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Retelling of Myth through Feminine Lens: An Analysis of Retelling of Mahabharata in *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and *Karna’s Wife* by Kavita Kane

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Abstract

Post millennium literatures are characterised by their diversity, empowerment and inclusion. Retelling of myth as a method in post-millennium literatures involve adapting and recontextualizing traditional narratives for contemporary audiences. It involves taking traditional myths, legends, or folklore and presenting them in new forms or contexts, adapting them to modern settings, reinterpreting them through different cultural lenses, or incorporating them into original narratives. It may involve reinterpretation and adaptation and often seeks to convey specific messages or insights. The Mahabharata is one of the most revered and influential texts in Indian culture and Hindu mythology. Mahabharata, the magnum opus of Indian Culture, consists of over 100000 slokas and long prose passages. The myths in The Mahabharata are not mere stories, but morals aimed to lead human beings to the right path. Its rich narrative, complex characters, and profound philosophical teachings have captivated audiences for centuries, inspiring countless adaptations and reinterpretations.

Keywords: Post Millennium, Recontextualizing, Retelling, Cultural Lenses, Slokas.

Discussion

The retelling of the Mahabharata has been a dynamic and ongoing process throughout history, with each generation adding its own perspective and interpretation to this ancient epic. “Bhishma” by Prem Panicker and Usha Narayanan, “Randamoozham” (The Second Turn) by M.T. Vasudevan Nair, “The Palace of Illusions” by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, “Karna’s Wife” by Kavita Kane etc are a few examples. Since the post millenium is also characterized by radical feminist theories, this paper particularly shed a light on *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and *Karna’s Wife* by Kavita Kane.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian born American Author. Her short story collection, *Arranged Marriage*, won an American Book Award in 1996. *The Palace of Illusions* was adapted into a play named *Fire and Ice: Draupadi’s Story* by Joe DiSabatino and performed in India under his direction. A Bollywood movie with the title *Mahabharat*, starring Deepika Padukone as Draupadi, is being prepared in India based on *The Palace of Illusions*.

The novel is the retelling of Mahabharata from the perspective of Draupadi or Panchali, the wife of Pandavas. Divakaruni retells the whole incidents from her childhood to her final moments through Panchali's perspective. The readers can see the spiritual and intellectual growth of Panchali, an innocent princess to a queen who can be equaled if not outsmart kings. If Vyasa's tale is about gods, demons and kings, Divakaruni's tale is more realistic and humane. Not only Panchali, but the other female characters such as Kunthi and the other wives of Pandavas are also described in detail. Divakaruni uncovered the story that lay invisible between the lines of men's exploits in Mahabharata. Draupadi is also known as Yagnaseni. It means princess who leaped out of the sacrificial fire. Vyasa, the great sage who wrote Mahabharata considers her a woman of curiosity, as one who takes her decisions without much consideration. Her actions, which are above the levels of a queen causes all the problems. In her novel, Divakaruni is giving her the chance to express her point of view, her thoughts and emotions. She is the women of fire, the lady with strong mind and decisions.

Kavita Kane is an Indian writer and former journalist. She is known for writing mythological fiction. Karna's Wife: The Outcast Queen is the retelling of Mahabharata through the perspective of Uruvi, the wife of Karna. Uruvi's retelling not only focuses on the problems faced by women but also on the social hierarchy of the period. Karna's introduction was a major part in The Mahabharata as he was the connecting point between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. When Uruvi favoured Karna over the Pandavas, they felt humiliated and it further infuriated them.

Class Difference

Uruvi's retelling is more focused on class difference as Karna is considered to be an outcast. In spite of his valour and courage, most of the Kshatriyas were not willing to accept Karna as he was raised by a suta. Most characters demean him as a sutaputra. By marrying Karna, Uruvi and her family also faces the harshness of class difference. Those who were close to them also considered them as inferior after her marriage. Uruvi, was not like normal royal ladies. She was more talented and educated than many of them. She was more interested in art, literature and medicine than idle gossip. So, we can see her bravely moving forward with her decisions and opinions, which is something that modern-day women can also adopt.

