

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Writing the “Other” : Engendered Resistance Through ‘Écriture Féminine’*

Reading women through the dark lenses of patriarchy has been a challenge for authors who have sought to question the immovable contours of gender typecasting perpetrated in the name of mythology. The deep roots taken by misogyny have programmed the thought process of generations, spilling into literature, distorting images and impacting lives. The marginalization extends to other minority segments questioning the gender binary, for example, the asexual, the bi-sexual or the gender queer. The gendered subaltern has been caught in the margins constructed by the dominant phallogocentric ideology. Since the creators of these mythic tales were essentially male, the vision and the versions of the female or the queer were never recorded, or even if they were, only warped versions of the same could exist.

One such narrative that brings out the misogyny and serves to refurbish the superiority of the male is recounted in the *Bṛihadaraṇyaka Upaniṣhada*. It states the story of Gargi Vachaknavi who was forced to accept defeat against Sage Yajnavalkya, though her arguments about the existence of the unmanifested, immutable Brahma were far superior. When questioned about the immanence of the supreme power, Yajnavalkya was hard-pressed for an

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answer. But instead of accepting the fact that Gargi Vachaknavi was more knowledgeable, he warned her against pushing her inquiry too far, 'lest her head should fall off'. Gargi was cautioned that her questioning about 'the deity that should not be reasoned about' could cost her dear. 'Thereupon Gargi, the daughter of Vachaknu, kept silent' (स होवाच, गार्गी मातिप्राक्शीः, मा ते मूर्धा व्यपत्तत्, अनतिप्रश्न्यां वै देवतामतिपृच्छसि गार्गी, मातिप्राक्शीरिति; ततो ह गार्गी वाचक्नव्युपरराम ॥ १ ॥ इति षष्ठं ब्राह्मणम् ॥ 3.6.1)

The Shalya Parva recounts the story of Subhru (Kunigargya), an old female ascetic, who chose not to marry, despite her parents insisting on the same:

सा पित्रा दीयमानापि भर्त्रे नैच्छदनिन्दिता |  
आत्मनः सदृशं सा तु भर्तारं नान्वपश्यत् ॥७॥ (*The Mahabharata BORI 9:51:7*)

Since Subhru did not get anyone worth her stature, she remained unmarried, and spent her days in meditation and asceticism. She was acknowledged as a great scholar and sage, but this did not come to her aid when it was time to go to heaven. She was informed by sage Narada that her unmarried status was not conducive to her entry in heaven, hence she had to marry, even if it was just for a day.

मोक्तुकामां तु तां दृष्ट्वा शरीरं नारदोऽब्रवीत् |  
असंस्कृतायाः कन्यायाः कुतो लोकास्तवानघे ॥११॥ (*The Mahabharata BORI 9:51:11*)

Poor Subhru offered half of her virtues to anyone who agreed to marry her (तपसोऽर्धं प्रयच्छामि पाणिग्राहस्य सत्तमाः ॥१३॥ *The Mahabharata BORI 9:51:13*), still there were no takers.

One good Samaritan finally conceded to accept her as a bride, and was richly rewarded, as she turned into a strikingly handsome lass on her wedding night. But in a dramatic twist to the story, Subhru, a renunciate at heart, gave up her life the very next day and ascended to heaven (एवमुक्त्वा ततः साध्वी देहं त्यक्त्वा दिवं गता ॥२१॥ *The Mahabharata BORI 9:51:21*). An unmarried

woman had no place in this world or the other, and a woman had to annihilate her individuality to survive in a man's world.

### *Of Queer-feminism and Gender-reversals*

The voices that were silenced in the case of Gargi, or Subhru, and countless others, have found a release in the re-tellings that have made their presence felt on the Indian literary scene in the recent years. Written by women-authors, these writings give expression to the disquiet that has simmered beneath the surface of the patriarchal texts. The unidirectionality of the meta-narrative is countered by re-inventing these stories, based on the version of the gendered marginal. If in the dominant discourse females were indirect participants assisting in the perpetration of the male-worldview, in the re-tellings they are the proponents who come out of the shadows and stake their claim. The beauty of *The Mahabharata* is that it has deliberately been kept an open-ended text, abounding in dilemmas which raise the questions of value, ethics, morality and justice. Did Kunti act according to Dharma when she got the five tribal youth along with their mother burnt in the House of Lac at the forest of Varanavat? Was she right in commodifying Draupadi and consigning her to a schizophrenic marriage just to keep her sons and the patriarchal legacy together? Or was Kunti herself a victim of phallogocentric manipulation, as we see in the victims of the Stockholm syndrome, where the quarry develops a feeling of trust towards a captor? What wrong did Hidimba do to be relegated in the background, her lament for her son Ghatotkacha's death missing from the epic, unregistered and unheard? Why did Uloopi have to conspire to get Arjuna killed by Babhruvahana? Why was Uloopi's son Aravana sacrificed, his head adorning the entrance of Draupadi temples in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka? Was this done according to Dharma? What was Dharma? This thesis attempts to address existential questions that the epic leaves open for its readers.

