

WORKING OUT FEMINIST PSYCHOLOGY IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS

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ABSTRACT--Mahabharata, one of the two most famous ancient epics of India (the other being Ramayana) is a virtual sea of stories. It has, in addition, religious value as Lord Krishna is one of the protagonists. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a well-known novelist of Indian origin. Her novel *The Palace of Illusions* centres around Draupadi, the female protagonist of Mahabharata. In this impressive re-telling, she aims at realizing a feminist picture of Draupadi to fit into the contemporary socio-psychological context. Her task is rather tedious as the key protagonist Draupadi is bound by the shackles of a patriarchal society that reveres only a pativrata (subservient to husband only) woman, and also by individual predicament that makes her the wife of five brothers. To achieve this end, Divakaruni resorts to tweaking the incidents, filling in the minor gaps that she spots and inventing Draupadi's psyche, but unlike some other authors, she stays loyal, in the main, to the original storyline and sentiment of Mahabharata as told first of all by Vyasa in Sanskrit. In this paper, I analyse the novel *The Palace of Illusions* to mark the deviations of plot from that of the accepted versions, as also other inventive strategies which go to depict feminist credentials of Draupadi, as for example, her harbouring extra-marital desire, her work for other women, and her castigation of war and environmental degradation.

Keywords--Indian English Literature, Psychological fiction, Mahabharata, Draupadi, re-telling of myth, feminism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Mahabharata, one of the two most famous ancient epics of India (the other being Ramayana) is a virtual sea of stories penned originally by Krishna Dwaipayana Vyasa, also called Ved Vyasa or simply Vyasa in Sanskrit language. The period is placed anywhere between 4th century BC to five thousand years ago. It has, in addition, religious value as Krishna is one of the protagonists. He is considered divine incarnation of Lord Vishnu, part of the earliest trinity in Hinduism. As the charioteer of Arjun, another important character, he delivered the message of Gita to him in the battlefield. For a large readership in India, the protagonists are not imaginary as is normally believed for a myth but real and in fact, the family tree given by Divakaruni, at the beginning of the novel, is still blooming in India. The present Yadav clan traces its origin to Lord Krishna. The author does keep in mind this and shows due respect for the divine personage and His message enshrined in *Bhagavadgita*, which is admired by many philosophers and thinkers around the world. However, in this article, we are concerned about the re-telling of the epic Mahabharata. Divakaruni has tried to treat the story along two planks – woman's psychology as interpreted by contemporary feminists and adherence to the original storyline to the extent possible.

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The original Sanskrit text by Ved Vyasa was translated into English by many authors and poets from India and abroad. Among them are Kisari Mohan Ganguli, Pratap Chandra Roy, J.A.B. van Buitenen and by organizations like the Bhandarkar Institute, Pune; and Writers' Workshop, Calcutta. Abridged versions have been presented by noted writers like R.K. Narayan, C. Rajgopalachari et al. Apart from these true-to-original texts, there have been many attempts at re-telling the myths by writers like Ashok Banker, Amish Tripathi, Anand Neelkantan, Namita Gokhale, Anuja Chandramouli, et al. While Banker and Tripathi have taken undue liberties with the original narratives, Neelkantan tells the Mahabharata story from the loser Duryodhan's (called by original name Suyodhana here) point of view in his two novels of the *Ajay* series. Kavita Kane has also dealt with mythical tale from female point of view as is clear from the title of her novel *Karna's Wife*. Devdutt Pattanaik is, for one, a writer who stands apart for his fidelity to the ancient versions of the epic. He has done much research and has also deduced lessons from the narrative for our times. His book *Jaya* is a re-telling done in a sincere manner. Divakaruni in her novel *The Forest of Enchantments* brings focus on to Sita and other marginalized women characters of Ramayana. Her other novel *The Mistress of Spices*, couched in poetic prose and with a poetic theme to boot, was immensely popular and was turned into a movie under the same title.

