

ANALYSIS OF GENDER-BASED MARGINALISATION: REVISITING MAHABHARATA THROUGH A POST- MODERN APPROACH

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Abstract

Myth is a history that is far-fetched and percolated generation after generation through human consciousness. Mythology has always aligned itself to promote certain voices, viewpoints, and perspectives over others. Mythology vividly delineates the marginalization whether it is based on caste or gender. My paper attempts to analyze how certain characters are marginalized and pushed to the brink of half-existence and seem to share their frustrations of being misunderstood or half-understood which were very neatly ignored in certain ancient texts. Some writers of the Post-Modern era write about these marginalized characters in their version of retellings. This paper attempts to trace the elements of marginalization based on gender which is vividly explained in the retellings of Mahabharata. The reason for choosing the study of marginalized characters is that many Post-Modern authors, especially Indian writers, give voice to such characters considered to be marginalized and provide a platform for the reader to visualize the same story from a different angle. In the hands of Post-Modern writers, the mythological past takes different interesting shapes and we get to know the flip side of the same story. It is the standard norm to privilege one group over the other but the Retellings of the epic give voices to the voiceless and unnoticed characters, question the binaries, and deconstruct the hegemonic notions.

This paper aims to light the suppressed voices of the suppressed personalities in the Grand narrative of the Indian Mythological epic Mahabharata. The analysis of the stories presented in this paper deals with marginalization based on gender – be it female or the LGBT community.

Keywords – Marginalization, Gender, Mythology, Queer Narratives, Hegemonic Notion, Folklore

Myth is a truth that is subjective, intuitive, cultural, and grounded in faith (Mahadevan,98). What is called a myth today might be the reality of a different era. So, Myth is a history that is far-fetched and percolated generation after generation through human consciousness. Mythology has always aligned itself to promote certain voices, viewpoints, and perspectives over others. This generates a dichotomy between the articulated and marginalized voices more clearly. Mythology vividly delineates the marginalization whether it is based on caste or gender. My paper attempts to analyze how certain characters are marginalized and pushed to the brink of half-existence and seem to share their frustrations of being misunderstood or half-understood which were very neatly ignored in certain Grand Narratives of ancient text.

Some writers of the Post-Modern era write about these marginalized characters in their version of retellings. This paper attempts to trace the elements of marginalization based on gender which is vividly explained in the retellings of Mahabharata. The reason for choosing the study of marginalized characters is that many Post-Modern authors, especially Indian writers, give voice to such characters considered to be marginalized and provide a platform for the reader to

visualize the same story from a different angle. In the hands of Post-Modern writers, the mythological past takes different interesting shapes and we get to know the flip side of the same story. It is the standard norm to privilege one group over the other but the Retellings of the epic give voices to the voiceless and unnoticed characters, question the binaries, and deconstruct the hegemonic notions.

The stories of Indian Mythology consistently favoured men. The best stories have always been men's stories. Women have never been given due reverence in society. Women's point of view is written, interpreted, and told by men. These stories always showcase how a woman should be and more importantly how she should not be. These stories accuse women of breaking the rules which are made by the patriarchal society and the punishments women receive to showcase the limit and boundaries of females in society. Some examples are Sita, accused of crossing the line made by the patriarchal society, Madri (wife of Pandu) objectified and used as a commodity, and Amba who was rejected, demeaned and discarded by her lover, her father, and ultimately by her abductor.

