempt to shoot an arrow towards a deer, Pandu

commits a grave mistake and fatally wounds Rishi Kindama and his wife who were copulating in the position of deer. This blunder leads Pandu towards the cursed life of impotence and abstinence, while plunging him into the darkness of despair and self-loathing. Comprehending the gravity of the situation, Kunti supportively helps her distraught husband to come out of the gloomy predicament of repentance and helplessness and at the same time she tries to provide the disheartened king who has lost the ability of fathering children, with a sense of optimism. In the epic narrative of the *Mahabharata* Kunti appears to be much fiercer and bolder as she attempts to persuade Pandu to be more valiant and indulge in a sexual encounter with her in order to beget children even if it leads him towards his death. Pradip Bhattacharya denotes in his renowned essay, "Panchakanya: Women of Substance" that— "She (Kunti) urges Pandu to be heroic and emulate Vyushitashva who died prematurely because of over-indulgence in coitus like Pandu's father, but whose wife Bhadra obtained seven sons by embracing his corpse. Pandu refuses to invite death-in-intercourse with Kunti (though that is precisely what he does with Madri) and urges that she will only be doing what is sanctioned by the northern Kurus (122.7), that the new custom of being faithful to one's husband is very recent and cites the precedents of Sharadandayani, Madayanti, Ambika and Ambalika (rather strangely he omits the far more apt instance of his own ancestress Madhavi). Finally, he quotes Shvetaketu's scriptural directive for implicitly obeying the husband's commands: "the woman who, / commanded by her husband / to procreate children, refuses, / is guilty of the sin of infanticide" (122.19)." (p. 26)

However, in Dasgupta's retelling, Kunti is portrayed as a much more composed, devoted and sacrificial character who often epitomizes the idealized concept of 'Pativrata'. As observed in the article "On Gender, Wives and Pativrata" by Shalini Shah, a 'pativrata' woman is always expected to prioritize the well-being of her husband and his family even at the cost of her own individual desires and happiness, hence like a devoted wife Kunti tries to fulfil the responsibilities of her 'pativrata dharma' by constantly striving to placate her restless husband who finds himself entrapped in the predicament of self-loathing because of his sexual infertility. Kunti transcends the self-imposed barrier of virtuous monogamy and sexual chastity as she attempts to provide her troubled husband with some sense of solace and agrees to use the magical boon which permitted her to summon gods and beget sons by them. In order to save Pandu from utter humiliation and to carry on the royal lineage of the Kuru dynasty, Kunti reluctantly accepts Pandu's request and readies herself to produce male heirs through the dubious process of 'niyoga' which is recurrently found in the mythological and epic tales—

“Niyoga is thus a well-established custom in the *Mahabharata*, given the sanction of both myth and tradition. For a variety of reasons, I argue that it belongs best within the category of practices excused by apaddharma, the "law of distress." These are practices that, while not exactly honorable or righteous, may nevertheless be performed with impunity in the case of absolute necessity. In this instance, niyoga represents an apparent violation of the ethic of sexual fidelity to one's husband. It is excused, however, because the circumstances under which it is performed are exceptional and the need for the survival of the lineage supersedes the mores of sexual chastity.” (Dhand, 39)

Just as Draupadi fiercely saves her five husbands from impending slavery after the fateful game of dice or, as Gandhari voluntarily sacrifices her eyesight so that she can become her husband’s equal companion in his blindness, or, as Hidimba aids her husband Bhima and his brothers by guiding her only son Ghatotkacha to participate in the great war of Kurukshetra before being martyred— Kunti also becomes the saviour of her husband who was struggling with the embarrassment of turning into an impotent man as a result of being cursed during his fateful hunting expedition in the forest. Thus, it can be noted that, by agreeing to be impregnated through the process of Niyoga using her magical boon- Kunti not only liberates her husband from the disgraceful shame of impotency, but she also succeeds in creating a more transparent and profound conjugal relationship while trying to find her own subjective voice with which she can articulate her wishes and desires. Kunti’s exceptional mental strength and uncompromising ideas regarding morality and righteousness not only posits her in an authoritative position of power, but they also enable her to assert sturdy resistance against patriarchal whims and demands.

Therefore, in the *Mahabharata*, after giving birth to three sons through the process of ‘niyoga’, Kunti can be seen drawing a strict line in order to protect herself from being labelled as a woman with lose morals as she refuses to indulge in a sexual encounter with another man/god and conceive for the fourth time. Pradip Bhattacharya, one of the most notable *Mahabharata* scholars, relevantly notes in his essay, “Panchakanya: Women of Substance” that Kunti, well versed in the ancient doctrines and scriptures, clearly defines the striking differences between an ideally chaste, righteous woman and a promiscuous, sexually immoral woman as she outrightly refuses to fulfil her husband’s ambitious wishes — “Very much like his grandmother (Satyavati), Pandu urges Kunti to give him more and more sons. Kunti bluntly refuses, quoting the scriptures to him, just as he had quoted Shvetaketu to her: "The wise do not sanction a fourth conception, even in crisis. The woman who has intercourse with four men has loose

morals; the woman who has intercourse with five is a prostitute." (123.83) Kunti shows remarkable control over her libido here. It is not that she will go on indiscriminately satisfying her sexual or maternal urges." (Bhattacharya, 27)

Furthermore, Bhattacharya contends that Kunti's bold argument ironically echoes patriarchal hypocrisy and double standards— as she quotes the scriptures while talking about protecting her reputation, but later on Kunti herself plays a pivotal role in contriving the polyandrous marriage of Draupadi with her five sons, and eventually Draupadi's marital union with the Pandavas inevitably raises a lot of troubling questions regarding Draupadi's character. In a paradoxical manner, on one hand, Kunti sternly asserts resistance against patriarchal control over her body and sexuality while arguing with her demanding husband about having sexual relationship with another person and giving birth for the fourth time, and on the other hand, she herself transforms into an instrument of patriarchal dominance and exploitation as she strategically compels Draupadi to marry all five of her sons – "However, while her mastery of scripture is admirable, her words also give her away. Arjuna is her fourth conception and she has had relations with four different men. Why invoke this injunction if she had summoned gods? The fact that Pandu accepts her argument shows that the fathers of her three sons were not gods. Thus, out of her own mouth Kunti appears to condemn herself un-awares. It also explains why she did not confess regarding Karna, for that would have put her into the "loose morals" category. Her last words bristle with tragic irony: this is precisely the fate into which she thrusts her daughter- in-law. In the dice-game it is Karna, her first-born, who, on the basis of this very pronouncement, declares Draupadi a whore." (Bhattacharya, 27)

In *Mahabharata*, Kunti is not just depicted as an ideal woman rather the epic narrative portrays Kunti as a psychologically complex, multifaceted character with overarching desires, self-centred tactics and emotional outbursts. Like Satyavati who incessantly kept fighting for her own good fortune and the welfare of her posterity, Kunti's determination to safeguard her authority and interests, is also highlighted as she outrightly refuses to assist Madri to beget more children even after giving birth to the twins (Nakul and Sahadeva). In the ancient patriarchal society, where a woman's worth largely depended on her 'ability' to produce male heirs who can take the male lineage forward, women were often socially conditioned to believe that their position in the family was also directly related with the number of sons produced by them. Thus, Kunti agitatedly states how she feels betrayed as Pandu's other wife Madri attempts to upstage her by begetting two sons through one mantra— "With one mantra I gave her, she managed to get two sons. I am afraid she will get more sons than I. Scheming woman!

What a fool I was! Had I known, I too would have summoned the Ashvins, and obtained twins. Don't come to me again, my lord, saying, 'Give her the mantra.'" (124.26-28)

However, Koral Dasgupta's revisionist novel reimagines Kunti as more composed and considerate especially in her confrontations with Pandu- rather than being defensive and guarded as her epic counterpart, Dasgupta's eponymous heroine discusses about the need for complete honesty, submission and transparency in conjugal partnership. Through the act of providing Pandu a space for opening up and unveiling his long-hidden secrets, Kunti readies herself to be unabashedly forthright and free, then subsequently she confesses about her pre-marital pregnancy and abandonment of her first son, Karna. Somehow, Pandu's impotence and distressed confession posits the long-neglected queen consort in a position of power as she takes the responsibility of taking the Kuru lineage forward through her miraculous boon of summoning 'gods' and beget children by them. Hence it can be noted that, the subservient wife who is mostly side-lined and silenced in the stereotypical patriarchal family structure, startlingly assumes an influential and authoritative role which enables her to take significant decisions regarding her marriage and family. Hence Kunti states — "It was not just a lame request to be set free from an unfair curse. Pandu was seeking from me way more than a man could ask of his wife. He was asking me to be his anchor. It was his most desperate endeavour to kick away a paralysis. Mortals are told that complete surrender happens in love. Yet there is another surrender that happens through confession." (Dasgupta, 145)

In response to Pandu's confession and desperate call for help, Kunti crosses the boundaries of shame and fear with excessive courage while choosing to talk about the undisclosed mystery of her miraculous boon received from Sage Durvasa, and then after much doubtful speculations she palpitatingly unveils the long-hidden secret of the birth of her first-born son with Surya. Instead of hiding her past secrets like her mythical counterpart in the primary epic narrative, the reimagined Kunti in Dasgupta's revisionist retelling confesses how as a young maiden, in the fear of social disgrace she had put her newborn child in a cane-basket and discarded him to the whims of the river which fortunately took him to his foster parents (whose identity was still unknown to her). After this uninhibited revelation of Kunti, Pandu eagerly yearning to restore his lost respect and position in the royal family by providing the Kuru dynasty with a male heir, tries to persuade Kunti to look for that lost son whom she abandoned as an unwed mother, and duly place him in the position of the rightful heir of the throne of Hastinapur while publicly returning him his misplaced identity. Nevertheless, Kunti's own tempestuous emotional upheavals as an adopted child enable her to empathise with her long-lost son, and she wisely

estimates the complications associated with the perplexing situation of reclaiming that son whom she had to abandon just after his birth. Therefore, Kunti wilfully gives up the opportunity of voicing her long repressed motherly affections by revealing her true identity to her long-lost son, while vehemently refusing to separate him from his adoptive parents— "He has already been adopted. He is growing up well. Meddling with a young boy's mind over something as existential as parentage would shake his faith. I can't. I shouldn't." (Dasgupta, 160)

Here Kunti's disconcertment about the psychological problems faced by her deserted son who was born outside wedlock, critically interrogates the problematic issue of the peripheral social position of the illegitimate child who often undergoes the anguish of not being recognized or, accepted by neither the family nor the society. In this context an observation found in Kusum's insightful essay "Rights and Status of Illegitimate Children" seems to be quite relevant— "The bastard, like the prostitute, thief, and beggar, belongs to that motley crowd of disreputable social types which society has generally resented, always endured. He is a living symbol of social irregularity and undesirable evidence of contramoral forces; in short, a problem - a problem as old and unsolved as human existence itself." (Kusum, 296) This statement aptly reflects on the socially sanctioned discrimination against the illegitimate child whose fragmented identity pushes him towards the dark abyss of shame and frustration. Dasgupta's deconstructive fictional retelling thus vividly depicts how Kunti repents over her past actions as she empathetically comprehends her deserted son's unbearable pain of rootlessness, however she feebly accepts that if she again tries to reclaim that son as her own, it would only intensify the chaotic crisis of selfhood that her illegitimate son (Karna) already deals with.

However, Pandu disregards Kunti's logical arguments and practical perceptions by accusing her to be cruelly nonchalant. Pandu's castigating comments regarding Kunti's sternness and cold detachment while urging her to reclaim the abandoned son (Karna) whom she had to abandon after giving birth, reflect on the socio-political pressure on the king and queen to produce an heir for the throne at any cost, and they also focus on the overwhelmingly complex sense of guilt experienced by Kunti for not being able to publicly accept her first born son. In addition to that, Pandu's castigating statements startlingly draw attention to Kunti's wise thoughtfulness and commendable control over her own emotions. On one hand, she masks her unexpressed maternal affections through her apparent cruelty and heartlessness, and on the other she proves to be immensely practical as well as realistic, as she accepts the impossibility of crossing the social and cultural boundaries in order to be reunited with her lost and separated son— "Pandu frowned 'you are a cruel woman', I heard him saying. I couldn't agree more. I

had been heartless once; but I couldn't be selfish now. Once you have let go of something, it won't ever come back to you in its entirety. Abandonment is unforgiving." (Dasgupta, 160)

In Dasgupta's novel Kunti's unexpressed love for Indra is frequently underlined in an attempt to connect the experiences of the mythical epic character with that of the gendered 'other' in the contemporary society. Just as most of the women in both ancient and contemporary Indian society are often forced to sacrifice their individual desires and accept the decisions made by their families, similarly Kunti was never given an opportunity to explore her deepest feelings. Her passionate yearnings for the king of Devas which led her to comprehend the complicated intricacies of human psyche and relationships during her marriage with Pandu, have been carefully hidden under the garb of her composed demeanour for a long time. She reluctantly reveals these suppressed emotions only after being compelled by her husband, Pandu who further persuades Kunti to summon different gods including Indra and give birth to illustrious sons who would be able to compensate for their father's flaws.

However, in Dasgupta's subversive retelling, instead of following the footsteps of his mythical counterpart, Pandu appears to be an empathetic and considerate individual who remembers how the atrocities faced by his mother while giving birth to him through the process of 'Niyoga', led to disastrous consequences. Therefore, he asks Kunti to prioritize love over the compelling duty of producing an heir, follow her innermost desires and summon her beloved Indra — "None other, Kunti, Call Indra. Our child will be born out of love, not from a compulsion upon the mother." (Dasgupta, 186) Through Pandu's voice, the author tries to draw the readers' attention to the unuttered pain and sense of helplessness experienced by the sexual 'other' who is often seen as nothing better than a dehumanized child-producing machine devoid of individual identity or, will.

Many mythological and epic tales depict this objectification and exploitation of women especially in terms of giving birth to male children for the continuance of the patrilineal family line, and the tale of Ambika and Ambalika from the *Mahabharata* exemplifies this patriarchal subjugation of the gendered 'other' in a very startling manner. After Vichitravirya's death, in an attempt to continue the lineage of the Kuru dynasty, his widows Ambika and Ambalika were forced to engage in a sexual encounter with Sage Ved Vyas, Satyabati's son sired by Sage Parashara. The epic narrative also explains how as a result of that forceful process of 'Niyoga', the terrified widowed queens gave birth to two children one of whom was blind (Dhritarashtra) and another turned out to be infertile and later on impotent (Pandu). This particular epic episode

critically interrogates several complex issues regarding degenerated position of widows, female sexuality, sexual consent and forced copulation etc., and at the same time it also reflects on the untold tales of the subjugated, exploited women whose objectified reproductive bodies often become the contested sites of patriarchal control in the Hindu/Brahmanical society. Shalini Shah's observation in her radical essay "Engendering the Material Body" relevantly addresses this problematic issue – "Another thing that stands out in the Dharmasastra vis-à-vis the female body is the perception of the anomalous female – the widow. While the early practice of niyoga had recognized the widow as a potential reproductive body, in later times it had fallen into disuse (to sow seeds in someone else's field and not to be able to harvest it was not a welcome thought) and niyoga was listed among the kalivarjya for dvija. With this the widow's body was transformed into a 'desexualised body' and the various norms laid out in the Dharmasastra for a widow (restrictions on eating, drinking and clothes) were meant to starve this body of any kind of sexual urge. The control over a widow's body was also sought by denying her material sustenance if she failed to remain chaste." (Shah, 2019, 37)

On one hand, the epic narrative of *Mahabharata* depicts how the widows of Vichitravirya were impregnated using the unconventional ancient process of niyoga, and on the other hand it focuses on the trauma and helplessness that these widows experienced because of the forced intercourse and impregnation. After the death of their husband, Ambika and Ambalika who were seen as nothing but fertile wombs, lost all authority over their own bodies as they were reduced to marginal dispossessed beings without any individual identity or, subjective voice. Similarly, widows in the contemporary Indian society are not only still deprived of their right to raise a voice and assert resistance against patriarchal supervision and subjugation, but they are also forbidden to look for earthly comforts, or, indulge in any kind of sensual gratification. As patriarchal society maintains its controlling grip over women through the standardized institutional structures like marriage and family, widows often experience social ostracization and degradation after the death of their husbands which customarily/typically points at her inauspicious impurity.

In her insightful article, "Widows without Rights: Challenging Marginalisation and Dispossession", Kate Young thus observes— "The clothing and the jewellery the widow wore during her husband's lifetime are cast off, and rags or rough clothing put on. Alternatively, the widow may have to remain in dirty unwashed clothing for weeks, enclosed in one room, being given virtually nothing to eat and even in some cases having to drink the water with which her husband's corpse was cleaned. She becomes a focus of collective repudiation, seen as a bearer

of bad luck, unclean, polluting and dangerous. She has to undergo rituals - many of them humiliating, and some life-threatening in these times of HIV/AIDS - to symbolically 'cleanse' her, in order to safeguard the community from her impurity." (Young, 200)

The intricate interconnections existing between female identity, agency, passion and ambition are critically examined in this postmodern retelling of the epic tale of Kunti, and especially through the conversations between Indra and Kunti, several complicated questions regarding women's sexual desires, their role and position in the Indian society and family, are relevantly raised and addressed. Through Indra's voice, Dasgupta redefines the term 'Sati' in an attempt to praise Kunti's prowess and competence as an ambitious queen who also plays the significant role of a political administrator and strategist — "Your desires align with a social good. Your love for me is not just born out of feminine passion but is also an ambitious succession for a state, as befits a queen. Not only do you fill in for Pandu's inadequacies, but also for the kingdom's defence and its progress. The cosmos, hence has come together to fulfil your wishes. A blessing that is reserved only for a Sati- the seeker of truth- a dreamer, a performer, an uncompromising negotiator for that very truth." (Dasgupta 195)

Here Indra points out that, Kunti's character not only interrogates and redefines the stereotypical ideas associated with the term 'Sati' by taking her devotion towards her husband and the welfare of the kingdom to another extent, but unlike other women of her times she doesn't choose to give up on her dreams and desires rather she puts a lot of effort to attain her own personal ambitions. It can be stated that the mother of the Pandavas symbolically represents modern Indian women who efficiently play both the roles of a dedicated homemaker and an ambitious woman dreaming of extraordinary triumphs in life. Kunti's miraculous boon of begetting sons by the gods, place her in an authoritative position of power which enables her to fulfil her desires for the king of gods, as well as it leads her towards the realization of her dreams of earning imperishable fame and honour through a gifted, valiant, illustrious son (Arjuna).

In Dasgupta's revisionist story Kunti's desires are highlighted in an attempt to talk about the significance of female desires that are interconnected with the idea of female agency and autonomy. Female desire is often overlooked as insignificant, or stigmatized as dangerous and immoral - within the phallocentric frame where womanliness is often equated with selfless conjugal love, monogamous devotion and maternal affections. Thus, many feminist scholars and authors have exclaimed that, The repression of female sexuality by attaching a sense of

shy/passive detachment with the stereotypical role of women in family and society is another covert patriarchal method of controlling and disciplining women.

