CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion

A selective reading of the 'others' in *The Mahabharata* brings us to the realization that the Hindu ethos does not essentialize gender, nor does it privilege a static, dominant hegemonic discourse. It is a way of life that teaches through reflection - airing thoughts, generating ideas and initiating opinions, to keep the discourse alive. K. Kunjunni Raja summarizes it for us:

> "In great literature as well as in real life, the problems that confront people in different situations are not based on the conflict between right and wrong, between Dharma and Adharma, but on the conflict between different, and often opposing duties. When there are opposing pulls from strong moral values, such as Truth and Non -violence, the problem is to decide what to do in the context." (*Moral Dilemmas in the Mahabharata* 49)

The text studied for this thesis, *The Mahabharata*, has survived three thousand years of adaptations and retellings, creating the foundation on which the rule of Dharma has been established in our country. While describing the epic as a dispassionate recital in dignified rhythmic narrative of a momentous theme of action fulfilled by heroic characters and supernatural agencies under the control of a sovereign destiny, Gayley (1899) says that the poem awakens the sense of the mysterious, the awful and the sublime. He finds the epic uplifting and calming the strife of frail humanity through perilous crises (*Methods and Materials of Literary Criticism* 424). Sukthankar considers *The Mahabha*rata a dateless and

---

A research article titled **"**Questioning the Lexicon of Silence: Subversive Women in The Mahabharata" based on this chapter is under review by *Indian Literature, Sahitya Akademi's bimonthly journal.*

and deathless poem which forms the strongest link between India, old and new. "*The Mahabharata* has certainly not ended in becoming a Chaos, as Oldenberg imagined. It has ended in becoming The Cosmos, as it presents a profound and universal philosophy leading to a glowing synthesis of life," asserts Sukthankar (*On the Meaning of the Mahabharata* 124). The timeless text still casts a spell, painting in exquisite strokes on an enormous canvas, moving from the problems of an internecine strife between brothers, to gender-dynamics, to ethics, morality and other existential dilemmas – the scope is exhaustive. This has been amply utilised by the passionate feminist myth-revisions that have connected the old to the new, continuing with the tradition of generating a debate on issues that matter.

The limitrophic Space of Agency and Empowerment

The Indic myths under the purview of our research reveal a saga of agency, subversion and empowerment, thereby giving the gendered marginal a fighting chance. We find that the margin, in the case of the examples studied for this thesis, did not consist of a disempowered passivity, but a limitrophic space which encouraged permeability. Derrida elucidates the permeability of the limitrophic space in these words:

> Limitrophy is therefore my subject. Not just because it will concern what sprouts or grows at the limit, around the limit, by maintaining the limit, but also what feeds the limit, generates it, raises it, and complicates it. Everything I'll say will consist, certainly not in effacing the limit, but in multiplying its figures, in complicating, thickening, de-linearizing, folding, and dividing the line precisely by making it increase and multiply. (*The Animal That Therefore I Am* 397)

While situating feminism, Spivak applies the Derridean tool of deconstruction to take the concept of permeability of the limitrophic margin further, enunciating that the gendered subaltern appropriated the agency and scope to secure representation (*Situating Feminism* 2010). In her preface to Derrida's '*Of Grammatology*', Spivak points out that the margin, in

terms of Derrida's concept of 'différance', undergoes constant 'erasure', giving the subaltern a chance to mobility. Derrida postulates that the sense of being is not a transcendental or trans-epochal signified, but a determined signifying trace. He posits:

> This is to affirm that within the decisive concept of ontico-ontological difference, all is not to be thought at one go; entity and being, ontic and ontological, "ontico-ontological," are, in an original style, derivative with regard to difference; and with respect to what I shall later call differance, an economic concept designating the production of differing/deferring. (*Of Grammatology* 23)

Derrida posits that if the present, living, conscious representation of a text is called by the name of discourse, and if the text constantly goes beyond this representation by the entire system of its resources and its own laws, then the question of genealogy exceeds by far the possibilities that are at present given for its elaboration. "In its syntax and its lexicon, in its spacing, by its punctuation, its lacunae, its margins, the historical appurtenance of a text is never a straight line. It is neither causality by contagion, nor the simple accumulation of layers. Nor even the pure juxtaposition of borrowed pieces," contends Derrida (ibid 101).

