

## **Myths Then and Today: An Analysis of the (Re)Creation of the Mahabharata by Women Writers**

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As far back as we can trace human history, the human (homo) community has always participated in narrating (naran) stories. These stories are known by different names. Myths being one of them are the most complex and malleable of all forms. Myths began as primitive religious narratives. They were at times accused of being false, fictitious and far-removed from life. Some scholars considered them to be sacred narratives and assumed that they were literally true.

Myths hold an important position in human psychology and society, as it is through them that we can delve into the past .They hold a key to our future. Carl Jung, expressed that all human societies go through the same stages of intellectual and cultural development and that nature and psyche are the same in all human beings. He thus considered the psychological processes to be manifested in the same way in our expressive behaviour across ages, through our myths. That is why probably, we have similar birth, evolution myths across cultures.

With a systematic breakdown in the joint family set- up, myths are no longer handed down to us through our urban-educated-in- English parents. It is partly through media representations including T.V. serials (thanks to B. R. Chopra and Ramanand Sagar), films and plays based on the plots culled from our epics (where mythical characters, often shorn of their complexities, are reduced to stereotypes) are most of us here, products of nuclear families, introduced to the Ramayana and the Mahabharata-the repositories of Hindu mythology .

It is with this media exposure, relevant reading and interaction with people, that I realised that in our country, myths have a long tradition; and how we see ourselves collectively or individually depends a great deal upon our myths. These are a part of our psyche, part of our cultural histories. Also our epics and Puranas are with us in every step of our lives; we can see them in our conversations, dances, songs, poems, proverbs and also in our films.

Writers in India often go to epics in search of some truths about themselves and their conditions. The values in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are still an intrinsic part of us.

To quote Prof. Dandekar,

“If there is any one single work which has proved to be of the greatest significance in the making of the life and thought of Indian people and whose tradition continues to live even to this day and influence, in one way or another, the various aspects of Indian life, it is the Mahabharata.” (A Toppling World-View, Writing from the Margin, Pg199)

Commenting on the malleability of our epics, the poet and scholar, the late A. K. Ramanujan, in an essay titled ‘Three Hundred Ramayanas’, asks, ‘How many Ramayanas? Three Hundred? Three Thousand?’ Here he focuses on the easy adaptability of these oral narratives to suit different contexts, locales, by different people.

In the same manner by going back to the epics, women writers retell these stories from their own unique point of view. Women writers all over India, in all languages have been exploring myths. However, while retelling stories, women writers, need to first have a language of their own. Words and ideas cannot mean the same to women as they mean to men, because the meanings of words have been built round the interests of men. Women, have not participated in the process of word making. These thoughts resonate in the Afterword to *The Stone Women*, by Shashi Deshpande, where she states that “...the basic problem is that not only myths have originated with men, their interpretation has also been in male hands.” (Pg87)

Besides, all women in myths have been created by men to fulfil their various needs, “There is the eternal child to be protected and controlled, the self-sacrificing mother to nurture and cherish the child, the chaste partner to guarantee exclusive rights and an undoubted paternity of children and the temptress to titillate and provide sexual gratification. There is also the goddess to provide morality. What place does a real, thinking, feeling woman have in this agenda?” (‘Telling Our Own Stories’, Writing from the Margin and Other Essays, Pg 90)

In a similar vein, Simone de Beauvoir, feels that “Women have no virile myths in which their projects are reflected, they still dream through the dreams of men. Gods made by males are the gods they worship.” (Afterword, *The Stone Women*, Pg 88). The Mahabharata was also supposedly composed by sage Vyasa (again, a man!), who played a part in the events and was an eye witness to many of them. So was the Ramayana, by Valmiki.