In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fictional retelling of the *Mahabharata*, *The Palace of Illusions* where the epic tale is narrated from Draupadi's point of view, Kunti's portrayal is much different than that in Dasgupta's novel - as Divakaruni's novel depicts Kunti as an experienced, calculative mother-in-law fiercely strategizing for her sons' succession instead of depicting her as an innocent, immature adolescent girl. In Divakaruni's retelling, the widowed queen first appears to be quite inflexible and strict about her values, ideals and decisions, especially in terms of her sons and their marriage with Draupadi. She unknowingly instructs her sons to equally share 'the acquired alms' (the princess of Panchaal) among themselves and then like an intimidating matriarch, she forbids the Pandavas to go against her instruction by reminding them of the impossibility of dishonouring the mother's words— "All through my life- even in the hardest of times- everything I said, I made sure it was done. I told myself I'd bring you up as princes in the halls of your forefathers, and no matter how much harassment I faced, I held on to my promise. Sons, if you value what I did for you, you must now honor my word. All five of you must marry this woman." (Divakaruni 108)

Here Kunti reveals how through her resolute dedication she has always achieved what she aspired for and her resilience led her to fight against all obstacles in the path of establishing the rights of her sons in Hastinapur. Although it is conventionally perceived that Kunti was completely unaware of Arjuna's valorous victory at Draupadi's Swayamvar, many scholars and critics have exclaimed that the stout and fiery mother who raised and protected her sons singlehandedly after her husband's death, strategizes to bind her sons in an unbreakable bond through their polyandrous marriage with the beautiful princess of Panchaal. Pradip Bhattacharya hypothetically states in his essay "Panchakanya: Women of Substance" that Kunti knowingly instructs her sons to make Draupadi their common wife in an attempt to remove all possibilities of future conflict resulting from the lust for the most attractive woman desired by all men of Aryavarta (the Indian subcontinent) — "Kunti's foresight perceives that any split among the united five will frustrate the goal of mastering Hastinapura. Moreover, in Ekachakra Vyasa had already briefed them that Draupadi was fated to have five husbands because of the boon Shiva had given her in a previous birth and had urged them to proceed to Panchala to win her as their common wife (Adi parva 168). Hence it seems to be quite obvious that Kunti chose to play that grim charade of pretending not to know what Bhima and Arjuna meant when they asked her to see what they had brought home." (Bhattacharya, 32)

Furthermore, Bhattacharya contends that Kunti's wisdom and experience made her understand that the beauty, intelligence and bravery of the fire born princess of Panchal might actually prove to be successful in uniting Kunti's five sons and eventually Draupadi could replace Kunti, the unifying factor that always kept the Pandavas together– "Kunti knows that the only way to forge an unbreakable link among the five is not to allow them to get engrossed in different wives. So long their lives have been governed by her and have revolved only around her. She can be replaced only by a single woman, not five, if that unified focus is to persist. It is as though she were bringing into practice the Atharva Vedic injunction: "May your drink be the same, may your food be common. / I bind you together with one common bond. / United, gather round the sacrificial fire / like the spokes of a chariot-wheel round the nave" (III.30.6). Draupadi, of course, is virtually born from the yajnic fire-altar." (p.32)

Shalini Shah notes in her essay "Women and Sexuality in the Mahabharata" that while trying to explain the reason behind the decision of arranging the polyandrous marriage between Draupadi and the Pandavas, Yudhishthira acknowledges that the brothers have eagerly acquiesced to Kunti's decision, as each of them secretly desired the princess of Panchal. Among all the women characters of the Mahabharata Kunti emerges as one of the most influential and powerful figures, as her unquestionable influence on the Pandavas distinctly affect and alter the course of the epic narrative — "It is also a magnificent tribute to the total respect and implicit obedience paid by the brothers to Kunti which is unparalleled in the epic. Despite all the paeans to Gandhari's virtues, her complete failure as a mother to command any respect from Duryodhana only serves to highlight the qualities which make Kunti pre-eminent among all women in the Mahabharata: "My mother's will is my will because I think she is right . . . Isn't it said that obedience to gurus is a supreme virtue? What greater guru than one's mother?... To me this is the highest dharma." (197.29; 198.17)" (Shah-33)

Divakaruni focuses on Kunti's shrewd intelligence and fierce protectiveness once again in the episode where the widowed mother of the five Pandavas wisely counters and ruins Duryodhana's abominable plan of burning the Pandavas along with their mother in the palace made of lac at Varanavat. Kunti doesn't falter to go against her innate sense of morality as she desperately tries to protect the lives of her sons, thus eventually she can be seen drugging a Nishada woman and her five sons after inviting them over to the palace and providing them with food and wine. Then the mother of the Pandavas takes an uncharacteristic stance while mercilessly and calm-headedly asking her sons to set the lac palace on fire so that the charred bodies of the Nishadas are mistaken for that of Kunti and her five sons. In Divakaruni's retold

tale Sahadev, the youngest Pandava narrates to Draupadi — “Our mother looked us in the eye. I drugged the wine, she said. They’ll feel no pain. As for the sin of killing them, I swear it will not touch you. I take it all on myself. For the safety of my children, I’ll gladly forego heaven.” (Divakaruni, 115) Here Kunti is portrayed as an aggressively protective mother who challenges the conventional boundaries of right and wrong, piety and sin, honesty and deception in order to protect her sons and herself. She unabashedly accepts that she has committed a sinful act by killing the Nishad woman and her sons, but at the same time she declares that she is unafraid of the afterlife judgements as the murderous act was a result of her frantic attempt to protect her sons at any cost.

Throughout the epic narrative, especially after the death of Pandu and Madri, it can be seen that Kunti chooses to prioritize her responsibilities as a mother over the stereotypical ideas of ‘dharma’ that significantly constitute one of the most prevalent themes in the *Mahabharata*. As a widowed mother of five sons begot by different fathers through the process of ‘Niyoga’, she comes across numerous hurdles, despicable plots and humiliations, however like a valiant warrior she fights against all adverse situations using her determination and wisdom. Bereft of any strong political support, she soon understands the importance of allies and thus befriends Pandu’s half-brother Vidura who ultimately help them to escape from the inflammable palace of Varanavat which was designed to kill Kunti and the Pandavas. Unlike Gandhari or, Ahalya, Kunti does not choose to embrace self-abnegation as a form of passive resistance against patriarchal oppression and subjugation, rather on one hand she plays the role of a father and bravely protects her family against all political conspiracies, and on the other hand she plays the role of an affectionate mother always devoted to the well-being of her sons. In this context Pradip Bhattacharya’s contention in his essay “Panchakanya: Women of Substance” seems relevantly insightful, where he suggests that Kunti’s bold decisions and humanly mistakes frequently challenge the image of the ideal/perfect woman which is often glorified in the ancient Brahmanical patriarchal society— “Like Tara and Mandodari she does not commit sati, but chooses to shoulder the tremendous responsibility of bringing up five children in a hostile court, bereft of relatives and allies. Neither Kuntibhoja nor the Vrishnis come forward to provide shelter or support. Quickly she turns to Satyavati's favourite grandson by a servant-maid: Vidura. He proves to be her fast friend and more. It is he who saves them from being burnt alive and it is in his home that Kunti takes shelter when her sons are exiled. He even accompanies her at the very end into the forest. It is not for nothing that Iravati Karve surmised that Dharma, the first "god" summoned by Kunti, is none other than Vidura, known as Dharma's

incarnation in the epic, for it is the younger brother (stepbrother in this case), devara, who is the first appropriate person to turn to for niyoga." (p.29)

The widowed mother of the Pandavas frequently exhibits her immense strength, aggressive protectiveness and strategic intelligence as she comprehends the necessity for powerful alliances and thus compels her sons to form political ties through marriage. It is because of her tactical advice and encouraging words that Bhima realizes the significance of forging an intimate bond with the powerful clan of Rakshasas or, non-Aryans. Thus he agrees to marry Hidimba, and subsequently Bhima and Hidimba's son the mighty Rakshasa warrior, Ghatotkacha, proves to be extremely beneficial for the Pandava army in the battle of Kurukshetra. Quite uncharacteristically Kunti expresses her emotions in front of her sons and furiously asserts her desire for revenge against the Kauravas who repeatedly plotted against the Pandavas and tried to murder them. Hence Pradeep Bhattacharya exclaims in his essay "Panchakanya: Women of Substance" that — "Where Yudhishthira stops short with preventing Bhima from killing the infatuated Hidimba, Kunti, with remarkable foresight, seizes upon this fortuitous occurrence to cement an alliance for the friendless five: "I can see no way of taking fit revenge, for the terrible injustices that Duryodhana has done us. A grave problem faces us. You know Hidimba loves you . . . Have a son by her. I wish it. He will work for our welfare. My son, I do not want a 'no' from you. I want your promise now, in front of both of us." (157.47-49) We know how useful the fruit of this union, Ghatotkacha, is for them in exile and as Arjuna's savior from Kama's infallible weapon at the cost of his own life. It is again Kunti who instructs her first grandchild in order to ensure his loyalty: "You are one of the Kurus. / To me you are like Bhima himself/ You are the eldest son of the Pandavas, / Therefore, you should help them" (157.74)." (Bhattacharya, 29-30)

In her revisionist novel which primarily focuses on Draupadi's perceptions about different episodes and other characters depicted in the epic, Divakaruni frequently draws the readers' attention to Kunti's persistent frigidity and inexpressiveness, however in specific problematic situations, the stern and impassive mother of the Pandavas does not prevent herself from expressing her feelings of loss, despair, and repentance that she often suppresses. Draupadi's dream about Kunti and Karna's meeting before the great war of Kurukshetra reveals a lot about the complicated character of the robust queen as well as her struggles and sufferings — "Kunti was weeping. All these years I'd never seen her weep. When she'd heard of my humiliation at the hands of Duryodhan, she'd pressed her lips together until they were bloodless. When we left for our twelve years of exile, her eyes had been bright with unshed tears. But always she'd

been in control, the same alabaster queen who had towered over me at our first meeting in the slums of Kampilya. Today, however, tears streamed down her cheeks and there was a look on her face of such careless abandon that I was startled. She held out her arms toward Karna as one would to an intimate, and then, as he backed away, she knelt in a gesture of supplication." (Divakaruni, 242)

For several years, Kunti's inflexible ideas of morality and fear of social disgrace compelled her to bury her maternal affections for her abandoned son, Karna whom she accidentally meets in Hastinapur much later. However, she decides to break her silence and reveal her hidden identity to the son whom she gave birth to as an unwed mother, in order to prevent him and the Pandavas from clashing against one another in the catastrophic war of Kurukshetra. Karna's resentful astonishment and subsequent rejection of his newly found identity as Kunti's first born son, leave Kunti much more shattered and disillusioned while submerging her into an overwhelming sense of guilt. Kunti's misery and anguish for not being able to accept her son publicly and for failing to dissuade her sons (Karna and Arjuna) from indulging themselves into the fatal contest of hatred, are intricately linked with the sense of displacement and marginalization experienced by Karna throughout his life.

As observed by Irawati Karve, Kunti's abandonment of Karna, his upbringing in the household of a charioteer (Suta caste), then his struggles to prove his worth and the incessant humiliations faced by him as the son of charioteer only steered him to despise his biological mother whom he never got a chance to know— "Kunti did not know his fate till years later, when she was not in a position to acknowledge him as her son. The son, on his part, never forgave the mother for having abandoned him. From the minute of his birth to well after his death this child was a constant source of dread and sorrow to the mother." (Karve 43)

Kunti's desperate helplessness emphasizes on the predicament that most of the unwed mothers in the patriarchal society are found to be entrapped in, and it also points at the lack of consent or, control of the women in the context of maternity. There are many female characters in the epic narratives, especially in the *Mahabharata*, like Satyavati, Kunti, Ambika and Ambalika who vividly exemplify this conundrum faced by women who are often compelled to conceive and beget a child even if they are reluctant, oblivious or, hesitant. The difficult situations faced by these epic women characters relevantly reflect on the problematic issues like premarital pregnancy and forced motherhood that are often encountered by women of the contemporary world. Following the contention of Gerda Neyer & Laura Bernardi in their article, "Feminist

Perspectives on Motherhood and Reproduction" it can be claimed that motherhood has often been used as a patriarchal tool of controlling women's sexuality as well as 'tying the gendered 'other' to immanence'— "As Carole Pateman (1988 and 1989) has pointed out, the de-valuation of motherhood (and women) was a consequence of the patriarchal construction of sexual difference. Through the fraternal (social) contract men became equal as members of society. Women were relegated to "nature", with childbearing and motherhood forming the core of women's nature. Under such conditions, the relationship between women and men is determined by a sexual contract (most visibly in the institution of the patriarchal marriage contract) which surrenders women's bodies and offspring to men and to society." (Neyer and Bernardi -165)

The adolescent unmarried princess (Kunti) who became pregnant while curiously testing her newly acquired miraculous power of summoning gods and conceive children by them, had no choice but to abandon the child for the sake of her own and her father's social reputation— thus after carefully covering the secret of the illicit childbirth, the silenced teenage girl is then presented as a socially acceptable 'chaste' woman so that she can be married off to the prince of Hastinapur, Pandu. Kunti's act of disclosing the secret of their relationship only to Karna and her act of persuading Karna to leave his friend Duryodhana's side and join the Pandavas, his biological brothers, in their fight against 'adharma'— can be interpreted as a manipulative way of imposing a political alliance between her socially accepted sons and the long-lost son who is also an exceptionally skilled archer. Karve draws attention to this particular aspect of Kunti's tale in her remarkable work *Yuganta* where she observes that— "During the first part of her life she had felt the need to acknowledge Karna. Just before the great war both she and Krishna had felt the necessity of getting Karna to join the Pandavas. For this a public acknowledgment of her relationship with Karna was necessary. Kunti was prepared to undergo this ordeal. But now after the war was won, such a necessity no longer existed. It was only because her sense of justice would not let her rest that she made a public confession at this time. Whatever the others might have said, Dharma's condemnation of her was sweeping and merciless. Dharma is said to have mourned the loss of his brother bitterly. He even blamed Kunti for the entire Mahabharata war. "Your secret has destroyed all of us — the Kurus and the Panchalas are no more. Draupadi's sons and Abhimanyu are dead. If you had told us at that time that Karna belonged to us, there would have been no war." He even went so far as to curse all of womankind by saying, "Henceforth they shall be incapable of keeping a secret." (Karve, 36-37)

This significant episode from the *Mahabharata* focuses on the quandary and turmoil that Kunti undergoes regarding her act of confessing about the premarital pregnancy and unveiling the truth of Karna's identity. On one hand, through Yudhisthira's lamentations and castigating remarks the main epic narrative emphasizes on the fruitlessness of the catastrophic war which destroyed innumerable lives and at the same time these statements point at the brahminical/patriarchal predisposition of blaming women's 'mysterious' and 'deceptive' nature for causing destructive chaos around them. Karve's observation rightly denotes that the hitherto unrevealed truth about Karna's origins jeopardizes the future of the entire Kuru/Pandava clan, and at the same time Kunti's carefully guarded secret about her abandoned son somehow overshadows her attempt to follow her conscience and transgress the boundaries of shame by publicly acknowledging Karna as the son whom she gave birth to as an unwed mother.

'Karna and Kunti' (translated from 'Karna Kunti Sambad'), Tagore's poetic reiteration of two brief episodes from the 'Udyogaparva' of the *Mahabharata* (a dialogue between Krishna and Karna, and an emotional interchange between Karna and Kunti) undertakes the task of presenting a psychoanalytical reading of the episode in which Kunti meets her long-lost son Karna and reveals that he is her firstborn son. This particular episode from the *Mahabharata* which is often perceived as a 'negotiation' or an attempt to tempt Karna to join the side of the Pandavas, is reinterpreted in a theatrically poignant manner.

In this poetic recreation, Tagore's reimagined Kunti appears to be immensely mortified as she unveils the long-hidden secret of her pre-marital motherhood in front of her first-born son, Karna who unlike his mythical counterpart in the main epic narrative (who already got to know about his original identity from Krishna) dramatically finds out the truth regarding his birth for the first time and cannot help but express his turbulent emotions in an acerbic yet reverential manner following the customary norms of righteousness. This reinvented dialogue between the pining mother and the abandoned son explores diverse shades of Kunti's complex character as she tries to soothe an inconsolable Karna and persuade him to join his brothers, the Pandavas in the Kurukshetra war. Karna, however indirectly reproaches Kunti for her unjust treatment towards him while trying to control his rage, disillusionment and bitterness in terms of his shocking discovery that the mother of his biggest rival, Arjuna, turns out to be his own biological mother. Tagore's mythopoeic verse portrays Kunti as a sentimental mother desperately pleading to her lost son for forgiveness while regretfully confessing how her fear

of public disgrace prevented her from socially acknowledging her first-born son whom she conceived out of wedlock—

"Kunti: Yes, I am the mother of Arjuna.
But do not nurse in your heart, my child
Hate for me on that account.
I remember even today when in Hastinapur,
There was a trial of arms.
You slowly came upon the stage
A youthful figure like the new-born Sun
In the star-studded eastern sky.
Of all the women who sat behind the screen
Wretched who was she that could not speak
And yet felt in her riven heart
The pangs of unsatisfied affection
Like the sting of a thousand serpents?
Who was she whose eyes-
Kissed every limb of yours in silent benediction?
It was me the mother of Arjuna." (Tagore, 02)

Through Kunti's words, Tagore's emotive retelling of the epic episode relevantly address the intricate combination of unexpressed maternal love, pain of separation, and overwhelming sense of shame and regret that an unwed mother experiences. Kunti reminisces how after witnessing Karna's radiant appearance for the first time at the 'trial of arms', she instinctively realized that the magnificently valiant youth was none other than that son who was born out of her union with the Sun god, and how desperately she wanted to defy the rigid boundaries of the social obligations while reuniting with her lost son. In addition to that, Kunti also recounts how the mother's heart could profoundly empathize with the terrible sense of anguish and dishonour experienced by Karna as his identity as 'the charioteer's son' prevented him from participating at the trial of arms and compete against Arjuna. Kunti's silence in that crucial moment not only pushes Karna towards rootlessness and dishonour because of the caste identity of his adoptive family, but it also compelled him to completely devote his loyalty to Duryodhana (and the Kauravas) who somehow helped him escape that disgraceful moment by

placing him in an authoritative position of the ruler of the eastern state, Anga. However, even after realizing the intensity of Karna's pain caused by her passive detachment and silence, Tagore's Kunti attempts to win Karna over through her emotional words and regretful confession —

"When Kripa came and asked your father's name
And said that none could Arjuna fight
Unless he was born of Kings —
You blushed with shame, you spoke no words,
And stood silent with lowered face.
Hapless who was she that felt
The blush of shame upon your face
Like a searing flame in her heart?
It was me Arjuna's mother" (Tagore, 02)

Karna's unforgiving refusal of her proposal to reclaim his identity as the firstborn son of Kunti and unite with his brothers, the Pandavas, shatters her heart as she fails to fulfil her desire of playing the role of mother to her long-lost, inaccessible son whom she had abandoned. Tagore's retelling vividly depicts Kunti's grief and disappointment as she mourns the loss of her firstborn son for the second time. She ardently confesses that although she is dearly loved and respected by her five sons, her heart incessantly longs for the love of that child whom she had abandoned many years ago as an adolescent unwed mother —

"My child, your words pierce through my heart
Like a hundred thunderbolts
And shatter it to fragments.
I cast you away —
That curse has always made me feel
Childless even when five sons clung to me." (Tagore, 07)

Kunti's recurrent requests for forgiveness for her mistakes and shortcomings can be interpreted as an appeal to the readers and the society to consider her as an ordinary woman full of flaws and imperfections, instead of perceiving her as an ideally virtuous woman. By seeking redemption through her abandoned son's forgiveness, Tagore's Kunti not only plays the role of the poet's mouthpiece for expressing his philosophical ideas about right and wrong, mercy

and denunciation, but she also indirectly questions the patriarchal notions of pure and impure, moral and immoral, righteous and unrighteous as she talks about the 'sinful' acts of her past and liberating herself from the tormenting thoughts of guilt and remorse.

