Traversing the Boundaries: Redefining Subaltern Identities in Modern Renditions of *The Mahabharatha*

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DECLARATION

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I hereby declare that the thesis titled "**Traversing the Boundaries: Redefining Subaltern Identities in Modern Renditions of _The Mahabharatha_ "** submitted to the University of Calicut for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English is an authentic record of analysis and bonafide research carried out by me under the guidance of Dr. Preetha. M. M as my Research Supervisor, and Dr. Abitha Balagopalan as my Co-Research Supervisor at the PG Department of English and Research Centre, Sree Kerala Varma College, Thrissur. I hereby certify that no part of this work has been submitted or published elsewhere for the award of any degree, diploma, associateship, or any such title, or recognition. I also affirm that the originality of the study has been ascertained with the help of University-approved software for plagiarism-check.

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This is to certify that the thesis titled **"Traversing the Boundaries: Redefining Subaltern Identities in Modern Renditions of *The Mahabharatha* "** is a bonafide record of studies and research carried out by **Ms. Sreeja. G** under my supervision, and submitted to the University of Calicut for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English. To the best of my knowledge, this research work has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, associateship, or similar such title, or recognition. Its critical evaluation represents independent work on the part of the candidate and its originality has been ascertained with the help of University-approved software for plagiarism check.

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<div style="text-align: right;">Sreeja. G</div>

CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Introduction

Myths have been intrinsic to the development of human civilization from the beginning. They encompass diverse forms such as narratives, beliefs, cultural artifacts, and historical accounts. Myths, as traditional narratives, play a vital role in explaining natural phenomena, customs, beliefs, and the foundations of societies. These stories, often involving gods, supernatural beings, and heroes, are orally transmitted across generations, serving as symbolic representations of a community's values and cultural identity. Found in diverse cultures globally, myths blend reality with fantasy, challenging the distinction between historical facts and symbolic or religious interpretations. Addressing profound existential questions, myths explore the nature of the universe, the purpose of human existence, and humanity's relationship with the divine. They provide invaluable insights into the collective imagination and perspectives of the societies from which they originate, highlighting their enduring cultural and artistic significance. Myths often recount significant historical events and the courageous endeavours of individuals. Over time, these narratives become integrated into a belief system constructed and shaped by society, passed down to subsequent generations. They serve as foundational material for literature and are transmitted through oral traditions and written texts. Stories, in this context, function as a medium for the transmission of mythological narratives.

The concept of myth finds its etymological roots in the Greek term "mythos," which denotes a narrative or story. Mythical narratives serve as a link between the present and the past, particularly in relation to the cultural evolution of societies. These narratives can be traced to eras predating recorded history and the formation of civilizations, frequently narrating experiences that surpass the comprehension of human intellect. Myths are found across diverse traditions and cultures, constituting a fundamental basis for understanding various aspects of a culture. Essentially, myths are stories that bear connections to ancient events intertwined with communal beliefs and rituals. They cannot be dismissed as mere fabrications or falsehoods, as myths possess deep historical underpinnings rooted in the social fabric of a society. They form an integral part of the narrative of a community. Myths have played a profound and influential role in the formation and development of communities, serving as a guiding framework that shapes societal norms and practices. They establish patterns of customs and beliefs, nurturing belief systems pertaining to the worship of deities and the appropriate modes of religious observance. Through their narratives, myths convey moral teachings, instilling a collective consciousness of righteous behaviour and instigating a profound reverence for divine authority. They evoke a sense of fear by emphasizing the potential consequences of defying the supreme power. Myths can be perceived as the foundational code of conduct within a society, as they codify deeply held beliefs and impart practical rules that contribute to the harmonious functioning of a cohesive social order.

Critics and scholars have engaged in extensive studies on myths due to their profound impact on shaping the collective consciousness and values of societies. The scrutiny of myths by scholars provides an opportunity to explore the cultures, revealing latent meanings and shared values interwoven within these narratives. Myths are believed to be the repositories of collective memory, safeguarding historical experiences and cultural identities. This analytical exploration provides critics with insights into fundamental societal inquiries, moral considerations, and reflections on the human condition. Myths wield considerable influence in shaping ideologies, moulding societal structures, and either upholding or challenging prevailing power dynamics. Through rigorous mythological analysis, scholars can untangle the intricacies of social narratives, illuminating the transformative trajectory of cultural beliefs and their impacts on individuals and communities. The study of myths serves as a multifaceted lens, enabling scholars to navigate the intricate interplay between storytelling, culture, and the collective imagination.