A possible solution to this issue could be by replacing these ideal male- devised mythological models with ‘replacement models’. Elaborating on the term ‘replacement models’, Chaman Nahal writes:

“It is very difficult to construct a replacement model. One cannot escape the myth-the conditioning myth with which one has grown up. Unless we construct new myths, we cannot construct replacement models. We all revere Sita and Savitri; they did something out of loyalty, out of dedication. We may not like it today, but can we disown them? We cannot escape the myths, so, the replacement models are to be constructed in the context of the myths we already have.” (‘Feminism in English Fiction: From and Variations’, *Feminism and Recent English Fiction*)

Women writers dealt with in this paper -Shashi Deshpande, Irawati Karve, Mahasweta Devi and Pratibha Ray, have precisely tried to construct new myths in the context of the myths already existing in the Mahabharata. These writers have probed the minds of iconic male and female characters from the Mahabharata and have presented them with voices that have sensibilities of today.

In *The Stone Women*, a novella, Shashi Deshpande uses myth as a technique. It is through these short stories, to which the epic provides a common background, the author has tried to revisit her mythological sisters. She has tapped their feminist consciousness from an awakened woman’s point of view.

The artist Shashi Deshpande carves beautiful images in this text. The first story *The Stone Women*, after which the novella takes its title, speaks volumes about the depiction of women throughout ages in architecture found all across India. These stone women epitomise the passions and desires of men who have carved them out of stone, thus women are uniformly depicted as, “.lush-bodied, high-breasted women carved on rectangular stone panels, leaning provocatively out of them, towards us, it seems.” (*The Stone Women*, Pg11)

On a metaphorical level the title includes the entire female fraternity from the past to the present. Just like the female protagonist in the story, a young, newly married woman, who has to be on her guard to assert her individual existence, so do we have to be alert constantly and keep breaking new ground in all areas of life or else run the risk of being one of the stone women; frozen for all time into a pose willed by the creator. Shashi Deshpande sends out a strong message-to carve a unique identity or exist forever in the form of stone women.

In *The Inner Rooms*, she invades the mind space of Amba and her two sisters, abducted by Bhishma, at the time of their swayamwara, for getting them married to Vichitravirya, ‘a puppet in the hands of Bhishma’. Amba, an anachronism in her time, has a mind of her own and speaks for herself. She refuses to bow down to the rules of the game formulated by the Bhishmas of the world. She expresses her love for the king of

Saubha, Salva, who with a ruptured ego, refuses to 'accept' Amba; he is 'defeated' by Bhishma at the swayamwara. Accepting her would mean disgracing to his manhood.

This proves to be a turning point in Amba's life, she questions at this juncture, "honour, dishonour, right, wrong-what are these but words used by a man to cover their real emotions?" (The Stone Women, Pg 21). Amba realises that it is pointless to continue being a pawn in the hands of patriarchy, wilfully chooses her own nirvana by choosing death over a life of servitude, echoing probably the thoughts of Satan in Paradise Lost , "Better to reign in hell, than serve in heaven."

*And what has been decided*, brings the reader and Draupadi face- to- face with the intentions of the Pandavas. The Pandavas, who are ready to settle with just five villages, had conveniently forgotten the insults Draupadi suffered at the Kuru court.

"Give us five villages –we ask for no more. One village for each one of us. And there will be peace." (The Stone Women, Pg 25)

Thus, Draupadi is forced to think, "We will forget-yes, even more easily-what they did to me, we will never think of the hands that touched me so cruelly, we will never remember the words they spoke to me. And all those oaths we took that day, the promises we made-yes ,we will forget them too." (The Stone Women, Pg 28)

The fact that promises made to women did not mean much, they were so light that they could be easily blown away. The fact that men spoke a different language and their promises were too hollow and could be negotiated is experienced by Draupadi, when she is disillusioned by the disinterest shown by the Pandavas in avenging her insults .

The anti-climax is experienced when all efforts at getting what the Pandavas want from the Kauravas fall flat, and they (Pandavas) put up a show as though they have obliged Draupadi and agreed to go to war as the *Queen wanted it!* Here, Shashi Deshpande brings to fore the Janus-faced patriarchy that we all have experienced at some point or the other in our lives.

