



Role of female identity in the ancient Indian Stories

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Abstract:

Along with the Ramayana, the Mahabharata is one of India's "great stories", and the ancient epic maintains its status as a culturally foundational text which, apart from philosophical/spiritual values, educational and religious instruction, contains and perpetuates ideas and ideals of ethical obligation (dharma), social norms and gender roles. Having inspired writers for centuries, references to the epic, its central legends or characters, are ubiquitous in literature. An explicit attempt to retell the epic in novel form is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions which will be analysed in the following. The novel not only invites criticism for the ambitious attempt this poses on a formal and structural level, but allows insight into the interaction of gender and identity, particularly into the complex construction of femininity already inherent in the original text, while also challenging it from a contemporary perspective. Divakaruni retells the epic from the point of view of one of its heroines, Draupadi, thus reclaiming female agency in the famous tale of war between two families, hyper-masculine heroes and their devoted wives. The text highlights a crucial relation established between womanhood and vengeance. Moreover, it displays the struggle for identity in a mythological context, which is distinctly Indian, yet transcends cultural borders, all the while showing the illusionary nature of those imposed by history and gender.

Key words: Indian female cultural, Indian Stories, Mahabharata.

Introduction:

Along with the Ramayana, the Mahabharata is one of India's "great stories", and the ancient epic maintains its status as a culturally foundational text which, apart from philosophical/spiritual values, educational and religious instruction, contains and perpetuates ideas and ideals of ethical obligation (dharma), social norms and gender roles. Having inspired writers for centuries, references to the epic, its central legends or characters, are ubiquitous in literature. An explicit attempt to retell the epic in novel form is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* which will be analysed in the following. The novel not only invites criticism for the ambitious attempt this poses on a formal and structural level, but allows insight into the interaction of gender and identity, particularly into the complex construction of femininity already inherent in the original text, while also challenging it from a contemporary perspective. Divakaruni retells the epic from the point of view of one of its heroines, Draupadi, thus reclaiming female agency in the famous tale of war between two families, hyper-masculine heroes and their devoted wives. The text highlights a crucial relation established between womanhood and vengeance. Moreover, it displays the struggle for identity in a mythological context, which is distinctly Indian, yet transcends cultural borders, all the while showing the illusionary nature of those imposed by history and gender.

Dating back to 1600 B.C. and considered to be the world's longest poem, the original epic consists of 100.000 stanzas in verse, structured into 18 books, thus exceeding by far the length of the great Western epics such as *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey* (cf. Narayan, R. vii). Although there are many different versions and uncertainties about its exact date of origin and authorship, it is commonly attributed to Ved Vyasa, who also appears as the narrator in the epic, telling the stories to his scribe, the elephant-headed God Ganesh. The structure is inherently dialogic, if controlled by an omniscient male narrator. Whereas "Maha-bharata" means "great India", the title first chosen by Vyasa was "jaya", meaning triumph or victory (Narayan, R. viii), an implication which is certainly

challenged in Divakaruni's rewriting. The main plot, which like the Arabian Nights digresses from one story into another (cf. Singh 10), tells the tale of the fight for supremacy in the kingdom of Hastinapur.[1] The conflict erupts between two families, the Pandavas and the Kauravas, who are the progeny of two brothers, Pandu, and the blind king Dhritarashtra. The rightful heir to the throne, Yudhishtir, and his four brothers, are exiled by their jealous cousin Duryodhan. All five Pandavas are married to the beautiful and headstrong princess Draupadi after Arjun, the handsome and virile warrior, wins her hand in an archery contest. A climactic scene is the game of dice in which Yudhishtir gambles away all his possessions, his kingdom as well as Draupadi, who vows revenge for their shame. In the final battle of Kurukshetra, everybody dies except Draupadi and her husbands. After their only remaining heir, Parikshit becomes ruler over Hastinapur and peace is restored, the brothers and Draupadi embark on a final journey into the Himalayas where they find eternal redemption.