The foundational contributors to the study of mythology, spanning a significant period, have each left an indelible mark on the field. Sir James George Frazer, in *The Golden Bough*, conducted an extensive examination of mythology and religion, elucidating the parallels and evolutionary trajectories of myths across diverse cultures. Sigmund Freud, renowned as the progenitor of psychoanalysis, explored the psychological dimensions of mythology in works such as *Totem and Taboo* and *The Interpretation of Dreams*. His pioneering proposition posited

myths as expressions of repressed desires and universal human experiences. Carl Jung, through works like *Man and His Symbols* and *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, advanced the notion of archetypes—universal symbols and motifs recurring in myths worldwide. This concept suggested a collective unconscious shared by humanity, unveiling deeper layers of symbolic meaning in mythological narratives. Mircea Eliade analysed the sacred dimensions of myth and ritual in *The Sacred and the Profane* and *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, emphasizing their role in connecting individuals to a transcendent reality. Joseph Campbell's influential *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* outlined the monomyth, revealing a recurring hero's journey in myths globally and underscoring common stages and motifs in diverse cultural narratives. Northrop Frye, in *Anatomy of Criticism*, integrated mythic patterns and archetypes into literary theory, underscoring the significance of mythology in comprehending the structure of literary works. Together, these scholars laid the groundwork for a multifaceted understanding of mythology, encompassing psychological, symbolic, and literary dimensions.

Roland Barthes in his *Mythologies* views myth in a post –structuralist perspective as a sign with ideological implications. Barthes, basing on the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, states that myth is a "second order semiological system" (Barthes114). Barthes says that mythology "is the study of a type of speech" and is part of the "vast science of signs which Saussure postulated some forty years ago under the name of semiology" (Barthes110). Semiology, according to him

"postulates a relation between two terms, a signifier and the signified (110). In myth Barthes finds the tridimensional pattern of the signifier, the signified and the sign. But Barthes points out that, "myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological system that existed before it"(114). Myth, according to Barthes, reduces materials of mythical speech that includes the language and what belongs to the first system, the story, the settings etc. to a mere signifying function. Seeing them as a raw material and reducing them to a status of a language myth sees them only as a "sum of signs"(113). Barthes calls myth a "metalanguage" for it talks about another. Barthes says that any sign that has a predetermined ideological significance is a myth. He says, "This is why semiologist is entitled to treat in the same way writing and pictures: what he retains from them is the fact that they are both signs, that they both reach the threshold of myth endowed with the same signifying function, that they constitute, one just as much as the other, a language –object" (114). Barthes' theory holds significant relevance in the interpretation of myth within literature, as it extends beyond a mere religious lens. His approach encompasses the exploration of diverse ideologies at play within myth, thereby offering a comprehensive framework for analysis.

Bruce Lincoln, another theoretician, in *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology and Scholarship* points out that some poetry are appropriate to be termed as myths. His concern is not just for decorum, but for social utility as well. Myth,

Lincoln notes, however remains "a term of high respect" and "reserved for stories that are moral in their content, reverent in their attitude, and socially beneficial in their consequences" (Lincoln 29). For Bruce Lincoln "the decisive characteristic of myth is that it is a narrative" that which was told most often, with greatest ceremony and greatest apparent enjoyment"   (Lincoln 22). In another of his studies, *Discourse and construction of society: Comparative studies of Myth, Ritual, and classification,* Lincoln divides narratives into different classes "not by their content but by the claims that are made by their narrators and the way in which those claims are received by their audiences" (Lincoln 24). Myth, for Lincoln, holds more ground and he defines it as "…that small class of stories that possesses both credibility and authority that not only claims truth and credibility (which 'history' does too) but also disposes of unquestioned authority"(Lincoln 24). Myth according to Lincoln thus stabilize social patterns between people, maintaining "society in its regular and accustomed forms" (Lincoln 25). In his scholarly works, Bruce Lincoln offers a comprehensive examination of the multifaceted nature of myth, recognizing its complex influence on ideology. He emphasizes that myth plays a significant role in shaping ideologies across various historical epochs, a characteristic that holds both accuracy and potential misrepresentation. But, what sets myth apart from other narrative forms is its exceptional narrative potency, the linguistic richness it employs, and use of refined expressions that create a unique and distinctive atmosphere. Myth possesses a remarkable capacity to narrate events that may have transpired in a distant past,

further heightening its unique qualities. The utilization of elevated language,

meticulously constructed settings, and a distinct narrative structure collectively

contribute to distinguishing myth from ordinary narratives, granting it a distinct

status within the realm of storytelling.

