

CHAPTER THREE

The Crocodilian Females of the 'Nari Tirtha': The Trauma and Silence in the Narratives of the 'Other'

Myths have been ready tools through which a woman is shaped as a socio-religious construct. The myth of 'woman' has been the most profitable myth created so far. De Beauvoir says that this myth is one of those deceptions that cloud objectivity: "The myth of Woman substitutes for an authentic relationship with an autonomous existent the immobile contemplation of a mirage (*The Second Sex* 320)." How a woman should behave, and when should her sexuality surface or sublimate, are questions raised and answered by the male for the female in our patrifocal texts. As pointed out by Cixous (1975), "The logocentric project (the literary history) has always been, undeniably, to fund phallogentrism, to insure for masculine order a rationale equal to history itself" (*Sorties* 95). "The role of women in males' patriarchal competition with each other is to reduce the stress of competition by serving as an underclass," says Joseph H. Pleck (*Feminism and Masculinity* 63).

This chapter studies the power differentials created by the intersection of gender, region, class and caste that governed the fate of the gendered subaltern in the Indic myths, focusing on those in *The Mahabharata*. The trauma and silence of the marginal, evident in the gender stories studied for this work, is problematized, to gain an insight into the resistance put up by them. As opposed to the one-sided monologue positioned around gender, identity and

A research article titled "Beyond the Pale of Virtue: The Other Woman" based on this chapter has been accepted by 'Gnosis', an International Journal of English Language and Literature. Number 48815. July 2019.

purity, we find a successful manoeuvring of positions and evidence of female assertion and agency in the narrative of Ulupi, the warrior princess of the Nagas, and Hidimba, the demoness-bride of Bhima. Castigated for two reasons: one, for being outside of “central politics”, and two, for being the ones who initiated physical intimacy which was essentially a male prerogative, these warrior princesses were representatives of scores of others, like the women of the Balhikas and the Madrakas, who were sanctioned for being different.

Labelled as fallen women, the epic has another category which can be called the ultimate male fantasy in Freudian terms. Ever youthful, never emotional, these women had to make the ultimate sacrifice. Menaka had to abandon her infant daughter Shakuntala. Urvashi had to leave her doting husband Pururava and be the handmaiden of Indra. The *raison d'être* of characters like Ghritachi, Jalapadi, Rambha and many others of their kind was to be pawns in the patriarchal power play. The accounts of Ahalya (*The Mahabharata (Critical Edition 5:12:6)*) and Renuka (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 3: Vana Parva: Tirtha-yatra Parva: Section CXVI) echo the trope of a woman being either evil or an object of deliverance. Ahalya, who escaped beheading, and Renuka, who could not, expose the efforts to control female initiative and agency and reveal the insecurities inherent in patriarchy. The attempt here is to re-read the myths related to the gendered other, questioning the “the imposing tone of the masculine voice of the epic text and its patriarchal context” (Ana García-Arroyo 13).

“The underground language of people, who have no power to define and determine themselves in the world, develops its own density and precision. It enables them to sniff the wind, sense the atmosphere and defend themselves in a hostile terrain,” observes Sheila Rowbotham (*Women's Consciousness, Man's World 2*). This chapter celebrates the resistance put up by the ‘other’, who made a place for herself in a strictly hierarchical social system, trying to survive against the wind. Not every attempt at agency was successful. But given the circumstances, even the effort was subversive.

The Politics of Language

Myths have long been appropriated by patriarchy. Gilbert and Gubar posit woman as “a creation of man - from Eve, Minerva, Sophia and Galatea onward . . . patriarchal mythology defines women as created by, from and for men, the children of Male brains, ribs and ingenuity” (*The Madwoman in the Attic* 12). Ausband points out that Mythology is a language which allows the creator to make sense of his world (*Myth and Meaning, Myth and Order* 18). Since time immemorial, across cultures, social and political discourse have been shaped by a masculine perception which gets encoded in texts, to come down to us in the form of Classics, some of the representative ones being *The Iliad, The Bible, The Ramayana and The Mahabharata*. Myths have informed and moulded the thought-scape of generations, to the extent that the patriarchal version of the account has been accepted as the gospel ‘Truth’.

The great structural anthropologist Levi Strauss pointed out that “to be known, the myth had to be told” (*The Structural Study of Myth* 187). The power of discourse or the dialogue rested essentially with males well entrenched in a patriarchal hegemonic set-up. According to Levi Strauss, the power and function of mythology lay not in the story told, but in the way it classified and encoded reality. This reality was altered for women who occupied the subject position. Laurence Coupe narrates an interesting account in which when God created the Universe from Chaos, He appeared to have battled with some unseen force, as that of the formless ‘deep’ which in the Babylonian creation myth represents ‘Tiamat’, the primal female chaos monster, from whose divided body is constructed the cosmos by the male warrior God Marduk (*Myth* 109). Myths being the universal language, it was important for patriarchy to come up with patterns where women were seen as the dependent ‘other’. “History has shown that men have always held all the concrete powers; from patriarchy’s earliest times they have deemed it useful to keep woman in a state of dependence; their codes were set up against her; she was thus concretely established as the Other”, says Beauvoir (*The Second Sex* 193). Also,

once the subject attempted to assert himself, the Other was however necessary for him, because he attained himself only through the realization of what he is not. That is why man's life was never plenitude and rest, it was lack and movement, it was combat, observed Beauvoir (ibid).

Cixous and the other French radical feminists strongly believed that the existing tradition could be transformed only if the structures that controlled social and cultural order were unveiled by confronting the politics of language. Cixous (1976) pointed out that as soon as we came to exist, we were born into language and language spoke to us, dictated its law, a law of death: The concept of 'L'écriture feminine' proposed by Cixous (*The Laugh of the Medusa* 888) appropriated Lacan's position on the shaping of identity by language and insisted upon women writing themselves. For Lacan the lack of the symbolic phallus was the reason behind the subservience of women, as language being essentially phallogocentric the male individuality controlled and dominated the female 'other' through immersion (*The Psychoses* 145). Elaine Showalter called this "the inscription of the feminine body and female difference in language and text" (*Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness* 249).