"When your lips could not speak a word
I did you grievous wrong, my child.
With the same lips forgive me today.
Your forgiveness will be more powerful
Than bitter condemnation,
Will light a fire that will burn my sins away
And make me pure again." (p- 07)

After going through these revisions and reiterations that focus on the mother of the Pandavas, it can be noted that Kunti, like many other female characters in the epic, is full of paradoxes and complexities. These contrasts inherent in her character make her immensely significant in an analytical reading of the epic narrative in the context of the issues of female sexuality, motherhood, position of widows, female leadership, gender stereotypes and inequalities etc.

Kunti's adolescent curiosity and her pre-marital pregnancy, abandonment of her firstborn son and subsequent psychological turmoil, bold act of singlehandedly bringing up her five sons after the deaths of Pandu and Madri, shrewd strategies to protect her sons and reinstate them as eligible heirs to the throne of Hastinapur, tactical decision of arranging the polyandrous marriage of Draupadi with her five sons to unite them in an unbreakable bond, stern persuasion of her sons during their exile after Draupadi's public disrobing to fight against the injustices faced by them, debatable act of unveiling her true identity to Karna in an attempt to lure him to join the side of the Pandavas, and sacrificial act of leaving for the forest with Dhritarashthra and Gandhari after the war in order to look after them in their last days— make Kunti an exceptionally nuanced figure suitable for deconstructive, feminist retellings of the epic. Pradeep Bhattacharya relevantly exclaims that— "Kunti has that rare capacity to surprise us which distinguishes the kanya. When all that she had worked for has been achieved, she astonishes everyone by retiring to the forest with, of all persons, Dhritarashtra and Gandhari, to spend her last days serving those who were responsible for her sufferings. Kunti's reply to her bewildered sons' anguished questions is that she had inspired them to fight so that they did not suffer oppression, and that having glutted herself with joy during her husband's rule, she

has no wish to enjoy a kingdom won by her sons. How effortlessly she transcends the symbiotic bonds of maternity! Seated calmly, she accepts death as a forest fire engulfs her. It is profoundly significant that the epic declares her to be the incarnation of siddhi, fulfilment. She is indeed the consummation of womanhood and the archetype of the modern phenomenon which is of such concern all over the world today: the Single Mother." (Bhattacharya, 35-36)

Chapter IV: Sita

"With your husband you chose exile:
suffered privation, abduction,
then the rejection –
the chastity test on scorching flames,
the victim twice victimized.
Could those flames turn to flowers
without searing the soul?
they say you, devoted wife,
questioned him not
and let him have his way.
Your brother-in-law, so quick to anger
on his brother's behalf, left you,
mother-to-be,
alone in the dark forest,
exiled again.
His brother's command!
Some citizen's demand!
Was injustice to you
not worthy of his anger?" – 'Sita Speak' by Bina Agarwal[36]

These lines taken from the subversive poetic retelling by Bina Agarwal urges Sita to raise her voice against the iniquities faced by the mythical heroine throughout her life while associating her anguish and struggles with those of the common women who have to undergo numerous 'trials by fire', although they are never provided with the opportunity to prove their 'innocence' like the daughter of Earth. Sita's apparent silence even when she is banished by her husband during her pregnancy or, when her sons are taken away as heirs to the throne, or when she is asked to prove her chastity through another fire trial – enrages the poet while leading her towards the complicated questions regarding the idealized concepts of devotion, loyalty, justice and sacrifice. Her pleadings to Sita transform into a supplication to the ordinary Indian women

[36] Bina Agarwal, "Two Poems on Sita", in *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition*, ed. Paula Richman (Oxford University Press: Delhi, 2000), pp. 239-242.

to come forward and voice their protest against the oppressive inequalities, torments and atrocities faced by them. These poetic lines give the readers a glimpse of how Sita's tale continues to fascinate, startle and intrigue the Indian society, especially women who often connect their problems to the experiences and conundrums faced by the legendary Sita. Whereas, in the canonical discourses she is often perceived as an epitome of piety, self-denial and loyalty, the postmodern creative reiterations and folkloric variations tend to humanize her while creating a parallel between the injustices experienced by Sita and the contemporary issues of the voicelessness of the gendered 'other', inequalities based on gender, patriarchal subjugation, suppression of female desires etc. As the literal meaning of 'Sita' is closely associated with the Sanskrit term 'furrow' or, 'ploughed land', and the story of her origin from the furrowed land or, her ultimate act of returning to the womb of Mother earth symbolically point at Sita's inherent connections with Earth— most of the subversive retellings portray the heroine of the *Ramayana* as an embodiment of forbearance and strength rather than a symbol of 'feminine feebleness' and 'subservient devotion' as depicted in the hegemonic narratives. The patriarchal attempts of ignoring Sita's sufferings and battles in order to glorify the 'ideal' king, Ram and placing her in the exalted position of the silent, tolerant and compliant wife – are brought to the fore by the revisionist reiterations that center around the peripheral epic women characters like Sita, Ahalya, Urmila, Kunti, Gandhari, Satyavati etc. Namita Gokhale rightly states in her essay "Sita: A Personal Journey"— "Then why do I picture her weeping? When and why did she become a figure of weakness rather than strength? Sita, in our prevalent idiom, is weak, oppressed, a natural victim. Considering that Sri Rama's wife— Vaidehi, Sita, Ramaa, call her what you will— is the primary archetype for all Indian women, a role model pushed and perpetuated by a predominantly patriarchal society, it is no wonder that she is someone the modern emancipated consciousness prefers to banish into yet another exile.[37]" (Gokhale, XIII)

The pervading influence of the *Ramayana* on the Indian civilization is an undeniable phenomenon and among all characters of this epic tale, Sita emerges as one of the most influential mythical figures- not only in terms of the traditional/mainstream glorification of her 'ideal' feminine virtues, but also in terms of her pivotal role in shaping the concepts of female subjectivity, female desire, gender identity and gender roles in the context of contemporary

[37] Namita Gokhale, "Sita: A Personal Journey", *In Search of Sita: Revising Mythology*, ed. Malashree Lal and Namita Gokhale (Penguin Books India and Yatra Books, 2009)XIII-XVII.

Indian society. In her article, "Sita and Draupadi: Aggressive Behaviour and Female Role-models in the Sanskrit Epics", feminist Indologist Sally. J. Sutherland discerns that— "A recent survey taken of one thousand young Indian men and women in the North Indian state of Uttar Pradesh revealed that from a list of twenty-four goddesses, literary heroines, and famous women of history, an overwhelming percentage chose for their ideal female role model Sita, the heroine of Ramayana.' That a fictional character would still, after more than two thousand years, exert such a fascination on the lives of men and women in the Indian sub-continent is an extraordinary occurrence and one that deserves some attention." (Sutherland, 63) This observation which tries to estimate the extent of Sita's influence on the Indian population might have overlooked the fact that for Indians, Sita is not just a fictional, mythical or, historical figure rather she is seen as a human incarnation whose extraordinary trials and tribulations have inseparably intertwined with the ordinary lives of Indian men and women irrespective of their class, caste, community or, religion.

The patriarchal definition of the 'ideal Indian woman' is often associated with Sita, the tragic heroine of the *Ramayana* who has not only been prevalent in the collective consciousness of the Indian subcontinent but is also often traditionally glorified as the epitome of sacrifice, patience, benevolence, and loyalty. However, her determination, endurance, sturdiness and bold resistance against injustices that are visible in many episodes of the *Ramayana*, are often overlooked or, sidelined in the canonical versions of the epic. In her essay "Rejecting Sita: Indian Responses to the Ideal Man's Cruel Treatment of His Ideal Wife", Linda Hess quotes Supreme Court Justice Hidayatullah who emphatically focused on the traditional glorification of the *Ramayana* as a sacred text containing significant lessons of morality and righteousness while advocating the normative ideas that extol Rama and Sita as the ideal man and woman— "The *Ramayana* is a mirror of the highest ideals of Hindu culture and civilization. Herein is described the ideal hero Sri Ramachandra who is not only the exemplar for all living and dutiful sons, but who is the ideal husband and king. Sita is the noblest flower of Indian womanhood, devoted to her lord in thought, word and deed. There can be no better text-book of morals which can be safely placed in the hands of youths to inspire them to higher and nobler ideals of conduct and character". (Hess, 2)

Mukti Lakhi Mangharam also contends in her path-breaking essay "Rama, Must I Remind You of Your Divinity? Locating a Sexualized, Feminist and Queer Dharma in the Ramayana" that contemporary mainstream retellings of the *Ramayana* attempt to 'desexualize' the epic

narrative in order to endorse orthodox ideas about marriage, sexuality and gender relations, and in the process of doing so these traditional adaptations create a prejudiced and stereotypical discourse which silences the nonconformist voices interrogating the patriarchal notions of chastity, purity and loyalty. In the colonial period, Indian nationalist leaders and social reformers started to focus on women's issues as British colonialists were portraying Indian women as primarily weak, oppressed and incarcerated in the confines of rigid traditions and superstitions, in an attempt to underline the need for emancipation (through colonialism) of the 'backward' Indian society. In response to this colonial misrepresentation, the Indian thinkers and activists started to reimagine Indian women as a fusion of tradition and modernity, a new age 'Sita', western-educated yet spiritually connected to her indigenous roots and devoted to her domestic responsibilities. In Mangharam's words— "Indian women were therefore represented as the soul of the inner, spiritual, and Hindu world of the home [Chatterjee 233-53]. At the heart of this burden of representing an authentic national identity lay the figure of the perfect wife. Often identified as a Sita figure, she was to be educated in Western-style conjugality while simultaneously being a pativrata, a woman who embraced devotion to her husband as the ultimate dharma. A domesticated, heterosexual, conjugal, and, by extension, religious femininity, then, has long been at the heart of nation building in South Asia." (Mangharam, 81)

However in many postcolonial revisionist retellings, oral narratives and folk songs that subversively interrogate and reinterpret the epic tales, Sita has always been perceived as an intriguing combination of divinity and domesticity, self-assertion and abnegation, strength and vulnerability, devotion and dissent — she is both the mystical daughter of Mother Earth who dazzles like gold in the blazing fire and also the ordinary earthly woman who is first loved and then cruelly abandoned by her husband Lord Rama, traditionally venerated as 'the ideal man' or, 'Maryadapurushottama'. Shalini Shah aptly notes in her non-conformist essay, "On Gender, Wives and Ptivratas" that according to Sally J. Sutherland, Sita's character as depicted in Valmiki's epic poem strikingly contradicts the hegemonic discourses that frequently emphasize on her sacrificial meekness and subservience, by portraying the mythical heroine as an argumentative, assertive individual clearly proclaiming her demands —

"Nonetheless, Sutherland asserts that the perception of submissive acquiescence that is associated with Sita has little basis in the story of Rama and Sita as told in Valmlki's Rãmãyana. Her character there is not that of the all-perfect wife, which Indian tradition holds so close to its heart. Sita critiques Rama's decision to leave her in Ayodhya and depart for the forest all by

himself. While Sita compares her devotion to that of Sävitri, it does not prevent her from using a strong verbal tactic to make Räma change his mind. She threatens that she will commit suicide if left behind, for, on no account will she allow herself to fall under the influence of her enemies. Sutherland notes that what is remarkable about the passage is that it is not at all clear if SIta's devotion and her insistence on sharing Rama's exile is a purely self- sacrificing act, for she has an obvious and real concern for her own welfare if abandoned by her husband." (Shah, 2012, 79)

In numerous novels, plays, poems, songs, paintings, movies, television serials, religious congregations and even political discussions, Sita is repeatedly revisited and reimagined as the image of this legendary mythical character has always been an integral part of the socio-cultural definitions of womanhood in India. Thus, in her essay "Sita: Naming Purity and Protest", Malashri Lal exclaims that— "What remains to be suggested are some things pertaining to the vitality of Sita as a continuing influence in the Indian social polity. The range she indicates is from the minutiae of local practice to the symbols of a globalized India. In her are embedded the aspects of India's burgeoning feminism for which no single image will suffice. Hence Sita is multiple in her aspects and deep in her self-sufficiency. Through art and literature, she is reconfigured time and again." (Lal 61)

In most of the deconstructive, feminist reiterations of the epic tale Sita is viewed as an embodiment of 'subdued subjectivity', and her final act of rejecting her husband who repeatedly subjected her to humiliation by raising problematic questions regarding her loyalty and chastity- is often heralded as a defiant act of resistance against patriarchy. Madhu Kishwar argues in her radical essay "Yes to Sita, No to Ram" that— "The refusal of Sita to go through a second agnipariksha - which Ram demands in addition to the first one that she had offered in defiance – sticks in the popular imagination not as an act of self-annihilation but as a momentous but dignified rejection of Ram as a husband. It is noteworthy that Sita is considered the foremost of the mahasatis even though she rejected Ram's tyrannical demand of that final fire ordeal resolutely and refused to come back and live with him. Humbled, he is left grieving for her; even his own sons reject him. Ram may not have rejected her as a wife but only as a queen in deference to social opinion, but Sita rejects him as a husband.[38]" (Kishwar, 307)

[38] Madhu Kishwar, "Yes to Sita, No to Ram: The Continuing Hold of Sita on Popular Imagination in India", in Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition, ed. Paula Richman, (Oxford University Press, 2000), pp-285-308.

In Valmiki's *Ramayana* Sita who is often seen as the embodiment of perseverance and endurance does not choose the path of unswerving protest and reluctantly chooses to undergo the fire trial in order to appease her husband. However, towards the end of the epic tale she asserts strong, silent resistance against Ram's harsh commands that directed her to prove her chastity through a trial by fire for the second time, by rejecting Ram and his kingdom through her definitive act of uniting with Mother Earth. Sally. J. Sutherland thus notes in her essay "Sita and Draupadi: Aggressive Behaviour and Female Role-models in the Sanskrit Epics" — "After her abduction by the ten-headed demon Ravana, Sita, reunited with her lord Rama, is subjected to cruel rejection and must prove her fidelity to him by entering the fire. Even after her successful fire-trial, she faces abuse and abandonment at the hands of her husband Rama, who cares more for his subjects' opinions than for his wife. She maintains throughout most of her ordeal a submissive acquiescence to the whims of her often cruel husband. Finally, rather than rejoin him, she abandons her life and is swallowed up by the Earth, her mother, an act which virtually brings the epic to a close." (Sutherland, 1989, 63)

In this chapter I would like to look at some of the literary retellings, cinematic adaptations, and some folksongs that reimagine Sita in strikingly different ways as they attempt to subvert and problematize the dominant discourses that tend to define the legendary epic character as nothing but a sacrificial, devoted and pious wife. For example- C.N Srikantan Nair's *Kanchana Sita* (1958), a dramatic adaptation of the *Ramayana* which critically questions and evaluates Rama's 'Dharma' especially his act of banishing Sita through the voice of other mythical figures like Urmila, Kaushalya, Hanuman and Valmiki, Sarah Joseph's subversive short story "Ashoka" (2005) which focuses on Sita's miseries and anguish caused by her sense of fragmented selfhood and rootlessness during the fire trial, *Sita Sings the Blues* (2008) by Nina Paley- an animated film which links the trials and tribulations of the mythical character and the contemporary issues like divorce, infidelity, gender discrimination etc., Volga's path-breaking mythopoeic work, *The Liberation of Sita* (2016), a deconstructive feminist anthology of revisionist short-stories about legendary female characters from the *Ramayana* like Sita, Surpanakha, Ahalya and others. In addition to that this portion of the thesis will explore and examine some of the Bhojpuri, Maithili and Telegu folksongs that personalize Sita's tale and use the epic imageries to allude to the experiences of the rural/tribal women.

Nina Paley's postmodern cinematic adaptation of the mythical tale of Ram and Sita, *Sita Sings the Blues* (2008) radically challenges the dominant ideologies perpetuated by the Brahminical

and neo-colonial historiography, while offering an alternative history of the peripheral 'other'. This animated tragi-comedy creates an exquisite parallel between the melancholic theme of the songs sung by the American Jazz singer, Annette Hansaw, and the autobiographical narrative mode which unveils the internal psychological conflicts of Sita, the legendary heroine of the ancient Sanskrit epic, *Ramayana*. In Nina's cinematic venture, the use of Jazz music and the animated caricatures of the epic characters, the autobiographical story of her own breakup with her husband Dave, the tragic tale of Sita's misery and her ultimate discovery of selfhood – all these merge to create an artistic, postmodern, feminist retelling of the epic.

Paley's feminist film which is seen as 'a culturally reconceptualized version of Valmiki's Sanskrit epic, the Ramayana[39]' raises intriguing questions about the fixed notions regarding gender roles and sexual identities by retelling and reimagining Sita's story while associating it with the postmodern narrative that entails the semi-autobiographical tale of a couple residing in San Francisco. This story revolves around the unfulfilled desires of Nina, a semiautobiographical representation of the director herself, who after being separated from her husband Dave, is placed in a similarly perplexing and distressing jeopardy of memories as Valmiki's Sita.

This concept seems to be quite relevant in this multi-layered postmodern adaptation of the Ramayana, as Paley quite efficiently creates a startling parallel between the mythical past and the contemporary present while addressing the issues of displacement, denial and dispossession. Ram's insensible act of abandoning Sita is harshly criticized through this deconstructive feminist reinterpretation from a different cultural and temporal context, where Nina's husband Dave gradually distances himself from her, even though she continues to find herself incarcerated in the fetters of her own emotions and recollections. This intimate connection between mythical Sita's unspoken desires and contemporary western woman, Nina's heartbreak - is explicitly hinted at the very beginning of this poignant film where the animated figure of Laxmi sings "She is a woman like me". Sita's overwhelming sense of dispossession and displacement is revisited and re-enacted in Nina's modern-day tale of heart-break and subsequent self-sufficiency.

Paley's narrative employs three conversing voices of the contemporary society who narrate the essential details of the great epic from memory and simultaneously these voices interrogate the

[39] Ipshita Chanda, "An Intermedial Reading of Paley's Sita Sings the Blues", CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 13, no. 3 (2011): 2, http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1798.

patriarchal, political, religious and historical power structures through the sarcastic descriptions of the mythological episodes. For example, Ravana's conventional portrayal as a demon in spite of the mythic depiction of his character as an immensely wise king and an intellectual musician, Sita's acts of carrying her gold jewelleries in the forest and throwing them while being abducted by Ravana so that her husband can find her, her denial to be rescued by Hanuman when he visits her in Lanka- all these episodes from the epic narrative are re-examined and subversively questioned by these voices in Paley's cinematic adaptation.