Myth thus forms archetypes and occupies the collective unconsciousness of

a society. In *Communities of the Heart: The Rhetoric of Myth in the Fiction of*

Ursula K. Le Guini, Warren Rochelle says that myth "… expresses truth of human

condition in metaphoric and symbolic language" (Rochelle19). Myths, according

to him, "…open the door through story, through language, to the latent

potentialities of the human psyche – an enormous, inexhaustible store of ancient

knowledge concerning the profound relations between god, man and the cosmos"

(Rochelle19). Many critics have viewed myths in various ways but all are of the

opinion that myth is essentially stories generated by society to hold its culture

together. Carl Jung comments about myth in the *The undiscovered self : The*

Dilemma of the Individual in Modern Society says that:

> Great art till now has always derived its fruitfulness from the myth, from
>
> the unconscious process of symbolization which continues through the ages
>
> and which, as the primordial manifestation of the human spirit, will
>
> continue to be the root of all creation in the future. (Jung 77)

To attain a holistic comprehension of the cultural significance of myths on a global scale, it is crucial to undertake a meticulous analysis of their inherent characteristics. Despite the inclination of numerous contemporary scholars and students to disregard the importance of mythological studies as outdated or insignificant, it becomes apparent that the dissemination of mythology remains prevalent in present-day society, potentially even more pronounced than in the past, owing to the widespread availability of diverse mediums for its transmission.

Reworking mythology becomes important when there are ellipses in representation and when there is deliberate avoidance of certain characters. Is myth an alternative historical text? It is a question that needs proper comprehension. Aparna Halpe, Professor of English at Centennial College, Toronto, Canada, feels that myth in a way "narrates history" and by making myth "the point of entry into a historical moment, the author also suggests a particular reading of history that is, to a large extent, determined by the reader's emotional response to the truth of the myth"(Halpe 10). By reworking myths the author manipulates history and in a way changes to the already alternated history to suit various purposes. Contemporary writers, by reworking myth from new perspectives, try to fill gaps deliberately made by the hegemonic power centres in these tales. Myth is generally narrated from their perspective and so is history. The reworking of myth enables a re-reading of myths in a way an alternative history. It introduces a layer of complexity to the understanding of historical events. It allows

for the exploration of untold stories, hidden narratives, and suppressed perspectives, contributing to a more subtle comprehension of cultural and historical realities. In essence, when writers intentionally change mythic elements, it allows for critical examination not just of the stories but also the larger socio-cultural dynamics they represent. Reworking myths from new perspectives becomes a powerful tool for addressing historical gaps and questioning dominant narratives. This approach provides an alternative way to look at myths, considering them as alternative histories, leading to a better understanding of cultural and historical complexities.

Within the realm of mythological narratives, epics form a distinct category known for their extensive and profound narratives. These epics include mythological elements, featuring characters and events that are deeply intertwined with broader cultural and religious beliefs. In the context of Indian literature, *the Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* stand out as seminal epics, intricately woven with both mythological components and the narratives of human heroes such as Rama, Krishna, and Arjuna. The interplay between mythology and epic is evident in the seamless incorporation of mythological elements within epic narratives, that highlight the interconnectedness between these two forms of storytelling. Beyond their literary dimensions, both mythology and epics assume pivotal roles in shaping cultures, influencing beliefs, and leaving an indelible mark on literature and art. Together, they serve as powerful reflections of the ethos and identity of a

society, enriching the cultural tapestry with their profound significance. In contemporary Hindu mythological literature, the traditional epics are not revered as inviolable texts but are subjected to deconstruction and interpretation through a human lens. Modern writers approach these epics with a critical eye, presenting characters as fallible and more human than divine. The protagonists' vulnerabilities take centre stage, and their struggles and battles are not always portrayed as driven by lofty purposes. The characters undergo scrutiny and critique, with the narrative and plot elements being questioned and intertwined with present-day ideologies and concerns. These novels creatively reshape Indian myths to address both current issues and timeless human dilemmas.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her "Author's note" *The Palace of Illusion* says why she reworked *The Mahabharatha:*