*In Hear Me Sanjaya*, the hard hearted, not so beautiful Kunti engages Sanjaya, the messenger in a dialogue, which ends up as a monologue. Hardened by circumstances, forced to become a charioteer of her own life, Kunti is forced to take decisions not ruled by her heart but by her intellect. Wronged by her biological and adoptive father, unable to acknowledge her son born unwittingly and finally being cursed by her own eldest born, Yudhishtira, for having kept the secret of Karna's birth. Kunti is a face of so many women we come across in our lives, who do not experience love from any

quarter, yet carry out their responsibilities with dedication; in the process if they wrong the Draupadis or Karnasin life, they feel it is justified keeping in mind the big picture of life.

*Mirrors*-reflects the life of Sachidevi, Indra's beautiful queen, who devotedly functions as a mirror, which inspite of her husband's womanising and wanderings, reflects the image that he wishes to see the image of a hero, the irresistible conqueror of men and of women; basically the king who could do no wrong. Although Nahusha's wife, her counterfoil, creates awareness of the boundless power a woman possesses, yet Sachidevi is not empowered enough to walk out of the palace. She still continues to be a mirror, albeit an enlightened one. Here one is reminded of socialite wives, who inspite of their spouses' infidelity, carry on with the sham called marriage as several things are at stake. However, the powerless Sachidevi does not give up hope, when she says, "...power came out of your courage, your strength." That was no illusion." I don't have them ,no, not as yet. But perhaps someday." (The Stone Women, Pg62)

*The Day of the Golden Deer* is Sita's evaluation of Lord Rama as being the victim of his own ideas of himself. He was still chasing the golden deer of perfection, while she had surrendered the golden deer-she had given up on the idea of perfection in any man, in any human for that matter. Here Sita is portrayed like any other woman, who has been through the entire gamut of peaks and troughs in the form of expectation, disillusionment in relationships and finally an acceptance of life as it is.

*The Story*, is a mythical account of the material obsession in human beings that starts with possession of materialistic things and ends up with possessing the perfect feminine being, that is illusionary. This craving for perfection leads to frustration and ends up in loss of the meaning of life.

Shashi Deshpande deconstructs the mythical image of women created by men in a systematic manner. The image created by men depict these women from the Mahabharata, with an angelic halo, submitting to the demands of their men without a whimper of protest. However, it should be understood that the way the exalted virtues of tolerance, kindness and faithfulness are accepted as female traits, in the same vein self-assertion should not be seen as a contrast but as a trait arising out of these virtues. In *The Stone Women*, although the contexts, figures and situations are mythological; the responses and reactions are akin to contemporary women.

Shashi Deshpande gained insight into the Mahabharata after she read Irawati Karve's *Yuganta*. To quote Shashi Deshpande on the influence of *Yuganta*, "Her (Irawati Karve's) readings of the characters in the Mahabharata showed me how differently a woman would view these characters; her interpretations made the women (and even the men) much more real and plausible-at least to me." (The Stone Women, Pg 88).

This radically new approach of viewing the Mahabharata, by Irawati Karve, spurred me on to take up *Yuganta* as the second text for this paper and *to set off* on a fascinating journey.

Irawati Karve's approach to the epic in *Yuganta* is that of an anthropologist-mercilessly practical, often giving the impression that she has put her characters under a microscope, thus presenting a clinical analysis of their motives. She adopts an historical approach to the text. She does not deal with the religious aspects of the epic stating those to be later interpolations. To her, like other Indians, it is not an imaginary tale, it represents real events that took place around 1000 B.C. The Mahabharata was called *Jaya* (victory), in its earliest form of narration. It was a poem of triumph and told of victory of a particular king over his rival kingsmen. For centuries there have been additions to it and today we have various versions of the epic.

