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## THE FEMININE AND THE SUBALTERN: REVISITING MYTHOLOGY AND RETHINKING WOMEN IDENTITIES

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### Abstract

The retelling of the mythological stories from the two great epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata presents different counter tales which deals with the hated, the misjudged, annihilated and the subaltern characters. The principal story is taken and re-written in forms of such fictional tales which tells a persuasive story from the point of view of the marginalized characters. The popular contemporary authors have re-interpreted and re-introduced the characters for the readers with critically evaluating aspects relating to the meaning behind certain narratives of the feminine. Marginalization of such characters in the Indian context has always risen a fire of rebellion and resistance between the elite and the 'others'. Let us take a look at the voices which have suffered in silence time and again in the mythological tales which now represents the voices of today.

**Keywords:** misjudged, subaltern, marginalized, re-interpreted, feminine

### Introduction

Emma Dawson Varughese in her book, 'Perusing New India Post-Millennium Indian Fiction in English' have stretched her neck to gander at the connection between the new fiction and the old stories of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and different origins of the customary legends and folklores along with the myths attached with them. According to Brodbeck and Black, the model feminine character was a loyal and devoted wife. The wives of the Brahmanical period were supposed to follow Pativrata and were ultimately seen taking a vow to their husbands. These vows signified that the wife would only live and ultimately die for her husband and husbands were their entire world. A

fine example of this Pativrata concept is Gandhari, who followed her husband, Dhritarashtra into the life of blindness and went through the sacrifice of sight by tying a silk cloth over her eyes for her entire life. These roles of the common women are antagonistic in the sense that women had such demeaning value at those times that they were represented by the virtue of their men and in terms of social and every other aspect. Mythology have assigned women a gender identity which is rooted in binary logic and an issuance of a woman's sexual identity in other words is anchored in the patriarch system. Revisionist myth making or engaging with challenging of the stereotypes is a recent method which is used by various contemporary writers for

looking back at the myths from the feminist perspective. Indian mythology and epics have now the ability to question as to why these myths and legends acts as a persistent recharging mine for these contemporary scholars, both male and female and the obvious answer one gets is that these are rich stories with multiple strands that are forever open to new interpretations and psychological analysis. These contemporary retellings also attempt a version of feminist revisionist mythology that aims at a strategic use of gender imagery to transform culture and subvert the heritage that women inherit and weave threads of sexuality and feminism in the narration of myths. The reality of the patriarchal society and the gender relationships is perhaps the most talked about subject in the recent retellings of the epics. Women's liberation has now turned into a basic viewpoint in writing of contemporary society and the female point of view, communicated through women's composition of numerous sorts and is viewed as in excess of a significant connective to an all-male perspective on the universe. There is this prevailing concept of woman consolidated by Christianity which affected the status of women and gradually they lost the right to control their lives and were deprived of human rights. The contribution of women writers in the nineties have dared to cross the rigid boundaries that were laid on them by the society. The picture of the women in fiction has experienced a great deal of changes during the most recent couple of decades as the authors have moved from the customary depictions of suffering, benevolent women towards clashed female characters scanning for personality, no longer portrayed regarding their casualty status rather they stand up for themselves and challenge the standards of the general norms set by the society. In this manner, it is significant for us to see the women authors composing not only as a solid entire but managing the inquiries of self and personality. The two fundamental female characters: Kunti and Draupadi assume a double job in this epic; the two of them play the ideal spouse. On the opposite side, both Kunti and Draupadi are frequently observed to be emphatic, scholarly, and even just perilous. Female creators like Kavita Kane who delineates the characters in her books like