> I was left unsatisfied with the portrayals of the women... in some ways remained shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions portrayed only when affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers and sons. (Divakaruni xiv)

she decided that if ever she wrote a book "I would place women in the forefront of the action. I would uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of the men's exploits" (Divakaruni xiv).

Rohit Sharma, in his article "The Art of Rewriting Indian Epics" is of the opinion that rewriting of the epics in India was not a recent phenomenon but started with Shudra Tapasvi translated in 1946 by K .V. Puttappa many retellings followed and the one reason he cites for the interest in reworking is that the *The Mahabharatha* with its "Wider literary, cultural and philosophical scope" of the epic and the second one according to him is "the predominance of Draupadi as protagonist in the women's retelling of the *The Mahabharatha*." He opines that "a story is new every film it is told" and "whoever is telling the old story tends to make it new" (Sharma 148). He cites several examples of how some retellings include alterations and modifications that are far removed from the original. One story narrates how crows carried the food prepared by Sita to Lanka and Ravana tastes it and is determined to bring Sita across to Lanka. Sharma points out that retelling is not wholly an unintentional act. He says:

> Unlike oral culture, the trend of rewriting a story in literature serves for
> various premeditated designs that the respective authors have in their
> minds. Because of this intentional element, the act of retelling in written
> literature tends to become politically and culturally charged .(Sharma 149)

This is true with the case of the Jain version of *Ramayana*. A.K .Ramanujan in the *Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation* talk about the Jain version. Ramanujan says that the Jains believe that the Hindu

version of Ramayana is all wrong and it starts by asking various questions about

representation in Ramayana:

> How can monkeys vanquish the powerful Rakshasa warriors like Ravana?
>
> How can noble men and Jaina worthies like Ravana eat flesh and drink
>
> blood? How can Kumbhakarna sleep through six months of the year, and
>
> never wake up even though boiling oil was poured into his ears, elephants
>
> were made to trample over him, and war trumpets and conches blow around
>
> him ?(Ramanujan 32)

In accordance with Jain tenets, the conventional characterization of Ravana

as a demon, cannibal, and consumer of flesh is deemed inaccurate, refuting what

adherents perceive as misrepresentations within Hindu narratives. Within the Jain

perspective, Ravana is not portrayed as malevolent but rather as a venerable

figure—one of the sixty-three leaders or salakapurusas within the Jaina tradition.

This Jain reinterpretation challenges and rectifies the Hindu narrative, presenting

an alternative construction that emphasizes Ravana's nobility, commitment to

ascetic practices, and adherence to Jaina principles. This instance exemplifies how

myths can undergo varied reinterpretations across distinct cultural contexts,

highlighting the fluid and context-dependent nature of mythological narratives.

Retellings can be for various reasons and epics are so conveniently placed

that it can be reworked from any view point. Shashi Tharoor notes in *The Great*

Indian Novel (1989), "….the essential *The Mahabharatha* is whatever is relevant to us in the second half of the 20th century. No epic, no work of art is sacred by itself; if it does not have meaning for me now, it is nothing, it is dead" (5). Retelling is for convenience too as the epic stories are so well know retelling is easy. Rajagopalachari, in *The Mahabharatha* says that, "there are few in our land who do not know the *Ramayana* and *The Mahabharatha*, though the stories come to them so embroidered with the garnish fancies of the kalakshepam and cinema as to retain but little of the dignity and approach to the truth of Vyasa or Valmiki." (Rajagopalachari vii). K. Satchidanandan, in his work *Myth in Contemporary Literature*, argues that the designation *Ramayana* in India does not exclusively pertain to a singular text. Rather, it embodies a tradition comprising a diverse array of oral, written, and performed narratives, each acknowledged as genuinely emerging from the shared imagination of the people. In her article "The Ramayana Syndrome", Romila Thapar notes that, "*The Ramayana* does not belong to any one moment in history for it has its own history which lies embedded in the many versions which were woven around the theme at different times and places, even within its own history in the Indian subcontinent" (Thapar).