Irawati Karve breaks new ground when she holds Bhishma responsible, the most respected character in the epic, for having wronged two generations of women, who face hardships in life due to his oath to celibacy. He had wronged Amba, who cursed him and had to take another birth as Shikhandi to avenge the insult of her previous birth. Ambika and Ambalika (abducted along with Amba at the swayamwara), were forced to unite with the horrible looking, dark complexioned, red-eyed man with unkempt hair- Vyasa- "these poor women were so repulsed at his sight", that they were forced to substitute a maid servant for the third time instead of offering themselves.

Bhishma wronged the second set of women-Gandhari, Kunti and Madri-by getting them as brides for the flawed princes of the Kuru dynasty. In his zeal to perpetuate the Kuru house, he humiliated and disgraced these women. Only Shishupala had the courage to denounce Bhishma at the yajna held by Yudhishtira, for wronging Amba and accusing him of being impotent not celibate.

Karve states that there was no attitude of chivalry towards women during the Mahabharata but none was as callous as Bhishma. Karve questions, "Had Bhishma achieved anything in keeping his vows?" (*Yuganta*, Pg29) In today's scenario we have many head strong patriarchs, who like Bhishma assume a difficult role i.e to take decisions on behalf of their children, and have to play their part to the end. Honour killings, the Khap Panchayat are manifestations of the rigid principles adopted by Bhishmas of today, at the hands of whom many Ambas are sacrificed.

The character of Gandhari is well etched; she wilfully opts to blind herself against all injustices. Dhritarashtra accepts in this text, having wronged her and pleads for forgiveness. Gandhari realises that only love can heal and establish bonds, which forces her to open her blind fold.

At the end she holds her husband's hand and walks towards the pyre (forest fire). If not in life, in death, she is united with her husband.

Kunti is wronged by every man in her life. Kunti establishes the fact that a woman is considered only to be a field to produce children from any man her father or husband wished. Born as Pritha, to Shurasena, her biological father gave her away to Kuntibhoja to have an heir, since Kuntibhoja did not have a daughter who could be used to wait on the Brahmin sage, out of whose blessings he could get his progeny.

Kunti's staying with a Brahmin for a year could result in the birth of a child (Karna), was no extraordinary occurrence. This scientific argument helps in busting the birth myth of Karna. Furthermore the maid also helped Kunti in disposing of the child thus born, with lots of gold, thus supporting the fact that this eventuality was foreseen and was provided for by Kuntibhoja, when he gave her to the Brahmana.

This son was a source of sorrow all through her life. One father gave her away to a friend that was the source of one sorrow, the adoptive father gave her in marriage to an impotent man Pandu, that was the source of another sorrow, the rest of her sorrows were the result of this union. After Pandu's and Madri's death, she had to drudge the path of life single-handedly with her sons. Knowing the fact well that marriages amongst the Kshatriyas were motivated by political needs rather than love, she got all her sons married to Draupadi, so that the brothers would remain united. She insisted on Bhima marrying Hidimba; and the son born of this union proved to be an asset at the Kurukshetra war.

A true Kshatriya woman, she never complained about the adversitiesshe had to face. Instead, when she found her eldest son craving for peace and not war, she goaded him into action with her harsh words.

Finally, she atoned for her lifelong sin of not having acknowledged Karna as her son, by asking Yudhishtira to perform his last rites. She died the way she lived, unbending, consumed by the forest fire.

Draupadi, born out of the yajna fire, gave the Pandavas their status and the reason to remain united lifelong. Karve calls her, 'Nathavatianathavat' (having husbands, but like a widow) (Yuganta, Pg 91) as each time she is dishonoured, her husbands and fathers-in-law stand watching in silence. Each agony of the dying Yuga, Draupadi suffered in her own person.

The disrobing episode, where Draupadi suffered at the hands of patriarchy finds semblance in society even today, as the values of our society even today are misplaced. Victimising a woman comes easy in the patriarchal society, that tells its men they are right in 'putting a woman in her place'.