When we apply the Spivakian subalternity to Indic myths, we observe that the gendered subaltern – the women and the queer – keep re-configuring themselves, questioning the patriarchal hegemony and constructing the epistemic paradigms that govern their 'long road toward hegemony' (Spivak, *A Critique of Post-Colonial Reason* 310). The shift between agency and marginalization, as documented in the various discourses in the great epic, problematizes the placement of the subaltern, and asks Spivak's famous question once again: 'Can the Subaltern speak?' The answer is "no" at a perfunctory level. But at a deeper level, as we have seen in the previous chapters, the answer is an emphatic "yes" – to those who go beyond the normative patriarchal yardsticks. For them, silence, in many cases, metamorphoses into powerful voices that tell stories of suffering and humiliation, but most importantly, stories

of subversion and resistance against a treacherous society where the marginals can escape only through death.

The extent of subversion depended on the 'irreducibility of the margin' (*In Other Worlds* 107), making the situation look rather grim at times - as in the case of Renuka who was 'silenced' by a beheading – but the very fact that these myths have managed to come down to us across centuries, and have not been 'silenced', speaks volumes. Renuka emerged a goddess with considerable mileage, alive even today in the southern states of our subcontinent. The readers of *The Mahabharata* were exposed to the coup de grace delivered by Uloopi, the princess of the Nagas, to Arjuna, the Pandava. The epic narrates the subversive story where Arjuna was killed by his son Babhruvahana, at the behest of his mother Uloopi, who, in a dramatic development, brought him back to life right there on the battlefield. This exercising of agency by the woman has been brought down to us by the epic, not allowing patriarchal designs to silence it. The references to women as infantile and untrustworthy were stereotypes that were mirrored faithfully, but for every such woman who was 'incapable of completing her task' the epic brought forth a Savitri who fought with Yama and brought her husband Satyavana back to life; for every woman who 'did not deserve independence' there was a Shakuntala who chose to marry on her own, and forced her reluctant husband, King Dushhyanta, to accord her the position she deserved:

> But if thou refuse to do what I supplicate thee for, O Dushyanta, thy head this moment shall burst into a hundred pieces! The husband entering the womb of the wife cometh out himself in the form of the son. Therefore, is the wife called by those cognisant of the *Vedas* as *Jaya* (she of whom one is born. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 1: Adi Parva: Sambhava Parva: Section LXXIV)

The model of feminism and gender-equilibrium in the great epic records a shift from the western model of the dominant male occupying the centre and the gendered subaltern

relegated to the periphery. This binary is made problematic by recurring narratives which show the marginal taking charge, as we have seen in the case of Shikhandini, the trans-woman, who changed her gender and became Shikhandi, the Prince, to kill Bhishma. The epic informs us that Shikhandini was Amba in her previous birth. Amba's name came at the helm of the list of women who would not forgive and forget. In fact, the trauma of the marginalisation was such that Amba committed suicide, only to be re-born as Shikhandini, who later became Shikhandi, ensuring justice and representation for herself. Amba's revenge may have been served cold, but it was served all right, proving that memories of marginalization transcend death.

The Mahabharata as a Dialogic Text

The Mahabharata did not portray a 'perfect' world, because life was not perfect, and this great text was the book of life. There was constant mobility, as those on the periphery moved to the centre, and vice versa, depending on the demands of the situation. The marginal had the chance and the choice to represent its case. That was how King Yuvanashwa celebrated his pregnancy and gave birth to a child, who was then wet-nursed by another male - the god Indra. King Sudyumna alternated between genders – when a woman he/she was the beloved wife of Budha, the patron of the planet Mercury, and when a man he/she would be his companion. King Bhangashwan who had been turned into a female because of the curse of God Indra, enjoyed femininity and motherhood and would not give up on it even when the curse was revoked. The fluidity of the Indic myths is evident in such gender-bending narratives which question the binaristic closure.