Just from this brief summary one can deduce why Alf Hiltebeitel, who has dedicated his scholarly life to the study of the Mahabharata[2], states that its academic reception is commonly centred on its "monstrosity" due to the text's sheer size, indeed presenting what Henry James would have called a "baggy monster" (2001, 1). The scholarship on the epic is, of course, extensive. Yet, as Hiltebeitel (2001; 1980) has argued, it has rarely been treated as a coherence fictional work, although this is changing, as recent and highly informative studies such as Brodbeck and Black's focus on gender and narrative in the epic show.[3] Principal themes are the results of vengeance and the human potential for destruction, love, sacrifice and loyalty, while problems and possibilities of rule are staged on various levels, e.g. individual, societal, and cosmic. Of central importance is the human struggle with destiny and the ethical concept of dharma.[4] Moreover, as Brodbeck and Black emphasize, "gender is one of the most central and most contested issues in the text, and [...] discussions regarding gender operate on a number of different levels and are manifested in multiple ways without the text providing one

consistent and definitive view” (10). In the present context, which refers to the epic[5] mainly indirectly, the complex world of the Mahabharata is treated as a fictional-literary one and reduced to the characters and scenes of particular relevance for a gender-theoretical analysis. The focal point is Draupadi (Panchaali), who is given a different presence by Divakaruni, yet also has a crucial, distinctly gendered function in the original. Taking the narrative situation and the dialogic textual orientation into account sustains the argument for a surprisingly (post)modern ambivalence and complexity of the gender roles conveyed in the contemporary text, which is already palpable in the ancient epic. Therefore, some issues in terms of gender and the relation of the sexes in the Mahabharata deserve consideration before turning to the novel.

The fact that the study of the epic’s many characters and sexualities in the text has found critical interest is hardly surprising.[6] As stated above, the “Mahabharata is one of the defining cultural narratives in the construction of masculine and feminine gender roles in ancient India, and its numerous tellings and retellings have helped shape Indian gender and social norms ever since“ (Brodbeck/Black 11; Sanzgiri). The desire for revenge is a central trait linking the sexes who are otherwise assigned clear differences in appearance, behaviour, as well as character and obligation of dharma. Fighting being one of the main gender-distinguishing activities, the masculine ideal is commonly represented by the virile husband and fearless warrior. This is complemented by the portrayal of the epic’s principal model of femininity, the ideal of the loyal, devoted wife (cf. Brodbeck/Black 16-17). A striking example for this is Gandhari, who decides to follow her husband, king Dhritarashtra, into blindness and sacrifices her sight by wearing a silk scarf over her eyes till her death. Yet things are more complex than a binary of the silent, passive, merely listening or following female and the actively battling male. The epic puts forth a second paradigm of femininity (Śri), which has mythical connotations and implies female independence, mobility, and agency, showing the women as important contributors to their husbands’ successes. Nonetheless, as

Brodbeck and Black rightly stress, both of these roles “are restrictive, only representing women in relation to their menfolk; but in terms of the behaviour of female characters, there is a sense in which neither paradigm is complete in itself” (18). While in particular Draupadi, as well as her mother-in law Kunti, is representative of this dual role and the inherent tensions, this shows how the epic transgresses essentializing gender models in favour of more fluid or contradictory ones. Andrea Custodi describes Draupadi as on the hand being “extolled as the perfect wife – chaste, demure, and devoted to her husbands”, yet on the other is often shown “to be intellectual, assertive, and sometimes downright dangerous” (213). Seeking to assign mythological references to this trait of her character, Alf Hildebeitel sees Draupadi as an invocation of Kali/Śrī-Lakshmi, the goddess of destruction (1980, 153).

Read against the background of contemporary notions of gender, the epic’s central characters, prominently Arjun and Draupadi, “manifest different modes of gendered behavior at different moments in the narrative” (Brodbeck/Black 21), illustrating the idea that gendered identities interact with particular situations as well as with markers of social class (caste), ethnicity, or education. Many characters unite opposing qualities with regard to their identities. Yudhishtir is the aggressive ruler and gambler, yet famous for his stoic endurance, kindness and wisdom; Arjun is virile lover and hero of the battlefield but also spends a year as an “effeminate” dance instructor. Like Gandhari, Draupadi is a fiercely loyal wife and a hot-tongued critic of her husbands, hence at once “active and passive, articulate speaker and symbolic listener” (Brodbeck/Black 21). This later aspect is important with regard to her portrayal in the novel. Furthermore, clear power hierarchies are established via the dialogical structure of the text, through the gap between the authority of narrators and listening characters, which often ardently await instruction of how to become better men or women (cf. Brodbeck/Black 23). With regard to female education and knowledge, a significant ambiguity can be found in the epic. As Brian Black points out, the women undergo a second-hand instruction as they are

usually a constant presence in all scenes, watching when men receive important teachings and hearing their stories, yet this eavesdropping “is far from passive”

Divakaruni’s version portrays the education of Draupadi and her transformation from ambitious princess to revenge-seeking queen in subjective detail. Following first her brother’s and then her husbands’s lessons, she also receives many instructions on her own (e.g. by a sorceress, a sage, or Krishna). Regarding the multi-dimensional presentation of femininity, Divakaruni’s narrative appears in many ways merely faithfully modeled on the original, but reverses the perspective by granting the reader insight into the mind of the listening Draupadi.