Speaking of the pre-Oedipal/Imaginary phase of complete identification of the child with the mother, Lacan observes that this phase belongs to the realm of the Feminine and is the primal spring of language, later codified by the Symbolic Order represented by the Father. Lacan categorizes the second stage as the Mirror stage when the self identifies itself through its reflection. The third or the Oedipal phase marks the separation of the mother and child, and the child is introduced to cultural signification which favours the androcentric social set-up (*The Mirror Stage* 5). Thus gender-roles are inscribed on the subconscious of the individual. While the male child adopts the dominant order, the female child, for want of an anatomical identification with the Father, is consigned to the position of the "Other" and is forced to speak an alien tongue. "The loss here is profound because the only language in which women can

think and speak cannot in any way express what they feel”, argues Rosemarie Tong (*Feminist Thought* 221), making the divide obvious.

The post-modern feminist authors like Judith Butler, *Hélène Cixous*, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva took it upon themselves to agitate the literary firmament, questioning the existing theoretical framework. The task of writing was equated to the act of creation, with the male author the God who gave the ‘Word’. Speaking of the penis/pen metaphor, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar contended that in patriarchal cultures, the text’s author was a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen was an instrument of generative power like his penis (*The Madwoman in the Attic* 6). Thus a “Man of Letters” was, like his divine counterpart, a master, ruler, and an owner (ibid 7). The Post-modern feminists have successfully subverted the subjugation of female body as a site of oppression by re-reading the patriarchal myths and re-interpreting them. The ‘other’ is trying to appropriate the subject position and take control of their destiny by ‘writing their bodies’ (Sellers 25). The words of Le Guin (1986) sum it up for us when she says, “Myths are one of our most useful techniques of living, but in order to be useful they must be retold”. *Hélène Cixous* speaks of the inevitability of the subversiveness of a Feminine text:

A Feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments; there’s no other way. There’s no room for her if she’s not a he. If she’s a her-she, it’s in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the “truth” with laughter. (*The Laugh of the Medusa* 888)

This is reiterated by Green and Kahn who find that gender in patriarchal ideology does not simply create difference, but actually deep division based on oppression, inequality and interiorized inferiority for women (*Feminist Scholarship and the Social Construction of Woman* 3). Foucault brings to our notice these processes of distinction, opposition and

exclusion which have at various times in history defined our conception of sexuality (*The Subject and Power* 780-781).

As acknowledged by Daly in her book titled *Beyond God the Father: Toward a philosophy of Women's Liberation*, woman was not just created out of man, she also caused his fall as the Biblical myth of the forbidden apple suggests (46). Genesis 2 says that when no suitable helper was found for Adam, the LORD God caused him to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. It was said she would be called 'woman' because she originated in man (*Biblegateway IV*). Though the Bible does not mention the forbidden fruit as such, LORD God the Father clearly asked Adam and Eve to keep away from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (*Genesis 2:16-17*), but since Eve violated the rule and tasted the forbidden fruit, a metaphor for anything prohibited by the law of the Father, she was put in the category of the temptress.

The Mahabharata places Menaka, Urvashi, Jalapadi and other celestial nymphs in this category of seductresses who tempted gullible males, disrupted their penance and diluted the rigours of their asceticism. Both Hidimba and Ulupi are shown as women who imposed intimacy on unwilling males, assigning them the role of temptresses, justifying their abandonment by their respective partners. This chapter initiates a selective reading of these stories of marginalization, celebrating the resistance put up by the 'other' who tried to appropriate a place for herself in a strictly hierarchical social system.

Female Sexuality as the Resident Evil

If myths transmit culture and men are the myth makers, it is obvious that certain 'truths' will be more acceptable than the others. The binary of the passive 'other' as opposed to the active 'self', the feminine 'chaos' pitched against the masculine 'order', or the language of the myth ascribed to a male creator of content as opposed to the silence of the under-represented

female consumer of content display the dichotomy of male-female dialogues in Indic myths. In a lesser known story in the Adi Parva, Arjuna, the great Pandava warrior, on a tour of expiation, came across the 'Nari Tirtha' which was inhabited by five 'Apsaras (celestial nymphs)' who had been turned into crocodiles. These 'Apsaras' or celestial nymphs had to stay put in what came to be called the 'Nari Tirtha' because they had tried to seduce a particular Brahmana and were cursed by him for their pains (*The Mahabharata BORI* 1:209:8-11). The first crocodilian female pulled out of the waters reported:

I am, O mighty one, Varga by name. I have four other companions. Beholding the Brahmana's ascetic devotion and his wonderful beauty, we alighted in that region, in order to disturb his meditations. We began to sing and smile and otherwise tempt that Brahmana. But, O hero, that Brahmana set not his heart even once upon us. O bull among Kshatriyas, the glance he cast upon us was one of wrath. And he said, staring at us, 'Becoming crocodiles, range ye the waters for a hundred years!' (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 1: Adi Parva: Arjuna-vanavasa Parva: Section CCXVIII)

When the women begged for mercy, they were ultimately assured that they would be rescued by the great Pandava Arjuna. The Brahmana forgave them with these words:

Ye shall, therefore, becoming crocodiles, seize and take away men. At the end of that period, an exalted individual will drag you all from water to the land. Then ye will resume your real forms. And those sacred waters (within which I assign you your places), will, after you will have been delivered by that individual, become known all over the world by the name of *Nari-tirthas* (or sacred waters connected with the sufferings and the deliverance of females. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 1: Adi Parva: Arjuna-Vanavasa Parva: Section CCXIX)

Reiterating the trope of a woman being either evil or an object of deliverance, the mythic story of the crocodilian-females of the ‘Nari Tirtha’ glorifies male supremacy over female agency, condemning female sexuality and seeing it as a resident evil that should be reined in by the male. In a similar lore, Apsara Rambha, the celestial nymph, was turned into a stone image by Sage Vishwamitra for trying to break his vow of celibacy. Rambha had been put on the task of seduction by Lord Indra, who was forever insecure about his own position and tried to break the penance of others (*The Mahabharata BORI 13:3:11; The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 13: Anusasana Parva: Anusasanika Parva: Section III).