These fragmented commentaries on the legendary episodes of the epic that continue to be retold in various forms and versions, are conflated with the pictorial images of the individual, intimate recollections of Sita as well as that of Nina. On one hand Sita's grief, evoked by the painful memories of the past, is dramatically connected with the melancholy and despair of other female creatures of the forest like the peahen, the frog, or the crane as they are also refused and abandoned by their male partners, and on the other hand Nina, entrapped within the memories of Dave's love finds her sole companion in the pet cat residing with her in her apartment. Whereas Sita, the daughter of Earth, relates her anguish with the sufferings of the wild birds and animals in the forest and finds relief in the serenity of nature, similarly Nina, a modern Indo-American woman grappling with the pangs of separation finds solace in the company of her pet cat.

The intermedial structure of this film adds another dimension to this complex structure constituted by myth, memory and desire, as the early 20th Century heart-rending songs sung by Annette Hanshaw quite brilliantly portray and reflect on the unuttered desires of Sita's mind, although the mythical figure of Sita exists in the ahistorical tale of the ancient past. Imminent postcolonial feminist critic, Jasbir Jain claims in her work *Writing Women Across Cultures*, that the individual often deconstructs the past in an attempt to retrieve the lost bearings and identities. Similarly, in her deconstructive animated film, Paley indulges in the task of questioning the conventional ideologies adherent to the cultural past while trying to represent the existentialist quest for identity undertaken by Sita and Nina.

Volga's feminist anthology of pathbreaking short-stories *The Liberation of Sita* undertakes the task of questioning and subverting the brahminical/patriarchal perceptions regarding virtue and sin, purity and impurity, truth and untruth, morality and immorality. This anthology of fictional reiterations based on the epic episodes from the *Ramayana*, reimagines some of the most remarkable epic women characters in a dissident manner and narrates their untold tales of struggles and sufferings while revolving around their journey of self-realization. In different

stories of this book, mythical characters like Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka, Urmila who are often silenced or, invisiblized in the mainstream epic narratives, are provided with an independent voice of their own and at the same time their perspectives about life, society, family and the concept of 'Dharma' are depicted in an intriguing manner.

In the first story "The Reunion", Sita, during her exile in the forest, meets Surpanakha and discovers a bond of sisterhood as Surpanakha, living in idyllic seclusion, narrates her painful tale of humiliation, disillusionment and desire for revenge. In many parts of the story, Sita and Surpanakha become one, mirroring each other's struggles, despair and resistance against oppression. When Sita's sons inform her about the woman with a 'hideously deformed' face, living in an enthralling garden in the middle of the forest, Sita doesn't fail to realize that it is no other than Surpankha, the 'Rakshasi' who was brutally mutilated by Lakshman at Ram's behest, for approaching the Aryan princes and seek Ram's affection. The exiled queen of Ayodhya empathetically recollects how the free-spirited sister of Ravana was violently taught a lesson for the 'audacious' and 'vulgar' act of openly expressing her desires for a man, while contemplating over the possible connections between Surpanakha's burning curse and their (Ram and Sita's) eventual tragic separation — "A woman's heart-rending cry! How much must she have cursed us for that act! That curse has still not left us it seems. No man will ever love her. The man who loved me abandoned me. Have the two stories become one and the same, finally?"

In a startling manner Volga's recreated tale places Surpanakha's mutilation and Sita's abandonment side by side while merging Surpanakha's rage and anguish with Sita's grief and heartbreak. Through Sita's voice the feminist reiteration questions the orthodox patriarchal attempts of controlling female sexuality and punishing the gendered 'other' for not following the conventional norms of chastity and morality. Renowned *Ramayana* scholar Kathleen M. Erndl thus notes in her essay "Mutilation of Surpanakha" that— "Mutilation as a punishment for women, is a standard feature of the Surpanakha story. In the majority of Ramayana tellings, it is Surpanakha's nose and ears that are cut off. In some versions, it is her nose alone, whereas others add her breasts, hands, feet or, even hair. As we have seen, in South India, especially Tamilnadu, the breasts are seen as a symbol of female power; thus, cutting them off is a

humiliating punishment which deprives a woman of her power. The nose is a symbol of honor; in all versions of the story, it's removal signifies the loss of honor.[40]" (Earndl, 81-82)

Indian patriarchal society which frequently associates the honour of the family/community with that of a woman's body or, sexuality, tries to get back at another individual or, community by dishonouring or, violently abusing its women. Lakshmana's act of deforming Surpanakha's face by cutting her nose off, is thus often seen by many critics and scholars as not just an act of violence against the sexual 'other', rather it is interpreted as an act of establishing Aryan superiority while teaching the Rakshasas/non-Aryans a lesson for transcending the boundaries of caste, race and ethnicity. Similarly, in Volga's radical retelling, Sita questions the unfair exploitation and oppression of women in the context of political/racial/communal conflicts of the male dominated world, as she subversively exclaims — "Do women exist only to be used by men to settle their scores? Rama and Lakshmana would not have done this to Surpanakha if they did not know that she was Ravana's Sister. Rama's objective was to provoke Ravana; his mission, to find a cause to start a quarrel with Ravana, was accomplished through Surpanakha." Here Sita transcends the boundaries of the stereotypical image which often depicts her as a demure, devoted and subservient figure, as she defiantly interrogates the stereotypical perceptions regarding the dichotomous structures of good and evil, pure and impure, virtue and sin- that are often underlined and exalted in most of the canonical interpretations of the epic. In the hegemonic discourses Surpanakha is often shown as the dangerous non-Aryan woman (a Rakshasi) who transcends the conventional gender boundaries and threatens to destabilize hierarchical system of caste and race through the uninhibited assertion of her sexual desires.

Joane Nagel's contention in her insightful essay, "Ethnicity and Sexuality" reflects on these rigid boundaries of race and ethnicity that are often used to protect and maintain the 'sanctity' of the ethnic identity– "The borderlands that lie at the intersections of ethnic boundaries are "ethnosexual frontiers" that are surveilled and supervised, patrolled and policed, regulated and restricted, but that are constantly penetrated by individuals forging sexual links with ethnic "others." (Nagel, 113) Volga's rewriting indicates that 'Rakshashi' Surpanakha is brutally punished not only for challenging these 'ethnosexual boundaries' through her romantic

[40] Kathleen M. Earndl, "The Mutilation of Surpanakha", in *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition* in South Asia, ed. Paula Richman (Oxford University Press, New Delhi: 1991) 67-88.

proposal to the Aryan hero, but also because of her identity as the sister of the invincible Asura king, Ravana who defended the southern parts of the Indian subcontinent against Aryan invasion. In her article "Clearing Sacred Ground: Women-Centered Interpretations of the Indian Epics" Rashmi Luthra quotes Uma Chakravarty who rightly points out— "That the punishment is regarded as justified is an index of how successfully the ideological premises of patriarchal violence have been incorporated into everyday life by the stereotypes of good and bad in the *Ramayana*, of which the Surpanakha episode is a structural component." (Luthra, 146)

Sita's sense of duty towards her husband and his kingdom Ayodhya even after being abandoned during her pregnancy, intriguingly focuses on the relevant discussions regarding Indian women's unflinching devotion to their familial duties even at the cost of their individual happiness. Sita and Surpanakha's conversations clearly reveal that, Sita's wifely duties to beget and bring up male heirs in order to carry forward her husband's lineage and her motherly responsibilities towards her sons, overshadow her desires of attaining contentment and leading a life free of social and political obligations. As Sita who emerges like an ordinary contemporary woman conditioned by the patriarchal social standards, connects her sense of fulfilment with her duties as a queen, Surpanakha's voice questions her overbearing sense of attachment with Ramachandra and his kingdom while compelling her to think about her own identity and purpose —

"'I find fulfillment in bringing up my sons.'

'Is that the goal of your life?'

'Yes. I am Rama's wife. As the queen, I couldn't discharge my duties.'

'I must at least give Ramarajya its heirs.'

'You never lived in that kingdom., yet see how your life is entangled in it, Sita!'" (Volga, 14)

Through the voice of Sita who transcendentally sees beyond Surpanakha's disfigured face, Volga raises critical questions regarding the patriarchal standards of physical beauty and the stereotypical association of women's destiny with male companionship or, conjugal love. In addition to that this subversive narrative connects the agony and mortification experienced by Sita during the 'trial by fire', with Surpanakha's overwhelming grief for losing her 'identity' and 'beauty' and her battle against the raging desire of avenging her mutilation and humiliation — "'How beautiful you are, Surpanakha! How does it matter whether any man appreciates your beauty or, not,' Sita's voice chocked. Surpanakha's trial was no less than the trial by fire that I had to go through – Sita thought and it brought tears to her eyes." (Volga, 12) Surpanakha's tale of despair, rage, revengeful desires, resilience and subsequent detachment

from the past self, inspires Sita to choose the path of ultimate liberation from the tormenting sense of rootlessness and dispossession.

In another part of the story, while introducing Sita to her companion, Sudhira, Surpanakha explains how there are some men who choose not to prioritize external beauty rather they find love in the truth of a beautiful soul and a meaningful companionship. Surpanakha's unconventional partnership with Sudhira not only introduces the concept of equality in conjugal relationship, but it also radically refutes the societal definition of success (especially for women) that largely depends on finding love and companionship. Thus, Surpanakha tells Sita— "I've realized that the meaning of success for a woman does not lie in her relationship with a man. Only after that realization, did I find man's companionship." (Volga, 13)

This radical reinterpretation of the epic tale creates a striking parallel between Surpanakha's act of finding solace and freedom in the comforting embrace of nature and Sita's ultimate union with Mother Earth after she refuses to testify her chastity by undertaking another fire-trial. Whereas Volga's reimagined Sita outrightly rejects her identity as the exiled wife of Ramachandra, and introduces herself as Janaki (daughter of Janaka, the king of Mithila) and the daughter of Earth, Surpanakha also reclaims her independent identity as an individual woman content in her serene garden full of majestic plants and trees. A profound ecofeminist undertone can be found in Surpanakha's defiant act of snubbing the peripheries of human civilization and rediscovering the sense of selfhood in the healing embrace of nature — "To come out of that spitefulness, to love beauty once again, to understand the essence of form and formlessness- I had to wage a huge battle against myself. My only collaborator in that battle was this infinite nature." (Volga, 12)

The ever-changing idea of beauty especially in terms of the elements of nature enlightens and soothes Surpanakha while transforming her perceptions regarding beauty and deformity, affection and revenge, justice and liberty. Volga intertwines the ecofeminist idea of celebrating the intrinsic connections existing between the gendered 'other' and nature, with Surpanakha and Sita's journey towards self-realization and liberation. The radical short-story thus vividly depicts how the oppressed and subjugated women often link their struggles for voice and authority with that of nature which is often dominated and exploited by men in the name of advancements of human civilization. Ancient Hindu philosophical texts also draw a parallel between women's impalpable vigour and indomitable spirit with Mother Nature's incomprehensible mysteriousness and uncontainable force. Thus Susan S. Wadley in her article

“Women and the Hindu Tradition” proclaims — “Woman is also prakrti, Nature, the active female counterpart of the Cosmic Person, purusa, the inactive or male aspect. But whereas prakrti represents the undifferentiated matter of Nature, purusa provides the Spirit, which is a structured code. Thus purusa (Cosmic Person) is code (differentiated Spirit), as opposed to prakrti, which is Nature (undif- ferentiated Matter). The union of Spirit and Matter, code and noncode, inactive and active, leads to the creation of the world with all of its differentiated life forms; no life exists without both Matter and Spirit, prakrti and purusa.” (Wadley, 114)
While talking about Ecofeminism, Sarbani Guha thus observes in her article, “Major Trends of Feminism in India” that— “It believes that the devastation of earth and her beings by the corporate warriors, and the threat of nuclear annihilation by the military warriors, as feminist concerns. It is the masculinist mentality depending upon the multiple systems of dominance and state power which denies women's right to their own bodies and own sexuality."(Mies & Shiva; 1 993 : Introduction)” (p-803)

Volga subverts the epic tale as her retelling portrays the mythical daughter of Earth as a remarkable woman whose repudiation of the norms of the Aryan/Vedic society leads her towards the path of empowerment and self-determination. Instead of avenging their humiliation and oppression, the mutilated demoness/rakshasi (Surpanakha) and the abandoned Aryan queen (Sita) assert an unconventional resistance against the patriarchal shackles of morality and chastity by forming a sublime bond of sisterhood through their mutual love for Mother Earth. Thus, as disheartened Sita foresees her future where she will be compelled to give up her beloved sons, and contemplates over ending her sufferings by returning to the womb of Earth (her mother) after fulfilling her duty towards her husband’s kingdom, Surpanakha urges Sita to come back and spend the rest of her days with her at her ethereal garden which is nothing but a manifestation of nature itself— “Isn’t your mother omnipresent, Sita? I think your mother is manifest more beautifully here than anywhere else.” (Volga, 15)

In the story ‘Music of the Earth’, the glorified image of the ‘ideal’ woman is critically questioned, as Sita who is repeatedly asked to prove her chastity, meets Ahalya who was also accused of being ‘unchaste’ as Indra, king of the Devas disguised as Ahalya’s husband, (Sage Gautam) deceived and seduced her. The intriguing conversation between these two women underlines the marginalization, objectification and oppression of women in the patriarchal Vedic society and raises many questions regarding female desire, sexuality, agency and resistance. In Volga’s retelling, Ahalya who is reimagined as a remarkably strong woman never

depending on the approval or validation of the society, becomes Sita's guiding force throughout all the difficult episodes of her life. This story places Sita's innocence and simplicity against the contrasting complexity of the enigmatic character of Ahalya traditionally described as unchaste and impure for her illicit sexual encounter with 'Devaraj' Indra.

At the beginning of the story, Sita, the adolescent princess of Mithila who marries Rama and eventually leaves Ayodhya in order to accompany her husband in exile, seems to be fascinated with the mysterious mythical figure of Ahalya about whom she learns from her husband, Rama who is traditionally portrayed as 'Ahalya's saviour'. Rama's ambiguous description of Ahalya as an exceptionally beautiful woman with remarkable control over her mind and body, yet eternally defamed for her deviant act, greatly intensifies Sita's curiosity about the legendary character. Sita intriguingly contemplates over the intricate connections that intertwine her identity as the daughter of Earth, with the essence of Ahalya while confusingly interrogating the patriarchal definition of the term 'character'— "Ahalya. A beautiful name that means 'land untouched by a plough'. I am the daughter of Earth tilled with a plough. The one who does not even know the stroke of a plough is Ahalya. What does Rama mean by lack of character? Can I ask him?" (Volga, 19)

Later on, as Sita asks Rama for an explanation regarding the phrase 'lack of character', he authoritatively prohibits her to enquire about Ahalya's tale which challenges the stereotypical notions of morality, chastity and decency— "Sita, you're still very young. You don't understand. You shouldn't even hear such things or, talk about them." (Volga, 20) Rama's reprimanding tone reminds the readers of the patriarchal attempt of controlling women by monitoring both their minds and bodies while focusing on the brahminical suppression of the desire to learn more about the 'forbidden' issues lying beyond the prescribed peripheries of conventional knowledge systems. The mysterious image of the accursed Ahalya who dared to challenge the strict norms of marital fidelity and sexual chastity, is presented both as a lesson and a warning to young women like Sita. The disgraced wife of Sage Gautama who is often depicted as an epitome of impurity and immorality even though there are debatable questions regarding her voluntary involvement in the illicit sexual encounter with Indra, is relegated to the position of the voiceless gendered 'other' in the mainstream epic narratives. Patriarchy strongly implies that the role of the 'self' in society is evidently played by 'Man' and it attempts to deflect 'Woman' from her existential destiny while immuring her in 'otherness'. This idea can be linked with notable feminist thinker, Kate Millett's observation— "Under patriarchy the

female did not herself develop the symbols by which she is described. As both the primitive and the civilized worlds are male worlds, the ideas which shaped culture in regard to the female were also of male design. The image of women as we know it is an image created by men and fashioned to suit their needs. These needs spring from a fear of the "otherness" of woman." (Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 34)

Another part of this subversive story records a startling encounter between Sita and Ahalya where Sita disapprovingly reflects upon the injustices faced by Ahalya, but the wise ascetic exclaims in an impassive manner that most of the women often face unjust accusations and punishments in the world which is mainly governed by the biased regulations and ideologies constructed by men —

> "'Aren't many women in this world wrongly accused, Sita?'
> 'But, wasn't it outrageous in your case?
> 'After all, you did not know that he was not your husband…'
> 'Do you know whether I knew this or, not
> Does anyone know?'" (Volga, 25)

The cryptic response of Ahalya which indirectly hints at the possibility of her willful indulgence in an extramarital sexual relationship with Indra, opens up newer dimensions in the discussions regarding conjugal fidelity, sexual chastity, corporeal desire and individual choice. Ahalya's defiant voice explicitly points at the objectification of women's bodies through the glorified concept of 'pativrata', as well as the degrading subjugation of the sexual 'other' as a silenced being 'owned' by the male members of her family. According to the brahminical/patriarchal viewpoint, the body of the gendered 'other' is typically perceived as a commodity (exclusively belonging to the husband) which can be 'contaminated' if a woman copulates or, gets intimate with another man outside her marriage — "Did I see through his disguise? That is the question that bothers many people in this world. But to my husband the question was irrelevant. It was the same to him either way. His property, even if temporarily, had fallen into the hands of another. It was polluted. Pollution, cleanliness, purity, impurity, honour, dishonour— Brahmin men have invested these words with such power that there is no scope in them for truth and untruth. No distinction." (Volga, 26)

Ahalya's voice points at the double standards of the ancient Hindu society which normalized polygamous marriages frequently practiced by Brahmin and Kshatriya men, while trying to restrict female sexuality within the rigid margins of the institutions of marriage and family.

Shalini Shah's assertion relevantly addresses this idea — "Moreover, the patriarchal ideology has constructed/represented women simultaneously as weak (abala) and concupiscent (pramada), a site of unruly passions and appetites which are disruptive and therefore in need of control and disciplining. Masculinist thought, instead of allowing women an autonomous and active form of corporeal specificity, judges them in terms of a 'natural inequality', as if there were a measure for the value of bodies independent of either 'sex' or the ideology about that 'sex'." (Shah, 2019, 32)

Like many other young, naïve women who consider the familial control exerted upon them as an expression of love and care, the 'optimistic' and 'gullible' Sita fails to comprehend these profound concepts postulated by Ahalya and innocently exclaims that her husband Rama can never act in such an insensible manner and will always 'enquire into truth and untruth.[41]' Ahalya's response however tries to explain that there is a sense of disbelief lurking behind that suspicious enquiry about the apparent unfaithfulness and that doubtful cynicism about the woman's 'character' not only disrespects her integrity but also obfuscates her sense of self — "What does conducting an enquiry imply, Sita? Distrust, isn't it?
Wouldn't it be better, instead, to believe in either your innocence or, guilt?" (Volga, 27)

These words uttered by the cursed hermit ironically haunt Sita's thoughts when she is compelled to undertake 'the trial by fire' in order to prove her chastity, and these perplexing feelings lead her to question her previous belief-systems that hindered her to wholeheartedly accept Ahalya's astute perspectives —
"Did Ahalya know it would turn out like this? Rama has asked for my chastity test. Isn't death better than this? Isn't leaving me to my fate better? Why humiliate me like this? Why wage such a war if this is how I was going to be treated?" (Volga, 32)

The sense of confusion, shock and utter humiliation faced by Sita in the context of the fire trial focuses on the frequent evaluations, experiments and struggles faced by most women in the Hindu patriarchal society which on one hand perceives women as 'vulnerable' and 'voiceless' requiring the protection of men, and paradoxically on the other hand, she is defined as a tempting seductress with disruptive sexual desires that can overturn the hierarchical power structures. Shalini Shah's essay "Engendering the Material Body" pertinently addresses the

[41] Volga, "Music of Earth", in *Liberation of Sita* (Harper Perennial: Noida, India, 2016), pp 17-41.