What distinguishes this novel, viz., *The Palace of Illusions* is her attempt to look at the epical narrative from the point of view of Draupadi, the heroine – as one might say – of the epic. As is common, the narrative belonging to the pre-historical, mythical times is mired in magic. Divakaruni is eminently qualified to deal with this type of narrative because of her felicity with poetic prose. This is no small task as Draupadi is constrained by her destiny, which as Vyasa foretells her, bids her to divide the Kuru dynasty and thus be responsible for the great war. The epic Mahabharata, as written by the seer Vyasa contains a large number of stories but basically these stories touch upon the exterior, being mostly in the form of monologues recounting incidents. Draupadi's psyche, therefore, holds great scope for exploration. With consummate skill, Divakaruni shows the agitation in her mind. She is portrayed as an impulsive and headstrong woman even though she is blessed with great wisdom and foresight too. It must be noted here that feminist ideology, as we understand it today, was born and nourished in the West. Even though the fact of patriarchal society holds good in both the East and the West. The movement for equal rights at the political front is what created feminist ripples in the Western society towards the close of 19th and early 20th century. Several theoreticians like Simone de Beauvoir, Toril Moi, Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, et al propounded several concepts and tried to re-define terms like 'female', 'feminine', etc. and presented new concepts like gynocriticism and *écriture féminine*. The movement went into an overdrive with the zeal to equal men in every sphere, regardless of biological limitations. The present state of feminism demands equal rights for both men and women and LGBT community members in all spheres of life. (Malik 76-94).

In India, despite a glorious antiquity, the hangover of an almost thousand-year long slavery is reflected in the subjugation of women. Again, even though laws have been enacted to change societal prejudices against women and to give reservation to women in local government bodies, coupled with the fact that women have won laurels even at the national and international level, discrimination continues because the society in the main remains a patriarchal one. Orientation through education is a big tool being used but due to the size of population, the results will take a long time to show. It is a good omen that literary writers have taken up the cudgels to spread the message of equality. In the present book, the writer has put the feminist ideology before her for which she has re-told the ancient myth, bringing about changes in the narrative at places and soaking Draupadi's psyche in feminist hues.

II. AUTHENTICITY AND INVENTION

Divakaruni admits of the central problem which led to the great war as it is understood commonly in India. It was the *putra-moh*, or the indulgence for his son which led to king Dhritrashtra's steadfast pursuit of the single goal to make his son the king of Hastinapur. "The goal of Dhritrashtra's life was to have a son who could inherit the throne after him" (77). The other and more famous reason that Draupadi taunted Duryodhan when he fell into a solid floor-looking pond in her palace with the words "It seems the blind king's son is also blind" (173) is deflected from her to keep her character morally lofty, and ascribed in this novel to Draupadi's attendants. There are, however, conflicting versions in different texts. While the renowned litterateur R.K. Narayan ascribes the guffaws of laughter to all including Draupadi (68), contemporary mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik notes: "Draupadi who was walking past, rather thoughtlessly, let out a peal of laughter and said, 'The Blind son of blind parents'" (2010: 133). Vyasa's version omits any reference to any act of mockery. Referring to the visit of the guests to the palace, it notes: "Some kings who came there and saw it [lotus pond] thick with precious stones and gems did not recognize it for a pond and fell into it. Around the hall stood tall trees that were always in bloom, lovely trees..." (Vyasa, trans. Buitenen: 37).

Draupadi was born of fire and has a fire burning within her bosom. More than that, the important point about Draupadi to be noted is that she was married to five Pandava brothers – something quite strange for our times. The author has, however, introduced her meeting with the astrologer named Vyasa who tells her that she would be the cause of much catastrophe on earth.

The first calamity strikes her when she is gambled away by her first husband Yudhishthir, who was the eldest of the Pandava brothers. Draupadi marks the flaws in her husbands. Yudhishthir, known as the flawless and truthful one, is faulted for his weakness for gambling and drinking. Duryodhan takes advantage of this weakness and is able to defeat him through his uncle Shakuni, thereby turning him from a prince to pauper and banishing all the Pandavas for a 13-year long exile. When she is told about it, she is aghast as to how she could be placed as a bet in the game. She is reminded of the injunction in a book which defines wife as the property of man, but then she was "no unlettered girl, ignorant of the law", and so she interpreted law to mean that "if a man has lost himself, he no longer had any jurisdiction over his wife" (190). Education has the power in our times too. However, she is still dragged to the court -- king Dhritrashtra's, and not the judicial one of our times – and disrobed!

