

Negotiating the patriarchal ideology of the *Mahabharata*: A Study of Bhisham Sahni's *Madhavi* and Saoli Mitra's *Five lords yet none a protector*

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Abstract

The Mahabharata has proved to be a fertile ground of artistic inspiration for writers who have tried to question its ideology. The epic lends itself to critical enquiry and writers who tried to critique the dominant discourse of *The Mahabharat*, have consistently interrogated patriarchy's concerted victimization of the women characters who have tried to resist or challenge its designs. Bhisham Sahni's *Madhavi* and Saoli Mitra's *Five Lords, Yet None a Protector* are essentially revisionary attempts to critique the patriarchy of the Aryavarta as manifested in the behaviour of the male characters in the text. The epic consistently cast women in the role of the other. These plays maybe critiqued as mythopoeic exercises whereby the unarticulated female discourse is given a legitimate voice and space. However these authors are not essentially creating feminist texts but trying to counteract the ideology of the epic by making an alternative counter-ideology seem feasible and also imperative. As texts of protest they are a courageous attempt to resist an uncritical absorption and circulation of the epic ideology.

Keywords: Mahabharata, patriarchy, mythopoesis, counter-ideology.

Introduction

The ideology of *The Mahabharata* is clearly patriarchal and this discourse is sustained as well as circulated in the canonical editions of the epic. Thus 'Aryavarta' or the land of the Aryans is a space where the patriarchal ideology flourishes since there is no resistance or counter ideology to challenge it. The reader perceives the social structure of such a society as one where the hierarchy of caste is as strictly observed as that of gender. Women in *The Mahabharata* are idealized only when they are dutiful wives or caring mothers. The canonical readings of the text have circulated this male-centric version of the epic without trying to probe deeper into the actual status of women in such a society. Readers seldom encounter a dissenting feminine voice in the epic. The resistance to a patriarchal ideology is sporadic and never effective. Amba and Draupadi have the potential to challenge patriarchy

and its gender bias but their resistance is contained within a greater design; that of necessitating the Dharma Yudh and enabling the Pandavas to triumph over the Kauravas. As women who have been wronged by high-born Kshatriya warriors they cannot claim redress unless they cast in their lot with one of the empowered groups of warriors (in this case the Pandavas). In other words their grievances are legitimized only when they concede to unite their cause with the more prominent patriarchal struggle for political power or with some other male agenda. Thus it is clear that the women have no agency of their own and remain the disenfranchised 'other'. This paper will seek to explore how Bhisham Sahni's *Madhavi* and Saoli Mitra's *Five Lords, Yet None a Protector* critique the patriarchal discourse of *The Mahabharata* by choosing two female characters from the epic and making their hitherto unarticulated discourse the subject of enquiry. The paper will also try to observe whether these plays are successful in their attempts at mythopoesis by choosing to re-read a canonical text by prioritising the trajectory of female experience and by foregrounding questions of their self-identity and sexual autonomy which have been obscured in the traditional readings of the epic. Finally, the paper will also try to establish whether these plays are able to create an effective counter-ideology by virtue of which Madhavi and Draupadi become figures resisting the patriarchal oppression or are the plays mere texts chronicling the eternal victimization of Indian women; reinforcing a discourse which is still prevalent in twenty-first century India.

Sahni's *Madhavi* (2002) is a tale of a woman who is mentioned only cursorily in the epic. She is Yayati's daughter and figures as the woman who becomes the medium through which Galav is able to fulfil a promise given to his guru Vishwamitra. Madhavi has been blessed with twin boons: she will always bear Chakravarthy sons who will grow up to become kings and she will be able to renew her virginity by performing the necessary rituals even after giving birth to her sons. Thus *The Mahabharata* with its patriarchal ideology reduces

Madhavi to her metonymic function. She is valued for her womb which becomes the instrument or the organ by virtue of which she enables Galav to procure aswamedhi horses for his guru-dakshina. Madhavi is taken to all the kings of Aryavarta who own aswamedhi horses and co-habits with them and gives birth to sons whom she has to abandon in order to go to another king. Jaidev in his Introduction to Sahni's text points out that dramatists or writers who have engaged with the epic, have done so at the level of ideology. Their critique is levelled at certain vulnerable points of the text which disclose the gender and caste bias of the textual discourse. Thus myth-making as a creative enterprise is revealed to have its own set of agendas and most importantly these narratives reveal the epic to be a privileged discourse and not a polyvalent or plural one. Jaidev regards these sister-texts as attempts to resist patriarchal ideology by revealing its fallacies which inevitably empower the males, the Kshatriyas and Brahmins over others. He remarks:

These modern sister-texts continually foreground the artificiality of this ideology and thus point to the possibility of its replacement by another that is less unjust and the more equitable. (p.vii)

Madhavi dramatizes the dialectic between the patriarchal ideology operating at the level of the myth and the modern gaze which chooses to address the problematic areas regarding the rights and privileges of the women in the epic world.