Marginalization can be defined as social, economic, political as well as psychological discrimination among human beings. The first target or victim of this theory was women who were commonly being, if not referred to, thought of as "The Second Sex". In her work "Second Sex", Simon De Beauvoir wrote, "One is not born a woman but becomes a woman". Here, the word "woman" does not refer to physical appearance but mental conditioning which is considered inferior, suppressive, and marginalized. Beauvoir said women are completely at fault because they allowed men to look at them as inferiors. They accepted being called the second sex and traded their freedom for security. She claimed Mythology portrayed women as if they are not an ideal match for men. They were represented as inessential, incomplete, and mutilated, unlike men who were essential, absolute, and transcendental. She even quoted Aristotle who said, "A female is a female by virtue of certain lack of qualities." Nowadays, Post-Modern writers take up the characters that are unheard or unspoken of. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions* portrays Draupadi as an authoritative and independent woman who shares an indistinguishable platform with the men around her rather than being pliant. Her life is the portrayal of her free will and not any sort of dictum imposed upon her by the people around her giving Draupadi a fairground to speak her mind out in the overwhelming patriarchal society. Divakaruni's interpretations of the epic provide a complete narrative, sometimes missing from the original epic, giving a more substantial role to the women of the story, portraying them as equal in society (Mahadevan, 89).

Kavita Kane, yet another eminent writer who was formerly a journalist, wrote several novels emphasizing the Gynocentric aspect of mythical stories, making these novels different from the historical texts. Kavita Kane takes up her characters from the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. She pens a collection of five novels taking up her female characters from these two epics and transforming such unsung female characters into the protagonists of her novels. Kane reconstructs a gynocentric version of the mythological stories by re-imagining her female protagonists, who were merely a footnote in the mythical stories. Kane usually hand-picks some of the most bizarre characters that are out of the ordinary. She sometimes even creates her characters to tell her readers what might have been the case if the characters behave in a certain manner. *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* is her debut novel and tells us the story of Uruvi, Karna's second wife who was an imaginary character in Kane's realm. How Uruvi's story is amalgamated into *Mahabharata* is phenomenal. The author has painted the emotions and feelings of a wife very accurately through his writings. Uruvi, knows the future of her husband very well but is helpless and can do nothing to change or modify this fact. Kane wrote another

book “The Fisher’s Queen Dynasty” which is about “Satyavati”, another character from Mahabharata. The journey from Matsyagandha to Satyavati is depicted in this novel. Kane in this novel portrays the patriarchal idea of loyalty, explains the differences between integrity, morality, and dharma, articulates the socio-cultural ideas and examined the role of duty and love. The author aims to provide a platform for different emotions, feelings, and situations of characters which have not been given the required attention in the past. These novels subvert the male perspectives and offer readers the remained stories, voices, and experiences of women characters that are primarily ignored in the narratives of the past. Barring a few exceptions, women find scant references in both Ramayana and Mahabharata. The portrayal of the marginalised and unnoticed female characters in Indian Mythology, the novels have hit a nerve with women who may have been ignored and left out of the mythology.

Marginalization does not limit itself to the boundaries of the Second Sex rather it takes a step forward and shows its traces to another community which is fondly referred to as “The Third Sex.” “The Sex” that is looked down upon, “the sex” that still symbolizes obscenity and vulgarity, and “the sex” that is still now struggling to get accepted and accommodated in society. Women have at least been given a platform just below “men”, but these are the “ones” who do not even have a place in society. They are derogatorily referred to as hijra, chakka, sissy, and so on and after a lot of struggle, now, are classified into a category popularly known as LGBT (Lesbians, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender). The Queer theory is a Meta- Modern phenomenon that marks the recognition of queerness and its community. However, we can find ample shreds of evidence of their existence in Hindu Mythology but they are not talked about very often till the concept of retellings emerged and certain writers present the perspective of the queer community that has been shackled in the fetters of voicelessness and are eventually marginalized for ages.