Even while remaining faithful to the original text and its broad message, the novelist has ample opportunity to invent elements like adding or deleting minor characters, writing dialogues, inventing minor incidents or situations, imagining the detail of costumes, settings, places, etc. In this, the postmodern writers' re-telling of myths is no different from those who re-tell history using such techniques.² In this story, for example, Kunti tempts Karna with the offer to be the sixth husband of Draupadi provided he did not fight his brothers, which is novelist's invention (280). There is no such insinuation in the original Mahabharata text. The Roy translation captures the meeting between Kunti and Karna where the former tries to wean Karna away from the Kaurava camp, revealing to him her status as mother. In section CXLV of Udyog Parva, Kunti says to him: "O Karna, surrounded by thy brothers, thou wilt, without doubt, blaze forth like Brahma Himself, surrounded by the gods on the platform of a great sacrifice. Endued with every virtue, thou art the first of all my relations. Let not the epithet Suta's son –

attach to thee. Thou are a Partha, endued with great energy” (trans. Roy 37). But Karna does not relent. There is, however, no inducement related to Draupadi offered by Kunti.

Divakaruni has interpolated many an episode, interpreted cultural mores, filled in gaps in the form of events and conversations, and added character traits wherever found necessary. The original Vyasa’s epic or others true to this version do not speak of the Bheeshma-Drona meeting that the author’s ingenuity has invented to assuage the doubts of king Drupad (124) and Draupadi’s tete-a-tete with Bheeshma while taking a stroll along the river bank. There are many such interpolations. Draupadi is also shown as the recipient of a boon by Vyasa whereby, like Sanjay, she would be able to watch in mind’s eye, the action in the field sitting far away. (112)

III. FEMINIST OUTLOOK

The re-telling is done from the standpoint of Draupadi as a first person narrative. She is protected the way women are in any patriarchal society. Everybody seems to be doling out advice to her as if she were no more than a child. How from a submissive quiet wife, she changes into a woman of agency is a gradual transformation. In Khandav forest, now turned into the capital city of Indra Prastha, in her palace of illusions created by Maya, she notes: “Yudhisthir began to ask my advice when a tricky judgment had to be delivered. And I, having learned more of the workings of women’s power, was careful to offer my opinion only in private, deferring to him always in front of others” (148). This change also creates rift with her mother-in-law Kunti: “She saw that in this place, I was mistress. Where my husbands had once relied on her, they now depended on me. She could not disrupt this state of affairs without causing her sons serious unhappiness” (150). It is much like modern bride gaining confidence when she lives with her husband away from her in-laws!

To achieve the feminist teleology of her character, Divakaruni invests Draupadi with an extramarital desire. When women, particularly of the Mahabharata time, were expected to be totally committed to their husbands as is borne out by the stories of Sati, Sita and Savitri related to her during maidenhood, she is shown to love Karna – though secretly. Motherless Draupadi, with a dark complexion, suffered discrimination at the hands of father. Later, she discovers similar prejudice against Karna by her brother and Krishna, and a kind of fellow feeling develops in her: “We’d both been victims of parental rejection – was that why his story resonated so? – but my suffering couldn’t compare to his” (78).

Right from the moment she learns about him, she is curious to see this famed warrior. At the Swayamvar (ancient custom wherein the girl picked her groom from among the suitors gathered), when her brother recounts to her the names of various suitors, she asks, “Is that all?” (93). She is taken aback because Karna’s presence has not been mentioned to her. The reason for this is that Karna’s royal connection is not known till then; he was merely a chariot-driver’s son which fact placed him at a lower rung in caste-ridden society. Her love for him is clear from her reference: “...the newborn tremor in my heart when I looked at Karna, the numbness that I knew would replace it when he turned from me in anger” (96).

