

Women as Mediators of Social Truths in Epics: A Comparative Study of Draupadi and Kannaki

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Abstract:

Indian epics features a world of heroism and mysticism. The heroic ethos and magical ritualistic atmosphere pervade the epic space. The ritual underpinnings exemplify the sacredness of epic poetry. The world of epic recants the story of the semidivine heroes who bear the spear of justice. *Cilappatikaram* departs from the patriarchal heroic world and goes on to establish a woman who achieves divinity. Draupadi in the dicing episode of *The Mahabharata* questions the patriarchal order of the assembly hall. Both these women challenge the norms of a patriarchal society that subdues the voice of a woman. The verbal impotence of the woman characters in epics is subverted only when they encounter an ethical dilemma, thereby projecting the social truths and realities. The role of a chaste wife or the caring mother labelled on a woman in the epic shows the preoccupation of the patriarchal world with woman's sexuality and its control.

Keywords: Indian epics, patriarchy, social truths, heroism, chastity

Introduction

The Indian epics differ from their European counterparts in the way they treat the subject matter. A common theme of male heroism governs the epical world of the two regions but the Indian epic deal in detail on the theme of spiritual rejuvenation which is missing in the Greek epics like the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey*. Another common factor that binds the epics of these two regions is the treatment of the women characters. Women are often misjudged, vilified, subdued and considered vulnerable in the epic which is governed by patriarchal norms. The Brahmanical patriarchy insists on maintain caste hierarchy and exert control over women. The epics negotiates with the heroic 'kshatras' and their execution of 'dharma'. In this ethical contest, women are pushed to the periphery. However, the women in epics assert their selfhood through minor slits that the writer provides. A feminist reading of the women characters, their dilemmas and their struggle to find their 'self' go on to depict these characters as empowered and courageous to stand against the patriarchal order.

The Mahabharata and the Tamil epic *Cilappatikaram* have women characters who exert their presence by fighting for their rights. Their position in the society is measured by their social relations. Draupadi and Kannaki are exemplary for their intellect and endurance. They are the epitomes of female chastity as they remain loyal to their husband irrespective of the treatment meted out by their husbands. However, an objective analysis of their characters reveals that these women worked within the limits of the patriarchal order and at the same time asserted their autonomy by lashing out when their rights are curtailed. When separated from the security and control of their husbands, they refuse to stand mute to the decisions set by the men and take control over their

destiny. It is seen that they thrive as individuals only when the essence of their existence is challenged.

A close examination of the two texts, shows how different tales are intricately woven together to integrate into stories that consist of similar themes. The existence of Draupadi and her stance in the dicing episode is equally integral to the text as the episode of Karna's temptation, Abhimanyu and the chakravyuh or Arjun's bird eye test. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her book *The Palace of Illusions* portrays Draupadi as a dark-complexioned, witty and courageous woman who breaks the traditionally conventional ideas of beauty and feminine personality. Anuja Chandramouli in her book *Shakti: The Divine Feminine* talks of the goddess Mahamaya whose supreme consciousness is the source of all creation and its eventual return. Her power destabilizes the power structure created by the male. She is forged out of love and hate and takes it upon herself to teach the men about the true power of compassion. The feminist writers choose to retell the story of the epics from a perspective that gives due recognition to the women characters. They establish the epics as text open to multifarious interpretations and question their absoluteness.

Cillapatikaram and the *Mahabharata* differ in their subject-matter and its execution; characters and their treatment. *The Mahabharata* revolves around characters who are deific and come from the upper strata of the society. *Cillapatikaram* has a distinctive influence of the philosophy of Jainism as the primary character, Kannaki comes from the middle-class society. Heroism is a stock theme in both these epics but *Cillapatikaram* gives more emphasis to the erotic, mystic than the world of chivalry. It is divided into three books- *The Book of Pukar*, *The Book of Maturai* and *The Book of Vanci*. *The Book of Pukar* revolves around the private life of Kovalan and Kannaki, the second book concerns itself with the journey of the husband and the wife to begin a new life. This book depicts the murder of Kovalan and Kannaki's succession to the status of a goddess. *The Book of Vanci* combines the world of Kannaki and the Chera king Cenukuttuvan. The apotheosis of Kannaki as the goddess Pattini is completed in this book as she enters the public domain. The heroic feats of the Chera king are established here. Thus, the epic *Cillapatikaram* focuses more on the private domain cocooning the world of Kannaki more than the valorized cosmos of the hero.