Dr Devdutt Pattanaik, an Indian physician, mythologist, author, columnist, and theorist whose work focuses on religion and mythology has written several retellings of the Mahabharata incorporating the viewpoints and visions of different characters of Mahabharata. A lot of his works are based on the relevance of sacred stories, symbols, and rituals and their impact on modern times. Some of Pattanaik’s popular books are Myth = Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology, Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of The Mahabharata, Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of The Ramayana, The Pregnant King, Shyam: An Illustrated Retelling Of Bhagavata, Ramayana Vs Mahabharata: My Playful Comparison, Shikhandi, and Other Queer Tales They Don’t Tell You. While going through his works one could able to visualize the epic from a different perspective. Pattanaik very efficiently lights the suppressed and marginalized voices through his works. His book Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales, They Don’t Tell You is a marvellous collection of short stories that account for Queer narratives in Indian folklore. The title itself says a lot of things about the book. Devdutt sets forth on a journey that chronicles stories of lesbians, gays, transgenders, and homosexuals and advocates that they are perfectly natural, leaving their acceptance or rejection to the norms of society and culture that are dynamic in nature. To understand queerness, cultural filters are necessary. What’s also needed is the awareness that these filters can sometimes choke voices (Pattanaik,5). Rejection or acceptance of gender plurality and sexuality cannot deny the existence of voices that are suppressed and marginalized.

Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales They Don’t Tell You is a compilation of myths across India. In this work, Pattanaik explained a few stories related to each category of the LGBT community. Ratnavali, who became the companion of her female friend portrays Lesbianism; Samavan, who became the wife of his male friend and Aravan, whose wife was a complete man

delineates the elements of gayness; Vishnu, who became a woman (Mohini) to enchant gods, demons and hermits depict the features of bisexuals and Transness is explained in the stories of Shikhandi and Arjuna. Cross-dressing is explained in the stories of Krishna and Samba. These stories are hidden in the Grand Narratives of Indian Epics which is unveiled by Mr Pattanaik in his works.

The Mahabharata is the greatest Indian epic that reached its final form between 300 BCE and 300 CE (Pattanaik,47). The character of Shikhandi is crucial in Mahabharata as his appearance in the scene is the climax of the Kurukshetra war. Even after fighting for nine consecutive days, the Pandavas and Kauravas did not reach any conclusion because Bhishma who was leading the Kauravas was a formidable force in the battle. Besides no one could kill him as he has been granted a boon to choose the time of his death. So, Krishna brought Shikhandi, born a woman but later goes through a very specific change genitally to satisfy her wife after marriage. Bhishma sees Shikhandi as a woman and surrenders his weapons as people in that era do not fight a woman in the war. Taking this act as an advantage Arjuna released his arrows and pinned down Bhishma to the ground leading to his downfall.

Shikhandini was Drupad's daughter but was brought up like a warrior and even got a wife, which is known to us. But on the wedding night, Shikhandini's wife discovered that the person she was married to was actually a woman. Shikhandini's wife was in utmost shock and returned to her parental abode to avenge this deceitful marriage. The situation was salvaged by Stuna(a yaksha), and Shikhandini was lent manhood only for a night to accomplish his husbandry responsibilities of fulfilling the sexual gratification of his newly wedded companion. When Shikhandini returned to Sthuna to lend back the manhood which he acquired only for a day, Kubera(master of Yaksha) got impressed by Shikhandini's integrity and allowed Shikhandini to use Yaksha's manhood for the rest of her life. This transformed Shikhandini into Shaikhandi.

But retellings stay away from this facet and tend to depict Shikhandi either as a eunuch (castrated male) or as a male-to-female transgender (man trapped inside a female body) or a hermaphrodite or as a man who was previously a woman (Amba) in his past life. Shikhandi is portrayed as a man of doubtful sexuality and hence even though this character plays a very crucial role in Mahabharata, it falls under the bracket of marginalized characters revealing patriarchal biases exist even in the queer category. Ancient Hindu works of literature like Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Puranas, were more liberal than the general population in the 21st century. Devdutt Pattanaik mentioned, "Hindu mythology makes constant reference to queerness."