However, she refused to take Karna as her husband even though she was infatuated by him (85). This is corroborated by Ved Vyasa’s version also: “But seeing Karna, Draupadi loudly said, ‘I will not select a Suta for my lord.’ Then Karna, laughing in vexation and casting glance at the Sun, threw aside the bow already drawn to a circle” (Roy trans. 425; Ganguli trans. Section CLXXXIX Adi Parva). At stake are many moral questions,

important as these were in the age to which she belonged. But this sentiment stays in her heart till Draupadi's death, and even afterwards! Muses Draupadi:

I confess: in spite of the vows I made each day to forget Karna, to be a better wife to the Pandavas, I longed to see him again. Each time I entered a room, I glanced up under my veil – I couldn't stop myself – hoping he was there. (It was foolish. If he'd been present surely he'd have turned away, my insult still a fresh gash in his mind.) I eavesdropped shamelessly on the maids, trying to discover his whereabouts. On the verge of asking Dhai Ma to find out where he'd disappeared to (for she had her ways of unearthing secrets), I bit back my tongue a hundred times. (130).

Apart from this radical streak in her character, Divakaruni's feminist mind is also reflected in her sympathy for women in society. She empathizes with the unknown woman, who was Karna's mother. This is evident in her thoughts about her when she might have abandoned Karna: "Against my closed eyelids, I saw her as she bent to the water to cast the child – her own sweet, sleeping flesh – into its night currents. In my imagination, she was very young, [...]. She didn't weep. She had no tears left. Only fear for her reputation, which made her draw her shawl more closely over her head as she watched the casket. Just for a moment; then she'd have to hurry back. She'd left all her jewellery in her bedchamber, had clothed herself in her oldest sari. Still, it would be disaster if the city watchman discovered her" (79).

King Dhritrashtra's wife Gandhari had sacrificed a lot; she even took to blindfolding herself for life in order to sense the life of her blind husband. Gandhari may or may not have rued her decision, for those were the days of *bheeshma pratigya*³, or staunch vows, but Divakaruni's Draupadi muses: "I wondered if there were days when she regretted her decision to opt for wifely virtue instead of the power she could have had as the blind king's guide and adviser. But she'd made a vow and was trapped in the net of her own words. Her mouth was strong, though, and her pale, beautiful lips balanced disappointment with resolution" (76). It was not an "intelligent decision", Dhai Ma and Draupadi agree. (76). It must be mentioned again that Vyasa does not probe the psyche of Mahabharata characters.

Musings apart, the question of agency with regard to Draupadi is found to be confusing in the original version. Applying the 'dialogical construction of the self' theory, a critic remarks: "With this theoretical lens, then – the idea of a polyphonic 'voice' which builds a single character – we can read Draupadi's speech in a new way; these are not simply the monochrome statements of a *pativrata*, but rather various voices of Draupadi which alternate between fierceness and meekness, savvy and servitude, authority and submission. [...] Indeed, in the various roles she assumes, we are tempted to think of Draupadi as the *adi-superwoman*" (Patton 104).

IV. CRITIQUING PATRIARCHY

The Palace of Illusions is a powerful critique of patriarchy. It is generally believed that the ancient system of Swayamvar showed the liberal attitude of the male society towards women, but no! there are strings attached by the patriarch. In the case of Draupadi, the liberal façade is ripped off when she discovers that her father Drupad means to lure Arjun to the Swayamvar. When Krishna contradicts her, she says, "We are nothing but pawns for King Drupad to sacrifice when it is most to his advantage" (58). The ancient injunction that "The wife is the property of the husband, no less than a cow or a slave" (190) rankles her no end. It is the same mindset that treats

a woman as polluted, so that Salva refuses to marry Amba because she has been touched by Bheeshma. (48). Surprisingly, her own father is not as much concerned about her marital predicament with five husbands, but about his own safety as a king! “He seemed more concerned about losing his new allies than about my marital misfortunes” (124).