The texts used for the present study are significant contributions to this new literary tradition which allows women to “write what cannot be written” (Jacobus 12-13). For this study the contemporary feminist sites have been explored to attempt a selective reading of the Indic myths. The present work uses feminist and queer tools to register, negotiate and critique the diversity that informs the Indic myths. The fluidity of the Indic myths lies in the fact that they are not prescriptive in nature. The attempt is not to ensure blind compliance, but to encourage debate on issues that matter. That is what has kept the great epics in circulation over thousands of years, spawning versions and fuelling re-tellings, engendering debates that help find answers to timeless questions.

Adrienne Rich (1972) points out that “such re-vision - the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entertaining an old text from a new critical direction - is for women more than a chapter of cultural history: it is an act of survival” (*When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision* 106). Sandra Gilbert (1980) observes that feminist criticism “wants to decode and demystify all the disguised questions and answers that have always shadowed the connections between textuality and sexuality, genre and gender, psychosexual identity and cultural authority” (*What Do Feminist Critics Want?* 19). While exploring the applicability of different readings and reading systems “in conscientiously decoding woman-as-sign”, Kolodny (1976) notes that “the feminist is asserting her own equivalent right to liberate new, and perhaps different, significances from these same texts; and, at the same time, her right to choose which features of a text she takes as relevant because she is, after all, asking new and different questions of it” (*Literary Criticism* 420). In a gender-asymmetrical world which feeds on the insecurities of women, it is crucial that they revise the myths that sanction and support such differential treatment. The control that patriarchy has exercised on the minds of women has been facilitated through myths that disrupt the gender-equilibrium. Eve was created by

borrowing one of the ribs of Adam (*Genesis* 2), and in our androcentric texts the husband became a master, the ‘*Pati-Parameshwara*’, or the ultimate God on earth:

पतिर्हि देवो नारीणां पतिर्बन्धुः पतिर्गतिः ।

पत्या समा गतिर्नास्ति दैवतं वा यथा पतिः ॥५१॥

(*The Mahabharata BORI* 13.134.34,51)].

The *Padma Purana* (*Shristi Khanda*) narrates the story of a pativrata (devoted wife) who took great care of her husband, to the extent that she carried him on her back to the prostitute he was lusting after, as he could not walk, his toes and fingers misshapen by leprosy (Deshpande NA, 51). The message was driven home, and generations of women believed in the patriarchal drive, accepting their second-rate citizenship without any question, agreeing to the divine sanction of male authority. Lauding the great deeds of men who fought and conquered and governed, the mythic tales confirmed the dependence of women, controlling their conceptualisation of sexuality and their sense of self.

### *The Appropriation of the Word*

“Few myths have been more advantageous to the ruling caste than the myth of women; it justifies all privileges and authorises their abuse. Men need not bother themselves with alleviating the pains and the burdens that psychologically are women’s lot, since these are ‘intended by Nature,’” said Simone de Beauvoir (*Myth and Reality* 61). A creation of the male imagination and perception, the gendered subaltern was handicapped because of the appropriation of the word. The texts devised distinct roles based on the binaries of subject/object and self/other. In *Thought and Language* (1962), Vygotsky observed that words played a key role in the evolution of awareness (153). Since patriarchy was in control of the written word, the texts that came into existence faithfully reflected the allegiance (ibid). The hierarchical power-structure based on words inscribed by the master class imposed a subservient position on the ‘other’, with little opportunity to individuate the latter’s personality

(ibid). While analysing feminist theories, Robyn. R. Warhol (1997) sees gender as something that shapes the way experiences are processed by the author. She observes that gender acts as “a significant influence in the life and the interior experience of the reader who is trying to understand what the text has to say” (Warhol 561).

To place gender and sexuality in the post-modern times, one needs to interrogate the experiences of women authors in an inter-textual world. In these liminal situations where the reality of the techno-economic space is different from what has been prescribed in the age-old patriarchal texts, it is imperative to study the change to differentiate the real message from the contrived one. In recent years we are experiencing gender in a novel manner, hence new ways of comprehending subjectivity and a new take on the study of the theories of gender and sexuality must be explored. This thesis focuses on the revisionist writings of Iravati Karve, Mahashweta Devi, Pratibha Ray, Saoli Mitra, Shashi Deshpande, Chitra Banerjee-Divakaruni and others, who have drawn from the Indic myths, bringing out the resilient gender asymmetries that are emerging in the post-modern Indian literature.