Myth functions as an ancient and collective narrative that fosters a sense of unity within a community or society. The process of mythopoeia has played a pivotal role in reshaping established myths, even amidst societal revolutions and movements, consequently influencing changes in societal beliefs. In the Indian

context, various mythological texts have played a significant role in crafting and normalizing specific myths, subsequently moulding societal behaviour based on the narratives presented. It is important to acknowledge that the creation of myths is frequently propelled by self-interest, with individuals in positions of authority often exploiting the beliefs of those lower in the hierarchy, particularly within the realms of power and gender dynamics. Binny Mathew in his article "Asura the tale of the Vanquished" comments, "As a tool of the oppressor who constructs myths to justify his position, myth distorts alienates meaning, naturalizes history, purifies things, makes discourse appear innocent." (1)

Myths can also be manipulated and distorted by dominant groups within society, serving as a tool to exert control and domination over marginalized communities and women. They engender notions of right and wrong, thereby providing a means for those in power to subjugate and manipulate less privileged segments of society. Indian mythological texts have generated multiple myths about the subaltern, which favour the superiority of upper class and patriarchy within the hierarchical structure. These narratives depict women as inferior to men, requiring protection from the authoritative gender, while simultaneously portraying the empowered gender as superior and possessing visionary qualities. They also purposely neglect the lower castes and the gendered subalterns. Ranajit Guha, post-colonial thinker , who has discussed many ideas on subaltern studies ,

comments that the individuals in positions of power were the " elites" whereas the remaining individuals occupy the subordinate position of non-elite subalterns.

The necessity of reworking myths arises from the evident male-centric nature of epics, emphasizing the need for a female perspective to be incorporated. Retellings involve presenting a myth in a new light while maintaining its core structure, subversion actively challenges and disrupts the traditional themes or messages within a myth, often with the intention of offering a critique or alternative perspective. Both approaches contribute to the dynamic evolution of mythological narratives in literature and other forms of storytelling. While such reworks are commonly called subversions, the question arises when considering the vast array of existing mythological versions: can female epics be classified as subversions, or do they represent distinct reinterpretations? The epics themselves present abundant opportunities to rework and present narratives from fresh angles. Therefore, this present study will approach reworking as the creation of individual texts, aiming to highlight the diverse techniques employed by writers to foreground subaltern characters suppressed within the male-dominated and power dominated versions of these stories. It is crucial to acknowledge that stories can be recounted from multiple perspectives, and within the main narrative, numerous tales are often subdued. Hence, the act of reworking offers a fresh point of view that challenges established norms, with each text emerging as an independent creation suppressed in the older version of these stories will be highlighted. Stories

can be said from different perspectives and multiple tales are subdued in the main narrative.

The Mahabharatha is more than a narrative of eternal human conflicts. It is a repository of political wisdom, personal discipline, global harmony, philosophical doctrines, and a remarkable masterpiece of literary artistry. Wendi Doniger commented that The Mahabharatha is a "brilliantly orchestrated hybrid narrative" (Doniger 264). The Mahabharatha, written by Ved Vyasa has ever expanded through the hands of different narrators who presented different perspectives of the text. This enriched the heterogenous qualities of the text as well as its narrative fabric. The Mahabharatha stands as an unparalleled masterpiece in the realm of human literature, encompassing a wide spectrum of human predicaments and internal conflicts within its rich tapestry of characters. It surpasses conventional notions of morality, distinguishing between protagonists and antagonists, and delineating the boundaries of virtue and vice. Instead, it presents a profound discourse on the disintegration of nations, familial discord, political machinations, and power dynamics Within this epic, one can even encounter the forces of history at play. The Mahabharatha exists in a perpetual state of tension, oscillating between its role as a cultural-historical text and its timeless essence . Engaging with this text entails a dynamic interplay between the reader and diverse cultural histories, transcending a mere mechanical interaction with the words on the page.