Susan Sellers divides Feminist rewriting in two categories: as an act of demolition, exposing and detonating the stories that have hampered women, and as a task of construction – of bringing into being enabling alternatives. She maintains that Feminist rewriting thus includes ironic mimicry and clever twists as well as a whole gamut of tactics that would open the myth from the inside as well as out, leaving in place enough of the known format to provide

evocative points of reflection for its reader, but also encompassing different possibilities and other points of view (30). In her essay '*The Laugh of the Medusa*', Helene Cixous (1976) insists that women must write themselves, and women should write about other women. The reasons why women have been violently driven away from writing are the same as their being driven away from their bodies, posits Cixous. It is all about power and control, so they must be brought back to writing, forcing their way into the textual world, the real world and history. The male-generated discourse hardly does justice to the feelings, emotions and reality of the feminine world, hence the need of putting a woman's body into the body-politic (875).

The Mahabharata emerges as a culture-scape where a woman is stationed on the highest pedestal, that of 'Devi', the alter-ego of the male God. She is the energy - He is the form. As against the Abrahamic mythology, there is no 'Fall', nor is the woman created out of man (*Genesis 2*). There are innumerable examples of the Devi prevailing over the God, making Him see Her point of view. The image of Kali with her tongue dripping blood, standing astride Shiva, the Mahadeva (God of Gods, Great God) is etched in our collective mindscape. No male could kill Mahishasura, the buffalo-demon – it took a woman to annihilate him. Yudhisthira propitiates the Devi in these words:

> O thou that hast slain the *Mahishasura,* that thou art praised and worshipped by the gods for the protection of the three worlds. O thou foremost of all deities, extend to me thy grace, show me thy mercy, and be thou the source of blessings to me. Thou art *Jaya* and *Vijaya*, and it is thou that givest victory in battle. Grant me victory, O Goddess, and give me boons also at this hour of distress. Thy eternal abode is on Vindhya--that foremost of mountains. O *Kali*, O *Kali*, thou art the great *Kali!* (*The Mahabharata,* translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 4: Virata Parva: Pandava-Pravesa Parva: Section VI)

Vishnu without Lakshmi, and Shiva without Parvati, were incomplete and powerless. The image of Shiva as the 'Ardhanarishwara', the Androgyne, was the culmination of this beautiful harmony that has been enshrined in the Indic myths, making *The Mahabharata* and *The Puranas*, for example, the Devi Bhagawatam, some of the earliest Feminist Texts in the world. The confidence, the conviction and the supreme belief in her superior position is evident in Devi's words:

> I am called Lakshmi, Bhuti, and Sree! I am Faith, I am Intelligence, I am Affluence, I am Victory, and I am Immutability. I am Patience, I am Success, I am Prosperity. I am Reverence, I am Fate, and I am Memory. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 12: Santi Parva: Mokshadharma Parva: Section CCXXVIII)

We find the dialogic text deliberately taking up conflicting positions, because without that no debate would have been possible. In Derridean terms, the act of privileging one against another – a concept, an individual, a group – kept the discourse going, giving the society a chance to look critically at itself. Hinduism has never believed in an essentialist philosophy. It has never been a binary – there were myriad shades in between, celebrating not just the mainstream, but also the marginal. The dialogue between the centre and the periphery was an ongoing phenomenon.

This has been beautifully portrayed in the character of Drauapdi who commanded authority and was at par with her husbands in terms of stature in the grand epic. Taking all phallocentric excesses in her stride, she used the tools of patriarchal control as weapons. Draupadi was the sole person who commandeered the Pandava accounts, man-power and public relations, thus making herself indispensable, taking the place that Kunti had as the matriarch. A unique and strong character from the very outset, Draupadi emerged as 'Vak'- the goddess Saraswati - in giving the collective Pandava misery a voice in the court of Dhritarashtra. She also came across as 'Shri', the goddess of wealth, who brought the Pandavas

into wealth after marriage and in possession of the Kingdom after the war. As a gendered subaltern, she was subject to patriarchal bindings. But from the miserable hand that Draupadi was given by the epic, she pulled out an ace and completed the straight, becoming the mascot of feminist subversion.

The epic woman's engagement with the centre was far from passive. Two examples stand out for their characteristic candour and confidence, where men - Kings and Princes - were forced to listen to a woman and abide by her diktats. One was the epic story of Sulabha, the wandering mendicant who visited the city of Mithila and defeated King Janaka in a metaphysical discourse. The second was the rousing narrative of Queen Vidula, the fire-brand mother of Prince Sanjaya, who convinced her son of the necessity to fight and win the war of Dharma.