The conditioning and coaxed socialisation of women has been questioned by Susan Sellers (2001), who, in *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction*, defines feminist re-telling as such writing “that would open the myth from inside out, leaving in place enough of the known format to provide evocative points of reflection for its reader, while also encompassing different possibilities and other points of view”(Sellers 29). In her work "*Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy*", Shoshana Felman (1975) argues that the task facing the woman today is to question “the phallogocentric structure, to establish a discourse the status of which would no longer be defined by the *phallacy* of masculine meaning” (10). Since the women revisionist authors ‘invent’ mythic stories, one must investigate whether myths are iron-clad, immutable, eternal kind of stories, or they have been open to revisions to ensure representation.

## *Exiled onto the Terrain of the Abject*

Sifaki and Spiropoulou (2012) find the term ‘resistance’ referring to both a struggle for and against a state of things. They see it evoking the image that Derrida called ‘undecidable’, their value being ‘double and contradictory’, deriving ‘from their syntax’ (*Gender Resistance* 189). They notice that on one hand, traditional binary constructions of gender and associated power dynamics often prove ‘resistant’ to change, whereas, on the other hand, feminist politics and more liberal attitudes towards sexuality and gender clash with the realities of women’s oppression under enduring patriarchal structures (ibid). They observe that politically engaged queer struggles target normative matrices that discursively constitute and exile onto a terrain of the abject those who do not fit into monolithic gender nominations and binaries (ibid).

The authors’ emphasis on the historicity of gender and sexual identities, broadening the meaning of ‘gender resistance’ to include resistance in the naturalising operations of discursive practices (ibid), holds true for the revisionist re-tellings written by the women scribes who have been selected for this study. The sensitivities and the altered circumstances of the 21<sup>st</sup> century women in India are experienced first-hand by these authors who have managed to bring out the angst and frustration in their characters. Hence the irreverence of Divakaruni’s Draupadi is in sharp contrast with the ‘pativrata’ Draupadi of the meta-narrative who launched into an enthusiastic sermon about the wifely duties that have made her a favourite to her husbands (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Vana Parva, Draupadi-Satyabhama Samvad). Shashi Deshpande portrays Draupadi as one who thought that she was the pivot around whom the epic revolves. She was made to believe that it was her honour that was at stake, and by defeating the Kauravas her husbands were trying to avenge her insult. She was shattered to learn that she was inconsequential in the grand scheme of the imperialistic strife (*Writing from the Margin* 243). The violence of the emotional trauma that bursts through in the words of ‘Dopdi’ in Mahashweta Devi’s *Breast Stories* (1997) has no parallel in Vyasa’s textual

universe. At the height of the Naxalite movement, when Dopdi Mehjen is ‘made’ (raped, assaulted) by the state machinery, she refuses to cower like Draupadi in the dominant discourse. Instead, she stands tall, unashamed of her nudity and thrusts her bloodied, ravaged breasts towards the police officer, proclaiming that she need not be clothed, as there wasn’t a man that she should be ashamed of (Devi 33). The defiance of the tribal Dopdi Mehjen is in sharp contrast to the prayers and supplications of the Draupadi of the dominant discourse, who needed a Krishna to save her modesty.

In ‘*After Kurukshetra*’ (2005), in an imagined conversation between the Kshatriya Queen mother Kunti and the Nishadin, the mother of the five tribal youth burnt in the House of Lac under Kunti’s direct intervention, Mahashweta Devi shows sagacity and forgiveness on the part of the poor tribal female who believed in ‘Lokvritta’, or the ways of the people. The Nishadin did not accuse Kunti, saying apportioning blame was the way of the Rajavritta (the way of the royalty and the aristocracy, the privileged). Instead, she sympathised with Kunti who herself was a product of the system. In Devi’s rendition, Kunti, the proud queen, gave way to the repentant Kunti who regretted the bloodshed and her role in it. She was as much a victim of the system, with patriarchy forcing her to live a lie as she consigned her new-born into the waters of the river Ashwa.

In her book titled ‘*The Thieves of Language*’ (1982), Alicia Ostriker considers revisionist mythmaking as re-reading a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture. She observes that since the poet is using myth, a previously told story, the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist, that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying only the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible (Ostriker 72). Adrienne Rich (1972) offers a radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, which takes the work first of all as a clue to how women live, how they have been living, how they have been led to



imagine themselves, how their language has trapped as well as liberated them, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how they can begin to see and name - and therefore live afresh (*Writing as Re-Vision* 35).