The origin of *The Mahabharatha* can be traced back to oral traditions, where the story of the epic was passed down through generations before being recorded in written form. The dating of *The Mahabharatha* remains a subject of scholarly contention, with consensus eluding researchers. However, it is commonly posited that the epic's composition took place during a broad timeframe spanning from the 8th to the 4th centuries BCE, though the subsequent centuries may have witnessed the incorporation or alteration of certain sections within the text. This nuanced understanding of the *The Mahabharatha*'s origin and development underscores the complex nature of its evolution and the potential layers of authorship and redaction it encompasses. *The Mahabharatha* exhibits a multi-layered structure that indicates its evolutionary nature as recognized by scholars. The earliest layer, known as the *Jaya*, primarily revolves around the fundamental conflict between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, establishing the groundwork for the epic's ethical and moral dilemmas. Successive layers, such as the *Bharata* and *The Mahabharatha*, introduce expanded narratives encompassing significant sections like *the Bhagavad Gita* and *the Anugita.*

During its development, *The Mahabharatha* underwent revisions, interpolations, and additions by various authors and redactors. These alterations contributed to its intricacy and profundity, accommodating diverse perspectives, philosophical traditions, and historical contexts. The process of redaction and compilation likely persisted until the Gupta period, culminating in a comparatively

stabilized version of the text. This ongoing evolution of the *The Mahabharatha* reflects its adaptability and ability to incorporate new elements, resulting in a rich tapestry of narratives that resonate with a range of philosophical schools and historical circumstances.

Alf Hiltebeitel, Columbian Professor of Religion, History, and Human Sciences, in his work *Rethinking the Mahabharatha* observes that *the Mahabharatha* attempts "to put their authors in the works, and introduce their audiences to the multiple selves of such authors and the nature of their interventions in the text and the lives of their characters" (37). According to Doniger "there is no single *The Mahabharatha*; there are hundreds of *The Mahabharatha*, hundreds of different manuscripts and innumerable oral versions" (Doniger 263). From the oral tradition of bards, *The Mahabharatha* went to the hands of Brahmins who added religious stories into the text. Fitzgerald, Indologist at Brown University, in his work *The Mahabharatha* observed that "Brahmin redactors of the *The Mahabharatha* had created a text that accepted the political implications of the violence of the universe, in part precisely in order to distinguish themselves from the nonviolent Buddhists and Jainas" (112).

Due to its universal nature regarding theme , characters and treatment , *The Mahabharatha* has been translated into many regional and international language and has been subjected to continuous rereading ,reinterpretation , subversion and deconstruction. The epic holds substantial cultural, religious, and literary

significance within Indian society. Composed over several centuries, it presents a complex narrative encompassing themes of morality, duty, power, and the human condition. While revered as a religious scripture, it also serves as a profound source of storytelling and philosophical exploration. DR.Lakshmi Bandlamudi, Professor of Psychology at LaGuardia Community College, in her book *Dialogics of Self, the The Mahabharatha and Culture,* says *The Mahabharatha* can therefore be interpreted as, "a historical text with its own history, and individuals with their own history of engagement with this text create a whole range of dialogic tension" (24).

The contemporary Indian literature has witnessed a significant revolution in the retellings of mythological narratives such as the *Ramayana* and *The Mahabharatha*. While these epics have always been subject to reinterpretation throughout history, the post-colonial era saw a surge in mythological retellings that challenged traditional norms and perspectives. Post-colonial Indian society, having identified various problem areas related to gender, class, caste, and power dynamics, influenced the literary landscape as well. Mythology, reflecting society, underwent transformation to reflect these societal changes. Authors began reimagining the narratives from post-colonial, feminist, and queer perspectives, subverting and challenging existing power paradigms. R.N. Vyas, comments about the *Ramayana* and *the Mahabharatha* in *Nature of Indian Culture*:

Very few books can be placed in the category of the books of eternity. Only

books like the *Ramayana* and the *The Mahabharatha* can be included in the

category of books of eternity. Culture is reflected in the books of eternity

alone. Only the books of the eternal value can contribute to the

development of real culture. (Vyas 53)