In the first narrative, Sulabha, the protagonist, was a wandering mendicant and a yogini of an advanced order. By dint of her advanced yogic powers, she could enter the body and minds of others. The Shanti Parva of *The Mahabharata* reports that Janaka, the father of Sita, was requested to engage himself in a metaphysical debate with the Yogini Sulabha. Janaka, an erudite and level-headed Philosopher-King, encouraged such interaction with sages who would discuss the true nature of Brahma. He took pride in the fact that he was the King of 'Videha' i.e., despite living in a physical body, he was unattached to the ways of the world. Though a King and a householder, Janaka claimed that he was also a practitioner of the 'Nivritti Marg, the path of salvation through renunciation, a claim not accepted by Sulabha.

Hence to test the veracity of the claim, Yogini Sulabha abandoned her ascetic self, and transformed herself into a ravishing beauty. When she was brought into the royal court, King Janaka was filled with wonder about her delicate form which did not really match with her description as a sage-mendicant. He was in for some more surprise, as with the help of her yogic powers, Sulabha colonised the mind of the King by entering his thought-process and his

understanding. A yogini of advanced practice, she could hypnotise King Janaka, tying him with Yoga bonds, but he defeated her intentions by seizing her resolution with his own resolution. Livid at this indiscretion, King Janaka questioned Sulabha's lack of propriety, and asked her as to why she had entered his gross body and mind:

> To what reason is thy entrance to be ascribed into my Kingdom or my Palace? At whose sign hast thou entered into my heart? Thou belongest to the foremost of all the orders, being, as thou art, a Brahmana woman. As regards myself, however, I am a Kshatriya. There is no union for us two. Do not help to cause an intermixture of colours. Thou livest in the practice of those duties that lead to Emancipation. I live in the domestic mode of life. This act of thine, therefore, is another evil thou hast done, for it produces an unnatural union of two opposite modes of life. I do not know whether thou belongest to my own *gotra* or dost not belong to it. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli Book 12: Santi Parva: Section CCCXXI)

King Janaka reproached Sulabha on four counts. According to him, their association was wrong because not only did they belong to two different Varnas, Gotras and Ashramas, there was this further question of her marital status which was not known to the King. Convinced of her ulterior motive, Janaka asked Sulabha if she had committed this immoral act because of her 'perverted intelligence'. Thoroughly flustered, he blamed her of possessing an evil nature and unrestrained behaviour. He informed her that by endeavouring to display her superiority, she had made it obvious that she was wicked, and her objective was not just to defeat Janaka, but to also humiliate the learned and very superior Brahmanas of his court and exalt herself at their expense. Janaka accused Sulabha of being jealous of his powers and making improper moves:

> Thou hast caused a union of thy understanding with mine and thereby hast really mingled together nectar with poison. That union, again, of man and woman, when each

> covets the other, is sweet as nectar. That association, however, of man and woman when the latter, herself coveting, fails to obtain an individual of the opposite sex that does not covet her, is, instead of being a merit, only a fault that is as noxious as poison. Do not continue to touch me. Know that I am righteous. The enquiry thou hadst wished to make, *viz*., whether I am or I am not emancipated, has been finished". (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli Book 12: Santi Parva: Section CCCXXI)

But Sulabha's enquiry was not over yet. In fact, it was her turn to show the King that she was more than her looks, which was actually a camouflage to catch him off-guard. The assumption that a young, beautiful girl would always be 'available' was nullified by Sulabha's words, which, according to *The Mahabharata*, were 'more handsome than her person'. Sulabha informed the King that just as lac and wood exist together, so does everything else in this world. Just as the five faculties of sound, touch, taste, form, and scent, though diverse, yet function together as one, similarly, happiness and sorrow, life and death, acquisition and loss, the agreeable and the disagreeable - the set of opposites - coexist. Sulabha edified Janaka about the 'Adwaita' principle which sees Jiva and Brahma as one:

> They that are conversant with Adhyatma behold Prakriti as the cause of all creatures. That Prakriti which is Unmanifest, becomes manifest in the form of these principles. Myself, thyself, and all others that are endued with body are the result of that Prakriti. The constituent elements of the body undergo change every moment in every creature. When such is the state of the bodies of all creatures, who then has come whence or not whence, or whose is it or whose is it not, does it not arise. What connection does there exist between creatures and their own bodies? (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli Book 12: Santi Parva: Section CCCXXI)

Sulabha said that if Janaka had been truly emancipated, he would not have asked questions like who she was and where she had come from. She asked rhetorically as to what

indications of emancipation could exist in him who failed to cast an equal eye on the agreeable, on the weak, and the strong. Like a Guru, she counselled Janaka about the intricacies of statecraft. She informed him that Sovereigns did not sleep easy. Their peace of mind depended on their allies, ministers, capital, provinces, punishment, treasury - the seven limbs of a Kingdom. For Janaka to be the emancipated King, he should sever his attachment with all this while managing them for the welfare of the state, said she. Sulabha reproached Janaka:

> It seems that like an ordinary man of the world thou art bound by the bonds of touch and spouses and mansions and the like. What harm have I done thee by entering thy person with only my Intellect? With Yatis, the custom is to dwell in uninhabited or deserted abodes. As a person of the mendicant order resides for only one night in an empty house, I shall reside for this one night in thy person, which, as I have already said, is like an empty chamber, being destitute of knowledge". "Hearing these words fraught with excellent sense and with reason, King Janaka failed to return any answer thereto. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli Book 12: Santi Parva: Section CCCXXI)

In a world where females were denied a voice, Sulabha's assertion of hers was in sharp contrast to the gendered role-play expected of a female. Ruth Vanita says that Sulabha's victory in the debate justifies her own choices in life, which are to remain unmarried, to be a wanderer on the quest for truth, to seek liberation and be one with The Divine. Her actions of entering public debate with Janaka and joining him in a yogic bond points to the degree of self-confidence, subversion and assertion that the marginal had achieved ((*The Self Is Not Gendered* 90). Ruth Vanita examines the oft-repeated figure of Sulabha, a single woman and an intellectual-renunciant, and focuses on her discourse with philosopher-king Janaka in *The Mahabharata*. She points out that when Janaka uses misogynistic arguments to analysis Sulabha's unusual behaviour, the renunciate, based on the Hindu philosophical principles,

effectively establishes that there is no critical difference between genders. Sulabha proves by her own case that a woman may achieve deliverance like a man, utilizing the same tools. Ruth Vanita summarizes it thus:

> "When we focus on the dynamic debates regarding gender that flourish in ancient Hindu texts, we help combat the stereotype of these texts as either monolithically justifying the subordination of women or as monolithically honouring women. Modern Indian debates about gender have a history that is not traceable to Euro-American feminism alone, a history that defines the questions and poses the answers both similarly to and differently from the way the questions and answers have been posited in Euro-American debates about gender. (*The Self Is Not Gendered* 91)

Sulabha was not alone. *The Mahabharata* narrates the story of Queen Vidula, the firebrand mother of Prince Sanjaya, who encouraged her son to give up on his cowardice and fight for his inheritance. This story, narrated by Kunti to Krishna, who was supposed to communicate it to the Pandavas, was meant to inspire them and get them raring for the great war. Vidula's son, Sanjaya, though a person of royal descent, was against war and bloodshed. He, in fact, was scared of dying in the battle, which mortified his mother. A Kshatriya Queen, Vidula believed that dying in a battle was a royal duty which ensures riches in this world and the celestial abode in the next. She did not mince words when it came to professing tough love to her son. Not for her the 'womanly' qualities of vulnerability and fragility - she was authoritative, ambitious and aggressive. When Vidula found that her son had accepted defeat at the hands of the King of the *Sindhu Desha* and was too dejected to retaliate, she took it upon herself to question his cowardice: "'Thou art not my son," said Vidula, "Begotten thou hast not been by myself and thy father!" She condemned his lack of wrath and informed him that he could not be counted as a man because unlike a true Kshatriya, he feared war. She inspired him

to die while plucking the fangs of a snake, rather than live miserably like a dog. Queen Vidula thundered:

> Abandon thy fears! Rise, O coward! Do not lie down thus, after thy defeat, delighting all thy foes and grieving the friends, bereft of all sense of honour! Why dost thou lie down like a carcass or like one smitten by thunder? Do not disappear from the sight of all so miserably. Do not smoulder. Blaze thou up, effectively displaying thy prowess. Slay thy foes. For but a moment, for ever so small a space of time, blaze thou up on the heads of thy enemies. Display thy prowess or obtain that end which is inevitable! (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli Book 5: Udyoga Parva: Bhagwat Yana Parva: Section CXXXIII)

Vidula exhorted her son to live and die like a hero, and if he must fall, he should seize the foe by the hips and thus fall *with* the foe. She made it clear that she would call him a man only if he was wrathful and ready to settle scores. The son, on the other hand, was still not convinced. He wanted to know of what use would her acquisitions be if he died in the battle and she did not get to see him again. Vidula was not one to get swayed by such emotional blackmail. She told him to die rather than live on another's charity. She regretted that like medicine to a dying man, her words were not making any impression on him. Trained in statecraft, Queen Vidula went on to give sound political counsel to Sanjaya. She informed him that the enemy of the enemy was a friend, so it was important to forge strategic alliances. She told him that he should not fear the large number of associates the rival had, as they would have their own compulsions and limitations, and could be managed with a little effort. She reminded him of his name 'Sanjaya', which meant 'the victorious'. She exhorted him to fight till the end:

> Thou art competent to encounter all foes if thou dost not cherish the desire of life. If, however, thou art for adopting this mode of life that is fit only for a eunuch, then with

troubled soul and depressed heart it would be better for thee to sacrifice thy life. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli Book 5: Udyoga Parva: Bhagwat Yana Parva: Section CXXXIV)

The Mahabharata reports that hearing these inspiring words of his mother, Sanjaya's despair lifted and the true warrior stepped forth. He expressed his gratitude to his mother and said that though during the discourse he was a silent listener, he had taken her nectar like words to heart and intended to follow them. Finally, Sanjaya, the son of Vidula, rose to the occasion and gave a tough battle to his rival, the King of Sindhu Desha, gratifying his mother and his countrymen. Goaded and stirred by his mother, he got ready to 'gird up his loins for repressing his foes and obtaining victory'(ibid).

The narratives of Vidula and Sulabha demonstrate that even in the androcentric ambience of the great epic there were situations where the story was appropriated by women. Brian Black (2007) points out that in *The Mahabharata* women were silent listeners who sat in the background and eavesdropped on the discourse (*Gender and Narrative* 53). He explored the theme of female listeners in *The Mahabharata*, both in terms of how the text represented its projected audience and in terms of how the female characters claimed authority to speak on matters of dharma and moksha:

> Despite the text's orientation towards men, its focus on war, and the way it characterizes the ideals of heroism, honour and courage as specifically masculine traits, subsequent Sanskrit texts have accepted *The Mahabharata* as the Veda for women and Shudras, a re-packaging of Vedic teachings in a format made accessible to a universal audience. This chapter asks the questions: to what degree is *The Mahabharata*, a text whose 'main business is the legend of men who were heroes' a text for women? (*Gender and Narrative* 55)

In the narratives of Sulabha and Vidula, it was the turn of men to be silent listeners to the subversive words of woman who were in direct control of the affairs. Barthes (2009) categorizes myth as 'a form of speech', a 'metalanguage', because it is a 'second order semiological system' (*Mythologies* 137) where the meaning is fashioned through the first-order sign and subsequently naturalised. He finds myth hiding nothing and flaunting nothing. Instead, it distorts, as myth is neither a lie nor a confession - it is an inflexion (ibid 153). The change of emphasis and thrust that happened in the narratives of Sulabha and Vidula was representative of similar efforts by the gendered subaltern who celebrated small victories. 'The logocentric project [the literary history] had always been, undeniably, to fund phallocentrism, to insure for masculine order a rationale equal to history itself', observes Cixous (2000: 266). The mythic stories of Sulabha and Vidula, and similar narratives question this appropriation and validate the efforts of women who never gave up their claim to subversion.