Rambha’s plight was similar to the better-known narrative of the curse of Ahalya, the wife of Gautama, who was literally petrified by patriarchy – turned into a stone for a perceived misdemeanour. The epic narrates the story of Sage Gautam’s wife Ahalya who was cursed by her husband for having accepted Indra’s advances:

अहल्या धर्षिता पूर्वमृषिपत्नी यशस्विनी ।

जीवतो भर्तुरिन्द्रेण स वः किं न निवारितः ॥६॥ (*The Mahabharata BORI 5:12*)

It did not really matter whether she was tricked into adultery by Indra or went ahead of her own accord – the punishment was identical. There is an interesting story about how Ahalya escaped being beheaded for her sin. An enraged Gautama had ordered his son Chirakarin (one who takes a long-time deciding things) to proceed with the be-heading of his mother:

[Witnessing the act of great fault in his wife, the sire Gautama, passing over his other children, commanded in wrath this Chirakarin, saying, 'Slay thou this woman.' Having said these words without much reflection, the learned Gautama, that foremost of persons engaged in the practice of Yoga, that highly blessed ascetic, departed for the woods. Chirakarin, in consequence of his very nature, and owing to his habit of never accomplishing any act without long reflection, began to think for a long while (upon the propriety or otherwise of what he was commanded by his sire to do. (*The*

Mahabharata, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 12: Santi Parva: Mokshadharmā Parva: Section CCLXVI]

True to his name, Chirakarin deliberated for a long time, and by that time Gautama's murderous rage subsided. Ahalya, turned into stone, waited, till Lord Rama's touch purified her and she was liberated from the sin of adultery (*Manushi-India.org*).

In Jungian terms we see the Apsaras functioning as the anima, the eternally young female, ever available to satisfy man and his erogenous needs. The Apsaras have been identified as a class of females who reside in the sky under the tutelage of God Indra. They are the answer to Indra's insecurities as their mission is to entice the sages who indulge in rigorous austerities and threaten the throne of Indra (Apte 164). Condemned by one male and saved by another, the five Apsaras in this narrative of the 'Nari Tirtha' were trapped in the dichotomy of being a gendered subaltern in a male-dominated world.

Speaking of the origin of society and languages, Derrida draws a contrast with the Northern and the Southern climes, and opines that in the South, the movement is inverse, it no longer leads from need to passion but from passion to need. The supplement, according to him, is not the warmth of the hearth but the coolness of the water hole (Derrida 261). Of the myths that centre on the waterholes, we have one with a fascinating reference to an Apsara called Jalapadi, who was dispatched by the Devas when the austerities practiced by sage Sharadwat threatened the throne of Indra. The term 'Jalapadi' literally translates into being 'web-footed', which makes Van Buitenen draw our attention to the possibility of the nymph being an aquatic bird (Buitenen 479). The nymph Jalapadi successfully seduced the sage, and the semen thus spilt fell on the Kusha grass, whence were born Kripa and Kripi, the twins, who were promptly abandoned by their mother. The Apsaras were not supposed to be maternal nor have any attachment with the progeny:

स विहायाश्रमं तं च तां चैवाप्सरसं मुनिः |जगाम रेतस्तत्तस्य शरस्तम्बे पपात ह ||१२||

शरस्तम्बे च पतितं द्विधा तदभवन्नृप | तस्याथ मिथुनं जज्ञे गौतमस्य शरद्वतः ||१३||

The Mahabharata BORI 1:120

[The chief of the gods summoned Jalapadi and sent her saying, ‘Do thy best to disturb the austerities of the sage.’ Beholding that Apsara, of figure unrivalled on earth for beauty, alone in those woods and clad in a single piece of cloth, Saradwat's eyes expanded with delight. The suddenness of his mental agitation caused an unconscious emission of his vital fluid. Leaving his bow and arrows and deer-skin behind, he went away, flying from the *Apsara*. His vital fluid, however, having fallen upon a clump of heath, was divided into two parts, whence sprang two children that were twins. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 1: Adi Parva: Sambhava Parva: Section CXXX)]

In the same analogy, Wendy Doniger finds Urvashi a water bird, discovered by her husband among other water birds (181). Shakuntala, when abandoned by her mother Menaka, was raised by ‘Shakuntas’ (birds). Like birds, a celestial nymph in a patriarchal world of gods and sages had to abandon her motherly instincts and fly away, breaking the ties of sentimentality.

The women in these stories never got a chance to narrate their version of events – they were mere props in an all-male cast of the grand epic. There were, as identified by Freud, only two states to be in – either that of the Madonna, or the whore (*On Sexuality* 251). The template set in these mythological stories continues to inform and perpetuate the behaviour patterns in modern times as well. The female that has come to exist is a product of the male imagination, or a ‘gender construct’, as has been pointed out by the French existentialist philosopher and feminist Simone de Beauvoir, who believed that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, to be held in a “relationship of long-standing oppression to man through her relegation to being man's Other” (*The Second Sex* 301). Beauvoir defined the need for there being the “other”,

without which “self” as a category cannot exist. Yet the “other” was “the incidental, the inessential, as opposed to the essential. He was the Subject; he was the Absolute - she was the “Other”(ibid). Beauvoir questioned the radically unequal relationship that emerged from such imbalanced association. She condemned the structures, attitudes and presuppositions needed to maintain the patriarchal clout. It is obvious that Religion, being a male domain itself, has supported this unjust system by giving it the status of Divine ordinance (ibid).