Vedic/brahminical perceptions regarding female chastity and loyalty while explaining the nuanced interconnections existing between the much-glorified concept of 'Pativrata dharma' (complete devotion towards the husband) and absolute purity of the female body —

"Since, in the sastriya discourse, women have always been viewed janus like, both as pramada and abala, they had to be controlled and defended against; but what of their minds? How was that to be disciplined so that their physical bodies could remain protected and chaste? The solution lay in fashioning the very ingenious pativrata ideology, meant to save women from themselves. This ideology elicited conformity at the psychological plane, thus eschewing the need to apply physical coercion over women, which would have been more difficult to establish and maintain. An important component of this ideology was the chastity of the wife at all cost and at all times. Where this body was suspected to be a tainted one, there was a test – fire ordeal (agnipariksha) – for it." (Shah, 2019, 37)

Volga's feminist retelling portrays Sita as a complex character full of contradictions and emotional inconstancies as her thoughts are shown to be drastically changing according to the demands of the situations. It can be noted that, Ahalya's profound advices transform Sita's naïve trustfulness into mature determination which makes her realize that Rama's cruel treatment of her is directly linked with his inability to trust her and his shocking command for the fire test 0symbolically represents his desire to demonstrate his wife's chastity to the brahminical world which places a woman's 'purity of character' above any relationship or, responsibility. Then, after hearing Lakshmana's pleadings she becomes convinced of Rama's helplessness, and instead of following Ahalya's advice and refusing to undergo the fire trial which degrades her self-worth, she readies herself to 'rescue' her husband from the possibility of social disgrace for accepting the wife who had been abducted by the king of the Rakshasas—

"He is helpless. A weakling. But against whom?
Not against Ravana but against society.
Against its moral principles, its code of justice." (Volga, 32-33)

Here Volga's subversive retelling challenges and overturns the hegemonic discourses that tend to describe Rama as the valiant hero who rescues Sita from Lanka, by emphasizing upon Sita's bold act of choosing to undergo the fire trial in order to protect her husband from public humiliation. Sita's act of saving her husband's honour by jumping into the raging fire and her triumphant return from the fire trial, represent Sita as an exceptionally brave character whose unmatched resolve, strength and magnanimity clearly overshadow Rama's victorious

achievements. David Shulman thus notes in his insightful essay “Fire and Flood: The Testing of Sita in Kampan’s *Iramavataram*”— “In Valmiki, the real test is Rama’s, while Sita’s ordeal is proclaimed a show for the benefit of a skeptical world. In Kampan, her trial seems altogether real: her love and commitment to Rama, despite his verbal hostility, and her readiness to die for her truth, are put to the test— and Sita wins, like the devotee who so often triumphs over god.” (Shulman, 110)

Towards the end of the story, when the pregnant Sita, abandoned in the forest by Lakshmana on Rama’s instructions, mournfully ponders over her heartbreaks and disillusionments, Ahalya comes to visit her at Sage Valmiki’s ashram and inspires her to discover her individual self. She urges Sita to stop restricting herself within the borders of her identities as a wife and a mother, and undertake the journey towards self-sufficiency — “You are not just the wife of Rama. There is something more in you, something that is your own. No one counsels women to find out what that something more is. If men’s pride is in wealth, or, valour, or education, or caste-sect, for women it lies in fidelity, motherhood. No one advises women to transcend that pride. Most often women don’t realize that they are part of the wider world. They limit themselves to an individual, to a household, to a family’s honour.” (Volga, 39)

Hindu patriarchal society which often defines women as enigmatic beings possessing indomitable power of seduction, tries to control the unruly, capricious nature of the unknowable gendered ‘other’ through the stereotypical domestic roles of the wife and mother. Susan S. Wadley’s observation in her article “Women and the Hindu Tradition” relevantly underlines this postulation — “The basic rules for women's behavior, as expressed in the Laws of Manu, ca. A.D. 200, stress the need to control women because of their evil character. "Because of their passion for men, their mutable temper, and their natural heartlessness, they become disloyal towards their husbands, however carefully they are guarded in this [world]. Knowing their disposition, which the Lord of creatures instilled in them at the creation [every] man should most strenuously exert himself to guard them." Submission to male control is the dominant duty of women: "Nothing must be done independently, even in her own house by a young girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one. In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, and when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent.... Though destitute of virtue, ... or good qualities, a husband must be constantly worshiped as a god by a faithful wife...."” (Wadley, 117-118)

Volga's reinterpretation of Sita's tale directly questions and criticizes these chauvinistic ideas while attempting to assert a rebellious resistance against different forms of patriarchal subjugation and oppression by providing the reimagined mythical characters with a subjective voice with which they talk about their deepest emotions and experiences. In this radical short-story, the unconventional, iconoclastic character of Ahalya plays a crucial role in Sita's journey towards her ultimate liberation from the repressive ties of conjugal duties. At the end of the story, Volga modifies the epic tale to some extents by portraying Sita's outright rejection of Rama's offer to return to the royal palace from where she was once mercilessly exiled, ultimately compels Rama 'to taste defeat for the first time'.

Although in the Uttarakanda of Valmiki's Ramayana Sita was asked to undergo another trial by fire to prove her chastity after her long exile in the forest, in Volga's feminist retelling, Rama pleadingly requests Sita to come back to Ayodhya, but the self-aware and self-sufficient Sita refuses to be controlled by her attachments to her wifely and motherly duties and recalcitrantly chooses to fight for her sense of dignity and self-worth — "I am the daughter of Earth, Rama. I have realized who I am. The whole universe belongs to me. I don't lack anything. I am the daughter of Earth." (Volga 41)

Similarly, in Malayalam feminist writer Sarah Joseph's recalcitrant short-story, "Asoka", Sita attains a subjective voice of her own with which she entails her own story of love, heartbreak, endurance and despair. This story re-appropriates the episode from the *Ramayana* which illustrates the fire trial undertaken by Sita to prove her chastity in front of both the victor and the vanquished. This mythopoeic work visualizes how Sita's hopes and desires were shattered in the hands of her husband, Ram who is often seen as an embodiment of 'ideal' manhood. Sita's hopes and longings to be reunited with Ram, the shocking suspicion about her character, the humiliating fire ordeal to testify her purity – all these events are depicted quite brilliantly by Joseph while her postmodern narrative delves into the depth of the psychological upheavals of Sita's mind. By giving a detailed description of Sita's pain, rage, memories and desires Joseph takes the act of revisionist mythmaking to another extent and destabilizes the traditional adaptations and interpretations of the epic in an intriguing manner.

K. Satchidanandan rightly observes, "Joseph is a committed feminist, both as a writer and an activist and has developed a subtle and elaborate critique of patriarchy-its real as well as verbal practices, world views and its strategies of social hegemony— through her articles and her works of fiction. She has looked at languages, myth and day to day relations in her attempt to

create a counter literary practice of retrieval, revision and resistance[42]". The stories of the marginalized beings like Soorpanakha, Manthara, Sita or, the children of Sambooka who do not seem to have a voice of their own in the conventional versions of the epic, are retold by Sarah Joseph in her short stories where these subliminal characters occupy the centralized positions.

In the intriguingly complex short-story "Asoka", Joseph uses contrasting images of the burning battlegrounds of Lanka and the serene, soothing natural elements of the forest to symbolically represent the psychological conflicts faced by Sita after being rejected by Ram in a heartless manner. The peaceful memories of her childhood and the reminiscences of the mesmerizing moments spent at the Panchavati forest are beautifully described to denote the intimate relationship between women and nature which is often underlined by many eco-feminists who claim that the oppression and exploitation of women is directly linked with the desecration of Nature. As Vibhishanan informs Sita of Rama's instruction which commands her to 'clean' herself by dipping in the sea and appear in front of him, Sita intuitively senses the derogatory tone in that command and hopelessly embraces the trunk of the 'Simsapa' tree which silently witnessed her prolonged misery and resilient struggles during her captivity in Lanka —
"The tree extended a solitary hand, a branch from a world beyond spoken words and consoled the soil. When the tender green leaves, caressed her head, Sita felt helpless and weary. Embracing the mother trunk, slowly turning into ashes from the fiery arrow embedded inextricably in its chest, she fell into its lap of roots, dazed." (Joseph, "Asoka", 110)

Here, the intimate bond existing between the tree (dying as a result of the destructions of the war) and the bewildered Sita who struggles to understand the significance of her husband's indignation towards her (after rescuing her through the calamitous war), focuses on the salient similarity between the painful experiences of Nature and that of the daughter of Earth.
As the story progresses Joseph evokes many such startling imageries that create a striking parallel between Sita and the women of the vanquished Lanka, in an attempt to emphasize upon the marginalization and oppression of the silenced subaltern. At the end of the war, both the wife of the victor (Sita) and the wife of the vanquished (Mandodari), find themselves in the same displaced, dispossessed position- one 'purifying' herself while awaiting the harsh

[42] K Satchidanandan, "Introduction", in *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala*, by C.N. Sreekantan Nair and Sarah Joseph, trans. Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), p- 6.

judgement about her 'character' and another one gravely mourning the catastrophic defeat of her kingdom and loss of her family — "Sita, along with Mandodari, dipped herself in the sea of Lanka. For a moment, Lanka observed complete silence. There was a break in the sounds of victory that rose. Suddenly the vultures shrieked, their voices sounding like a heartbreaking lament." (Volga, "Asoka", 111)

Through the rootlessness and hopelessness of the gendered 'other' Joseph comments on the hypocrisies and injustices of the patriarchal society which prioritizes men's ambitions, desires, anger and humiliation while compelling women to sacrifice their will and sense of self-worth for the pre-conceived notions of righteousness, honour, purity and morality. By pointing at the meaninglessness of the horrific devastations, this iconoclastic retelling unveils the harsh truth about the great war which was fought either for salvaging the 'abducted' honour of the Aryans, or, for avenging the dishonour of the non-Aryans (or, even for lust).

After enduring terrible hardships while waiting for her dearly beloved husband to come and rescue her from her confinement, Sita experiences immense sense of despair when her husband, Rama (here shown as 'the victor') cruelly refuses to accept her as his wife and he publicly degrades her by explicitly talking about his doubts about the integrity of Sita's character—

"As for you— you stand before me as a woman whose chastity is suspect. As harmful as a lamp to a diseased eye are you to me. Henceforth you are no body to me. So, bid me farewell and take refuge in any of the ten directions before you." (Joseph, 114) Ram's rejection of Sita can be seen as mirroring his own insecurities and fears of being publicly disgraced for accepting the wife who was abducted and kept in captivity by the king of Rakshasas. Madhu Kishwar's essay, "Yes to Sita, No to Ram: The Continuing Hold of Sita on Popular Imagination in India" thus radically states — "Sita's offer of agnipariksha and her coming out of it unscathed does not signify an act of slavish surrender to the whims of an unreasonable husband; instead, it is an act of defiance that challenges her husband's aspersions, a means of showing him to be so flawed in his judgement that the gods have to come to show up Ram for his foolishness. She emerges as a woman that even *Agni* (the fire god) – who has the power to destroy everything he touches— dare not touch or harm. Thus in popular perception Sita's *agnipariksha* does not belong in the same category as the mandatory virginity tests that Diana had to go through in order to prove herself a suitable bride for Prince Charles, but rather is seen as an act of supreme defiance on her part which shows her husband to be unjust and foolish in doubting a woman like her." (Kishwar, 306)

However, the fire ordeal is often justified by many mainstream adaptations as well as the hegemonic discourses as Rama's individualized way of differentiating between the two sides of Sita who (like all women) is an amalgamation of both Gauri (the gentle, modest, subservient earth) and Kali (raging, wild and irrepressible nature). Devdutt Pattanaik contends in his essay, "Sita as Gauri, or Kali" that in *Adbhut Ramayana* Sita is associated with Gauri, 'the goddess of civilization' who is mild, demure and controllable- symbolizing the domesticated earth/field', as opposed to 'Kali- the fearsome, naked, bloodthirsty goddess symbolizing the untamable nature/forest'. — "When Ravana is killed and Sita rescued, Rama demands proof that Gauri, the field, which is bound to a single man, did not even momentarily become Kali, the forest, which is bound to no man, and hence available to all men. The only way this can be done is through the trial by fire. Sita goes through the ordeal and the fire does not touch her, proving that neither in thought nor in action did she ever think of any other man." (Pattanaik, "Sita as Gauri, or Kali", 19)

Joseph's revisionist tale creates a sharp contrast between the characters of Ram and Sita, as she portrays Ram as an arrogant, furious, suspicious and domineering figure, referred to as 'the victor' who conquers and torments the land of Lanka (symbolically connected with Sita), whereas Sita is picturized as an emotionally sensitive yet resilient, inviolable and brave woman who refuses to accept Rama's unjust accusations by asking Lakshman to prepare a funeral pyre for her so that she can immolate herself in a supreme act of defiance. By emphasizing upon her bold decision of renouncing Ram through the fire ordeal, Joseph projects Sita as an exceptionally fiery and undaunted woman (as opposed to the conventional viewpoint) whose boundless love for her husband instantly turns into detached revulsion and impassive indifference as a result of his disrespectful treatment of her—

"Sita realized that the earth that used to be wet and ready at his touch like the ploughed land at the onset of rains, was now dry and barren. Never again would his hands be able to rouse any feeling in the earth. Never again would a single kiss stir a shiver in the veins of the earth, nor from those shivers rouse the heady, wild fragrance of the forest. Now forever the only thing to remember were his harsh words, rock hard slivers of stones flung at her, in broad daylight, in the presence of a crowd." (Joseph, "Asoka", 115)

The subconscious mind of the disillusioned Sita then craves to relive those memories that provide her with an alternative path of spiritual liberation, thus she goes back to the blissful,

joyous image of peace and elemental harmony which is represented through the picturesque recollections of her childhood spent in her father's kingdom, Mithila—

"By this time, she was in Mithila. Running around, jingling golden anklets on her small, fair, rounded feet. Mithila was filled with their sound. All the farms yielded plentiful harvests. There was abundant rain and bright sunshine over the ploughed land. The season of flowers was marked by extravagance. The fruits ripened without insect bites. Rivers filled and overflowed. There were peaceful valleys where birds sang without a break and the lambs pastured lazily. Filled with a sense of wonder and happiness, Janaka preserved the breast milk of the soil to feed Sita and a mattress of fresh green grass for her to sleep on." (Joseph, "Asoka," 114)

Here Sita remembers the affection and love showered on her in her childhood by her foster father, Janaka who gratefully and proudly cherished his daughter (a gift from Mother Earth) whose arrival brought prosperity in his land. In contrast, her recollections of Ayodhya represent it as a mysterious place haunted by the intriguing conspiracies and curses— "In Ayodhya everyone always kept something hidden. The palace corridors reeked with the dark aura of this secret known to everyone, but not uttered by anyone in public. The dark shadows of endless curses wandered over Ayodhya. Sleep was disturbed by the knowledge that at all times, someone was aiming a hidden arrow at a wrong object." (Joseph, "Asoka", 115)

As the Aryan Victor (Ram) rejects Sita by calling her 'as harmful as a lamp to a diseased eye' her uncontrollable desire to be at Mithila where she had never been dishonoured, leads her to indulge into the nostalgic remembrance of her father's love and affection. Simultaneously the utter sense of displacement reminds her of Ayodhya's hidden conspiracies and curses and she links these haunting memories of the past with her terrible present mired in the mud of dreadful suspicion of Ayodhya's 'ideal' king. It can be suggested that Sita's intermittent thoughts about the injustices faced by the vanquished people of Lanka and her vivid recollections of Mithila, Panchavati and Ayodhya, center around her traumatic experience of being disgracefully rejected by her beloved husband, while enabling her to assert a dissenting resistance against the exalted concepts of morality and chastity that were excessively valued by Ram, 'the ideal man' (Maryada purushottam).

Another deconstructive reinterpretation of the epic tale of *Ramayana* can be found in C.N. Sreekantan Nair's multidimensional dramatic creation, *Kanchana Sita* (The golden Sita), where several minor characters are provided with a voice of their own. For example,

Lakshmanan's wife and Sita's sister, Urmila, subjectively rebels against the torments inflicted upon Sita by the 'divine' King, Raman, Kausalya (Raman's mother) persistently requests her son to bring Sita back from exile, whereas Raman's greatest devotee Hanuman ragingly states that Sita and the kingdom stand for one another while raising startling questions about the remote, subliminal position of the queen whose metal statue presides over the *Ashwamedham yajna*. Nair's subversive reading of the mythic story depicts how on one hand, Sita's golden statue symbolizes the dehumanized position of Indian women in the traditional social structure, and on the other hand it hints at the ironic sublimation of the ideal image of the virtuous, devoted, pious woman.

In Nair's ground-breaking play, the invisiblized character from the *Ramayana*, Urmila, dissentingly questions Raman's cruel act of banishing her pregnant sister, Sita, by poignantly alluding to the picturesque images of the past when Raman and Sita were together in the Panchavati forest— "There, the *kadambu* will bloom the moment it sets eyes on Raman; the krauncha birds will coo; the peacocks spread their tails and dance; the does will leap in pleasure.. and they will ask, 'where is our beloved friend, Sita?' what will he say in reply? When the waves of the Godavari swell in happiness and enquire 'Where is Sita?' even his emperor's heart will melt. He will remember my sister." (Nair, 22)

In an imaginary context, Urmila's melancholic voice fuses with that of the flora and fauna of the forest while enquiring about Sita's absence and reminding Raman of his abandoned wife. These mournful interrogations on one hand, underline the unjust oppressions experienced by Sita as Rama exiled her during her pregnancy without even confronting her, and on the other hand, they reaffirm and celebrate Sita's inexplicably deep connections with the elements of nature. In her conversations with Kausalya, Urmila not only voices her irrepressible desire to be united with her dispossessed sister, but she also hopes that the visit to the forest where Sita was abducted by Ravana, will remind the emperor of Ayodhya the depth and intensity of his passion for Sita in the past.

However, the veteran queen-mother, Kaushalya explains to the grief-stricken sister of Sita that her idealistic son who banished his wife for the sake of his kingdom can never prioritize his emotions over his ideologies or, responsibilities. She creates a parallel between her late husband, king Dasarathan who banished his son in order to keep his promise that he made to Kaikayi, and her son, Rama who exiled his wife to pacify his subjects— "Do not hope Dasarathan's son would change his mind. That single-minded concentration is the glory of Aryavamsam…" She further adds in a disappointing tone— "A human being's words were

deemed greater than the human being himself... that misfortune— the sin— spreads its dark shadow even now. From Ayodhya to the forest... the father threw the son away... now the husband flings his wife away in the same manner." (Nair, 23)

Nair's reimagined Urmila and Kaushalya emerge as remarkably brave and intrepid women especially in terms of their criticisms of the unfair decisions made by men that compel women to undergo dreadful miseries. Kaushalya's recalcitrant words take the discussions regarding patriarchal exaltation of the conventional Aryan/brahminical ideas of commitment, sacrifice, moral duty and sanctity to another extent, while defiantly challenging the phallocentric dichotomies of virtue and sin, right and wrong, good and evil. The queen mother's concerns about the uncertain future of 'Raghuvamsam' (the Raghu dynasty) due to the childlessness of the king, fuses with Urmila's gravely disappointing voice which censures Raman's act of banishing Sita in an attempt to continue the tradition of sacrificing personal contentment for 'the greater good' of the kingdom.