The prolific writings of Devdutt Pattanaik probe misogyny and trans-phobia, and sensitively deal with identity issues faced by the transgender community in the Indic myths. A self-proclaimed champion of the gay community rights, Pattanaik says: “If you believe *gay* sex is unnatural, you will dismiss all evidence of *gay* sex in nature. If you believe women always lie, you will dismiss all evidence” (364 *Retweets*). His views on Hinduism as a faith that does not comply with pre-conceived notions of what god and religion should be are portrayed in his book on LGBTQ+ stories called “*Shikhandi And Other Queer Tales They Don’t Tell You* (27)”. Shikhandi aka Shikhandini, the transgender child born to King Drupada, was a major embarrassment to the parents and was raised as a male, till she got married and the truth was out. She underwent a transformation with the help of a well-meaning ‘Yaksha’ (a demigod) who loaned her his manhood. Now a male, Shikhandi who was Shikhandini could save his marriage, avert war, and finally be the instrument of Bhisma’s death. According to Pattanaik, this transformation is what modern queer vocabulary would call a female -to-male trans-sexual, as her body goes through a very specific change genitally. In his opinion, such stories like the restoration of normalcy after the loaning of the male sex organ reveal a patriarchal bias even in the queer space (*Shikhandi* 46).

Pattanaik refers to an oral tradition in Rajasthan where a forest spirit magically enabled the sexual transformation of a woman. Borrowing from Vijay Dan Detha’s Rajasthani folklore, Pattanaik narrates the story of Teeja and Beeja. When Teeja, who was a woman earlier, turned into a man, he stopped being as romantic and was no more his earlier considerate self, so Beeja asked him to become a woman once again. With the help of the gods Teeja managed to become a woman again, and the two lovers lived happily ever after (ibid 48). Pattanaik asks why was

it that in the Vinaya Pitaka men were ordained as monks, even women were allowed entry after some hesitation, but not hermaphrodites, for fear that their excessive craving for sex would cause monks to deviate from the path of dhamma (ibid 24)? He points out that this was happening in the same country that celebrated Arjuna as the transgender dancer Brihannala (*The Mahabharata BORI* 4.2), or lauded Bhagirath, who was born of two women (ibid 92-93), or venerated Vishnu as Mohini, and Shiva as the ‘Ardhanarishwara’ (*The Mahabharata* 1:16). Pattanaik feels that to understand queerness, cultural filters were necessary, as also the awareness that these filters could sometimes choke voices (*Shikhandi* 5).

### *Deconstructing and Re-inscribing Patriarchy*

There were other peripheral characters who were marginalised because of their place in the social hierarchy. In his Marathi feminist play titled *Resurrecting the Mother in Mata Hidimba*, Chetan Datar 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 1682). Hidimba, the demon-bride of Bhima was abandoned soon after the marriage. Similarly, Uloopi, the daughter of the king of the Nagas, and Chitrangada, the princess of Manipur were wedded by Arjuna but were never given their due, to the extent that Uloopi had to influence Babhrvahana, Chitrangada’s son to indulge in a parricide on the battle-field. In a dramatic finale Arjuna was revived on the battlefield by Uloopi, who was satisfied after the point was driven home (*The Mahabharata BORI* 1:206). Incidentally, both Uloopi and Hidimba were remembered on the eve of the great war when their valiant sons were needed by the Pandavas. Hidimba’s son Ghatotkacha was tricked into a one- to- one combat with Karna and was killed by the ‘Shataghni’ (a lethal weapon that could not miss its target), something Karna had saved only for Arjuna (*The Mahabharata BORI* 14:81). Uloopi’s son Aravana could not even fight in the great war. He was asked to volunteer himself for a human sacrifice to ensure the Pandava victory in the war. We see the sculptural evidence of this gory discrimination in

Aravana's severed head adorning the gate of Draupadi temples in South India. While referring to Aravana's battlefield sacrifice to Kali in "*The cult of Draupadi: On Hindu ritual and the goddess*", Hildebeitel says: "Yudhiṣṭhira is stupefied at the thought of human sacrifice, especially that of his brother Arjuna's son, and in extended terms, his own (cf. Shulman 1993, on the theme of filicide). But he finally agrees when the resolute Aravāṇ offers the compromise that he will make his initial kaḷappali of flesh and blood on the caturdaśī" (215).