Dialectical Relationship between 'Reality and 'Representation'

We thus come to realize that *The Mahabharata* registers the shift from a strong, matrilineal system to a patrilineal structure that was based on the denial of representation to the gendered subaltern. 'Matsyagandha' Satyavati, the mother of Veda Vyasa, the author of *The Mahabharata,* was neither ashamed of her association with sage Parashara (The Mahabharata 1.57.64), nor was she petrified of being 'found out', which reminds us of times when a woman was free to make alliances as per her wish, and the child could be known by her name. The Chhandogya Upanishad (4.4 - 4.9) speaks of Satyakama, who did not know the name of his father. He was called Satyakama Jabala after his mother Jabalaa, and unlike later times, when a woman could not give her name to the progeny, this decision of Jabalaa to give him her name was accepted and endorsed by the society (Hume 219). As the transition to a patrilineal worldview happened the notion of purity gained in strength, and the name of the father was the only name that a child could take. The epic apportions the blame: "The maiden

who suffers her virginity to be deflowered incurs three-fourths of the sin of Brahmanicide, while the man that deflowers her incurs a sin equal to a fourth part of that of Brahmanicide (*The Mahabharata,* Book 12: Santi Parva: Apaddharmanusasana Parva: Section CLXV)." This substantiates what Ghosh and Singh (2014) say, "Myth, like all forms of discourse, is propagated by patriarchy to systematically construct the subject, the woman as the 'other', the negative of man, in order to perpetuate the social hierarchy and maintain the subjugation and domination of women" (*Reconstructing Draupadi* 12).

While discussing the coming into existence of the body-politic, Moira Gatens says: "Modern political theory typically conceives of political life as a state created by a contract, entered into by rational decision, and designed to ensure the protection and safety of the body and its needs. As it is a contract entered into by men only, one must surmise that it is a contract designed to secure the needs of male bodies and desires" (*Towards a feminist philosophy* 61). The requirements of the body-politic overshadowed the needs of the female body, hence the example galore of women being sacrificed in the name of maintaining lineages. Ghosh & Singh consider the body of the woman as the site for contest where men can take revenge upon other men by violating her sexuality, thus, taking revenge on her 'owner.' Referring to Usha Ganguly's play, *Hum Mukhtara*, an adaptation of Mukhtar Mai's sensational and inspirational autobiography, *In the Name of Honour: A Memoir*, they bring into focus the protest of the victim of an institution sanctioned gang rape whose body becomes a site of resistance (*Representing and Resisting Rape* 202). Ghosh & Singh analyse the phallocentric objectification and reductive categorization of the female body which restrain the agency and subjectivity of women. While deliberating on the Post-Colonial Feminism and the use of theory in "*Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Post-colonialism*", Vilashini Cooppan focuses on the conflicts between nationalist ideology and communal concerns, state centralization and regional federalism, and the competing and unequal claims of class, caste,

community and gender. She agrees with Rajeswari Sunder Rajan who finds the unrelenting opposition between the aesthetic and the political as separate cognitive structures playing not only into the opposition dominant/subaltern, but also into other oppositions between form and content, scripts and life-stories, postcolonialism and reality, art and experience and even 'writing' and women , seeking her methodological ground in the conflictual spaces between these oppositions (Cooppan 273). Sunder Rajan suggests that we 'read' gendered subjectivity and resistance rather than hear the critical ventriloquism of subaltern and gendered voices, seeing women as a 'site' for such conflict. She situates this reading in terms of a dialectical relationship between 'reality and 'representation', arguing that the study of 'real' Indian women cannot take place apart from a sustained consideration of 'imagined' women as they are ideologically constructed and discursively situated within the realities of postcolonial India. She observes that women are the sites of such contests than participants in them (Cooppan 274). Sunder Rajan installs in the space vacated at the centre (of history, society, politics) a resisting subject, one who will be capable of the agency and enabling selfhood of the 'active' earlier subject, while at the same time acknowledging the politics of difference (ibid). Rajeswari Sunder Rajan sums it all up in the following words:

> Both the trauma of publicity and the sanctity of privacy are for women products of the ideology of the separate spheres. In the narrative of *the Mahabharata*, textual scholars say, it is not so much the disrobing as the forced entry into the public space that Draupadi returns to later (in her recurrent allusions to the time), as the source of her shame. (*The Story of Draupadi's Disrobing: Meanings for Our Times* 333)