When it comes to Draupadi's tale, she paid more focus on lower class women and their sufferings. Right from the beginning of the novel, we can see Dhai Ma as the perfect maid and mentor for Draupadi. Dhai Ma introduces her to the society and makes her aware of the rules of conduct for a princess and how it differs from that of a maid. Whenever Draupadi involves in Dhai Ma's homely chores, she rejects her and remembers her of the difference in social construct for classes. She dresses her like a queen and tells her stories. When Draupadi tells her that she wants to visit the sage in the village, Dhai Ma remembers that it may cause her loss her job. Dhai Ma's dissatisfied marriage relation with Kallu, the palace cook shows that lower class women are neglected by their husbands. She complains that Kallu often harasses her. When the Kshatriya women are neglected between war and power, the destitute working-class women are harassed by the men folk.

Draupadi's life as sairandhri for the queen Sudeshna sheds light to the problems faced by the maids. When she approaches the king for help from Keechak, the king ignores her because he cannot disappoint Keechak who is the chief of his army. For him, the stability of his kingdom is more important than the problems faced by a maid. When Draupadi approaches queen Sudeshna, she requests her to satisfy Keechak. Sudeshna tells her that her husbands may not accept her and Keechak can provide her with happiness as if it is the right of the kingly man to make advantage of the maids.

The enraged looks of the warrior's women is another instance of the problems faced by the lower class women. Just before the war Draupadi happens to see a warrior's women she looks Draupadi

as if the cause of all the problems. While war and power are the matters of pride for the kings, the soldiers face more consequences. According to the soldier's women, he is the pillar of the family. Whoever wins the war does not change their situation. For the kings, the success or failure in war is a matter of pride. The soldiers alone suffer the wounds for the rest of their lives.

Problems of Polygamy

Polygamy was not a wrong notion at that time. It was common that a king marries three or four women. No stories depict the problems faced by the wives. It is believed that they should live happily together and pray for the long life of the king. When Draupadi visits her father's other wives, they hesitate to talk to her. The other wives did not like her because they believed that the king considered her more important than their own children. The jealousy between these wives was not depicted in any ancient stories. The society restricts the duties of women to giving birth to children and supporting husband. It is the same whether the woman belongs to high class or low class. The novelist depicts the same problems when the Pandavas take other wives. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi says that she tried to resist these multiple marriages by starving and breaking expensive objects. But, being a lady of intelligence, she can identify the importance of these marriages and she is able to understand the political reasons behind them. In most cases, marriages were aimed at increasing the strength of countries and to strengthen the relationship between them. As she was aware of these reasons, she tried to mingle with them.

When the society permits man to marry how many women as he wants, the same society considers a woman who marries more than three men a whore. When Kunti announced the idea of Draupadi marrying all her five sons, king Drupad was hesitated because it was not an idea prevailing in the society. Moreover, the society will consider his daughter as a whore. As a father, he did not want this to happen.

The same social constructs were the reason that forced Kunti to abandon Karna, her first child. She knows that the society would not accept the child born outside a marriage contract. Karna, one of the bravest Kshatriyas of the time was doomed just because he did not know about his parentage. The problems of polygamy were mentioned by Uruvi also on the earlier days of her marriage. Uruvi, who was well aware of the first wife of Karna has already planned on how to deal with the truth. "But, when she came to face the truth, she didn't feel comfortable with Vrushali, possible because of her own guilt of intruding in the older woman's marital paradise" (50). She also mentions them as two souls loving the same man. We can find the arrogance and indifference of Shona, Karna's younger brother when Uruvi came to their palace after their marriage. But, Vrushali expressed a cold response to Uruvi. May be Vrushali, who was polite and keen on the family made herself able to accept the notion of polygamy practiced by higher class men.

Swayamvara

Swayamvara is the practice that existed in the ancient periods among the Kshatriyas. 'Swayam' means self and 'varan' means bridegroom. It is the practice such that the queen can select her husband from the large number of kings who are present for the function. Swayamvara is an important aspect in both these retellings. When Uruvi's swayamvara was attacked as Pratiloma, (when a woman marries from a lower caste), Draupadi's marriage to 5 men was acceptable with a special marriage process. Sage Vyasa prepares a special marriage conduct for Draupadi as she marries five princes. Vyasa prepared the marriage conduct in such a way that Draupadi will be the wife of each one in each year. At that period no other should touch her or face her eyes straight.