“The recent Guwahati incident where a teenager was groped, violated, molested for more than thirty minutes in full public glare showed the world that the men committing this heinous act were neither deterred by the fact that they were in public place, nor the fact that it was being recorded.” (Times Life, ‘Why the molester won’t be deterred any time soon.’)

The fact that molestation is a cognizable, but bailable offence in India did not act as a deterrent. Similarly the presence of seniors at the Kuru court did not deter the revenge-driven Kauravas.

Also the hair-raising account of the sexual assault on the British journalist Natasha Smith by an unrelenting mob of hundreds of men at Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt, reminds us of the humiliation that Draupadi must have experienced. Violation against women, thus continues to be a trend with onlookers present, sadly through ages, universally.

Draupadi is also blamed for having caused the Mahabharata, according to the Jain Purana. In actuality the day Dhritrashtra was denied the throne due to his blindness and Pandu was made king, the seeds of war were sown. Draupadi did not cause the war, she wanted it but as true inheritors of Indian patriarchal society that they were, the Pandavas were hardly men to bow down to their wives wishes.

Draupadi’s questioning whether Yudhishtira had staked himself before he staked her, before her disrobing, was supposed to be the cause of all misfortunes that ensued. Instead of asking questions, she should have begged for forgiveness. However, technically sound the question was, it was seen as the height of pretentiousness; a young Kshatriya-bride showing off her knowledge in front of elders was hardly appreciated. Yudhishtira called her a ‘Lady Pandit’, hardly a compliment in the eyes of the Kshatriyas of the Mahabharata. Although like a modern woman Draupadi tried to salvage her dignity with her reasoning, yet this part of her was not acceptable to patriarchy as intelligence and scholarship were considered a male prerogative.

In spite of roughing it through life, the worst allegation made by Yudhishtira, when they set out on their last journey where Draupadi was the first to fall, was of her loving Arjuna more all through her life. This was the worst accusation that a devoted wife could take; especially after having sacrificed everything to carry on the balancing act successfully all through life.

In *Yuganta*, Irawati Karve paints a huge canvas called the Mahabharata making it relevant even today. By demystifying all characters and presenting them with clay feet, we find a bit



of ourselves in Kunti, Gandhari and Draupadi and can completely identify with them in their reactions to situations. Karve's interpretation of the Mahabharata reveals that all human life ends in frustration and human toil, expectations, hates and friendship—all seem puny, without substance.

We should consider ourselves fortunate to be part of such heritage that offers us myths which when altered a little can easily suit current times. To sum up the significance of the epic in Irawati Karve's own words, 'I am indeed fortunate that I can read today a story called Jaya, which was sung three thousand years ago, and discover myself in it.' (Yuganta, Pg 217)

In *After Kurukshetra*, Mahasweta Devi presents the battle of the Mahabharata and its immediate aftermath. The three short stories present a convincing and consistent picture of the 'other' and the 'marginalised'. Mahasweta Devi speaks of women from a woman's point of view, in a woman's language, marked by thoughts and feelings that mainstream literature wishes to sideline.

Through all the three stories, she reveals the woman's side of the Kurukshetra war. The first of the three titled, *The Five Women*, is about young lokavritta (common people) war widows. These widowed young women are courageous enough to accompany their husbands to war, but watch them fighting from far. They have no illusions about life; they are very clear that there would be no chariots descending from Divyalok to deliver their husband's souls as they did not consider the war to be holy. Where blood was thirsty for the blood of the same family was not their idea of a Dharma." Brother kills brother, uncle kills nephew, shishya kills guru. It may be your idea of dharma. It is not ours." (*After Kurukshetra*, Pg 26). They are aware of their rights, their power and lead dignified lives that are very close to nature.

The Rajavritta (royalty) have completely different notions of life. Devi has juxtaposed the life of the naïve Uttara, Abhimanyu's wife with the life of these five women. In spite of being war widows of the foot soldiers, these five women, named after five rivers, have more aspirations and dreams of the life that lay ahead. "We need husbands, we need children." "... We will create life!" (*After Kurukshetra*, Pg 25) For as long as there was life, they believed in fulfilling its demands and not repressing it like the Rajavritta.