Subramaniya Bharati's early 20th century classic, *Panchali Sabadham,* has five Sargas of exquisite lyric clusters, focusing on a single crisis from *The Mahabharata*, that of Draupadi's disrobing in the royal assembly of the Kauravas, and her terrible vow of keeping her hair open till she anoints it with the blood of Duhshasana (Valam 124). Bharati views

Draupadi as a symbol of Indian womanhood and her empowerment. He also saw a political allegory in the timeless conflict between Dharma and Adharma. He saw Draupdi as a projection of India's political consciousness. Draupadi was thus Mother India, while Duryodhana and his allies were the foreign forces of exploitation. Draupadi was the symbol of an oppressed country in shackles but still defiant even in the most critical moment of her ageless life (ibid). Bharati views Draupadi as 'Adi Parashakti' who has descended on earth to restore the balance:

Youthful Uma, Kali Herself the strong,
The original Shakti with the terrible bow,
The Mahamaya that destroys illusion,
Who is thrilled by ghosts, murder and corpses,
Who saves all through smiles while riding her lion?
The Queen of all who is served
By the Rider of the dark Buffalo,
Who is surrounded by the guards Prosperity,
Riches, Longevity, Fame and Knowledge
Herself the work; she the Destruction
The novelty of the past and the present,
Through the ages of change and re-change
And inner change; she the Custom–
Adi Parashakti!
(Nandakumar 167)

Thus, we see that whether it is Bharati's Draupadi, or Mahashweta's Dopdi, or Bhyrappa's Hidimba, or Karve's Kunti, or Amba who was reborn as Shikhandini who became Shikhandi, or Renuka who became Yelamma, the goddess of the marginal, it is the gendered subaltern trying to break out of the patriarchal construct. The re-tellings that draw upon *The Mahabharata* - to question, to condemn, to be in sync with the meta-narrative, or to find countless permutations in between - are all within the purview of the grand design of the epic, whose aim is to initiate a discourse on the existential dilemmas of mankind. We realize that the

grand narrative, by design, encourages the gendered subaltern to seize a place in the spaces and the margins of the text. The Indic myths under the purview of our research reveal a saga of agency, subversion and empowerment, thereby giving the gendered subaltern a chance to make itself heard. This resilience of the marginal has been celebrated in the Indic myths.

Keeping in mind the detailed study in this thesis, we understand that there is a requirement to further explore the marginal characters because they are being erased from the public memory due to selective amnesia. There is a need to investigate why Draupadi continues to be remembered as a negative character who brought about a war, when there is ample evidence that she was a victim of circumstances and herself a marginal. Learning more about *The Mahabharata* traditions which have been recorded in other countries like Sri Lanka, Singapore, Malaysia, Mauritius, Réunion Islands and South Africa, where Draupadi is worshipped as an Amman Goddess, will delineate the Epic trajectory and facilitate our understanding of the subject. It would be fascinating to study the differences in the storyline and the development of marginal characters in the Javanese version of the grand Epic, called *'Kakawin Bharatayudhha'*, and the versions of *The Mahabharata* in India. An exclusive study can be done based on the writings of the Indian feminist and gender writers and read *The Mahabharata* entirely from their perspective.

Finally, we come to the conclusion that in the mythic narratives analysed for this study, the gendered subalterns have managed to create and sustain a framework of resistance despite the deep-rooted constraints that marked their life and times. They have become influential examples of struggle, and, at the same time, they have also emerged as prototypes for future generations of marginalized persons, who would draw sustenance from the fact that their predecessors had faced similar humiliation, and in many cases, were able to overcome them. It was about finding one's voice, which, in the course of our study, was lent to the gendered subaltern through the re-tellings based on the great epic.

The Mahabharata has a message for the under-privileged and the down-trodden - that their stories would also be told, and their individualities celebrated. The grand epic, true to its space-time transcending genealogy, attests to such possibilities even today.

This document was created with the Win2PDF “print to PDF” printer available at
http://www.win2pdf.com

This version of Win2PDF 10 is for evaluation and non-commercial use only.

This page will not be added after purchasing Win2PDF.

http://www.win2pdf.com/purchase/