Like the ‘Apsaras’ who had become a symbol of temptation and male enticement by lusty females, the women of the Madrakas and the Balhikas were condemned because of their totally uninhibited ways. The epic narrative questions their ways of dressing up, their mannerisms, food, customs and of course, sexual conduct with unwarranted virulence.

Beyond the Pale of Virtue: Ahalya, Renuka and the Women of the Balhikas

The Epic registers an interesting dialogue between Karna, the great Kaurava warrior and Shalya, the King of the Madra Kingdom, in the Karna Parva. This conversation that takes place in the middle of the great war is an attempt at one-upmanship between Karna who was a sworn enemy of the Pandavas, and Shalya, who, was sympathetic towards them. Condemning the women of the Madrakas and the Balhikas, Karna proclaimed that one should always avoid the Balhikas who were impure and lived out of the pale of virtue, i.e. away from the Himavata and the Ganga and Sarasvati and Yamuna and Kurukshetra and the Sindhu and its five tributary rivers:

बहिष्कृता हिमवता गङ्गाया च तिरस्कृताः |सरस्वत्या यमुनया कुरुक्षेत्रेण चापि ये ॥१०॥

पञ्चानां सिन्धुषष्ठानां नदीनां येऽन्तराश्रिताः |तान्धर्मबाह्यानशुचीन्बाह्लीकान्परिवर्जयेत् ॥११॥

The Mahabharata BORI 8:30 (बाल्हीकमद्रककुत्सनम्)

Karna recalled his younger days when he came across the entrances of the abodes of the Balhika kings which were always adorned by a slaughter-ground for kine and a space for

storing intoxicating spirits. He shamed the Balhika women who, inebriated and unclad, behaved in a manner that was obscene. Their songs were as musical as the braying of a donkey or the bleating of a camel:

हसन्ति गान्ति नृत्यन्ति स्त्रीभिर्मत्ता विवाससः | नगरागारवप्रेषु बहिर्माल्यानुलेपनाः ||१६||

मत्तावगीतैर्विविधैः खरोष्ट्रनिनदोपमैः | आहुरन्योन्यमुक्तानि प्रब्रुवाणा मदोत्कटाः ||१७||

The Mahabharata BORI 8:30(बाल्हीकमद्रककुत्सनम्)

Karna censured the Balhika women for eating beef with garlic and drinking Gauda liquor and being totally uninhibited:

धानागौडासवे पीत्वा गोमांसं लशुनैः सह |

अपूपमांसवाट्यानामाशिनः शीलवर्जिताः ||१५||ibid

The matrilineal ways of the Arattas also were questioned by Karna, who narrated the story of how they came to have the bad reputation. According to Karna, the Arattas had raped a ‘chaste’ woman who cursed them with infamy, saying that since they had dishonoured a girl ‘who was not without a husband’, therefore, the females of the Arattas will become unchaste:

सती पुरा हता काचिदारट्टा किल दस्युभिः |

अधर्मतश्चोपयाता सा तानभ्यशपत्ततः ||५८|| ibid

Karna surmised that it was because of this dreadful sin that the sisters’ sons of the Arattas, and not their own sons, became their heirs. The matrilineal system of the Arattas was viewed with great suspicion, and it was the woman who had to bear the burden of chastity. The tirade does not end there. Karna further informed Shalya that the Balhikas were the filth of the Earth, and the Madra women stigmatised the female-kind: मलं पृथिव्या बाल्हीकाः स्त्रीणां मद्रस्तियो मलम् ||६८|| (*The Mahabharata BORI 8:30*), and the latter being the King of the Madras, stood to bear some of the blame.

The Mahabharata narrates the story of a beheading, where a mother was beheaded by the son at the father’s behest. Renuka, the wife of sage Jamadagni, was a devoted wife. But a

single act of omission on her part was punished by death. Renuka went out to bathe in the river and happened to see King Chitrartha sporting in the water with his wives. Renuka was enamoured by his splendid form and desired his company:

सा तु चित्ररथं नाम मार्त्तिकावतकं नृपम् | ददर्श रेणुका राजन्नागच्छन्ती यदृच्छया ||६||

क्रीडन्तं सलिले दृष्ट्वा सभार्यं पद्ममालिनम् | ऋद्धिमन्तं ततस्तस्य स्पृहयामास रेणुका ||७||

The Mahabharata BORI 3:116

The sin of infidelity was committed more in her mind than in reality. Yet when she came back to the hermitage and sage Jamadagni came to know of the transgression, he was livid. In a mad rage he ordered his five sons to take upon themselves the task of be-heading their mother. All others refused and paid with their lives. Only the youngest, called Parashurama (Rama with a battle axe), complied. He severed his mother's head and was rewarded with multiple boons, one of which was used to bring her and his unfortunate brothers back to life. Patriarchy ensured that the power equation was balanced – one male accorded the punishment while another emerged as the saviour.

Decapitation was a signifier. The head was a symbol of identity and individuation, professed through speech. Silencing the voice through be-heading/turning into stone/ splitting into thousand pieces was a loud message: A thinking female was a threat. A head was equipped with a mouth that spoke, so beheading her was silencing her. The objectification and commodification of the female body still left one with the problem of the head, which could be solved by decapitation.