Objectives:

The paper attempts to analyze the following issues:

- To draw a comparative analysis of the character of Draupadi and Kannaki
- To establish the idea that women are mediators of social truths
- To analyze how patriarchy subdues the women in the world of epic
- To comprehend how ethical dilemmas catalyze women into asserting their self

Methodology: The understanding of the depiction of women in epics have changed drastically in from the modern period. According to Helene Cixous, woman's narrative has been pushed violently to the boundaries as their bodies. A retelling and reinterpretation of the women characters in Indian epics provide a scope to understand the varied dimensions of these characters who break the conventions of the patriarchal society. In her essay, 'The Laugh of Medusa', Cixous interprets the Greek myth of Medusa who is a victim of male phallogocentrism and describes the systematic oppression of women under patriarchy. Angelika Malinar in her essay 'Arguments of a Queen' displaces the concept of the subordinate, dependent Draupadi to a confident, self-assured woman

capable of criticizing the follies of her relatives and her husband, Yudhishtira. The paper seeks to a feminist questioning of patriarchy and how it subdues the voices of women. It will present the causes that unfurls the repressed female souls and how by rebelling against the lawless authority and speaking the unspeakable truth they are able to restore order and balance in the society

Discussion:

The nucleus story of epics is succession which revolves around glorious battles. However, the succession feud is complimented by intricate and complex structural plots that give layered interpretation of the text. The heroic code of the epic does not circumscribe only the men, it extends its impact on the female characters. Within the purview of the patriarchal domain, the female characters in the Indian epics manifest the knowledge of dharma or the law and exhibit heroism when the circumstances demand. They carry out their dharma of being a chaste and dutiful wife and at the same time have in depth knowledge of dharma that help the political functioning of the kingdom. The acceptance of the female characters as heroic and equitable with the 'Sanskrit hero' is not conventional in a patriarchal society. The women are divorced from the battle field where the physical violence is exerted, but they are the initiators of empirical questionings of truth and they display chivalry by demanding justice.

Kannaki and Draupadi place verifiable questions that cause ripples in the court. The king's court is the space which is predominated by male presence. It is in this very court that Draupadi questions the ideals of dharma and the decisions made by the Kauravas and the Pandavas for her. She blatantly refuses to accept the demands made by the Kauravas and even questions Yudhishtira's haste decision to wage her in the game of dice. Angelica Malinar in her essay, 'Arguments of a Queen' emphasizes on the debates between Yudhishtira-Draupadi where she questions the validity of her husband's bet, since he had lost himself first and then wagered her. Her queries in the sabha shows her acute understanding of the intricate laws of dharma and her examination of the gender dynamics highlight her as an independent woman who chooses to be a queen first and a wife second. In *Cilappatikaram*, Kannaki reaches the king's court with her disheveled hair, a mark bore by a widow, and questions the judgement passed by the Pantiya king. Both these women, are central characters in the epic and display uncanny fortitude and valour to question the authoritative figure when their honour is challenged.

The epic world is dominated by male ego and discourse. This discourse often tends to highlight the women as vulnerable and in need of men to carry out the justice on their behalf. However, an epic carry within it many narrative stories and there are discourses within the primary discourse. A feminist reading of the epics *Mahabharata* and *Cilappatikaram* show that image of the epic hero as a protector and women as victims and passive sufferers is meta-discursive or a mere construct. Patriarchy is often consumed unquestionably and is often ambivalently understood. The grand narrative of the epic masquerades the grand narrative of patriarchy. Bell Hooks in her essay 'Understanding Patriarchy', shows patriarchy as a discursive apparatus, a visceral phenomenon that is designed to promote, protect and perpetrate the interests of a certain category of human beings.

The epic world is governed by the patriarchal dynamics. This is clearly visible in the way the roles are assigned to the characters on the basis of gender and class. The chaste woman in an epic is elevated to the status of a goddess but is never given her individuality. Her position is always defined by her relation with her husband and her kin. Feminism deconstructs the priviledges provided by the patriarchal society to a certain section of individuals and exposes it a malevolent force that insists the

subversion of women. The court is a space that does not permit the women to voice her opinions. *Cilappatikaram* and the dicing episode of the *Mahabharata* makes exceptions by allowing a woman to enter the court, voice her opinions and reveal the problems that exist in the court that is governed by the laws of dharma. The laws are made by the Bhramanical patriarchy society and it is interesting to witness that Draupadi very shrewdly uses these laws to counter-question and examine the decision taken by the court under Dhrtarastra.

The Tamil epic, *Cilappatikaram* holds a pluralistic and a heterogenous view of the world. Kannaki is a middle-class house wife whose husband has an affair with a dancing girl. They decide to rekindle their relationship and move to a new place. In Maturai, Kovalan decides to pawn the anklet of Kannaki and put as capital to build their life. He meets the royal goldsmith who examines the anklet and asks Kovalan to wait for him. The goldsmith tips the king about Kovalan as the thief who stole the queen's anklet. The king under the pressure of finding the culprit and pleasing his wife, orders the execution of Kovalan without setting a trial. The unjust execution of Kovalan aggravates Kannaki, who until now had mutely tolerated her husband's adultery. As a dutiful wife, she supports her husband, but his murder channelizes the feminine energy which had for so long remained dormant within her.