Saoli Mitra's *Five Lords Yet None a Protector* (2006) addresses the sexist bias at the core of the myth-making in the entire text of Mahabharata especially with regard to Draupadi. Unlike Sahni, Mitra uses a Kathak who narrates the crucial episodes of the text and enacts Draupadi's role as well as those of the others as described in the epic. However this enactment or performance is only a mediated form of reading that enables the modern viewer to perceive the gender bias of the primary text. The Kathak's narration gives the

viewer/reader a female or perhaps a more humane lens to interrogate and critique the epic. Draupadi's narrative running parallel to the objective epic narrative voice (also narrated by the Kathak) gives the text its dialectical texture whereby Draupadi interrogates the actions of the Kshatriya princes and calls into question the principles underlying the definition of Kshatriya valour endorsed by the epic world.

Both Sahni and Mitra try to explore the ambiguity inherent in the concept of Kshatriya 'dharma'. The male characters in *Madhavi*: Yayati and Galav, try to justify their action by pleading the cause of 'dharma'. Galav's dharma as a disciple makes it imperative that he deliver the promised guru dakshina to his guru. Yayati's dharma also makes it imperative that he keep his reputation of being generous by enabling Galav to fulfil the promise made to his guru. When Galav comes to Yayati's ashram to ask for his aid, Yayati readily tells him to take his daughter Madhavi as she would be able to produce Chakravarthy sons which in turn would induce the kings to give up their Aswamedhi horses. Madhavi's shock is registered in her first reaction: "Madhavi: If Mother were alive would she have let you gift me away like this?"(p.10)

Madhavi's artless question makes the reader realize that patriarchy seldom understood the real worth of daughters. Moreover her reaction also underscores the sexist bias inherent in the code of Dharma. It was necessarily an ideological construct which effectively reduced the woman to an object to be appropriated and bestowed, as and when the patriarchal society deemed convenient. The impassive, inhuman dimension of patriarchal ideology is manifested through Yayati's instant reply: "Yayati:Madhavi,the only thing that matters at present is *my*[italics mine] dharma."(p.10)

Yayati's curt reply succinctly establishes the authority of the 'dharma'. He does not feel that he needs to justify his action to his daughter.

Canonical texts which have been the ideological framework of societies often circulate a male centered world view and encoded the role of women as the vulnerable sex .Thus revisionary readings needed to address this in the founding myths of societies. Alicia Ostriker(1986) remarks:

Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and 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 the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible.(pp.212-'13)

Ostriker's contention applies equally to Sahni. Sahni's artistic gaze is engaged in an attempt to revision the Mahabharata myth. This is evident in his creation of the character of Ashramite2. This nameless character has the audacity to question Yayati's understanding of Dharma and denounces his decision to gift his daughter to Galav.

In Mitra's text Draupadi's disrobing or *vastra haaran* episode raises the same questions and once again forms a critical indictment of the Kshatriya's conception of Dharma. The Kathak chooses to question Yudhistir's role in staking Draupadi as the pawn in the dice game. The Kathak ironically comments on Yudhistir's reputation as the Dharma-Putra (the son of Dharma Raj) to make the audience appreciate the depth of his depravity. The Kathak quotes Yudhistir thus: "Kathak: ...And Yudhistir says, 'She who is not feeble, she who is not puny, this supremely beautiful and beloved Draupadi...I stake her!'"(p.31)

The Kathak chooses to ponder the implications of Yudhistir's decision and raises the question of his distressing lack of moral integrity:

Kathak: Just think, Yudhisthir actually says this. The son of *Dharma*[italics mine] without once pausing to use his judgement. He thinks neither of the husband's moral obligations,

nor of the wife's rights. He just goes ahead and stakes Draupadi the beloved of the five Pandavs.(pp.31-32).