The next character that shows "Queerness" is Arjuna. Arjuna was temporarily emasculated for holding back. Once Urvashi, a celestial nymph of Indra's kingdom visited earth to experience pleasure. She spotted a handsome man on the bank of the river Amravati. Smitten by the sexually alluring personality of this man, Urvashi could not smother her desire and approached him intending consummation. Arjuna denied Urvashi's proposal. Arjuna was the son of Indra and Urvashi was the lover of Indra. So, Arjuna considers Urvashi as her mother. Urvashi explained that being an apsara she would not belong to anyone and the rules of mortality would not apply to her by any means, but Arjuna refused. Urvashi cursed Arjuna, "Only a eunuch refuses a willing woman. So be one" (Pattanaik,110). Arjuna asked Indra to revoke the curse but the curse could only be modified and not revoked. So, the curse was modified as Urvashi's will but only for a year of Arjuna's choice. Arjuna used it during the incognito exile period that was for a year. Arjuna disguised himself as a eunuch called Brihanlalla and was employed in the royal women's palace for the job of taking dance classes. He taught dance to the girls

residing in the palace along with princess Uttara, the daughter of King Virata. Certain retellings and television shows on Mahabharata show Arjuna as a male dressing like a woman. But due to the effect of the curse, Arjuna lost his manhood and regained it only after the completion of one year.

In Tamil Mahabharata, there is a mention of a character named Aravan. Aravan was the son of Arjun and his serpent wife Uloopi. The battle of Kauravas and Pandavas is a well-known fact. Both of them share equal strength, profound knowledge of the weapons and capable

warriors on their side. The only way left for the Pandavas to persuade the Goddess of War and assure their victory over Kauravas was human sacrifice before the war. Krishna, Arjuna and Aravan were found eligible candidates for this sacrifice but the role of Krishna and Arjuna were unavoidable. So, Aravan stepped forward for the sacrifice but on a condition. He wanted to get married before his immolation. No woman was willing to get married to a person who was doomed to die the following day of marriage. Being out of options, Krishna transformed himself into a beautiful and attractive woman (Mohini) and spent the wedding night with Aravan. After Aravan's death, Krishna lamented for Aravan as his widow. This incident suggests queerness also plays its part and contributed to Pandava's victory in the battle of Kurukshetra.

Interpretations of mythic stories, symbols and rituals are strongly influenced by the beliefs of the interpreter as well as the beliefs of those receiving the interpretation. There is no such thing as an objective interpretation (Pattanaik,36). A careful analysis of the massive written oral traditions reveals many tales that are unnoticed and neglected such as that of Shikhandi, a story of a woman who became a man to satisfy her wife; Mahadeva, who transformed himself into a woman to conceive and eventually deliver a child of his devotee; Chudala, who metamorphosed and became a man to enlighten her husband; Samavan who married his male friend; Bhagirath who was a child of two women and many more.

The function of myth in literature is to provide an equal platform for each living in this world. This paper aims to light the choked voices of the oppressed personalities in the Grand narrative of the Mythological epic Mahabharata. The analysis of the stories presented in this paper deals with marginalization based on gender – be it female or the LGBT community.

It is more important to understand that humans have an innate response to the unknown: fear or denial. In the early days when psychology was developing as a science initially, it was considered pseudo-science and many still believe that because they don't understand it. Similarly, the mere lack of knowledge about the LGBT community which is very different and unique from our rigid belief of “standard society” creates a stigma about this community and led to their marginalization and suffrage. This community has continually borne the brunt because of their body structures, sexual preferences, and psychological get-up. Some orthodox and conservative beliefs led to a lot of suicides, murders, killings, and tortures which is not good and healthy for any society. We always look upon, admire and respect our epics and mythological texts and even approach these texts to seek answers to several doubts and questions but all these become redundant when there is a need to understand a person's sexuality and his/her sexual preferences. We Indians derive our theories and practice from ancient epics and other scriptures. Therefore, it is necessary to restructure our beliefs and values. Myth is history, so we must learn from our myth and try to bring necessary changes in our mindset so that we can together form a healthy society, not only for us but for the coming generations also. Discrimination or Marginalization, whether based on gender, class or caste, will have no benefit for us or society. James Stuart Mill an activist, politician and thinker of the Victorian Age wrote in his book “On Liberty” - Actions are considered right if they encourage happiness and actions are wrong if they repudiate it. He calls it the Utilitarian Principle.

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