The Mlechhas and the Nishadas tribes were at the receiving end despite being brave warriors and expert ironsmiths (Ganguli, *The Mahabharata*, Shanti Parva, LIX). One such Nishada tribal youth called Eklavya was asked for the inhuman gift of a thumb by Guru Drona (*The Mahabharata BORI* 1:123:30), proving the point that for the 'Rajavritta', the royalty, ethics were optional, and victory was everything. Vidura, the son of Veda Vyasa, the great author of *The Mahabharata*, never became the king despite the fact that both his brothers, Dhritarashtra and Pandu, one blind and the other an invalid, were not the right fit - just because he was a 'dasi-putra' - born of a slave (*The Mahabharata BORI* 1:102:19-20). Perhaps the biggest example of such caste and class-based discrimination was Karna, the much-maligned first-born of Kunti.

Karna, the great warrior lauded for his large-hearted behaviour and charity in the epic, was denied his identity and position by the establishment. His mother abandoned him while he was still a babe-in-arms. He bore the brunt of caste-based allegations his entire life (*The Mahabharata BORI* 1:127:4-6). Never acknowledged by his biological mother Kunti, he was killed in an unfair combat by his own brother Arjuna (ibid 7:155:16-19). It is important to note that Eklavya, Vidura and Karna belonged to the lower strata of society, either by birth or by circumstances. Such cases of marginalisation based on caste, class and regional injustices have captured the imagination of many, and have led to a host of retellings analysed in this work.

In the preface to her translation of Derrida's '*Of Grammatology*' [(1967) 1997)], Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak maintains that "by daring to repeat the book and reconstitute it in another register, one re-enacts, hence a book's repetitions are always other than the book" (xii). She reiterates that there was, in fact, no "book" other than these ever-different repetitions: the "book" in other words, was always already a "text," constituted by the play of identity and difference. Spivak considers writing as the site where, "between reading and reading, book and book, the inter-inscribing of "reader(s)," "writer(s)," and language is forever at work" (ibid). She upholds that the text has "no stable identity, no stable origin and no stable end, since each act of reading the "text" is a preface to the next" (ibid).

The revisionist writings based on the text of the meta-narrative not just reflect the realities of the times but also mould the same. Post-structural theorists believe in the multiplicity of meanings based on the reading experience of the person experiencing the text. Hence in *The Palace of Illusions* Divakaruni's Draupadi is forced to acknowledge the abusive glances and leers when she was engaged as Sairandhri in the Matsya Kingdom, something she escaped while she was a royal wife. Sheltered from the public gaze, Draupadi in *The Mahabharata* did not know what insult was till she was dragged to the royal court. Saved by Krishna's grace, she escapes public disrobing, only to face it again during the '*Agyata Vasa*' (the year of living incognito) in the court of King Virata whose brother-in-law Keechak lusted after her. Divakaruni's Draupadi recalls the trauma in these words:

His kohl-lined eyes roved up and down my body approvingly. My face grew hot. Not even Duryodhana had dared to look at me quite like this in his sabha, for he'd known I was a queen. Is this how men looked at ordinary women, then? Women they considered their inferiors? A new sympathy for my maids rose in my mind. When I became queen again, I thought, I would make sure common women were treated differently. (*The Palace of Illusions* 2008, 228)

In a new take on the ancient '*Pancha Kanya*' (Five virgins), Mahashweta Devi proposes her own set of five 'kanya' (young women), who question the life of privilege led by Kunti, Subhadra and Uttara in the royal palace. Called Godhumi, Gomati, Yamuna, Vitasta and Vipasha in Devi's '*After Kurukshetra*' (2005), these five are young war-widows who have been pressed in the service of Uttara, the child -bride of Abhimanyu, the slain Pandava hero (4). Devi points out that the privilege of being a royal lady, an 'Asuryampashya' ( someone who had not even been seen by the sun), has blinded Uttara to the fact that life goes on beyond the hallowed portals of 'Rajavritta'(the way of the aristocrats and the royals), despite conflict, death and destruction. Uttara is made to realize that the luxury of extended mourning is only for the privileged. These rural women had to leave the palace and get back to life, as the drying fields had to be tilled, the starving children had to be fed, and the rhythm of life had to continue, leaving them with no time for extended bereavement. Devi emphasizes upon the fact that for the disadvantaged, even mourning was an indulgence.

Jack M. Balkin says that deconstructive arguments are aligned with the analysis of conceptual oppositions, giving the example of the opposition between writing and speech, (1976). He finds the deconstructor looking for the ways in which one term in the opposition has been "privileged" over the other in a particular text, argument, historical tradition or social practice. He posits that one term could be privileged because it was considered the general, normal, central case, while the other was considered special, exceptional, peripheral or derivative. According to Balkin, something could also be privileged because it was considered more true, more valuable, more important, or more universal than its opposite, and because things could have more than one opposite, as many different types of privilegings could occur simultaneously. We can see this being endorsed in the words of Derrida himself in *Of Grammatology*:

We could thus take up all the coupled oppositions on which philosophy is constructed,

and from which our language lives, not in order to see opposition vanish, but to see the emergence of a necessity such that one of the terms appears as the difference of the other, the other as “differed” within the systematic ordering [l’*économie*] of the same, e.g., the intelligible as differing from the sensible, as sensible differed; the concept as differed-differing intuition, life as differed-differing matter; mind as differed-differing life; culture as differed-differing nature. (Derrida, 1967, 148)

### *The Indefiniteness of Textuality*

In the preface to *Of Grammatology*, Spivak considers deconstruction as a means of offering an exit or a way out of the closure of knowledge, as by inaugurating the open-ended indefiniteness of textuality, it shows us the lure of the abyss as freedom (*Of Grammatology* lxxviii). She notes that ultimately it is about “deconstruction, deconstructing deconstruction, both as the search for a foundation, and as the pleasure of the bottomless” (ibid). Spivak points out that our desire is the tool for any deconstruction. She says that desire itself is a “deconstructive and grammatological structure that forever differs from and defers the text of our selves” (ibid).

Derrida’s method, says Spivak, was ‘reversal and displacement’. It was not enough “simply to neutralize the binary oppositions of metaphysics (ibid lxxvii),” as to deconstruct the opposition was first to overthrow the hierarchy and to fight violence with violence. Quoting Derrida, Spivak reiterates that the critic must make room for “the irruptive emergence of a new ‘concept,’ a concept which no longer allows itself to be understood in terms of the previous regime or system of oppositions (ibid)”. She observes that deconstruction entails “locating the promising marginal text, disclosing the undecidable moment, prying it loose with the positive lever of the signifier, reversing the resident hierarchy, only to displace it, to dismantle in order to reconstitute what is already inscribed” (ibid). The idea is to re-appropriate the text by undoing and redoing it, to show the text what it “does not know” (lxxviii).

Derrida's pedagogy, said Spivak, informed the reader that there was "nothing outside of the text, but that within it, in its interstices, in its white spaces and unspokennesses, the reserve of the origin reigned" (ibid). Spivak observed that the act of reading was besieged by the precariousness of intertextuality. Since translation was one version of intertextuality, within the limits of its possibility, it practices the difference between signified and signifier. Spivak noted that it was unprecedented to deal with some "transfer" of pure signified that the signifying instrument or "vehicle" would leave virgin and intact, from one language to another, or within one and the same language, as there might be as many translations of a text as readings, for a text was infinitely translatable (ibid). Derrida summarized it thus: "It was not necessary to search elsewhere, for exactly here, to be sure not in the words, but in words as erasures, in their grill, "the meaning of being" spoke itself, giving to the voice of the teacher that unlimited sovereignty which permitted him to read the text indefinitely" (ibid lxxviii).

This holds true of the *Ur-Mahabharata*, a text that has lent itself to several versions, translations and revisionist retellings. Extensively translated in several Indian languages, the text has been mined for myths by the extended diaspora in countries of south-east Asia and Africa. The derivative literature based on *The Mahabharata* has a significant presence in the corpus of Indic texts. Liberty has been taken in terms of storyline of the original, new characters have been added, old ones dropped, till it becomes a tale of contemporaneity, new wine in old bottle. And perhaps there lies the secret of the longevity of the text which has remained popular for more than 3000 years. The issues of right and wrong ride on stories that always end in a dilemma, making the reader part of the game, taking the authorship as he/she /it tries to come to a conclusion. Never pruning out the bad and the ugly, it lays before the reader-participant a veritable smorgasbord of options. The beauty of the Indian tradition is that it keeps the scope of keeping the debate open.

This endorses what Barthes has to say about all writing consisting of several indiscernible voices, and that literature being the invention of these voices, to which we cannot assign a specific origin. In his essay titled *'The Death of the Author'* (1967), Barthes argues that a text does not consist of a line of words, releasing the "message" of the Author-God, but is a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, not one of which is original (145). The text instead is a tissue of citations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture. To give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification, to close the writing, says Barthes (ibid). He posits that the true locus of writing is reading, as a text may consist of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other, but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the author, but the reader (ibid). Barthes insists that the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of. The unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination as the birth of the reader which must be ransomed by the death of the Author (ibid). The revisionist re-writing based on the *Mahabharata* also involves a reading, reinterpretation and reviewing of the Ur-text, deconstructing it in the process. The aim is to restore the equilibrium by questioning the parent narrative which has chosen to 'privilege' some at the cost of the others, as happened in the case of the gendered subaltern in the *Mahabharata*. The issues of representation, agency and power inform the marginalisation of the women and the queer whose voices have found an outlet in the retellings.