Lanka's Princess and Sita's Sister suitably by adjusting them. The character of Surpanakha being the one and only sister of Ravana would have been very like him as compared to Urmilla, who may have been similar to that of Sita. The differences and qualities in delineation of her characters like Menaka was additionally to a great extent carved out through notable and very much created characters like Indra and Vishwamitra. Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen likewise depicts the character of Uruvi. Despite the fact that a totally fictional figure, Kane took a lot of imaginative freedoms and made her different characters as well, with affection and heart who confronts and face tough characters like Kunti or Bhishma and poses important answers to the questions which rose in the minds of the readers after reading the story. There are numerous sides to the epic and it might analyze totally in contrast to the perspective of women and other minor characters. In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Palace of Illusion" the portrayal of Draupadi is very interesting. The character of Panchali inside the retelling is a sharp, enthusiastic and daring lady with a dim appearance that breaks the regular domains of magnificence and has a strong and sure nature. Yajnaseni by Pratibha Ray has increased huge universality for remaining consistent with the epic. She is the most extreme female who however was associated with a polyandrous marriage yet she unquestionably cleared into the journey to recover the inheritance of the Pandavas and proved her loyalty by staying next to them during their time of the outcast. Anuja Chandramouli in her book Shakti: The Divine Feminine portrays the accounts of Shakti, the mother goddess in the entirety of her structures. Beginning with the account of Usa's, the author proceeds to paint the numerous existences of Shakti in splendid and clear hues. Ruler Indra and his better half Sachi fill the role of the rival and keeping in mind that I was somewhat shocked with this take at the beginning, it before long began to bode well. There are a great deal of shades and tones to each character and what stays steady is Shakti's relationship with the Holy Trinity giving some resemblance of stability. The writer Kavita Kane's book Lanka's Princess is a short-fictionalized delineation of the character Surpanakha otherwise

known as Meenakshi from the Ramayan. From her youth to her last minutes, the author has depicted the conditions that caused the character to change into a horrendous wild Surpanakha who drives Lanka to its obliteration. The author aptly portrays the Ramayan from the viewpoint of the fleshed-out characters. Kane's *The Fisher Queens Dynasty* is an account of Matsya gandha, Daseyi, Johana gandha-the sovereign of Hastinapur, Satyavati. It shows the backstory of one of the most significant characters-Bhism who was conceived as Debabrat, his biography and the job of Satyavati in it. Satyavati was abandoned when she was just an infant and went after by a rishi when she solidifies herself verified that whenever she is with a man, she will be the one to win in the relationship. The story is a penetrating, wise glance at the administrator of the Kuru family and the lady who set off the succession of occasions that finished in the grisly skirmish of Kurukshetra. But a majority of works are in the realm of literary fiction, and aimed at readers who have a deep enough knowledge of the epics Mahabharata & Ramayana and want to explore alternate narrative possibilities.

### **Dynamics of Gender identities**

Now coming to the theme of Subaltern, Antonio Gramsci adopted the term, Subaltern referring to those groups in society who are subjects to the "hegemony" of the ruling classes which may include peasants, workers, women and other groups denied access to 'hegemonic power'. We can see this particular theme of gendered Subalternity in works of Mahasweta Devi. Her work "Breast Stories" which is a collection of short stories portrays a woman who is a victim of the politics of gender, class and caste played in different levels of social relationships. Kavita Kane who is the author of the new era of Retellings is best known for her novel *Karna's Wife: The outcast's queen*. She has published seven novels till date namely, *Sita's Sister*, *Menaka's choice*, *Lanka's Princess*, *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*, *Ahalya's Awakening* and *Saraswati's Gift*. We all are aware of the female protagonists from the epics who have been put on pedestal of honor, chastity and resilience. Characters such as Sita, Draupadi, Kunti, Mandodari. Kavita Kane has brought out the 'lesser known' or 'marginalised' characters who have been