On the other hand, Uttara's life, after the child would be born and handed over to royal care after a year, would be full of penance, prescribed rituals and rites and self-denial. Devi tears the velvety veneer of the Rajavritta and exposes what lies beneath - unpreparedness and ignorance amongst the Rajavritta about the brass tacks of real life.

*Kunti and the Nishadin*, deals with Kunti's inner mindscape. She has repressed herself throughout her life, and gives a vent in the form of a monologue. Her life in the Rajavritta has been full of playing different roles, where there was no space of being her true self. She confesses all her sins, but not the heinous crime where to save herself and the Pandavas, she burns a Nishadin (a tribal woman) and her five sons. The nishadin who confronts her is the eldest daughter in law of the nishadin; who along with her five sons was then brutally burnt to death.

She makes Kunti realise that harming innocents in their self-interest is the most unpardonable of all sins. The nishadin believes in poetic justice and tells Kunti of the fate that awaits her in the form of the forest fire which she would be unable to escape.

*Souvali*, the third story in the text reveals the self-righteousness of Souvali, a prostitute in service of Dhritarashtra. She gives birth to Dhritarashtra's son named Souvalya or Yuyutsu. She does not follow the rituals that a widow should follow, when Dhritarashtra is dead, as she is very clear that her son and she were of no great consequence to the king when he was alive. Also she tells Vyasa who was to write the Mahabharata, that she did not even want a mention. She wants her son to realise that in spite of him having fought the battle from the Pandava's side, he should not expect them to accept him as their own.

In *After Kurukshetra* - Mahasweta Devi is not re-writing history or the epic for the contemporary peasant or tribal community as the nishadins of the Mahabharata cannot match the people in contemporary times. Mahasweta Devi is not trying to displace or replace the canonized version with an alternate reading of the epics, she uses it as a tool to open us up to different feelings, emotions and situations that are unexpected.

In *Yajnaseni*, originally written by Pratibha Ray in Oriya and translated in English by Pradeep Bhattacharya, the epic is viewed from the point of view of Draupadi. The epic is in the form of a letter that starts backwards chronologically. In this text Draupadi is clearly aware of the purpose of her birth i.e. to establish dharma and annihilate evil. Born nubile out of the sacrificial altar of dharma, the prophecy at her birth is to establish dharma and destroy the Kauravas. This dictates the misfortunes that she has to face all through her life. She takes every difficulty in her stride and proves to be a faithful daughter, a chaste wife. She endures different husbands with different dispositions, with hardly any physical or mental space left.

Ray questions whether it is Draupadi's pride in her learning and wisdom that has led to her downfall. Ray's Draupadi is a woman trapped by circumstances; one cannot but help sympathising with the Draupadi created by Ray. However, Ray has also portrayed her as an

‘agent of change’ in her time and honours her for holding the Pandavas together; but for Draupadi, the Pandavas wouldn’t have functioned as one single force to be reckoned with.

These representations by different writers of the Mahabharata drive home the fact that we are not much different from our mythical counterparts. These texts teach us to stand our ground and to fend for ourselves. We could also imbibe the virtue of patience and tolerance which we are losing out today. When we talk about needing space in a relationship, we need to remind ourselves of the near claustrophobic life that Draupadi would have led, with no physical or mental space whatsoever. Similarly, when we think of self-respect, sacrifice and about compromises made in life, we can reassure ourselves that things can’t get worse than what Gandhari, Kunti and Draupadi would have faced.

The pressing need of the hour however, is a paradigm shift in the way women are to be treated in society today, for which we need to sow permanent seeds of change. This can only happen by changing men inherently, by teaching our boys to respect women and to put them first.

Tomorrow definitely holds the promise of a better man as long as we catch them young and train them right.

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