In her work *Gender and Representation*, Rey Chow (2001) argued that in men's act of representation women were often used as symbols for meanings that men wanted to convey - goddesses and femme fatales being the two extreme examples (39). Women, regretted Rey Chow, had 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" (ibid). The course of



identity formation was truncated in the process, and women, even the ones with speaking roles like Draupadi, or Kunti, or Amba were hand maidens, or rather, victims of patriarchy. When we read into the silences and omissions of the epic, we find that the problem is far from being unidimensional. Issues of intersectionality need to be addressed, so that a Souvalya does not feel mortified for being a Dasi-putra (even when his father was the mighty King Dhritarashtra), and a Drona or a Kripa or Kripa or a Shakuntala do not live without ever knowing who their mothers were. Could it be that these episodes point at certain low-caste/ aboriginal mothers who were spirited away from the narrative because of the taboo attached to the progeny being a mixed breed (*Varna-samkara*)? Explaining it away by laying the blame on an un-emotional, cold-hearted celestial nymph who was not even there to defend herself (as in the case of Shakuntala's mother Menaka) was taking misogyny to a whole new level. The agenda was to relegate the gendered subaltern to a subject position. The fight for representation took Amba to Parashurama, but instead of getting justice against the attempted abduction by Bhishma, she got a rebuttal and some unsolicited advice as to how she should repair back to her father's abode, as a woman rejected by her husband had no place and standing of her own.

In her work titled *Constructing the Subject, Deconstructing the Text*, Belsey (1997) argues that withdrawing from discourse itself is not a workable option as it is politically hopeless. She insists that a resolution of the incongruities in the discourse should be addressed instead (657). Calling it a 'gendered destiny', Madhusraba Dasgupta questions the anomaly in her book "*Faces of the Feminine*", where Amba, and others like her, for example Madhavi, are treated as 'usable women'. The patriarchal tropes that confine a woman within the '*Lakshaman Rekha*' (boundary) of 'propriety' need to be questioned and subverted through myth-revision and through re-telling the same with feminist sensitivity. Since mythic stories play such a great role in identity formation and construction of self-worth, it is important that we re-write the same with the changed ethos and values.

In her work titled *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory* (1986), Elaine Showalter observed that speaking, reading, and writing were gender marked and men and women used language differently. She found the problem going “well beyond reformist efforts to purge language of its sexist aspects, ridding "the oppressor's language" of the chauvinism that marked it” (185). She pointed out that male-centred classifications moulded our discernment of reality, and this was why attention was increasingly directed to the characteristically oppressive traits for women in a male-constructed language system. According to Showalter language was the place to begin questioning the dominant discourse which bore the mark of the dominant masculine ideology, as when a woman wrote herself into existence, she was forced to speak in something like a foreign tongue. The texts were written in a lingo that was strange to her. The bias was evident at every given step, the sensitivity missing. Showalter believed that a process of defining the feminine had begun, where women were studied as writers, and the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women was paramount. “Since no English term exists for such a specialized critical discourse, and so I have invented the term *gynocritics*,” held Showalter (*Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness* 185).

In their work titled ‘*Queer Methods and Methodologies*’, Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash (2016) show that queer researchers draw on poststructuralist and postmodernist approaches such as some feminist, anti-racist and postcolonial theories. “In research deemed ‘queer’, the methods we use often let us speak to or interact with people, usually on the basis of sexual/gender identities and within anti-normative frameworks – again, a focus shared with many scholars including feminist, gay/lesbian, antiracist and postcolonial”, say Browne and Nash (1). Raising the question of the fluidity and instability of subjects and subjectivities, and the fact that they are ‘perpetually becoming’, the authors ask as to how it was possible to gather ‘data’ from the fleeting identities. Andrea Custodi (2007) tries to explain such subversion of

seemingly stable categories and deliberates on the interesting possibilities that may emerge. She points out that it is in the “liminal states such as trans-sexuality that the boundaries of the symbolic binaries of gender are thrown most starkly into relief” (*Show you are a Man!* 211). An insight into the world of male parthenogenesis is seen in Brodbeck and Black edited *Gender and Narrative in the Mahabharata* (2007), which highlights the fact that gender ambiguity in the Great epic is employed in relation to ‘notions of masculinity’ (20). This line of argument is supported by Andrea Custodi who refers to the lengths that the male characters in the epic can go, to prove their manhood (ibid 208). She regrets the fact that there is no equivalent for the female characters, ‘whose femininity is rarely if ever contested’, as one is rarely ‘challenged to be a woman’. Custodi questions the Freudian interpretations of Indic myths and has found Lacan to be of more help in unlocking the riddle: “For Lacan, masculinity and femininity are not biological essences but symbolic positions, and the assumption of one of these two positions is fundamental to the construction of subjectivity; the subject is essentially a sexed subject. ‘Man’ and ‘woman’ are signifiers that stand for these two subjective positions” (ibid 211).