At times there was an interesting mix -up of heads and bodies, as happened in the case of Renuka. When she was being pursued by her son Parashurama, she was given shelter by a low caste woman who was also beheaded along with Renuka. In a dramatic twist, the head of Renuka was attached to the body of the woman who tried to protect her, and a new deity, Renuka Yellamma, was born. Devdutt Pattanaik refers to an Indian oral tradition which tells

us how Renuka survived the beheading to become a cult figure and the mother goddess of the Dalit communities in the southern states of India (*Indian Mythology* 17). Revered as the patron goddess of the fallen in the states of Telangana, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu (Arun 2013), Renuka stepped out of the patriarchal high caste social hierarchy where she was at the mercy of the son and the husband to being Yellamma -The Mother of all.

If mother Renuka Yellamma survived by side-stepping the system of patriarchal exploitation, Ulupi, the warrior princess of the Nagas, took matter in her hands and made the great Pandava Arjuna bow to her needs, not once, but twice over. Left behind in her father's kingdom, with Arjuna gone for good, Ulupi plotted and planned, turning patriarchal aggression on its head to teach Arjuna a lesson.

Ulupi, the Warrior Princess of the Nagas

Ulupi, the warrior princess of the Nagas, was a strong -willed female who went against the accepted code of conduct by proposing and coercing Arjuna to marry her. The epic reports an interesting narrative:

One day that bull amongst the Pandavas, while residing in that region in the midst of those Brahmanas, descended into the Ganges to perform his ablutions. After his ablutions had been over, and after he had offered oblations of water unto his deceased ancestors, he was about to get up from the stream to perform his sacrificial rites before the fire, when the mighty-armed hero, O king, was dragged into the bottom of the water by Ulupi, the daughter of the king of the *Nagas*, urged by the god of desire. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 1: Adi Parva: Arjuna-vanavasa Parva: Section CCXVI)

A woman who does not mince words, Ulupi apprises Arjuna that she, the daughter of King Kauravya of the Naga lineage, has been hit by the arrows of Kandarpa, the god of love and has fallen in love with Arjuna.

ऐरावतकुले जातः कौरव्यो नाम पन्नगः । तस्यास्मि दुहिता पार्थ उलूपी नाम पन्नगी ॥१८॥
साहं त्वामभिषेकार्थमवतीर्णं समुद्रगाम् दृष्टवत्येव कौन्तेय कन्दर्पेणास्मि मूर्च्छिता ॥१९॥

The Mahabharata BORI 1:206

Ulupi informs Arjuna that she was still unmarried, so he should gratify her by giving himself up to her. Arjuna, who was on a tour of expiation, was not keen on getting married to Ulupi. He informed Ulupi that commanded by king Yudhishtira, he was undergoing the vow of *Brahmacharin* for twelve years, hence he was not free to act in any way he likes. But he was still willing to do her bidding: “Tell me, therefore, O *Naga* maid, how I may act so that, while doing thy pleasure, I may not be guilty of any untruth or breach of duty” (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 1: Adi Parva: Arjuna-vanavasa Parva: Section CCXVI).

Ulupi, who would not take no for an answer, managed to convince him. The Critical Edition shows her trying to persuade Arjuna:

तदिदं द्रौपदीहेतोरन्योन्यस्य प्रवासनम् | कृतं वस्तत्र धर्मार्थमत्र धर्मो न दुष्यति ॥२६॥
परित्राणं च कर्तव्यमार्तानां पृथुलोचन | कृत्वा मम परित्राणं तव धर्मो न लुप्यते ॥२७॥

The Mahabharata BORI 1:207

[The exile of any one amongst you, therefore, is only for the sake of Draupadi. Thou art but observing the duty arising from that vow. Thy virtue cannot sustain any diminution by acceding to my solicitation. Then again, O thou of large eyes, it is a duty to relieve the distressed. Thy virtue suffereth no diminution by relieving me. Oh, if (by this act), O Arjuna, thy virtue doth suffer a small diminution, thou wilt acquire great merit by saving my life. Know me for thy worshipper, O Partha! Therefore, yield

thyself up to me! Even this, O lord, is the opinion of the wise, viz., that one should accept a woman that wooeth. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 1: Adi Parva: Arjuna-vanavasa Parva: Section CCXVI)]

Arjuna could not withstand this request. *The Mahabharata* informs us that he spent a night with Ulupi, and this alliance resulted in the birth of Arjuna's son Aravana. The marriage, however, did not give Ulupi the recognition of being a Pandava bride – in fact, the epic does not give any description of the marriage rites or any other ritual that would have solemnized the wedding. This is yet another proof of the fact that females in the epic age had control over their bodies and sexuality, and their decision was respected by the parents, a situation that gradually changed as patriarchy took over.

The narrative of Ulupi demonstrates the agency displayed by the warrior princess of the Nagas. She raised her son Aravana on her own, never complaining about the desertion or the lack of invitation to visit her marital home. Arjuna, the Pandava, never returned to ask how she was doing, nor invited her over to join him in Indrapashtha. Despite such conduct, Ulupi convinced her son Aravana to fight in the great war against the Kauravas. The 'other' was trying one last ditch attempt at acceptance by the dominant discourse. But that was not to be. The *Tamil Mahabharata* records a gory tale of deceit and subordination wherein Ulupi's son Aravana was asked to sacrifice himself to ensure the victory of the Pandavas in the great war of Mahabharata. Dying fighting for victory was a dream for any warrior, including Aravana, but that was not his fate. Hildebeital (*Aravana's battlefield sacrifice to Kali* 284) refers to an oral re-telling of the Tamil version of the great epic where the oracles decided on a sacrifice to ensure victory in the great war, and Aravana was chosen to be the one. He was willing to sacrifice his life for his absentee father but raised a valid demand - he should be married before he is dead. There must be a bride to lament his death. No ordinary mortal would agree to be a bride one day and widow the next. So, to honour his request Lord Krishna himself became his

bride for the night! This tradition is kept alive by the Aravanis of Tamil Nadu, a transgender community, who take Aravana to be their husband and practice ritual widowhood in his name (Somasundaram 75). Huge sculptures of Aravana's head are placed at the entrance of the temples of South India, reminding us of the gory past behind it.