A little later the Kathak declares:

Believe me, Sirs. Sometimes I feel if I ever got the chance to go to heaven I'd ask why Yudhisthir wasn't sent to hell for this sin!What for heaven's sake is the rule up there?(p.33)

This is an ironic comment on *The Mahabharata* itself where it is narrated that Yudhisthir attains heaven as does Duryodhan.

Like the Ashramite 2 in Madhavi there is only a maiden voice of protest. It is from Vidur who is not a Kshatriya. He is the son of a slave. The Kathak muses:

So shouts Vidur. He who is not a Kshatriya.He who is the son of a slave. And who as the son of a slave is given no honour in court. It is Vidur who, unable to bear it any longer, protests. Duryodhan showers abuse on Uncle Vidur. But Dhritrarashtra is silent. Bhishma silent.(p.38)

Quite like Yayati's refusal to defend his action before his daughter, the court consisting of the Kaurava elders remains silent and is unable to protect Draupadi or protest against Duryodhan's attempt to dishonour her publicly. The Kathak's narration forms the frame while Draupadi's reaction is the inset and this double narrative gives the readers a twin set of dissenting voices: one subjective and involved and the other objective and distanced. Thus patriarchy is doubly indicted by the victim herself as well as by a modern day chronicler. This tenor is sustained throughout the play to give it its unique discourse.

Commentators like Kevin McGrath(2009) have remarked that it is Draupadi's wrath which propels the epic towards the climactic Kurukshetra battle. Draupadi becomes with her wild, uncombed tresses becomes a metaphor of wronged womanhood. McGrath also describes her as a figure of 'charged femininity' who finds greater acceptance in modern India where women are challenging the evils of institutional patriarchy. However, it is Draupadi's suffering on which Mitra concentrates rather than her fiery presence. Even after the dice game Draupadi remains the faithful wife of her five husbands. The play moves forward in time to record Draupadi's debasement at the hands of Kichak. Even while retelling Draupadi's woes, the Kathak ponders on the question of Draupadi's sexual fulfilment in a marriage where polyandry was imposed upon her when she was actually legitimately married to Arjun. Draupadi's love for Arjun remains unrequited and she hardly shares any physical intimacy with him. Arjun's intimacy with other women pains her but she cannot protest as she is bound by the code of polyandry to be a dutiful wife to all her husbands. The Kathak dwells upon Draupadi's sexual longing. But like Madhavi Draupadi cannot win the love of Arjun. Arjun, like any Kshatriya king, marries for political advantage as well as love whereas Draupadi is denied any kind of sexual preference amongst her husbands as she has to follow the code of a polyandrous marriage as laid down by the patriarchal ideology giving her husbands the prerogative of deciding the time of sexual co-habitation. In this retelling of the epic, Mitra appropriates the epic to interrogate its glaring biases and flaws. The feminist reading is oriented towards exposing the central tragedy of Draupadi's life: she is a woman married to five great princes but none of them could protect her. Mitra is most critical of Arjun and Yudhisthir. While the latter is more concerned about protecting Dharma, the former's quest for valour gives him very little time for Draupadi. The Kathak expresses Draupadi's dilemma in the following manner:

How much of him did Krishnaa get? How little? Yet it was for him that he pined. And on that horrible day, the day of the dice game? Arjun had remained silent. Why, he had not come forward to protect the honour of his beloved Panchali.(p.45)

In fact Draupadi's questions become all the more insistent and probing. She asks Krishna when he requests her to forget her humiliation and advises her to concede to a peaceful truce. The Kathak records her angry response:

Kathak: Convenient, isn't it, Good People?...Forget them-for the sake of political expediency...

If I forget the humiliation inflicted on me, dear friend, will it usher a Dharmarajya, the rule of Virtue, into this world? Can you promise that in future no woman will ever be persecuted or demeaned like I was? Will my forgiveness usher in that heavenly state? Tell me, Krishna[with an agonized cry] tell me!(p.60)

However Draupadi's ire dies down as she grows old. It is the inevitable compromise or the silencing of the other when he/she finds the dominant ideology too powerful to resist. Even after the Battle of Kurukshetra her life does not become any better. Yudhisthir is busy ruling the land and Arjun is always moving from one heroic quest to the other. At the end of the play the woman who chooses to accompany her husbands on their final journey to heaven is just a tired wife who undertakes the journey because the patriarchal law ordained it such. The Kathak comments: "Good Sirs, Draupadi's suffering was very real, the suffering of flesh and blood. The suffering of life itself... Draupadi endured the agony of a corrupt, decadent era."(p.64).