Furthermore, this mythopoeic drama also undertakes the task of focusing on Urmila's individual struggles and miseries, as it underscores her own painful experiences of separation from Lakshmanan who has always prioritized his loyalty towards his brother over conjugal love or, responsibilities. Here, Urmila's lamentations for not being able to enjoy the intimacy or, affection of her husband whose dedication towards the king also deprives the wife of Lakshmanan of the joy of becoming a mother, allegorically hint at the abandoned Sita's unuttered pain and rage— "Children for this woman, permanently separated from her husband? Earlier when my Aryaputran, his hair matted and dressed in bark-skin, followed his elder brother to the forest, the pain of my separation began. It has not ended till now." (Nair, 26)

Urmila, who is provided with a subjective voice of her own in this revisionist play, represents all those women whose personal sentiments, passions and desires are neglected or, discarded as insignificant in the male dominated world which pays more attention to the developments of human civilization while trying to control and exploit the 'untamable', 'unknowable' nature/women through that process.

She also defiantly questions Raman about his unwarranted suspicions against Sita's character just after winning the great war in Lanka and reminds him about his mortifying implications that Sita should become the mistress of his brothers or, choose someone else like Sugrivan or, Vibhishanan. Sita's sister attains the voice that Sita lacked during her 'agnipariksha' (the fire trial) and asks Raman to explain the reason behind fighting the war against Ravanan and liberating the 'unchaste' woman whom he wanted to abandon. In response to her rebellious

questions, Raman accepts that the war was fought for defending the glory of Aryan civilization and 'Sita was only an excuse'[43]. Linda Hess also raises problematic questions regarding Ram's cruel behaviour towards Sita during the fire ordeal, as depicted in Valmiki's *Ramayana* in her article "Rejecting Sita: Indian Responses to the Ideal Man's Cruel Treatment of His Ideal Wife"— "Showing affection for his clamoring soldiers but none for his wife, he orders, against custom and expectation, that they all be allowed to look at her face. She approaches him "confused and shrinking within herself" still open and vulnerable, casting aside anxiety and gazing at him with undisguised love. Rama now gives a long blustering speech, celebrating his own valor and prowess, proclaiming that he has won her back, and defeated his enemy, expunged the stain and avenged the insult caused by the abduction. He dwells on the achievements of his leading generals repeatedly refers to winning her back in terms of wiping out an insult and preserving his own honor. In case she misses any part of the message, he specifies: "Let it be known that this arduous campaign, so gloriously completed through the support of my friends, was not undertaken wholly for your sake." (Hess, 5)

In Nair's dramatic retelling, Urmila emerges as a prominent feminist figure blatantly talking about the rights of the silenced gendered 'other' when she disapprovingly reprimands Raman after hearing his explanation that the purpose of the war was to avenge the dishonour caused by Sita's abduction — "Your legally wedded wife was just an excuse!" (Nair, 32)

In addition to that, the dissident Urmila, largely disgruntled with Raman's act of evading the intriguing issue regarding Sita's chastity and his absolute dependence on the perspectives of the ordinary people, derisively enquires — "Is King Ramachandran the servant of ignorant people?" (Nair 32) Through the voice of the recreated mythical figure, C.N Sreekantan Nair critically interrogates the patriarchal practice of judging women's character depending on the orthodox views about female body and its carefully guarded 'purity'. As the play progresses Bharatan, Lava and Kusha, Valmiki and Hanuman also echo Urmila's thoughts as they distinctly voice out their perspectives regarding Raman's cruel act of banishing of Sita.

Another part of this nonconformist play starkly scrutinizes the brahminical/patriarchal notions of gender roles and dehumanization of women as it illustrates Valmiki's encounter with Lakshmanan where he outrightly disapproves of the idea of installing a gold statue of Sita as the wife of the 'yajmanan' (the patron/sacrificer) for the 'Aswamedham yajna'. Here, Valmiki,

[43] C.N. Sreekantan Nair, *Kanchana Sita*, in *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala*, trans. Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 32.

the creator of the great epic poem, *Ramayana*, emerges as the mouthpiece of the playwright who disparages the phallocentric act of silencing the sexual 'other' in an attempt to perpetuate the dominant structures of oppression and exploitation —

"Young Prince, is the better half of King Ramachandran just metal… mere lifeless material? Does this mean that even though a wife is invaluable, she should not have any consciousness? A being without any consciousness, or thoughts, an unquestioning, lifeless lump! After all, Ramachandran's heart is also metal, isn't it?" (Nair, 65)

Subversive undertones of feminist ideas are quite evidently found in this dialogue between Valmiki and Lakshmanan, as Valmiki clearly condemns Raman's ruthless act of banishing Sita by referring to his merciless heart as an unfeeling piece of metal devoid of any sympathy. Through Valmiki's voice this revisionist retelling emphasizes upon the importance of re-discovering one's individual identity independent from the ties of familial relationships, while eulogizing Sita's commendable journey towards self-awareness and self-sufficiency— "Her life flows at a calm pace savouring the bliss of self-knowledge. What has not abated is the sorrow of humiliation. Sita shines from her own glow like the circle of the Sun, whereas Raman without Sita is a mere circle of darkness." (Nair, 66)

It can be noted that these lines implicitly point at a different form of agency and autonomy attained by Sita through her pregnancy, motherhood and independent life as a hermit. While rearing up her children and transforming them into intelligent, empathetic individuals as a single mother, the exiled Sita also gains a sense of autonomy and agency by embracing her true self. As discerned by many feminists, pregnancy symbolizes an integrity of the self and other while allowing the woman to see herself in newer ways— "In pregnancy, the boundary between self and other breaks down, and one experiences one's "insides as the space of another" (Young 1990). In contrast with Young, Gail Weiss suggests that pregnancy allows us to re-envision the integrity of the body: instead of positioning the pregnant body as a breakdown of the traditional unified self, pregnancy reveals that bodily integrity is always already fluid and expansive (Weiss 1999). As Talia Welsh points out, the experiences of those who are pregnant reveal that selfhood is neither unified nor genderless (Welsh 2013).[44]"

Sita attains subjectivity through her role as a single mother by keeping her sons unaware about the identity of their illustrious father, while bringing them up to be dauntlessly assertive so that they learn to question the hegemonic discourses. In Madhu Kishwar's words— "She remains

[44] "Feminist Perspectives on the Self", in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (June 28, 1999), https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-self/.

Janaki— the daughter of Vaid or Janaka even after marriage. And she makes sure that her sons, though deprived of their father's care, grow up loved and nurtured by many others of her adopted family in the peaceful Ashram of the sage Valmiki. Her two sons are thus willing to go to war even against their own father on her behalf." (Kishwar, "Trial by Fire", 110)

Like, Urmila, Kaushalya, Bharatan and Valmiki, Nair reinvokes another legendary mythical figure, Hanuman, the greatest devotee of Ram and Sita in order to strengthen his critique of Raman in a much more drastic manner. Hanuman who believes that Raman and Sita constitute one unified being as they are the embodiments of 'Purusha' and 'Shakti, dishearteningly exclaims in disbelief on seeing a metal statue placed in Sita's position at the 'Aswamedham yajna'— "How did my mistress turn into metal? How did my master grow into granite? Metal and stone… stone and metal… In this Kosala kingdom aren't there any human beings, oh, King! ... or, only metal statues ... or granite ones? Isn't there any place in Ayodhya for Sitaram?" (Nair,81) These words vividly mirror Valmiki's derisive comments against Rama while drawing attention to the superficiality and hypocrisy of the Brahminical rituals that are closely intertwined with the the conventional systems of degenerating women into voiceless objectified beings. In response to Hanuman's disillusioned exclamation, as Rama elaboratively explains how being fettered by his responsibilities towards the kingdom and the people, the King of Ayodhya cannot bring Sita back even if he desperately wishes to do so and asks Hanuman to choose between Sita and Ayodhya, Hanuman appositely asserts in a censorious tone — "Blessed one! Are Sita and the kingdom opposing forces? A kingdom without Sita! Like a man without a soul…" (Nair 82)

Towards the culmination of this iconoclastic dramatic reiteration of the epic tale, Valmiki vehemently reprimands Raman for his blind dependency on the narrow, immutable viewpoint about Sita's character and urges him to accept her without a question in order to protect his kingdom and himself from the wrathful curse of a deserted woman. Here, the image of Sita transforms into a potently destructive figure who is allegorically linked to the raging goddess who abolishes everything that obstructs the path of justice or, 'dharma'— "If you do not accept your abandoned wife… Saketam will burn to ashes, destroyed by a woman's curses. Immerse yourself in that Ganga of purity and rid yourself of sin." (Nair, 90)

Sita, however, asserts her resistance against patriarchal structures of subjugation and tyranny in an intrepid yet impassive manner by choosing to reject Raman and unite with her mother (Earth) as the King of Ayodhya again humiliates the mother of his children by asking her to

take an oath in order to prove her chastity, even after recurrent fierce protestations proclaimed by the queen mother (Kaushalya), the learned sister of Sita (Urmila) and the revered sage, Valmiki. Through this ultimate act of self-annihilation Sita not only attains liberation from the exhausting cycle of disgrace, despair and desertion, but in a remarkable manner, she also wins over her distrustful, dogmatic and puritanical husband by leaving him in a disadvantageous, disempowered position. Hence Madhu Kishwar says in one of her interviews—

"Her final rejection of Rama leaves him forever diminished. She is considered superior to him. That is why her name comes before his, as in 'Jai Siya Rama'. Valmiki writes a whole epic to vindicate her. Men and women alike see her as being worthy of worship, rather than an object of pity." (Kishwar, Trial by Fire, 110)

There are many oral narratives, folk songs and ritualistic songs that reimagine Sita in various ways and recurrently retell the story of her distress, heartbreak, resilience and liberation while relating these epic episodes with the experiences of the ordinary women in the contemporary world. These folk songs and folk-tales beautifully merge Sita's struggles, joys and troubles with the mundane aspects of the rural domestic life while re-establishing the idea that Sita continues to exist in every other girl in the Indian society. Hence, it can be easily noted that in these songs or proverbs Sita often becomes an anxious little girl about to be wedded forcefully, a rural housewife who reluctantly goes to fetch water carrying a heavy pitcher or a teenage girl whose parents lament about the difficulty of finding a suitable husband for their daughter who playfully lifts up the divine bow of Lord Shiva. The marginalized rural/tribal women whose voice is mostly silenced or ignored in the dominant narratives, find a way to express their profound thoughts and emotions through these songs and tales that talk about various commonplace yet significant issues such as child marriage, domestic conflicts, moral and social duties, familial and conjugal problems, pregnancy and childbirth etc. Sita's pervading presence in the folk narratives and songs underline how Indian women who themselves are oppressively constrained by 'the Lakshman Rekha' drawn by the patriarchal society always find Sita's tale to be extremely relatable as they are also compelled to prove their 'worth' through the 'trials by fire' like the unfortunate heroine of the great epic.

In her article, "Sita's trial by Fire and Bhojpuri Women's Songs", Smita Tewari Jassal points out that the motif of 'trial by fire' becomes a recurring symbol in the 'Jatsaar' or, 'the peasant women's ballads of the millstone' where "like Sita who had to furnish proof of her chastity, the heroines of the Jatsaar are also put to various tests of fire." (Jassal 173) In this context she draws our attention to the ballad of 'Satmal' where the main female character is suspected of

cheating her husband as she wears a gold necklace gifted by her brothers and only after she jumps into a vat of burning oil to prove her loyalty and chastity that her husband realizes about the gravity of his blunder and 'reproaches himself for harboring the destructive suspicions against his chaste wife'—

"In the center the vat of truth is ready
In the flames leapt Satmal
In the burning oil she leapt
And then the flames died down." (Jassal, 174)

Here Satmal and Sita become one through the violent act of self-immolation which enables the subjugated gendered 'other' to assert resistance against patriarchal oppression (in this case, the terrible agony and humiliation caused by the husband's unfair doubts). By choosing the most painful way of killing herself, Sita and Satmal both attempt to proclaim their radical protestations against the disgraceful and anguishing accusations heaped on them. The defiant decision of giving up the turmoiled life full of humiliations, point at the oppressive structures of the marital and familial relationships that rob the gendered 'other' off her own voice and agency.

"What kind of a woman am I?
I was given away to Rama when I was five years old.
What sort of mother's love have I got?...
Dear plum tree, dear Bulbul tree, Sita is telling you the story of her life.
Please listen.. I was found at the tip of a plough
How can I have parents?" (Dev Sen, 131)

These lines from Navaneeta Dev Sen's insightful essay "The Essential Orphan: The Girl Child" in the book *In Search of Sita: Revisiting Mythology*, observes how in a Marathi folksong, Sita mournfully yearns for her unseen parents who abandoned her after her birth while voicing out the thoughts of the perpetually dispossessed 'other' (the girl-child in this context). The sense of rootlessness and displacement found in this song can be related to the sense of fragmented selfhood of those numerous girls and women who were abandoned after birth or, married off at an early age to lessen the 'burdens' of the family, or, thrown out of their homes by their husbands or children. Sita's image has thus become a universal symbol or, language which is frequently used and adapted to express, emphasize, or, interrogate certain cultural, religious or, political perceptions or, to subvert normative ideas about gender roles.

Dev Sen also points out how the marriage of the girl child is a matter of extreme importance in the Indian society and most of the families prioritize the task of training the girl child to become

an ‘ideal’ bride, over her education or wellbeing. In a Maithili folksong, we can see that the queen mother of Princess Sita who is reimagined as a humble farmer’s daughter, desperately urges king Janaka who wears a dhoti and turban like a common peasant, to look for a husband for Sita as she comes of age —

“Princess Sita is scrubbing the floor
Her saree slips off her shoulders
and her mother the queen
Tells the father
Up, up, king Janaka!
What are you doing here?
Go, get a groom for Sita.
She is ready for a husband.” (Dev Sen, 137)

Here the mother hints at her adolescent daughter’s transformation into an adult woman which is frequently linked to the necessity of marriage to a suitable groom because an unmarried woman is considered to be the symbol of disgrace for her family in an orthodox rural society. According to the traditional ideas and conventions of the Hindu/Brahmanical society, any woman who is not bound by the rules and customs of a conjugal life under the protection of a husband, threatens to disrupt the patriarchal order through her uncontrolled independence and subjectivity. Thus, Rama who is often depicted as the ‘ideal’ man in the Indian society tells his mother Kausalya in Valmiki’s *Ramayana*—

“Even the best of women, constantly engaged in religious vows and worship, will be walking the path of sin if she is not obedient to her husband. A woman obtains the highest heaven merely by serving her husband even if she completely abstains from worship of the gods and does not pay obeisance to them. With her only interest the welfare of her husband, a woman should constantly serve him— this has been the dharma of women from the ancient times, this is what the Vedas and the Smritis say.” (Ayo 24.25-27)

The issue of gender inequality and the stereotypical ideas about gender roles are confronted and underlined in many folksongs that revisit the epic tales. For example, in another Maithili song, Sita surprisingly lifts up the ‘Haradhanu’ (shiva’s bow) in one hand while cleaning the house and on seeing this, Sita’s father laments as an ordinary farmer worried about the difficulty in finding a suitable match for his daughter who is unconventionally strong and self-sufficient— “Ab Sita rahali kumari, yo!” (Alas! Sita will remain a spinster now!)

(Dev Sen, 137)

This song focuses on the stereotypical concept that the groom is supposed to be superior in every aspect as the traditions and customs of the Indian society expect the bride to be completely devoted to her husband and worship him as 'Pati parameshwar' (the divine lord). However, the association of Indian women with the figure of 'the great Mother Goddess' especially found in the matrilineal traditions, radically contradicts with the conventional portrayal of the Hindu wife as a demure, devoted and subservient figure in the traditional Indian society. This contrasting positioning of the sexual 'other' is relevantly addressed in Rashna Imhasly-Gandhy's insightful essay "Matrilineal and Patrilineal" where she observes that Brahmanical patriarchy 'relegated the female to the position of a devotee by using mythological weaponry and religious license to transform culture and induce a societal and sexual shift away from the strong position that women had originally occupied.' (Gandhy, 71)

Usha Nilsson in her essay "Grinding Millet But Singing of Sita: Power and Domination in Awadhi and Bhojpuri Women's Songs" exclaims that the folksongs sung by the Awadhi and Bhojpuri women attempt to subvert the mainstream phallocentric interpretations of the *Ramayana*, especially the perspectives propagated by Tulsidas's *Ramcharit Manas* which is considered to be a cult 'sacred' text and that these songs also assert a particular kind of resistance against the dominant discourses that eulogize Rama as 'Maryada-purushottama' ('the ideal man'). She also focuses on the difference that exists between the songs sung by the lower caste women and the songs of the upper caste women who themselves defend the hierarchical system of oppression by contemptuously criticizing the lower caste (Kahar and Barbar) women for 'unsuitably' singing about the 'exalted' divine character like Sita. In the songs sung by these women the divine characters from the epic especially Rama and Sita are seen as ordinary people with their human emotions and flaws— by singing about Sita's marriage, abduction, Rama's insensitivity towards Sita, Sita's exile, her lamentations and childbirth etc., these women subversively question the hegemonic notions that often associate gross physicality and bestial mindlessness with women as opposed to the 'sublime' masculine virtues like ascetic detachment and spiritual wisdom. For their unknowable mysterious bodies and overwhelming powers of creating and nurturing life, women are often associated with Mother Nature whereas men are associated with culture which tries to control and exploit the unlimited resources of Nature.

Through these folkloric tales and songs, the long silenced ordinary women find a rebelling voice to interrogate and challenge the double standards of the society which often overlooks sexual promiscuity practiced by married men. In one of the folksongs sung by the rural Bhojpuri women, Sita reimagined as 'Sital Rani' asks Lakshman to bring Rama back to the

palace as he has gone to the forest alone leaving Sita and Lakshman behind. After Rama's return, while serving her husband silently as a 'devoted wife', Sita vehemently expresses her anger and frustrations caused by Rama's absence and his extramarital relationship with 'the hunchback maid', by refusing to be sexually intimate with him —

[Rama] Rama grabs her arm, "Let's go to the top terrace".

[Sita] "No, Rama! I won't come to your bed,
Up in the palace tower.
You left me behind.
You can go back to your forest Exile."