Ulupi, whose son was sacrificed to ensure victory for the Pandavas, had her moment of retribution when she managed to incite Babhruvahana, the son of her co-wife Chitrangada, to kill his father Arjuna (14:78:11-13). Ulupi goads Babhruvahana:

उलूपीं मां निबोध त्वं मातरं पन्नगात्मजाम् | कुरुष्व वचनं पुत्र धर्मस्ते भविता परः ||११||

युध्यस्वैनं कुरुश्रेष्ठं धनञ्जयमरिदम | एवमेष हि ते प्रीतो भविष्यति न संशयः ||१२||

एवमुद्धर्षितो मात्रा स राजा बभ्रुवाहनः | मनश्चक्रे महातेजा युद्धाय भरतर्षभ ||१३||

The Mahabharata BORI 14:78

[Know that I am thy mother Ulupi that am the daughter of a snake. Do thou accomplish my behest, O son, for thou wouldst then attain to great merit? Fight thy father, this foremost one of Kuru's race, this hero that is irresistible in battle. Without doubt, he will then be gratified with thee.' In this way was king Vabhruvahana incited against his sire by his (step) mother. At last, endued as he was with great energy, he made up his mind, O chief of the Bharata's, to fight Dhananjaya. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 14: Aswamedha Parva: Anugita Parva: Section LXXIX)]

The epic goes on to record that the battle between the sire and the son resembled the encounter between the gods and the asuras. Egged on by his stepmother Ulupi, Babhruvahana managed to stall Arjuna's advancement, ultimately piercing his body 'as a snake pierces an anthill'. With Arjuna fallen dead, Babhruvahana's real mother Chitrangada, the princess of Manipur, took her co-wife Ulupi to task:

Behold, O Ulupi, our ever-victorious husband slain in battle, through thee, by my son of tender years! Art thou conversant with the practices of the respectable? Art thou a

wife devoted to thy Lord? It is through thy deed that thy husband is laid low, slain in battle. If Dhananjaya hath offended against thee in every respect, do thou forgive him I solicit thee, do thou revive that hero. O righteous lady, thou art conversant with piety. Thou art, O blessed one, known (for thy virtues) over the three worlds. How is it that having caused thy husband to be slain by my son, thou dost not indulge in grief? How is it that thou dost not grieve, having caused him to be slain through my son when thou didst excite with thy words? (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 14: Aswamedha Parva: Anugita Parva: Section LXXX)

Finally, Ulupi has a chance to set things right. The climax of this family drama is reached when, in the presence of the entire army, she proceeds to bring Arjuna back to life:

तं गृहीत्वा तु कौरव्य नागराजपतेः सुता | मनःप्रह्लादनीं वाचं सैनिकानामथाब्रवीत् ||३||
अयं तु मे मणिर्दिव्यः समानीतो विशां पते | मृतान्मृतान्पन्नगेन्द्रान्यो जीवयति नित्यदा ||९||
एतमस्योरसि त्वं तु स्थापयस्व पितुः प्रभो | सञ्जीवितं पुनः पुत्र ततो द्रष्टासि पाण्डवम् ||१०||

The Mahabharata BORI 14:81

[Vaisampayana continued, 'When the king of Manipura, that chastiser of foes, afflicted with grief, along with his mother, sat down to starve himself to death, Ulupi then thought of the gem that has the virtue of reviving a dead man. The gem, the great refuge of the snakes, thus thought of, came there. The daughter of the prince of snakes taking it up, uttered these words that highly gladdened the combatants standing on the field. 'Rise up, O son. Do not grieve. This celestial gem has been brought by me, O king. It always revives the snakes as often as they die. O puissant king, do thou place this gem on the breast of thy sire. Thou shalt then see the son of Pandu revived. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 14: Aswamedha Parva: Anugita Parva: Section LXXX)]

Thus, the dead Arjuna was brought to life by Ulupi in a very public spectacle, thereby irrevocably establishing her prowess and place in the narrative. Ulupi, the warrior princess of the Nagas, proved herself a strong woman who held her own in a psychological warfare against patriarchy, exclusion and subordination. The dominant discourse may have left her behind for the ‘mistake’ of seducing Arjuna. But Ulupi asserted her right to visit her marital home and be recognized as Arjuna’s wife by demonstrating in no uncertain terms her prowess in an actual and a psychological war. The story of the marginal must be read in the silences and the omissions of the dominant discourse. The epic does not show Ulupi fighting in a direct battle with Arjuna, but her proxy war through Babhruvahana, and her subsequent victory against Arjuna, speaks of the agency of this warrior Naga princess who never became a Pandava Queen.

The epic speaks of another woman who shared Ulupi’s fate and had to follow a similar trajectory. Hidimba, the demoness-bride of Bhima, lost her son to the hegemonic forces waging a war for ‘Dharma’. Like Ulupi, she was also left behind to fend for herself, patriarchy not quite comfortable about the inversion of roles where a woman was not dependent on the male. In her work *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* (1988) Judith Butler delineates how symbolisms are inscribed upon the female identity to support hegemonic masculinity, making gender “an innovative affair, with strict punishments for contesting the script by performing out of turn or through unwarranted innovations” (531). Both Ulupi and Hidimba did not conform to the gender-mould, refusing to become the fragile, delicate wallflower relying on the manliness of an alfa male. They were guilty of ‘contesting the script’ that patriarchy had prepared for females, and were abandoned by the establishment for the same.