Kovalan's death provides her with two choices- to assume the role of a grieving widow and sit on her husband's funeral pyre or to rebuke the Pantiya king for murdering her innocent husband. Kannaki refuses to lead the life of a widow of an accused murderer and takes it upon herself to restore her husband's honour. She asks for an audience in the king's court and charges the king for her husband's murder. She subverts the king's authority and challenges him,

Till the wrath that burns in me

Is appeased, I will not hold my husband

In my arms. I will confront the evil king

And demand an answer

(The Cillapatikaram 19.91-94)

The king defends himself claiming that he was bound by duty to punish the thief. Kannaki proves Kovalan's innocence by breaking the anklet and revealing the rubies inside the trinklets, while the queen's anklet contained pearls. The king is unable to deal with the burden of his judgement and dies, the queen follows him. Kannaki releases her feminine energy by castrating her breast and flinging it to the floor. The flames arising from the castrated flesh burns the city to the ground, sparing the innocent. Kannaki's ascension from an ordinary housewife to goddess Pattini is possible only because she has the capacity to transgress the material world and find the course of spirituality through her obedience and dedication to her husband.

The dicing episode in the *Mahabharata* seems accidental as the setting of the epic is in an androcentric world. This episode contradicts the doctrine of female weakness and incapable of handling the courtly affairs. Draupadi's rhetoric stirs the assembly hall and creates a conflict in the decisions taken by the men. She accuses the men of dereliction of duty and warns them of the consequences of their evil acts. She goes on to question the intentions and viability of her own husband, Yudhishtira and demands him to act in accordance to his duty as a husband and a king.

A feminist reading of the episode presents her as a self-assured, confident and rhetorically skilled women who is wise and well-versed in the dictates of dharma. She acts rationally and possesses acute presence of mind in a critical situation where her dignity is at stake. She takes up the role of a defiant woman when she criticizes her kinsmen and tackles the politics of the court with her eloquent comprehension of the laws. Duhsasana drags her to the assembly hall in her most vulnerable state.

She is not adequately dressed; her petticoat carries stains of menstruation and her hair is disheveled. She has never been in the public eye and has always lived secured within the walls of her house. Her presence in the assembly hall is unexpected as it is no place for a woman. She laments, "I whom neither wind nor sun have seen before in my house, I am now in the middle of the hall in the assembly of the Kurus. I whom the Pandavas did not suffer to be touched by the wind in my house before, they now allow to be touched by this miscreant." (*The Mahabharata*, 58) Draupadi is unable to comprehend the silence of the Pandavas and feels betrayed by the people who she relied on providing her protection.

Despite her forcible abjection, she addressed the hall with dignity and argues the mute stance taken by the men when they witnessed injustice. She reminds them that she is the wife of the sons of Pandu, friend of Krishna and the queen of Indraprastha and asks them as to where the dharma of the kings has gone. She speaks ethically and legally in a moment of crisis, where her husbands sit on the floor, stripped off their attire and unable to stop the abuse. She prefers her position as a queen than a wife since the position of the queen permits her to present her case in the sabha. Her arguments compel Dhrtarastra to grant their freedom and three favours, but she accepts only two, thereby reminding the old king about the dharma concerning favours. "As the owner of whom did you lose us? Whom did you lose first, yourself or me?" (*The Mahabharata*, 47)

Women's participation in the proper execution of laws is necessary to maintain the social order. Their participation is passive until they witness a major transgression is observed. They act as mediators of justice when the human laws fail to protect the weak. Their husband's abandonment provides them with a surge of power to defy authority and undue demands of patriarchy. The violation of Draupadi in the Sabha Parva and Kannaki's self-castration of her breasts adorn them with the power to strike the authority as they have already been abandoned and pushed to the periphery. Women's body has been exploited, controlled and abused by patriarchy. Woman's body is the site of vulnerability and power and provides contesting narrative. Helene Cixous comments, "Women must write through bodies... muffled throughout history they have lived...in silences, in aphonic revolts." ('The Laugh of Medusa' 1976)

The character of Kannaki and Draupadi draw the women from the periphery to question the flaws inherent in the androcentric world. Their strength lies in the relationship that they have with their husbands. However, they spring into action only when they become independent of their husband's shield. The crisis in their conjugal relationship affects the way they deal in the public space. They observe the dictums set by the patriarchal society regarding the mannerism of a married women. However, in moments of crisis, they question the law setters of the society and present the society with ethical truths. Kannaki as a middle-class housewife is supposed to be oblivious to the workings of a king's court. Only after her husband's unlawful execution, she decides to carry the responsibility of seeking justice on his behalf. In doing so, she also cleanses the city of further evils. Draupadi, as a queen reminds the men in the sabha of their dereliction of duty only when the her and her husband's honour is at stake. Rather than being blind seekers of revenge, these women intellectually question the justice system and its nature of favouring a particular section of the society. The interrogation of Kannaki and Draupadi destabilizes the complex hierarchical structure of the patriarchal society and the highlights their desire to create a world where the law treats all equally.

Conclusion:

The analysis of the characters of Kannaki and Draupadi, in situations where they encounter an ethical dilemma, show that women in epics are more closely related to the community values and the execution of impartial justice than their male counterparts. In an epic, the hero usually initiated into the world by crossing the threshold of their secured surroundings and approaching a dire crisis. The crisis tests the hero's durability and true character. His true self is revealed in his most vulnerable moments. Kannaki and Draupadi are tested and they rebel by rebelling against the persecutors of injustice. They restore the balance of the cosmic world of the epic by siding with the truth and the just. Their spiritual journey begins when they emerge from the periphery to subvert the unjust authority.

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