

Examining Selected Epic Women Characters in the Contemporary Revisionist Retellings of the Ramayana and Mahabharata

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Synopsis

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.

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.

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.

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, and Tagore's poetic retelling, 'The Mother's Prayer' (1919) (translated from the Bengali poem, 'Gandharir Abedan') which records confrontational dialogues between Dhritarashtra and Gandhari regarding righteousness, justice, morality and compassion, especially in the context of the unjust, immoral acts committed by their son, Duryodhan. In addition to that this specific portion of this thesis also examines Dharamveer Bharati's existentialist play *Andha Yug* (1953) and Iravati Karve's *Yuganta* (1967). 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 dissects each and every episode of Kunti's life in order to comprehend her emotions and characteristic intricacies, for example- 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 son born out of her union with the Sun god, then how 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. 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.

This work also looks at Tagore's poetic adaptation 'Karna and Kunti' which 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.

In the final chapter of this thesis, I have tried to look at the 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.