He also gave her a boon that she would be virgin again the next year for the next husband. Even though it was given as a boon for Draupadi, it was really the idea for making the princes

happy. Vyasa also adds that since Yudhishtir is the eldest, she would be his wife for the first year and it continues according to their hierarchy. Draupadi was attracted by the physique and caring nature of Arjuna. But, she was denied the right to choose with whom she beds. Even though she preferred Arjuna to the others, he becomes her husband only in the third year. Here, she is having her sexuality based on the laws fixed by a sage. Her desires are not important in the scenario.

Draupadi's swayamvara is conducted with a test to find the brilliant among the bridegroom. Those who can shoot the eyes of a fish moving above the stage seeing the reflection from a bowl of water are only eligible for marrying her. The likes of the bride is not important. All that matters is the talent in archery. Even the word swayamvara is distorted by the patriarchal society. King Drupad knows the fact that only Karna and Arjuna are capable of completing this challenge. Since, Karna is not sure of his parentage, he can be avoided and so Panchala kingdom can create a relation with The Pandavas. So, swayamvara or the marriage of Draupadi was conducted by king Drupad only to lure Arjuna to Panchaal. Arjuna also participated in the swayamvara to attach Panchaala army with them so as for the coming war against Kauravas. Here, Draupadi was only a weapon for both Panchaala and Pandavas to strengthen their kingdoms. At the swayamvara, the one who wins the task is a Brahmin and she was forced to marry the man according to the rules of swayamvara. She did not know who that man is. He enforces that he cannot reveal his identity without the consent of his family. According to the social norms, Draupadi was forced to dress in simple clothes like her husband is using. The man denies all the wealth and gifts given by king Drupad and she follows the man on foot. The social norm of the time was such that she did not have the right even to know the name of the man whom she marries. Ironically, Draupadi who questioned Karna of his parentage marries the man who does not reveal his name.

Both theses retellings question the very meaning of the word swayamvara. Uruvi's desire to marry the main the loves are questioned first by her parents and then by almost all the elders in the court. When this infuriated the Pandavas, the Kauravas were happy that they will get the alliance of king Vahusa of Pukeya (Uruvi's father) also at the time of war. Thus, the sole aim of the so called swayamvara is just to strengthen their family ties so that it can be helpful at times of marriage. Right from the beginning of the problems between Kauravas and Pandavas, they were expecting a war and both these ladies, as many others were prey to the manly desire for war and kingdom supported by the patriarchal society.

Differences in Education

Draupadi mentions the difference in education provided for boys and girls. When Dhri, her brother was given education about the rules of war, Draupadi was given a different type of education. Tutors from various places were invited to teach her music, dance and different types of embroidery works. King Drupad also sent bards to her apartment, hoping that their songs would instill appropriate attitudes in her and warn her off the dangerous ones. In the later life, she remembers how hectic those classes were for both the student and the teacher. She was not able to learn those things because she was not interested in them. Rather, she desired to know when the righteous was should be fought and when it should not. Even, Dhri hesitated to tell her these things. Also, as a part of learning, Draupadi was taught to live with minimal needs, which helped her to adjust herself to the life in the forest. Uruvi, on the other hand was interested in art, literature and medicine. She had a great talent in healing, which helped others at the time of war. As a woman of determination, she was able to learn and focus on the subjects that she liked. In both the characters, we can see the power of their knowledge in their later life.

Conclusion

In *Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir explains about the formative years in the life of a woman. She summarizes how a girl passes through childhood, into girlhood, and through sexual initiation in ways that are more traumatic and limiting than a male's experience of these phases. She shows how at each stage of her upbringing a girl is conditioned into accepting passivity, dependence and inwardness. Every force in society conspires to deprive her of subjectivity and flatten her into an object. Both of them are intelligent, talented and educated. In many parts of the story we could find their sufferings and problems and yet they stand strongly and courageously with their men. They have all the characteristics to be considered as superior characters, yet the ancient story neglected them for being women. We can find their emotional as well as logical intelligence in spite of their lack of proper education.

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