Her husbands were also concerned more about other things: “Their notions of honour, of loyalty toward each other, of reputation were more important to them than my suffering. They would avenge me later, yes, but only when they felt the circumstances would bring them heroic fame” (195). Comparing these men’s ways to women’s, Draupadi muses: “A woman doesn’t think that way. I would have thrown myself forward to save them if it had been in my power that day” (195). When Yudhistir gives example of Damyanti, who never rebuked her husband even if the path of righteousness brought her misery, Draupadi retorts: “And how did he repay her? By abandoning her in a forest. How is that righteous?” (209). This was also the plight of Ramayana’s Sita who was abandoned by Ram because of insinuation by an ordinary washerman. Clearly, Draupadi is not the one to put up with skewed notions of one-sided righteousness!

The patriarchal discourse prevailing at that time (as it is even today in India) is critiqued by Draupadi on several occasions. When her brother Dhri’s tutor, while explaining the karma phal (result of actions) and the various lokas (celestial levels) says that virtuous women, if they are lucky, will be born as men in the next birth, she muses, much like the sisterhood concept⁴ in our times: “But I thought that if lokas existed at all, good women would surely go to one where men were not allowed so that they could be finally free of male demands” (155)!

It may also be pointed out that the system of polygamy into which Draupadi entered perchance was not a normal system at that time. The women in society practising monogamy considered themselves superior to Draupadi. (129). When in disguise in the city of Virat, she is ogled at and molested by Queen Sudeshna’s brother Keechak, Draupadi reflects: “Is this how men looked at ordinary women, then?” (228). She resolves to set things right when she came to power. And actually, she does so, setting up a women’s court in the aftermath of the war to attend to women’s woes. This indeed is a radical feminist idea that is Divakaruni’s invention but it fits in with the author’s objective to represent Draupadi as a feminist.

V. A GREY WORLD

The world that the Mahabharata portrays is neither black nor white. It is grey with shades of virtues and vices dotting the canvas. As such, it is more humane and not an idealized and ethereal one even though gods play their part alongside humans as in the Greek myths. If there is one thing that stands out as sacrosanct in the Dwapar Yuga culture, it is the Word – the word given to another which must be kept and fulfilled at all cost. But Draupadi deconstructs the sanctity of the Word, displaces it as a logos and reveals its instability in the face of reality. Bheeshma was known for his commitment to his word; he remained unmarried for the sake of his father’s beloved. Karna fulfilled his vow to donate whosoever begged him anything after he took bath. Even his father, the sun-god could not deflect him from this vow. Draupadi rues this streak in him: “Keeping his word was more important to him than a human life” (132-33). The author stands for pragmatism. Time and again, the principles of yore are interrogated. “What is a dead vow, compared to a living woman’s ruin?” asks Amba when refused by Bheeshma because of his pledge to his father that he won’t marry all through his life.

Sometimes, this fussiness about word can work out ridiculously. Draupadi, in her previous birth, was asked by god Shiva for a boon. She said it five times before the lord said ‘yes’, so that she had five husbands. (50)! Divakaruni is concerned about this predicament and creates the scene where it is discussed between her father and her husbands, bringing out the patriarchal mindset of the age. The boon given to her regarding re-gaining of virginity after the one-year term of a husband was over and the amnesia obliterating memory of past year are all, according to Draupadi, aimed at “husbands’ benefit not mine” (120). If one were to believe in the wisdom of antiquity, then this stress on keeping a word means being true in thought and action. Is this a hangover of the previous Treta Yug (third eon according to Hindu belief) in which king Dasrath, having once given boon to his wife Kaikeyi, was duty bound to honour it even if it meant exiling his son for 14-year long period.

As with the opposition to war by feminist groups in our times⁵, Draupadi too, is disillusioned with the war. In the battlefield, even though Bheeshma is calling upon soldiers to fight on with the promise that the gates of heaven would be open to all who die there, Draupadi’s thought: “When I’d looked down on the huge Pandava host on the battlefield, I’d surmised that those soldiers had chosen to join my husbands because they supported our cause. Now I realized that for many of them, it was merely a job, an alternative to poverty and starvation. Or may be they’d been forcibly conscripted by their overlords” (257) reminds one of dramatist G.B. Shaw’s mercenary character Bluntschli in his play *The Arms and the Man*.