Browne and Nash find Queer theory challenging the normative social ordering of identities and subjectivities along the heterosexual/homosexual binary as well as the privileging of heterosexuality as ‘natural’ and homosexuality as its deviant and abhorrent ‘other’ (*Queer Methods* 3). In ‘*The History of sexuality*’(1978), Michel Foucault’s emphasis on Queer Discourse shows how sexuality itself is a historically specific concept as well as a regime of disciplinary knowledge structuring society and social relations : “Discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations; there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy; they can, on the contrary, circulate without changing their form from one strategy to another, opposing strategy” (Foucault 102-103). Judith Butler also observes that though gender is culturally formed, it is also a domain

of agency or freedom and that it is most important to resist the violence that is imposed by ideal gender norms, especially against those who are gender different and nonconforming in their gender presentation (*Gender Trouble* 1990:137). Browne opines that “Queer scholarship in its contemporary form is anti-normative and seeks to subvert, challenge and critique a host of taken for granted ‘stabilities’ in our social lives” (*Queer Methods* 7).

Calvin Thomas, in his ‘*No Kingdom of the Queer* (2017)’ registers that Queerness can never define an identity – it can only ever disturb one (3). Derrida speaks of the ontology of beings and beingness and the play of *différance*, drawing our attention to the fact that *sollicitare*, in old Latin, means to shake as a whole, to make tremble in entirety:

Therefore, it is the determination of Being as presence or as beingness that is interrogated by the thought of *différance*. Such a question could not emerge and be understood unless the difference between Being and beings were somewhere to be broached..... *différance* is not..... It is not a present being, however excellent, unique, principal, or transcendent. It governs nothing, reigns over nothing, and nowhere exercises any authority. It is not announced by any capital letter. Not only is there no kingdom of *différance*, but *différance* instigates the subversion of every kingdom. (*Margins of Philosophy*, 1982, 21-22)

As Spivak notes in her translation of ‘*Of Grammatology*’, the task is to dismantle the metaphysical and rhetorical structures which are at work in the text, not in order to reject or discard them, but to re-inscribe them in another way, making the relationship between the re-inscribed text and the so-called original text the relationship between two palimpsests (Ixxv). The re-reading of the Indic myths, especially those in the palimpsest that is *The Mahabharata*, has to be done keeping in mind that the signifiers are ‘not to be used as a transcendental key that will unlock the way to truth, but as a bricoleur’s tool’. The same myths that report abuse and aggression also, in a very subtle manner, share the story of resistance. The need is to think

about the Derridean question in the interpretation of our text: How to perceive what is outside of a text? What is a text's own, appropriate margin? Those who have been on the margin have found a voice in the stories of male to female trans-sexual transformations, whether it is to experience, as Lacan said in *The Psychoses*, “the prospect of jouissance beyond the phallus that must be attractive to ‘normal’ men and mystics alike, or the Otherness of Woman’s place in the Symbolic Order which holds the promise of knowledge, full presence, and most compellingly, absence of the lack that dogs the ostensible possessor of the phallus”(145).

The review of literature on the topic shows that there is a lot of scope for focused research on the construction of our cultural history from below, and for new interpretations which on one hand question the colonial interpretation of Indic myths and legends, and on the other support the idea of the exploration of a subaltern consciousness. The portrayal of the ‘others’ in our myths has never been given the kind of attention it deserves till very recently when authors like Sukumari Bhattacharji, Gayatri Spivak Chakravorty, Pratibha Ray, Irawati Karve, Ruth Vanita, Madhu Kishwar, Saoli Mitra, Sashi Deshpande, Chitra Lekha Banerjee Divakaruni and other revisionist writers took up the case and the cause. As Madhu Kishwar says:

The confusion is not theirs alone; these common misrepresentations are an unfortunate by product of our colonial education which we slavishly cling to, even though it is more than five decades since we declared our Independence. We keep defending or attacking the same hackneyed quotations from the shastras and the epics which, incidentally, colonisers used for the purpose of creating a new discourse about these writings. Their inaccurate and biased interpretations have continued to inspire major mis-readings of our religious tenets.

*(From Manusmriti to Madhusmriti: Flagellating a Mythical Enemy 1)*

The uniqueness of the Indic myths warrants an unbiased study centered on the Gender narrative, which has been initiated here, wherein a host of Post-structural theories (the Gender theory, the Queer theory and the Deconstructionist theory) have been applied to an Ur-text, *The Mahabharata*, to situate the ‘other’ in the discourse.



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