Although one has to guard against taking the enthusiasm for this too far, the challenge of normative gender roles is moreover aided by the various “gender-bending” characters (Brodbeck/Black 19).[8] All the while the idea of the third sex stems from ancient India, the epic does by no means break with a binary framework. In this context Andrea Custodi emphasizes that: “As fluid as sexual characteristics and gender may be among deities and in mythological escapades, however, dharma as it structures and orders this-worldly affairs revolves around a firm conception of the two genders, and is very much based upon their clear distinction and eternal stability” (210). The characters’ fate and gender identity remains usually stable, determined by birth, status, and the customary expectations connected to them. Still, there are several instances of transsexualism, of sex changes from man into woman or vice versa. A prominent example is Sikhandi who switches sex in order to fulfil a mission of revenge; according to the ancient rules she has to give up womanhood in order to kill her nemesis Bhisma. Most sex-changing episodes, while drawing attention to the fluidity of gender, show elements of transgression of the traditional categories, but are playful enough to not subvert the existing order for good. An example for this occurs during the Pandavas’ year of disguise; Draupadi and her husbands are forced to spend their final year of exile in hiding before embarking on the mission of reclaiming their kingdom. As

cover, each of them has to choose an identity as opposite to their previous one as possible. The disguise forces Draupadi into the role of a chambermaid. She thus becomes socially inferior, almost an outcast (cf. Hildebeitel 1980, 153), while the alpha-male Arjun is transformed into a eunuch dance instructor, his virile masculinity symbolically turned into sexual abstinence (150).[9] While many critics make well-founded arguments for Arjun's disguise as an invocation of the androgynous god Siva (cf. Hildebeitel 1980, Custodi), the year in disguise brings an accentuated reversal of the gender roles between Arjun and Draupadi, highlighting ambiguities that occur, in fact, throughout the narrative. Draupadi is depicted as increasingly dynamic, impatient, and even aggressive, which is contrasted with her husbands', especially Yudhishtir's and Bhim's, more passively enduring, and gentle nature, or Arjun's newly effeminate, playful character. As Custodi comments, "not only are physical sexual characteristics put into question, but on a psychological and behavioural level as well, Draupadi wears the proverbial pants while Arjuna wears the skirt" (213). In this context Hildebeitel draws attention to fact that "Draupadi's disguise and actions [...] hold strong associations with defilement" (1980, 169). In more than one way is her role bound to tasks and behaviour 'improper' for a royal heroine, which in the Indian context has strong implications of caste, impurity and transgression. A strength of Divakaruni's novel is the empathic rendering of these scenes. Furthermore, the analysis will show how the sex change of avenger Sikhandi contrasts with Draupadi's challenging of gender roles and how the narrative develops the relation between femininity and vengeance. Agreeing with Hildebeitel that the disguises reveal more than "univocal mythic associations" (1980, 173), the ancient epic already seems to allow for multiple identities and shifts between different sides of personality. Therefore it provides a fruitful ground of investigation for modern notions of gender as fragile, conditional, and part of constantly queried identities. But such an argument certainly requires the "recognition that the epic also evokes, through its symbolism, certain cultural themes, myths, ritual practices, and social

norms that are not fully attested historically until ‘post-epic’ times” (Hiltebeitel 1980, 151).

Regarding the scene of contemporary Indian women’s writing, international bestsellers like Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* or Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* and the quality and variety of fiction by authors like Githa Hariharan, Shashi Deshpande, Jhumpa Lahiri, or Bharati Mukherjee spark academic interest in India and abroad. In comparison to these writers, Mary Louise Buley-Meissner observes,[18] “formal literary criticism addressing her [Divakaruni’s] work is rare, a situation likely to change as her books are given more attention in educational circles” (43). Divakaruni is a representative of India’s educated, politically active elite of expatriate writers.[19] Frequently compared to Bharati Mukherjee (cf. Shankar 65), she is seen as giving a voice to female Asian immigrants and to portray the struggle with hybrid identities in her fictions (Mandal 115). Apart from cross-cultural perspectives, feminist issues (i.e. women’s oppression, arranged marriages, sisterhood etc.) continue to shape her works.[20] Making her agenda explicit Divakaruni wrote: “I really wanted to focus on women battling and coming out triumphant” (cited in Mandal 116). The author’s interest in a fusion of art forms characterizes her writing as well as an “ideologically” interesting mix of Hindu traditionalism, spiritualism, and emancipated feminism. While her first novel *Mistress of Spices* (1997) already experimented with magical realism and Hindu myths, she takes up these elements again in *The Palace of Illusions* (2008).