Thus patriarchy appears to have contained the rebel woman. Draupadi, at the end seems to have lost to the mightier institution. While comparing her with Madhavi, it is clear that both

are victims of patriarchy. Madhavi does not have any standout moment of grand defiance like keeping her tresses uncombed, but she is intelligent enough to know that patriarchy has denied her any real agency. Thus her final decision to opt out of her swayamvar and refuse Galav because he wants the earlier version of Madhavi(a virgin with youthful beauty) and she is most reluctant to change. Thus she asserts her subjectivity in this final act of refusal. Patriarchy fails to reduce Madhavi to a helpless other. She refuses to perform the necessary rites to become young again. Madhavi informs Galav of her decision:

Madhavi:I am still the same Madhavi. The Madhavi whose very presence tormented you. But now I know that I was only something for you to use, only an instrument. Even when you told me that you were grateful and full of respect, you were lying. You have only loved one person and that is yourself. I knew that but refused to believe it. Instead , I deceived myself into believing that you were a man of truth and principles...I was only trying to look into your heart , Galav...I can perform the rites to become regain my beauty and virginity again, but I no longer feel young at heart.(p.66)

Madhavi decides to leave her swayamvar and her father's ashram too. She decides to go away to the forest. Thus she forsakes the patriarchal human society for the more humane and perhaps compassionate realm of nature. This is her protest and also her most effective act of self-definition. Draupadi's destiny is somewhat similar. As she lies dying she realises that it was Bheem the middle Pandav who was always her protector and perhaps his devotion was the only true love she ever had. She dies with her head cradled in his lap praying that in her next birth she would want to have a husband like him. While this is not exactly a moment of self-definition it is one where the character attains self-knowledge and is no longer the victim with no agency of her own.

Adreinne Rich in 'When the Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision'(1971) speaks about re-vision as a feminist act of protest aimed at rectifying the flawed discourse of canonical myths.

She writes:

Re-vision--the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction--is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male -dominated society.(p.18)

Thus Sahni's and Mitra's attempt at revisioning the ideology of *The Mahabharata* critiques patriarchy and tries to articulate the concerns of the women in a patriarchal society. The myth of the *The Mahabharat* is one of the most enduring ones in the Indian society. Jaidev in his introduction to Madhavi speaks about its power and dominance. According to him:

These 'canonized' ways of reading [the epic] have also endured because there has been no real revolution at the ideological level, and since the Mahabharata ideology has all along been quite supportive of the dominant groups, there has not been any great demand to question or change the ideology.

It is not accidental that the challenge has come from artists who have an alternative ideology with which to counter it. Like all myths the ones of the Mahabharat too are adaptable, but this quality does not by itself guarantee a redressal of the ideological balance; nothing less than a superior counter-ideology is required for that.(p.xii)

Perhaps Sahni and Mitra's attempts are not as powerful to be defined as a concerted counter ideology but these texts ask the relevant question to challenge patriarchy if not totally

dismantle it. Draupadi and Madhavi are survivors in the inimical patriarchal space but they try to articulate their resistance and seek a safe space for themselves with only a modicum of success.

Karen Armstrong in *A Short History of Myth* (2005) has spoken of the need to admit the authority of the myths and their persistence in the modern imagination. The book is an introductory text to the Canongate Series of Myths which showcases different authors who challenge the received versions of various universal myths in an exercise of creative mythopoesis. Armstrong says:

We must disabuse ourselves of the nineteenth century fallacy that myth is false or that it represents an inferior mode of thought. We cannot completely recreate ourselves, or cancel out the rational bias of our education and return to a pre-modern sensibility. But we can acquire a more educated approach to mythology...We cannot counter these bad myths with reason alone, because undiluted *logos* cannot deal with such deep-rooted, unexorcised fears, desires and neuroses. That is the role of an ethically and spiritually informed mythology.(pp.135-136)

Sahni's *Madhavi* and Mitra's *Five Lords, Yet None a Protector* may therefore be adequately defined as texts which represent a new kind of mythology where the female presence needs to be inscribed and given a voice despite its location in a society or space which disenfranchises them as the other. These texts have inaugurated a feminist myth making or revisioning which has contemporary relevance as well universal resonance.

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