At Kurukshetra, the senior warriors of both sides lay down some lofty norms to conduct the war which was supposed to be *Dharmayuddha*⁶, or the righteous war:

Fighting would start only after sunrise, when the commanders of the armies blew on their conches, and it would end at sunset with a similar signal. Night was a time of truce when warriors could visit one another’s camps unharmed. [...] No matter who won the war, the women would not be harmed. The battle was to be between equals – foot soldiers would fight with foot soldiers, horsemen with horsemen, and the chief warriors only with those who had similar astras [arms]. Servants, charioteers, musicians who blew the war horns, and animals would not be harmed on purpose. No one who was weaponless would be attacked, and above all, no one who had laid down his arms should be killed” (250-51).

Draupadi has the guts to raise questions about the so-called Dharmayuddha fought at Kurukshetra in which both sides, and the impartial Krishna too swerved from the straight path of righteousness as in the above memorandum agreed upon by both parties. She questions the way, the Pandava side broke the law: Arjun shot the astra at Karna when he lay low, Abhimanyu was attacked by many instead of one, Drona was killed treacherously as was Bheeshma after the latter acceded to the Pandavas’ request to reveal the secret of his own death. (219). The feminists today decry war, for it means a lot more to women than to men. Drawing upon the sociologist Anthony Giddens, Maria Miles and Vandana Shiva aver:

The nation-state, as Giddens shows, was constructed by means of direct violence, but it cannot be upheld without state monopoly over direct violence and means of coercion in the form of military and the police. This monopoly of direct violence implies the militarisation of men, with the army as the new school of manhood. Militarization of men, on the other hand, always implies violence against, and the degradation of women. (Miles 122-123).

In Mahabharata, while the womenfolk pray for the success of their respective husbands, they were also “torn between pride and concern” (248), They also raise an unequivocal voice against environmental degradation that is

causing havoc in the world. This is in consonance with the current feminist thinking that condemns the Western male-patronized system, for it rapes nature “seeing nature and women as worthless and passive, and finally as dispensable” (Shiva 223). As such, “recovering the feminine principle as respect for life in nature and society appears to be the only way forward, for men as well as women, in the North as well as in the South” (ibid). At the conclusion of the great war, Draupadi notes not only what hardships women had to face during and after the war but also what the war did to mother earth (a very feminine Indian concept) “The land stretched sick and discolored, great, gaping holes torn into the side by the blasts of astras. The few remaining trees were lifeless skeletons. There were no signs of the many birds and beasts that had roamed here peacefully just a few weeks ago. Only vultures sat on dead branches, waiting in eerie silence. This was what we had done to our earth” (300). Clearly, Draupadi does not share Vyasa’s view of the Mahabharata being a “glorious battle” (294).

VI. CONCLUSION

Towards the end, during their final journey to heaven, Draupadi falls by the wayside. Waiting for sure death, she has vision of talking to Krishna who is her ultimate consolation – “Krishna’s love was a balm, moonlight over a parched landscape” (356), but no, there is Karna in ethereal form whose hand she clasps, for ever, perhaps! This last chapter is the most beautiful one, language wise and of course, from the point of view of depiction of final moments in Draupadi’s life, even though the invention of Karna meeting Draupadi distances the story from the original one.

Draupadi, who emerges as a tragic character even though Krishna’s advice provides her temporary solace. Like any feminist narrative, remains ambivalent in the end. Judith Butler, the well-known gender theorist underlines this aspect. In the words of a critic, “All those foundational categories and identities that we normally take for granted – the difference between nature and culture; the divisions within gender, sex and sexuality that bifurcate into mutually exclusive attributes and desires; correspondence theories of language that explain reference in terms of meaning and truth; or the adjudication of what seems oppressive from what is more enabling, or even emancipatory – all of these simple discriminations have become more provisional and certainly contestable in Butler’s hands” (Kirby 108). Draupadi leaves the world without comprehending her own self: “The princess who longed for acceptance, the guilty girl whose heart wouldn’t listen, the wife who balanced her fivefold role precariously, the rebellious daughter-in-law, the queen who ruled in the most magical of palaces, the distracted mother, the beloved companion of Krishna who refused to learn the lessons he offered, the woman obsessed with vengeance – none of them were the true Panchali. If not, who was I?” (229).