Criticism of the novel often sees the mix of Hindu scripture and fiction as making Indian reader feel uneasy (Dasa), or claims that the “mysterious potency of myth translates badly into commercial fiction” (Lindner). Scholarly reception often assesses the text, despite acknowledging Divakaruni’s poetic imagery and lucid style, as a failed attempt of making the epic’s grand sweep of time, place and characters fit into a single novel (cf. Dunn, Lindner). All critics agree on the ambitious scope of the project, typically referring to the fact that Peter Brook’s famous theatre version of the Mahabharata

lasted nine hours, while Divakaruni compresses it into just 350 pages. But perhaps, like Atwood's novella *Penelopiad*, one needs to read the text as an addition, rather than as an alternative version of the original, as a re-writing which complements a picture without claiming comprehensiveness. Divakaruni's text works both for readers who grew up with knowledge of the epic and those exposed to it only in this revised, condensed format.[21] The novel fills many gaps, not just because historical fiction dealing with Hinduism, written for Western audiences, is generally sparse, but because above all, it presents both a spiritual and irreverent feminist retelling from the viewpoint of Draupadi (Panchaali). This dramatic change de-thrones many of the male heroes, which appear to be "no longer the perfect supermen" (Dasa). Divakaruni also shifts the focus onto marked silences, e.g. on the grief of the widows after the battle of Kurukshetra. Another twist is the focus on Panchaali's intimate friendship with Krishna, but more importantly her secret love for Karna which "reminiscent, in its obsessive weakness, of Guinevere's attraction to Lancelot [...] will ultimately trigger the war and seal Panchaali's promised role in history" (Lindner). The decisive change in comparison to the original in which female voices are usually "filtered through a battery of nominally male subject-positions" (Brodbeck/Black 23), is the subjective account of a heroine who, driven by her desire to change the course of history, "owns up to a mass of flaws: pride, jealousy, arrogance, stubbornness, vanity, self-absorption, and (most threatening) unfulfilled romantic yearnings" (Lindner).

The last part of the narrative adds another dimension. During the battle Panchaali is most shocked to find that her self-perception (as the brave woman wronged, admired for enduring hardships) is completely at odds with the opinion of the women around her, who, consumed by their own suffering gaze only in fear at "the witch who might, with a wave of her hand, transform them into widows" (PI, 258). The portrayal of the battle of Kurukshetra and its aftermath present perhaps Divakaruni's most radical modification of the plot of the original epic. The focus on the subjective female consciousness

is here broadened to draw attention to what is omitted in the older text: “But here’s something Vyasa didn’t put down in his Mahabharata: Leaving the field, the glow traveled to a nearby hill, where it paused for a moment over a weeping woman” (PI, 298). Highlighting the grief of the women, the narrative presents a different angle of the morale of the battle between families and thoroughly blurs the distinction between kin and enemies, between winners and losers. After the battle, the grieving widows try to jump onto the funeral pyres. Faced with a mass sati, which would add unimaginably to the tragedy of the war, king Yudhisthir is rendered helpless: “If it had been a battle, he would have known what kind of command to give his men. But here he was at a loss, paralyzed by guilt and compassion and the ancient and terrible tradition the women had invoked” (PI, 312). This crisis forces Panchaali to finally prioritize sisterhood over her own interests and emotions. She steps forward to address the crowd, speaking as a woman and mother sharing their grief and manages to avert more deaths (cf. PI, 314). The devastation of the war, which had made Hastinapur “largely a city of women” (PI, 322), triggers a further change of Panchaali. She takes action, but this appears now to be driven less by personal than political interest and feelings of community: “It was time I shook off my self-pity and did something. I resolved to form a separate court, a place where women could speak their sorrows to other women” (PI, 323). Divakaruni’s feminist agenda underlines this almost utopian vision of a new city rising from the ruins, now a haven of safety and respect, a place of equality for women: “And even in the later years [...], Hastinapur remained one of the few cities where women could go about their daily lives without harassment” (PI, 325). This is sustained through another plot change. Whereas in the original the only remaining heir to continue the Pandava line, is a son, Divakaruni turns Parikhshit into a daughter, who takes on Panchaali’s legacy and realizes a peaceful female supremacy.

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