[Rama] "A hundred thousand times I swear by father Dasrath,
And my mother Kausalya
I'll give up the hunchback maid,
But I won't give you up, Sital Rani." (Nilsson, 144)

Here Sita emerges as a paradoxical combination of a subservient wife and a defiantly belligerent woman who criticizes and challenges the age-old traditions of the patriarchal society that not only perceive men's polygamous/extra-marital relationships as unremarkable and unobjectionable, but they also often associate the prowess of keeping numerous wives and mistresses with power and elevated social status. She attains a particular kind of subjectivity through her silent protestations and through the undaunting expression of her unwillingness to be compliant and accept her husband's extramarital sexual encounters with the maid-servant, while firmly reminding him to respect her position and desires.

Nilsson's essay examines another Awadhi folk-song sung mostly by the lower caste Barbar women almost sacrilegiously transgresses the higher caste moral codes set by *Ramcharit Manas* or other conformist, ritualistic songs sung by the higher caste women. This folk-song recalcitrantly draws attention to the sexual tensions existing in the relationship between the older sister-in-law (Sita) and the younger brother-in-law (Lakshman) in the context of the rural/tribal social customs that allow the brother-in-law to marry the widowed or abandoned sister-in-law. The words of this song shockingly challenge the conventional/brahminical dichotomies of purity/impurity, acceptable/unacceptable, good/evil by portraying how Lakshman crosses the boundaries of propriety by offering Sita to let go of her despair and indulge into a sexual encounter with him. as she miserably laments when Lakshman fails to find Rama —

[Sita] "For whom should I make the wedding bed?

And cover it with Flower petals?
Whom should I serve, so my grief is gone?"

[Lakshman] "Make my bed, scatter flower petals over it.
Serve me, Sister-in-law!
I'll make you forget your grief."

[Sita] " I have tested the sweet mango.
I can't eat tamarind.
I have called you Lachhman, the brother-in-law.
How can I call you my man?" (Nilsson, 145)

Here, Sita's outright rejection of Lakshman's sexual advances, on one hand reflects on her characteristic integrity and impregnability, and on the other hand it reaffirms her role as 'the ideal woman' devotedly following the customary principles of the 'Pativrata dharma'. In this context, it is important to focus on the intricate interconnections existing between the ideas regarding sexual chastity and the patriarchal concept of the ideal wife, Shah specifically focuses on these multifaceted notions in her essay "On Gender, Wives and Pativratas"—

"Interlinked with the notion of pativratã is the issue of chastity. Sãndill says, 'I have never stood in front of my doorway or talked to anyone.' Draupadi tells Satyabhãmã not to wait in solitude even on her grown-up sons Pradyumna and Samba. What does one make of such statements? Actually, women's sexual subordination to male authority was ensured in many ways, and one such way was by artificially creating a division of women into conformist and deviant women, i.e. those who were not attached to one man but were free for all men. The views of Draupadï and Sãndill can be explicated in this light. This notion of respectable women and emphasis on chastity were taken to a ridiculous extent when pativratã was described as one who, apart from her husband, does not even glance at the sun, moon and trees since they have masculine names. In fact, one will need to juxtapose the patirip of the Vedic texts and the suspected wife of the *varunapraghãsa* ceremony with this chaste pativratã model, through which brahmanical patriarchy needed to secure the purity of patrilineage." (Shah, 2012, 81)

The image of Sita as an auspicious deity is considered to be very significant in the traditional wedding songs that include 'Sita Mangal' which is often sung especially by the bride's mother praying for peace and prosperity of the bride's conjugal kin, and the five Devi songs that pray for protection of the bride who is seen as innocent and vulnerable as Sita. It can be noted quite interestingly that, in the Devi songs sung in the weddings, the bride is often portrayed as Sita as she needs Devi Maa's blessings to protect herself from the evil/demonic forces just as in one

of these songs, Sita sends a letter to the almighty goddess (Devi) requesting her to assume her destructive form of 'Shakti' and annihilate Ravana, the demon King of Lanka.

In addition to that there are some wedding songs that prominently underline the struggles and sufferings of women in the patriarchal Indian society while criticizing the problematic social issues like objectification of women, casteist discrimination, dowry and other exploitative customs— [Queen]: "I see you come, Rama.
I see your brother Lachchman
But I don't see your wife Sita anywhere.
Where is she?
Is she lacking beauty?
Or is she of low birth?
Has she done something wrong?
Why don't I see her with you, Rama?"

[Rama] "Mother! Sita doesn't lack beauty
Nor is she of low birth.
I've left her behind and have come alone.
Her father didn't give enough dowry in her marriage."

[Queen] "Gold lasts for ten days, Son!
Silver even less
Silk rips.
O Son, a good wife
Fills your life with happiness." (Nilsson, 148)

Here the Queen mother of Rama enquires about Sita's physical beauty and class/caste identity like most other matriarchal figures in the Indian society who themselves were once oppressed by the discriminating and objectifying systems of oppression, continue to uphold the patriarchal system of subjugation and objectification. In response to that question, Rama says that the actual reason for rejecting Sita is neither her lack of beauty nor her caste identity rather the insufficient dowry offered by her father. This statement which reimagines Sita as an ordinary girl belonging to a lower middle-class family and Rama as a typical Indian bridegroom representing narrowmindedness and materialistic greed, as opposed to the mainstream *Ramayana* tradition which portrays Rama as 'the ideal man'. Towards the end of the song the Queen mother is seen advising her son, Rama about the importance of having 'a good wife'

and how gold, silver and other materialistic possessions can never be compared with a devoted, pious and self-sacrificing woman who serves the husband constantly and takes care of the household.

In most of the songs sung by the rural women, Sita ceases to be the princess of Mithila or the Queen of Ayodhya, rather she becomes one of them, an ordinary wife of a farmer, a midwife or a fisherwoman performing seemingly 'menial' domestic duties like fetching water, grinding grains or collecting cow dung to make fuel patties. These folk songs not only portray the epic characters in a completely different manner but also like Jain and Buddhist retellings of the *Ramayana,* they sometimes question and alter the dominant discourses. For example, in one of these Awadhi songs, as Sita goes to fetch water with her sister-in-law, her sister-in-law tricks her to draw a picture of Ravana which sows the seed of suspicion and jealousy in Rama's mind and he decides to banish her to the forest. On one hand this song subversively criticizes Rama's cruelty and insensitivity towards the pregnant Sita, and on the other hand it emphasizes on the rootlessness of the dispossessed women who are often exploited and betrayed by their conjugal kin just as Sita gets betrayed by her sister-in-law, husband and brother-in-law—

Sister-in-law: "Brother! That Ravana, enemy of yours.
Sister-in-law is drawing his image."

Rama: "Oh! Oh! Brother Lachhman!
You stayed with me in all my times of trouble.
I am going to turn Sita out.
Only then I'd drink a drop of water."

Lakshman: "My sister-in-law gives food to hungry.
Clothes to the naked.
She is heavily pregnant.
Why do you send her away?"

Rama: "O brother Lachhman!
My companion in times of trouble.
I will exile Sita.
She sits and draws image of Ravana."

Here although we can find a sympathetic tone is Lakshman's voice, Lakshman fails to assert effective resistance against his brother's unjust commands and eventually he carries out his brother's instructions by deceivingly telling Sita that she is summoned by her father in Mithila and then executes the task of abandoning her into the forest. Although Sita gets betrayed by her husband and brother-in-law, she finds a strong bond of sisterhood to rely upon, as other marginalized women living in the forest take up the task of consoling and supporting the heartbroken Sita by providing her with a shelter to start her life anew—

Sita: "Her eyes streaming with tears.
Who'd make a fire for me?
Who'd make the bed for me in the birthing room?
Who'd watch over me the night I give birth?"
The Ascetic women emerge from the forest.
They console Sital Rani." (Nilsson, 150)

Furthermore, this song sung by working class Bhojpuri women, also goes on subverting the canonical epic narrative by placing Rama in the disempowered position of a repentant, pining husband who begs his brother to bring back his abandoned wife after hearing about the birth of his children. However, Sita rejects his plea by defiantly stating—

[Sita] "Lachhman! Go back."
I'm not coming with you.
I'm going to live for my sons.
May they live for a long time." (Nilsson, 152)

It's not only the folksongs in Bhojpuri/Awadhi language that focus on the muted tales of the gendered 'other' by retelling the tale of Sita's struggles, misery and liberation, rather there are various kinds of oral narratives in other regional languages that use the *Ramayana* tradition as a significant language to raise startling questions about the subaltern identity, gender and caste based marginalization and the intrinsic connections existing between the folkloric discourses and the socio-cultural aspects. Velcheru Narayana Rao, in his essay, "A Ramayana of Their Own: Women's Oral Tradition in Telegu", says— "The *Ramayana* in India is not just a story with a variety of retellings; it is a language with which a lot of statements may be made. Women in Andhra Pradesh have long used this language to say what they wish to say, as women." (Narayana Rao, 114)

This observation is quite relevant in the context of many other folksongs, proverbs, myths and legends that are often used by many Indian women irrespective of their class and caste identity, in order to give voice to their fears, sorrows and joys in the patriarchal society which always robs them off their subjectivity and suppresses their sexuality. This societal and familial control over female sexuality becomes extremely prominent in the songs sung by the Telegu Brahmin upper caste women, where the newly married bride (associated with the image of Sita) is given a strict lesson of propriety by the Mother-in-law, Kausalya, and other older women who teach her how to behave with her husband and in-laws and how to become an epitome of patience, purity, gentleness and obedience—

> "Be more patient than even the earth goddess
> Never transgress the words of the father in-law and mother-in-law.
> Do not ever look at other men.
> Do not ever speak openly.
> Do not reveal the words your husband says in the interior palace,
> Even to the best of your friends.
> If your husband is angry, never talk back to him.
> A husband is god to all women: never disobey your husband."
>
> (Narayana Rao 114)

This traditional concept of training the young women to be able to attain the idealistic 'perfection' exemplified by the divine mythical figures reminds us of "the Lakshmi principle" which has been a prevalent phenomenon in the Indian society. Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his essay "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for Indian Pasts" elaborates on how 'the true Indian women' are seen as 'the Lakshmis of the community'. Here Chakrabarty contends that— "Laxmi, regarded as the Hindu God Vishnu's Wife by about A.D 400, has for long been held up in popular Hinduism, and in the everyday pantheism of Hindu families, as the model of the Hindu wife, united in complete harmony with her husband (and his family) through willful submission, loyalty, devotion and chastity. When women did not follow her ideals, it was said, the (extended) family and the family line were destroyed by the spirit of Alakshmi (not-Lakshmi), the dark and malevolent reverse of the Lakshmi principle." (Chakravarty 237)

These startling ideas relevantly address the problem of elevating the status of the subaltern women by comparing them with the valourized mythological divinities and confining them within the stereotypical gender roles. The contradiction existing between the auspicious figure

of Lakshmi and the dark image of Alakshmi is constantly challenged and interrogated by both the folkloric narratives and the postcolonial, postmodern revisionist retellings of the Indian epics. However, unlike the Brahminical narratives that portray Sita as a subservient wife completely dependent on her husband, in many folksongs sung by the lower caste Telegu women, Sita is visualized as a strong-willed, self-sufficient woman potently able to fight against the outside world. Hence in the *Ramayana* tales reimagined and retold by the dalit women, instead of affectionately pleading to Rama to catch the golden deer, Sita herself chooses to fulfill her own desires and bravely tells her husband—

> "You give me your bows and arrows
> I will go right now and get the animal." (Narayana Rao, 132)

On one hand this song talks about how the seemingly 'ignorant' tribal/dalit women often unknowingly challenge the stereotypical gender roles upheld by the patriarchal society, and on the hand, it reflects on the difference existing between the lower caste women and the upper caste women in the rural Indian society. Most of the working-class dalit women (often tormented or abandoned by their husbands) independently take care of their entire families by working in the fields or by serving as domestic help at the upper caste household, whereas upper caste women are mostly compelled to stay inside the boundaries of the private world and dedicate their lives to play the role of the devoted mother, wife, sister or, daughter. Here in this song through Sita's voice, the dalit woman who often has to take care of her family single-handedly challenges the conventional barriers existing between the private and the outside world, as she asks her husband to give the bow and arrow to her to catch the golden deer herself. Unlike the main-stream upper caste narratives, the Tribal and Dalit retellings of the *Ramayana* depict Sita as a much more powerful, fiery and independent figure.

Conclusion

After going through the deconstructive reinterpretations of some of the legendary epic women characters like Draupadi, Gandhari, Kunti and Sita, it can be discerned that the contemporary epic retellings effectively underline and analyse the trials and tribulations of the ordinary Indian women, while connecting them to the similar experiences faced by the iconic mythical figures. This study encompassing both creative fictional retellings and theoretical/scholarly commentaries, attempts to delve deeper into the words, thoughts and actions of the revisited, reinvented epic characters that exert an undeniable influence on the cultural consciousness of the Indian population. Throughout the course of the four chapters that constitute an analytical enquiry of the most remarkable women characters from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata,* this work tries to focus on the emotions, desires, ambitions, disappointments, despair and resistance of the sexual 'other' as depicted through the reimagined representations of the epic tales.

On one hand, the canonical narratives revisit the legendary mythical characters like Rama, Sita, Savitri or, Krishna in an attempt to idealize their exemplary acts of sacrifice and righteousness, and on the other hand, the non-conformist revisionist retellings try to subvert hegemonic discourses by reimagining the invisiblized/marginalized characters like Kunti, Gandhari, Surpanakha, Ahalya, Tara, Urmila etc. The radical literary works produced at the advent of colonial modernity, the anti-colonial writings of the pre-independence era that sought to transmit nationalist ideas, or, the post-independence/postmodern literary compositions dealing with the nuanced issues of gender equations, class/caste discriminations, and socio-political power struggles— all of them have been significantly influenced by the epic characters, episodes as well as the philosophical thoughts espoused by the ancient epic narratives.

The reimagined tales of the peripheral, muted mythical characters drastically indicate that, most of the conformist retellings of the epic narratives tend to disregard the underlying concerns regarding gender inequality, female sexuality, feminine desires and patriarchal subjugation of the sexual 'other'- that remain an integral part of the subversive/rebellious mythopoeic works. The widely popular devotional reiterations that solely emphasize upon the traditional glorification of the exemplary acts of self-denial, self-sacrifice, unwavering righteousness and piety of the legendary epic characters (especially female characters), immensely influence the societal concepts of womanhood and feminine identity. Thus, the notable epic episodes

featuring remarkable women characters like Sita, Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari and others constitute a widely accepted language which is often used by the patriarchal society to reestablish the mainstream traditional notions regarding womanhood. As observed by Susan S. Wadley in her article, "Women and the Hindu Tradition" that in the Hindu Brahminical society women are often seen as paradoxical amalgamation of wifely devotion, motherly affections and seductive temptations or, destructive rage — "The concept of the female in Hindu ideology presents an essential duality: on the one hand, she is fertile, benevolent-the bestower; the other, she is aggressive, malevolent-the destroyer. As a popular statement about the goddess suggests, "in times of prosperity she is Laksmi, who bestows prosperity in the homes of men; and in times misfortune, she herself becomes the goddess of misfortune, and about ruin." (Wadley, 113)

Most of the contemporary revisionist retellings that this study looks at, radically interrogate these dichotomous notions while opening up newer avenues for multifaceted discussions about gender roles, female subjectivity, sexuality, suppressed desires, fragmented selfhood, resistance against different forms of oppression/exploitation etc. For example, Mahasweta Devi's short story, "Draupadi" (1997) which subverts the mythical episode of Draupadi's public disrobing in the context of the Naxalite movement of 1970's Bengal, and reimagines the epic heroine as the tribal rebel, Dopdi Mejhen who asserts bold resistance against the neo-colonial male leadership (the Senanayak) by refusing to be clothed and defiantly exhibiting the horrible wounds of her mass-raped body, or, Volga's recalcitrant feminist anthology of revisionist short-stories, *The Liberation of Sita* which radically overthrows the brahminical/patriarchal perceptions regarding virtue and sin, purity and impurity, truth and untruth, morality and immorality, by narrating the untold tales of the struggles and sufferings of the mythical characters like Surpanakha, Ahalya, Urmila and Sita.

The first chapter, "Draupadi", attempts to examine the interconnections existing between the tempestuous experiences of the fierce, rebellious, assertive and vindictive heroine of the *Mahabharata* and the challenging contemporary issues like sexual exploitation and abuse, oppression and objectification of women, voicelessness of the peripheral beings etc. Draupadi's polyandrous marriage, her clear assertion of her desires and disappointments, her reprimanding monologues criticizing the legendary heroes of the Mahabharata, and her direct associations with the cause of the apocalyptic war of Kurukshetra- place her in a stigmatized position in terms of the contemporary cultural and political context of India. At the same time, these problematic aspects of Draupadi's tale, make her one of the most intriguingly popular mythical

figures in the subversive feminist reiterations that tend to challenge the traditionally idealized concepts of purity, righteousness, self-abnegation, devotion and subservience. Her valiant act of rescuing her husbands from slavery, striking intelligence with which she questions Yudhishthira about his decision of staking her at the fateful game of dice, her unconventionally intimate friendship with Lord Krishna or, her vehement articulation of her rage, despair and the irrepressible desire for revenge present her as an intrepid woman of today's world. Hence, various authors, scholars, playwrights, poets, artists and filmmakers look into her story for new meanings and deliberations that potently address the problematic portrayal, perception and position of women in the contemporary Indian society. This chapter contains detailed analyses of some of these deconstructive mythopoeic works that centre around the Princess of Panchaal, such as— Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel, *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) where the tale of the *Mahabharata* is narrated from the point of view of Draupadi who is provided with a radical subjective voice of her own, Shaoli Mitra's subversive dramatic adaptation, *Five Lords Yet None a Protector* (2006), critiques the phallocentric modes of oppression by raising complicated questions regarding the hypothetical ideas of 'duty' that instigated the disgraceful inaction of the Pandavas during Draupadi's public disrobing, Pratibha Ray's novel *Yajnaseni* (1984) depicts the fire born princess, Krishnaa as a magnanimous, affectionate, eloquent and sensible woman who plays the role of a dedicated wife and mother with excellence while guiding her husbands in forming political strategies, or governing the kingdom, and Mahasweta Devi's iconoclastic short-story "Draupadi" which reimagines Draupadi's public disrobing by the Kauravas, as a tribal rebel's brutal mass-rape by the army men- in an attempt to resist and overturn the oppressive structures of gender and class/caste based violence.

In the second chapter which revolves around Gandhari, another exceptional character from the great epic *Mahabharata* who voluntarily blindfolds herself in a defiant act of asserting resistance against the patriarchal whims that compelled her to marry Dhritarashtra, the blind prince of Hastinapur and pushed her towards a life full of discontents and disillusionments. Her lifelong struggle with voluntary blindness, recurrent heart-breaking experiences and incessant battles against her own emotions (especially in terms of her son, Duryodhana) are often emphasized upon by many feminist scholars and authors who create a striking parallel between Gandhari's tragic tale and the stories of the contemporary Indian women who are often directed or, manipulated to sacrifice their desires, dreams and sense of selfhood for the sake of their families. Her rebelling act of cursing a god (Lord Krishna) for the deceptions and misconducts, symbolically represents the long-suppressed voice of resistance attained by the marginalized

'other' in the contemporary socio-cultural context. Among the legendary epic female characters, Gandhari stands out as a remarkably brave woman whose enigma, ambiguity, dedication and resilience make her more human and relatable than most other mythological/epic characters.