It is only the genderless existence granted to her in the other world by the grace of Krishna and after shedding the bane of womanhood of this world that she attains a unique selfhood: “I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet, for the first time I’m truly Panchali” (360). Thus, the message that the writer seems to be giving here is that the abolition of the patriarchal mindset is probably tied to the gendered existence of women and only in the other world it will be possible to shed this form and the strings attached to it. It is the most apt comment on the pathetic plight of women in a patriarchal society.

VII. NOTES

1. The term ‘myth’, which is generally taken in the West for a false and totally imaginary narrative, may not necessarily mean the same in India. Devdutt Pattanaik defines it thus: “The Hindu worldview can be startling to those accustomed to a Western thought process, until we challenge the told definition of myth (‘the irrational, the unreasonable, the false’) and embrace a new definition (‘subjective truth expressed in stories, symbols and rituals, that shapes *all* cultures, Indian or Western, ancient or modern, religious or secular’). The Sanskrit word for subjective truth is *mithya* – not the opposite of objective truth, but a finite expression of *satya*, that which is infinite” (2006: xiii).

2. While being interviewed for *The Times of India*, Michael Preston, writing with his wife Diana under the pen-name Alex Rutherford had this to say about the art of re-telling history as done by them: “Our job is to sift through main historical facts as are generally recognized. We, I hope, haven’t altered things that may have changed the whole outcome. We may have added things to characters: we may have put particular character traits into people; we may have imagined relationships between families” (Srivastava).

3. The term *bheeshma pratigya* is a Hindi proverb and refers to the vow undertaken by the Mahabharata character Bheeshma, previously called Devavrata, to remain unmarried throughout life, so that his father could marry the girl of his choice – the one who wanted to be assured that Bhishma’s progeny would not supersede the claim of the child born of her wedlock. This term now means any strong vow. Mythologist Pattanaik adds: “...Devavrata earns the title of Bhisma [or Bheeshma] because in order to make his father happy he takes a bhisma or terrible vow that condemns him to Put [limbo] for all eternity” (Pattanaik, 2006: 77).

4. The idea floated during the second phase of Women’s Lib movement calling upon women of the world to work together for a better deal in society got articulated in an anthology *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from Women’s Liberation Movement* (1970) edited by one of the earliest American feminists Robin Morgan. Later works edited by her highlighted the universal and eternal nature of the collective as can be made out by the titles: *Sisterhood is Global* (1984), and *Sisterhood is Forever* (2003).

5. Feminist movement has, from its earliest phase, been opposed to war as this 1964 remark from a young feminist of the time makes it clear: “Women had learnt from their participation in the civil rights and anti-war movements that their role had frequently been limited to serving men” (Todd 20). Over time, this sentiment only gathered force and found expression in the context of different conflicts in the world.

6. The first verse in the *Bhagvadgita* compiling Krishna’s teachings on the battlefield begins with reference to the battlefield at Kurukshetra as *dharmakshetra*, i.e., the religious space: “*dharmkshetre kurukshetre samveta yuyutsava...*”.

7. The contemporary perception of the environment problem from the women’s point of view supports the Indian concept of ‘mother nature’ (Nayar 83) though the western critique views it askance, as being based on the notion of only giving and all-forgiving one. This image of ‘mother’ links the female with nature. Both suffer at the hands of the rapacious male in a patriarchal system. In fact, Vandana Shiva, the well-known Indian environmentalist believes that ecological crisis, patriarchy, colonization and oppression of the women have a strong link among them and that these are women who have sustained nature with traditional knowledge and systems.

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