overshadowed and overlooked in the epic. Kane has said that all her novels centers around female characters as she believes, "... women are more layered and more interesting as a person. They multi task and multi think. They are a mother, daughter, sister, friend, wife all at the same time. Thinking is a continuous and dynamic process for women as they are more complex and more intricate." Sub altern theory takes the perspective of the "other" as the one who has had no voice because of race, class or gender based on the deconstruction theory of Derrida. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, to marginalize means, "to make somebody feel as if they are not important and cannot influence descisions or events; to put somebody in a position in which they have no power.' Simone De Beauvor, in her work " *The Second Sex*" philosophized about the females in society who are always referred to as the opposite sex. She says' " A woman has always been a man's dependent, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality." Urmila's character can be seen as one of the most overlooked and misunderstood character in the Ramayana. Valmiki's Ramayana and the later versions never talk about her even if she was a significant contributor to the events of the story. Kavita Kane gives her a voice and portrayed her presence in the story as a strong female figure who is an intelligent, assertive and a passionate woman. Kavita Kane identifies with the sense of otherness and subalternity in the character of Urmila which is visible throughout the novel. In the second chapter 'The Swayamvar' Urmila expresses the doubt she had throughout her growing years about how Sita was considered unique and extraordinary and was showered with ceaseless attention and affection. "The image of her father bowing and looking up reverently at the little Sita flashed through her mind and Urmila felt a strange knot within her. Was Sita Special?" (Kane, p-27). Marginalisation has always risen the fire of rebellion and resistance. In the Indian Context, we can see this particular discourse of Ramayana where essentially the difference between the elite and others. The silenced and oppressed Urmila is identified as the 'Wife of Lakshmana' or 'Sister of Sita' but never as an individual. Gayatri Chakraborty

Spivak in her work "Can the Subaltern Speak?" comes out with "One never encounters the testimony of the women's voice- consciousness." (Spivak, p-93). "Marriage did not hold much interest for Urmila but it was a social discipline she would have to conform to. She would rather seek knowledge instead of a suitor." It is very interesting to see how the character of Urmila is portrayed as the emancipated woman who maintained her individuality throughout. The author has tried to recreate the narrative, through Urmila's perspective. Along with her own upliftment, she also inspires and stimulate the women around her. She definitely gives a message to the readers about how she sustained her individuality throughout without being skeptical and set herself free from all kinds of restrictions, be it social or political. The author has traced the importance of a subaltern woman's voice presenting the neglect and struggle in the story. She refers to the 'other' as minority or the least favored. Sita's Sister has redefined the concept of sub alternity through this modern retelling of the epic Ramayana. The character of Sita might be depicted as the perfect spouse and the perfect girl however Urmila is appeared as the lioness who is defensive of her family. The creator additionally centers around the lesser realized characters like Manthara, the lady who planned against Rama. Aswapati the dad of Kaikeyi, Kaikeyi – the second and most loved spouse of Dasaratha. The book portrays the tale of Urmila in two stages, the first as a girl and researcher there are scenes wherein, she goes to the brahma yagna of her father as a free researcher and even as a little girl when she snickers, laughs and split a few jokes. The novel depicts how the marginalized woman character represents the voice of the woman of the society who are devoid of the voices and suffer in silence. Although we have known Ramayana as a major male centric story which revolves around the character of Maryada Purushottam Rama, but through this new trend of modern retelling, the marginalized characters of the epic are given voices just like the present-day common woman is being empowered and emancipated with the challenging circumstances which is reflected through the garb of this narrative, which unfolds through the eyes of Urmila.

## Conclusion

These tales are revisited in ways that are critically appealing and reach out to a wider range of audience of the fast-paced genre fiction of the contemporary Indian English fiction. A balance with an expansion of the minor characters and events which are distinguishably weaved in excellent tales of facts and fiction which many of the readers might as well find difficult to tell one from the other. As Toril Moi explains in his essay "Feminist, Female, Feminine" (1989), But "it is nevertheless important to stress that in a male- dominated context an interest in women writers must objectively be considered a support for the feminist project of making women visible" (129) Through the study of these epic reworkings we can make inferences regarding each gender's role, virtues and their abilities as each one of them present different ideologies and in order for us to rethink and reach out to the next generation for a better understanding of the mythological reworkings we must instill these ideas from the epics that are supposed to be universal and all- empowering. The male centric portrayal of the epics and the reconstructing of a feminine perspective through these narratives is definitely a changing tradition in the contemporary period.

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