Hidimba, the Mother of Ghatotkacha

The epic narrates the story of Hidimba, the demoness, who was clearly the mistress of her own destiny. After the Pandavas managed to escape the blaze at Varanavata, they found

refuge in the dense forest which was the territory of a cannibal demon Hidimb and his sister Hidimba. When the demon saw the Pandavas he ordered his sister to kill them and bring them over, but she had other ideas:

And beholding Bhimasena unrivalled on earth for beauty and like unto a vigorous Sala tree, the *Rakshasa* woman immediately fell in love with him, and she said to herself, 'This person of hue like heated gold and of mighty arms, of broad shoulders as the lion, and so resplendent, is worthy of being my husband. If I slay him, my brother's gratification as well as mine will only be momentary. But if I slay him not, I can enjoy with him for ever and ever. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 1: Adi Parva: Hidimva-vadha Parva: Section CLIV)

After Hidimb was slain by Bhima, his sister Hidimba managed to persuade Kunti to allow her to have Bhima as her husband:

हिडिम्बा तु ततः कुन्तीमभिवाद्य कृताञ्जलिः | युधिष्ठिरं च कौन्तेयमिदं वचनमब्रवीत् ||४||
आर्ये जानासि यद्दुःखमिह स्त्रीणामनङ्गजम् | तदिदं मामनुप्राप्तं भीमसेनकृतं शुभे ||५||

The Mahabharata BORI 1:143

[Vaisampayana continued, 'Then Hidimva reverentially saluting Kunti and her son Yudhishtira also, said, with joined palms, 'O revered lady, that time is now come, when I expected I would be made happy. O illustrious dame unite me with this thy son, my husband. Endued as he is with the form of a celestial, let me go taking him with me wherever I like. Trust me, O blessed lady, I will again bring him back unto you all. I will carry you on my back whenever ye desire to proceed with swiftness. O, be gracious unto me and make Bhima accept me. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 1: Adi Parva: Hidimva-vadha Parva: Section CLVII; 1:143:4, 5 *BORI*.)]

Bhima cautioned Hidimba that he would stay only till she had a child with him. In due course of time she was blessed with a son, who was named Ghatotkacha on account of his

terrible countenance and a head that resembled a ‘Ghata’ or water-pot. This mighty warrior, in a trajectory similar to Aravana, lay down his life for the Pandavas. But there is a sad tale of treachery and deceit involved in the narrative, because like Aravana, even Ghatotkacha was essentially ‘sacrificed’ by the establishment. Legend goes that Karna, the arch enemy of the Pandavas, was given a divine weapon called ‘Shataghni’ that just could not fail if deployed. Karna had saved it for his nemesis Arjuna.

‘Nata Nagara’ (wily, smart) Krishna, in an attempt to save Arjuna, exhorted Ghatotkacha to fight against Karna in a one -to-one combat. Karna, though a great warrior, was no match for the demon who was capable of para-normal feats. Helpless, he had to use the great weapon ‘Shataghni’ against Ghatotkacha, who was decimating the Kaurava army. When Ghatotkacha fell and the Pandava army was routed, Krishna could not stop smiling, as according to him, a bigger danger had been averted. Karna, armed with Shataghni, could easily kill Arjuna. Now with the power of the celestial weapon spent, the Pandava victory was ensured. The epic reports the incongruity of Krishna’s response and his master-move that sealed the fate of the Kauravas. Witnessing Krishna’s untimely laughter at the death of Ghatotkacha, Arjuna asks:

अतिहर्षोऽयमस्थाने तवाद्य मधुसूदन | शोकस्थाने परे प्राप्ते हैडिम्बस्य वधेन वै ||६||

विमुखानि च सैन्यानि हतं दृष्ट्वा घटोत्कचम् | वयं च भृशमाविग्ना हैडिम्बस्य निपातनात् ||७||

The Mahabharata BORI 7:155

[Sanjaya said, 'Beholding Hidimva's son slain and lying like a riven mountain, all the Pandavas became filled with grief and began to shed copious tears. Only Vasudeva filled with transports of delight, began to utter leonine shouts, grieving the Pandavas. Indeed, uttering loud shouts he embraced Arjuna. Tying the steeds and uttering loud roars, he began to dance in a transport of joy, like a tree shaken by a tempest. Beholding those tokens of delight that Kesava manifested, Dhananjaya, O king, with heart in grief,

addressed him, saying, 'O slayer of Madhu, thou showest great joy at a time scarcely fit for it, indeed on an occasion for sorrow caused by the death of Hidimva's son. Our troops are flying away, beholding Ghatotkacha slain. We also are filled with anxiety in consequence of the fall of Hidimva's son. O Janardana, the cause must be very grave when at such a time thou feelest such joy. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 7: Drona Parva: Ghatotkacha-badha Parva: Section CLXXX)]

Ghatotkacha was sacrificed so that Arjuna could fight another day. He died the death of a warrior, but the fact that he was expendable for the establishment, his death inconsequential, is not lost on anyone. The subaltern has always been dispensable in an imperialist war. The irony of the whole situation was that both Karna and Ghatotkacha, though cheated by the establishment, died fighting on their behalf.

Madhumita Majumdar investigates narrative voices in Biswas's 'Ghatotkacha and Hidimba: A dialogue' and draws our attention to the fact that both Ghatotkacha and Karna were low caste men who were deprived of their Aryan parent's love (Majumdar 12). In her article "Resurrecting the Mother in Mata Hidimba", Uma Narain notes that patriarchy does not sanction a child born outside the confines of the institution of marriage. Hidimba was placed in the subject position and her son Ghatotkacha became a victim of imperialistic design to deconstruct, negotiate, transform and re-inscribe Patriarchy (Narain 4). Aravana and Ghatotkacha were 'sacrificed' even before they could get a chance to prove themselves in the field of battle, reminding us of the tragic tale of the 'sacrifice of the thumb' by Eklavya, the tribal warrior prince. The difference in the treatment meted out to these sons of the 'other' speak of altered realities.