This chapter focuses on some of the revisionist retellings that subversively interrogate the mainstream interpretations glorifying the queen of Hastinapur as an exemplary figure of self-sacrifice, docility, wifely devotion and chaste austerity. For example, Aditi Banerjee's revisionist novel, *The Curse of Gandhari* (2019) which narrates the epic tale of *Mahabharata* from the point of view of Gandhari, while unveiling the story of devotion, rebellion, ambition and disillusionment of the mother who is often criticized for her failure in positively influencing her sons or, for being the audaciously defiant woman who dared to curse a god after the Kurukshetra war, and Tagore's poetic retelling, 'The Mother's Prayer' (1919) (translated from the Bengali poem, 'Gandharir Abedan') which records argumentative dialogues between Dhritarashthra and Gandhari about the profound philosophical ideas regarding righteousness, justice, morality and compassion, especially in the context of the unjust, immoral acts committed by their son, Duryodhan. Here, by raising her voice against her own son, Tagore's reimagined Gandhari underlines the inherent complexities of maternal affections that often grapple with the nurturing instincts as well as the desire of leading the offspring towards the path of truth.

In addition to that this specific portion of this thesis also examines Dharamveer Bharati's existentialist play *Andha Yug* (1953) which revisits the multi-layered epic characters like Gandhari, Dhritarashthra, Ashwathama, Sanjaya and Krishna in order to ponder over the implications of morality and humanity in the context of the gloomy, catastrophic war of Kurukshetra instigated by ambition, envy, and hatred, and Iravati Karve's *Yuganta* (1967) which is an intriguing fusion of critical investigation and psychoanalytical interpretation of some notable characters from the *Mahabharata*. Whereas in Karve's deconstructive work which contains the author's interpretative commentaries on several complex characters from the *Mahabharata*, Gandhari's maternal affections seem to overpower her wisdom and sense of morality as she obsessively attaches herself with the achievements and failures of her sons, in Bharati's *Andha Yug*, after the culmination of the disastrous war, the inconsolable Gandhari furiously rejects her faith in the divine being by harshly censuring Lord Krishna's 'unacceptably unrighteous' acts and exclaims that certain people strive to attain power and

fame by hiding their greed and resentment with deceptive words of spirituality and religious devotion.

The next chapter revolves around another phenomenal female character from the *Mahabharata,* Kunti, the exceptionally wise and gifted adopted daughter of Kuntibhoja and an immensely courageous widowed mother of the Pandavas. Kunti's unwanted pregnancy before marriage, her secret unexpressed love for her abandoned first born son (Karna), her psychological turmoil while using the magical boon to summon gods and beget sons by them at her impotent husband's request, her incessant struggles and miseries as a single mother, her intelligent strategies for the protection of her sons and their eventual succession of the throne of Hastinapur, make her an exceptionally complex and multi-dimensional character significantly necessary for a profound understanding of the contemporary relevance of the epic narrative. On one hand, Kunti's sense of rootlessness, silent subservience, immature curiosity and fear of social defamation as an adolescent girl makes her extremely realistic and relatable, and on the other hand, her strict idealism, resolute decisions, manipulative strategies and strict ways of persuading her sons to wage war against the Kauravas unveil the formidable side of this legendary epic character.

This chapter studies some of the contemporary reworkings that revisit the ancient epic tale of Kunti in an attempt to look for new layers of significance while creating a unique space for startling discussions regarding female desire, agency and identity. The mythopoeic texts that this chapter looks at, tend to portray the mythical character as an ordinary woman possessing extraordinary qualities as well as flaws and imperfections, such as- Iravati Karve's *Yuganta* (1967) which censoriously analyses Kunti's mistakes and achievements, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) which entails the tale of Kunti's immense strength and intelligence through the eyes of Draupadi, Koral Dasgupta's *Kunti* (2021) which closely follows the widowed queen's struggles, desires, ecstasies, and frustrations from her childhood till the birth of Arjuna, and Tagore's poetic adaptation, 'Karna and Kunti' (originally published as 'Karna-Kunti Samvad' in 1900) which revisits the episode from the *Mahabharata* where Kunti confronts Karna and reveals to him that he was her first born son who was abandoned by her as an unwed mother in the fear of social disgrace.

In her interpretative retelling of the mytho-historical epic narrative, *Yuganta,* Karve investigates, reimagines and reconstructs several characters and episodes from the *Mahabharata,* while proclaiming that unlike Draupadi, Gandhari, or, Subhadra, Kunti never

got an opportunity to experience blissful contentment or comfort, as she incessantly fights to fulfil the responsibilities of her roles as a daughter, wife and mother. Karve dissects each and every episode of Kunti's life in order to comprehend her veiled emotions and characteristic intricacies, for example-her biological father, Shurasena's act of giving her away to Kuntibhoja so that the childless king could appease sage Durvasa and attain a male heir who can carry the paternal lineage forward- points at her acute sense of displacement, her premarital pregnancy as a result of her curious experiment with the miraculous boon received from sage Durvasa and then her eventual abandonment of the radiant son born out of her union with the Sun god- indicates her immature inquisitiveness and fear of dishonouring her family, then the re-emergence of that deserted son, Karna (as the son of a charioteer) immensely problematizes Kunti's life, image and social position, as the mother of the Pandavas fails to publicly accept Karna as her own son.

In Koral Dasgupta's postmodern retelling, *Kunti*, the young princess radically attempts to transcend the boundaries of gender roles as she boldly talks about her aspirations to become the greatest conqueror while drastically opposing the stereotypical notion regarding a woman's fixed destiny of becoming nothing but a dedicated wife and mother. Through Kunti's fascination with the tale of Ahalya's seduction by Indra and her subsequent obsessive desire of knowing more about the romantic as well as sexual charms of the mysterious king of gods, the adolescent princess raises some subversive questions regarding the conventional ideas of virtue and sin, purity and impurity, morality and immorality. Adolescent Kunti's curious desires to know more about the mysteries of her sexually awakening body and that of the complex relationship existing between the male (Purusha) and female (Prakriti) energies of the universe - leads her towards her 'impudent' act of summoning the Sun god while experimenting with Sage Durvasa's 'mantra' (magical formula).

This novel also reimagines Kunti as more composed and considerate, especially in her encounters with Pandu (rather than being aggressively defensive and guarded as her epic counterpart) as the eponymous heroine is seen to be discussing about the need for complete honesty, submission and transparency in conjugal partnership. As the novel progresses, Kunti's unexpressed love for Indra is frequently underlined in an attempt to connect the turbulent experiences of the mythical epic character with that of the suppressed desires and struggles of the gendered 'other' in the contemporary society. Through her astute management of critical situations regarding the continuance of her impotent husband's lineage, Dasgupta not only depicts Kunti as an intelligent, independent woman potently able to find an effective solution

to the familial and political difficulties, but here Kunti also represents those Indian women who often silently undertake the task of implementing peace and stability in the domestic sphere, by overlooking their own longings and dissatisfactions.

In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fictional reinterpretation of the *Mahabharata*, *The Palace of Illusions*, Kunti's portrayal is much different than that in Dasgupta's novel - as Divakaruni's novel depicts Kunti as a knowledgeable, discerning and calculative mother-in-law fiercely strategizing for her sons' succession by uniting them through the polyandrous marriage with Draupadi. Here, Kunti unknowingly instructs her sons to equally share 'the acquired alms' (the princess of Panchaal) among themselves and then like an intimidating matriarch, she forbids the Pandavas to go against her instructions by reminding them of the impossibility of dishonouring the mother's words. Divakaruni also focuses on Kunti's ferocious protectiveness in the episode where the widowed mother of the Pandavas wisely counters and obliterates Duryodhana's abominable plan of burning the Pandavas along with their mother in the palace made of lac at Varanavat. Kunti deliberately undermines her strong sense of morality as she tries to protect her sons at any cost, thus eventually she debilitates a Nishada woman and her five sons while calm-headedly instructing her sons to set the lac palace ablaze so that the burnt bodies of the Nishadas are mistaken for that of Kunti and her five sons.

Tagore's poetic adaptation 'Karna and Kunti' illustrates the widowed queen as a repentant mother who not only chooses to cross the social boundaries of indignity and prejudice, but also reflects on the tormenting feelings of guilt and despair while breaking down in front of her long-lost son. On one hand, Kunti's unrestricted declarations about her deepest sorrows and tormenting burdens critically question the traditional/stereotypical notions regarding the flawless image of the 'mother' in the Hindu/brahminical society, and on the other hand, her persistent efforts to remind her first-born son of the inherent bonds that tie him with his biological brothers (the Pandavas) while compelling the disheartened and puzzled Karna to join the side of the Panadavas – focus on the complex blend of her maternal affections with strategic intelligence.

In the final chapter of this thesis, I have tried to look at the recalcitrant and non-conformist reiterations of the *Ramayana* that revisit and reinvestigate Sita's character in order to subversively interrogate and assert resistance against the brahminical/patriarchal exaltation of the mythical heroine as an embodiment of self-abnegation, silent devotion and subservience. The influence of 'the Sita ideal' on the cultural consciousness of the Indian population is

undeniable as along with Ram who is conventionally perceived as 'the ideal man', she is often visualized as 'the ideal woman' whose gentleness, unfaltering loyalty, persistent endurance, and demure femininity are presented as exemplary qualities fit to be emulated by Indian women. However, in many postcolonial revisionist retellings, oral narratives and folk songs that subversively interrogate and reinterpret the epic tales, Sita has always been perceived as an intriguing combination of divinity and domesticity, self-assertion and abnegation, strength and vulnerability, devotion and dissent.

This chapter looks at some of the literary retellings, cinematic adaptations, and some folksongs that retell Sita's tale in subversive ways while problematizing the hegemonic discourses. For example- C.N Srikantan Nair's *Kanchana Sita* (1958), a dramatic adaptation of the *Ramayana* which scrutinizes Rama's act of banishing Sita through the voice of Urmila, Kaushalya, Hanuman and Valmiki, Sarah Joseph's subversive short story "Ashoka" (2005) which focuses on Sita's sense of fragmented selfhood and rootlessness, *Sita Sings the Blues* (2008) by Nina Paley- an animated film which links the trials and tribulations of the mythical character and the contemporary issues like divorce, infidelity, gender discrimination etc., *The Liberation of Sita* (2016), a deconstructive feminist anthology of revisionist short-stories about legendary female characters from the *Ramayana* like Sita, Surpanakha, Ahalya and others. In addition to that I have also looked into some of the Bhojpuri, Maithili and Telegu folksongs that adapt, retell and reconstruct Sita's tale while using the epic imageries to underline the everyday troubles and challenges faced the rural/tribal women.

Volga's feminist anthology of pathbreaking short-stories *The Liberation of Sita* reimagines Sita's encounters with some of the most remarkable epic women characters from the *Ramayana,* and at the same time this radical work gives voice to the untold tales of struggles and sufferings of these peripheral women (like Ahalya, Surpanakha, Urmila etc.) while emphasizing on their journey of self-awareness and self-sufficiency. My study specifically deals with two stories from this anthology- "The Reunion" and "Music of the Earth" that are replete with dissenting questions and rebellious ideas that assert a bold resistance against the oppressive structures of patriarchy. In the first story "The Reunion", Sita accidentally meets Surpanakha after being exiled into the forest by Rama, and ironically discovers a special bond of sisterhood with the sister of Ravana. Surpanakha, living in idyllic seclusion, becomes the mouthpiece of the feminist author and narrates her insightful tale of humiliation, anguish, disenchantment and irrepressible rage, as well as her subsequent liberation from the anxious desire for vengeance through the beauty of Nature. This eco-feminist short-story creates a

striking parallel between the abandoned Sita (the 'righteous' woman) and the mutilated Surpanakha (the 'unrighteous' woman) whose love for the natural elements of the forest join them in an unbreakable bond, while portraying how they mirror each other's struggles, despair and redemption in an exceptional manner.

Another story from Volga's anthology, 'Music of the Earth', subversively questions the glorified image of the 'ideal' woman as Sita who is repeatedly asked to prove her purity and chastity, meets Ahalya who was also accused of being ''immoral and 'unchaste' as Indra, king of the Devas disguised as Ahalya's husband, (Sage Gautam) deceived and seduced her. The intriguing conversation between these two women underlines the marginalization, objectification and oppression of women in the patriarchal Vedic society while raising pertinent questions regarding female desire, sexuality, agency and resistance. In Volga's retelling, Ahalya, reimagined as a remarkably strong woman never caring for the approval or validation of the society, becomes Sita's guiding force throughout all the difficult episodes of her life. This story thus places Sita's innocence and simplicity against the contrasting complexity of the enigmatic character of Ahalya, traditionally described as 'unchaste' and 'impure' for her illicit sexual encounter with 'Devaraj' Indra.

Nina Paley's feminist film *Sita Sings the Blues*, which is described as 'a culturally reconceptualized version of Valmiki's Sanskrit epic, the Ramayana' raises interesting questions regarding the patriarchal ideas of gender roles, gender relations and sexual identities, by recreating Sita's story while connecting the mythical narrative with the postmodern semi-autobiographical tale of a couple residing in San Francisco. This story revolves around the unfulfilled desires of Nina, a semi-autobiographical representation of the director herself, who after being separated from her husband Dave, also gets trapped in a similarly perplexing and distressing predicament of haunting memories and overwhelming emotions as Valmiki's Sita.

Another deconstructive reinterpretation of the epic tale of *Ramayana* can be found in C.N. Sreekantan Nair's multidimensional dramatic creation, *Kanchana Sita* (The golden Sita), where several minor characters are provided with a voice of their own. For example, Lakshmanan's wife and Sita's sister, Urmila, subjectively rebels against the torments inflicted upon Sita by the 'divine' King, Raman, Kausalya (Raman's mother) persistently requests her son to bring Sita back from exile, whereas Raman's greatest devotee Hanuman ragingly states that Sita and the kingdom stand for one another while raising startling questions about the remote, subliminal position of the queen whose metal statue presides over the *Ashwamedham*

yajna. Nair's subversive reading of the mythic story depicts how on one hand, Sita's golden statue symbolizes the dehumanized position of Indian women in the traditional social structure, and on the other hand it hints at the ironic sublimation of the ideal image of the virtuous, devoted, pious woman. Nair's reimagined Urmila and Kaushalya emerge as remarkably brave and intrepid women especially in terms of their criticisms of the unfair decisions made by men that compel women to undergo dreadful miseries. Kaushalya's recalcitrant words take the discussions regarding patriarchal exaltation of the conventional Aryan/brahminical ideas of commitment, sacrifice, moral duty and sanctity to another extent, while defiantly challenging the phallocentric dichotomies of virtue and sin, right and wrong, good and evil.

Similarly, in Malayalam feminist writer Sarah Joseph's recalcitrant short-story, "Asoka", Sita attains a subjective voice of her own with which she entails her own story of love, heartbreak, endurance and despair. This story re-appropriates the episode from the *Ramayana* which illustrates the fire trial undertaken by Sita to prove her chastity in front of both the victor and the vanquished. This mythopoeic work visualizes how Sita's hopes and desires were shattered in the hands of her husband, Ram who is often seen as an embodiment of 'ideal' manhood. Sita's hopes and longings to be reunited with Ram, the shocking suspicion about her character, the humiliating fire ordeal to testify her purity – all these events are depicted quite brilliantly by Joseph while her postmodern narrative delves into the depth of the psychological upheavals of Sita's mind. By giving a detailed description of Sita's pain, rage, memories and desires Joseph takes the act of revisionist mythmaking to another extent and destabilizes the traditional adaptations and interpretations of the epic in an intriguing manner.

In addition to that, this chapter also surveys and enquires into the oral narratives, folk-tales and rural ritualistic/celebratory songs that beautifully depict how Sita's joys and troubles fuse with the wishes and distresses of the common housewives or, dalit/tribal women who incessantly fight against their regular household or, conjugal problems. Sita's prevalent existence in the oral/folk narratives that are handed down from one generation to another reaffirms the idea that Sita is never seen as a mythical character in the Indian society, rather she is picturized as another next-door girl possibly belonging to a 'lower caste' peasant family. Hence, it can be noted that, in these indigenous stories and songs Sita often becomes an anxious girl about to be wedded persuasively, a rural housewife who reluctantly goes to fetch water carrying a heavy pitcher, or a teenage girl whose concerned parents sorrowfully lament about the difficulty of

finding a suitable husband for their brawny daughter who can lift up the divine bow of Lord Shiva quite easily. The marginalized rural/tribal women who are often silenced or disregarded in the mainstream dominant interpretations of the *Ramayana*, find a distinct way to express their profound thoughts and emotions through these folk songs and rustic tales that talk about various significant issues prevalent in the Indian socio-cultural context, such as- abandonment of girl children, child marriage, dowry system, women's moral and social duties, conjugal conflicts, extramarital affair, pregnancy and childbirth etc.

This portion of the culminating chapter, mainly looks into certain scholarly articles and analytical commentaries that attempt to decipher the intricate meanings of the women-centered songs and non-conformist folk-tales that tend to humanize the traditionally deified figures of Rama and Sita while presenting diverse viewpoints about different episodes from the epic, such as – Smita Tewari Jassal's "Sita's trial by Fire and Bhojpuri Women's Songs", "Grinding Millet but Singing of Sita: Power and Domination in Awadhi and Bhojpuri Women's Songs" by Usha Nilsson, "A Ramayana of Their Own: Women's Oral Tradition in Telegu" by Velcheru Narayana Rao etc.

Apart from all these texts and characters that I have attempted to examine in my thesis, there are many other noteworthy subversive texts that revolve around some of the peripheral silenced characters found in the mythological epic narratives, like Ahalya, Surpanakha, Urmila, Tara, Mandodari, Amba/Sikhandi, Chitrangada and others. These revisionist reiterations enrich the diverse universe of the deconstructive mythopoeic texts that tend to radically question and challenge the authoritative discourses, while trying to reconstruct an alternative narrative of subjectivity, resistance and liberation. Recalcitrant fictional retellings like *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* (2014) which comments on the intersections of caste and gender while depicting the tale of the *Mahabharata* from Karna's wife, Uruvi's viewpoint, *Ahalya's Awakening* (2019) which attempts to delve into the depths of the defamed and accursed legendary character, Ahalya's mind, *Sita's Sister* (2014) by Kavita Kane which narrates the tale of the *Ramayana* from Urmila's perspectives, *Ahalya* (2020), *Mandodari* (2023) and *Draupadi* (2022) by Koral Dasgupta who revisits these mythical 'Kanyas/Satis' and gives them their own subjective voice with which they talk of their desires and disillusionments, *Vanara: The Legend of Baali, Sugreeva and Tara* (2018) where the alternative discourse of the non-Aryan 'Vana-nara' (Forest men) tribe is focused on and at the same time their queen, Tara is reimagined as an exceptionally bold, wise and assertive woman, and *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* (2012) by Anand Neelakantan which subverts the traditional interpretations of the

Ramayana, or, Sarah Joseph's rebellious short story, "Mother Clan" which equates the mutilated non-Aryan 'Rakshasi' Surpanakha's anguish and miseries with the exploitation of the forest — open up completely new avenues of debates and discussions regarding normative gender roles, female sexual desires, patriarchal subjugation and the position of women in the Indian society. In these revolutionary retellings these mythical characters attain a specific kind of subjectivity with which they transcend the preconceived notions about gendered identity while redefining womanhood in a drastically different manner.

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