The Resistance of the Marginal

Characters like Ulupi, Hidimba, Renuka and others demonstrate that though the dominant discourse hardly allowed space for manoeuvre, the marginal did put up resistance.

Challenging the male supremacy myths was far from easy. The familiar trope of a woman being ‘cursed’ by one man and ‘delivered’ by another is oft repeated, making it obvious that the identity and self-worth of a woman was linked with the man in her life. Gautama and Jamdagni could order the be-heading of their wives – that too by their own sons. In a master-move, the martyred wife was brought back to life by the grace of the all-powerful patriarch. Like Rambha or Ahalya, a woman could be turned into a stone, or like Renuka, she could be dispatched to the other world, and brought back at will. It is worth noting that none of these punishments were irreversible, giving a chance to the male prowess to display its worth. Renuka was brought back to life, so was Ahalya, and the crocodilian females in the Nari Tirtha were turned back into beautiful Apsaras (celestial nymphs). But the results were not always as expected. Bodies got switched, and new power-centres were created, as happened in the case of Renuka. The marginal’s resistance is witnessed in Renuka’s refusal to die and her determination to live on as a goddess of the marginal. Ulupi’s retribution came through Babhravahana, her co-wife’s son, who killed his father Arjuna at Ulupi’s behest. The patriarchal epic quickly provides an explanation for Ulupi’s unusual behavior, attributing it to an exigency. According to *The Mahabharata* Ulupi had to take this drastic step to expiate Arjuna of the sin of killing a father figure, i.e. Bhishma, on the battlefield. The credit of killing Bhishma went to Shikhandi, but the arrows belonged to Arjuna, hence he had to die, of course to be brought back to life by Ulupi in a dramatic finale. The epic left the great Pandava warrior at the mercy of a female, which itself was something exceptional.

This resistance put up by Ulupi ultimately fetched her the recognition that she had been lacking so far. After this act of Ulupi, informs the epic, an invitation was extended to King Babhravahana, the sire-killer, who, along with his two mothers (Ulupi and Chitrangada), paid a visit to Hastinapura:

Vaisampayana said, 'Entering the palace of the Pandavas the mighty-armed prince saluted his grandmother in soothing and sweet accents. Then queen Chitrangada, and Ulupi met Subhadra and the other ladies of the Kuru race with due formalities. Kunti gave them many gems and costly things. Draupadi and Subhadra and the other ladies of Kuru's race all made presents to them. The two ladies took up their residence there, using costly beds and seats, treated with affection and respect by Kunti herself. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 14: Ashwamedha Parva: Anugita Parva: Section LXXXVIII)

This treatment was denied to them till Ulupi took the matter in her own hands. The reception was a distinct result of the changed position that these two princesses enjoyed after the so-called death and revival of the Pandava hero Arjuna. Ulupi's subversion is unprecedented and extra-ordinary, what with patriarchy being used to calling the shots and cutting woman to size, confining them to an allotted slot on the margin. The dramatic scene of Ulupi bursting through the earth directly on the battlefield in the Ashwamedha Parva (Book 14) is a unique example of active confrontation. Though side-lined by the hegemonic powers, the 'Other' guaranteed visibility for herself, gaining currency and ensuring representation. In a fluid text like *The Mahabharata* there is ample scope of contradiction and conformation, conflict and resolution, giving the marginal a chance to document resistance.

We find Ulupi's son Aravana's legacy living on in the transgender community called Aravanis, who mourn his death and keep his memory alive. The followers of Aravana have knit themselves in a movement for equality and given themselves a strong political dimension. Hidimba is worshipped as Mata Hidimba in the hills of Himachal Pradesh (Bernier 83). Chetan Datar in his Marathi feminist play 'Mata Hidimba' gives voice to the hitherto invisible character of Hidimba, who is placed in the subject position to deconstruct, negotiate, transform and re-inscribe patriarchy (Narain 4). Renuka Yellamma survived a be-heading, to emerge as

the goddess of the Dalits in the southern states of India. The myths recording resistance by the gendered subaltern display the changing dynamics, where though the scope was limited, yet efforts were registered, showing agency and empowerment.

Survivors like Ulupi, Renuka, Hidimba and other marginals who strived to make a place for themselves prove that the aim of the epic was not just to document the instances of marginalization, but to also showcase the examples of resistance. *The Mahabharata* itself claims that what is not here is nowhere else – ‘*yannehasti na tadkvacit*’. The great epic tradition teaches by discourse and not by design. We observe that the relations of power between the binaries are deliberately blurred, to initiate a dialogue with the ‘other’. This leads to an interplay of meanings, giving a semblance of control - whether a wishful reality, or a self-fulfilling prophecy, depends on the context. The meanings are recast when ‘read’ in an alternative domain. The divide deepens with each overlapping difference - gender, class and other structures of authoritarian patriarchal culture intertwining to give birth to hegemonic relationships. The discourse is shaped by a constant give and take, forming clouts and subverting stereotypes.

In his succinct work titled “*The Problem Revisited: Perceiving Women*”, Edwin Ardener (1977) regrets that women were rendered inarticulate by the male structure, and those who were not in the male world-position were muted (21-22). Rey Chow questions the portrayal of women in two stark categories – a Goddess, or a Femme Fatale - to be worshipped, or condemned, at will. She asserts that women have all along been objectified as the very devices of representation, as the signs that bear specific moral or artistic significance in a world created by men, with women being the means with which men represent themselves to themselves and the world (*Gender and Representation* 39). The meta-language of myth naturalizes and justifies the purpose of their creation, serving the objectives of the creator. But somewhere in the nooks and crannies, in the fissures and crevices of the dominant discourse

we find the marginal clawing her way up, showing how *The Mahabharata*, a fluid text based on an oral tradition, recorded the trajectory of the resistance of the Marginal.



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