These retellings often involved relocating characters traditionally on the

periphery to the centre of the narrative. This shift gave voice to the voiceless and

power to the powerless, allowing them to retell the stories from their own

perspectives. By rewriting these narratives, the authors aimed to deconstruct and

analyze the underlying power structures, uncovering hidden narratives and

marginalized voices within the epics. These contemporary retellings not only

provide a fresh perspective on the traditional tales but also explore themes of

identity, agency, and social justice. They serve to engage with and question

societal norms, offering new possibilities for interpretation and understanding. In

the *"Introduction" to Gender and Narrative in the Mahābhārata*, the authors

Brodbeck and Brian Black states, "*The Mahābhārata* is one of the definitive

cultural narratives in the construction of masculine and feminine gender roles in

ancient India, and its numerous telling and retellings have helped shape Indian

gender and social norms ever since" (10- 11). Some of the popular retellings on

The Mahabharatha include : *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch* by Irawati Karve

(1967) which analyzes characters from the *The Mahabharatha*, focusing on their

personalities and actions. Irawati Karve examines the moral and ethical

dimensions of the epic, providing insights into the motivations and dilemmas

faced by various characters and offers a different shade in portraying women

characters. The book offers a thought-provoking interpretation of the *The*

Mahabharatha and its timeless relevance. Another notable retelling on *The*

Mahabharatha is *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (2008).

This novel is a reimagining of the Indian epic *The Mahabharatha* from the

feminist perspective of its central female character, Draupadi. It explores her

experiences, emotions, and struggles in a male-dominated society and challenges

the norms of the patriarchy. *Mrityunjaya, the Death Conqueror: The Story of*

Karna by Śivājī Sāvanta (1989) is a retelling which narrates the life story of

Karna, one of the central characters in the *The Mahabharatha*. The retelling delves

into the intricate struggles of Karna, delving into his complex relationships, such

as his deep friendship with Duryodhana, his unwavering loyalty to his mother, and

the internal conflicts he grapples with. Through this narrative, the book offers a

profound exploration of Karna's character from a subaltern perspective. It provides

a unique and nuanced understanding of Karna's experiences and sheds light on his

untold story, offering a fresh and compelling interpretation of his journey. *Jaya* by

Devdutt Pattanaik (2010) provides a concise retelling of the *The Mahabharatha*

and presents the story in a simplified and accessible manner, making it easier for

readers to grasp the intricate plot and numerous characters. The book explores the

moral and philosophical teachings embedded within the epic, and sheds light on

the profound relationship between spiritual fulfilment and material achievements, offering profound insights into the harmonious coexistence of these contrasting yet interconnected aspects of human existence. *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* by Anand Neelakantan (2013) presents a unique perspective on the *The Mahabharatha* by presenting the story from the viewpoint of the Kauravas, usually depicted as the antagonists. It challenges the conventional notions of good and evil, forcing readers to question their preconceived notions and evaluates the political intrigue, power struggles, and the moral dilemmas faced by the characters. *Rise of Kali: Duryodhana's The Mahabharatha* by Anand Neelakantan (2015): This book is a sequel to *Ajaya* and continues the narrative from the perspective of Duryodhana, a prominent character from the *The Mahabharatha*. It explores the complexities of Duryodhana's personality and delves into his motivations and actions. The story explores the multidimensional nature of characters and challenges the conservative approaches to heroes and villains. *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* by Kavita Kané (2013) explores the life of Uruvi, the wife of Karna, a key character in the *The Mahabharatha* from a subaltern perspective. Kavitha Kane masterfully captures Uruvi's anguish, making it easily relatable and deeply comprehensible. Despite being centred on Karna's wife, the book provides a remarkable understanding of Karna's character through Uruvi's close observation. This approach creates an authentic and intimate connection with Karna, who is otherwise known for his silence and aloofness. *Karna's Alter Ego* is another retelling of *The Mahabharatha* by Surendra Nath (2017) which analyses the

character Karna from the *The Mahabharatha* which displays his psyche,

motivations, and the conflicts Karna faces throughout the epic. The book explores

the complexity of Karna's choices and actions, making readers question the

notions of right and wrong. *The Great Indian Novel* by Shashi Tharoor (1989)

ingeniously utilizes the framework of *The Mahabharatha* to craft a remarkable

political satire. Drawing inspiration from the epic, the novel artfully portrays the

insatiable hunger for power that permeates India's post-independence era. By

borrowing the story and characters from *The Mahabharatha*, Tharoor skilfully

weaves a narrative that exposes the depths of greed and ambition within the Indian

political landscape.

In Indian English fiction, there has been an influx of captivating retellings

of *The Mahabharatha*, offering readers a fresh and novel perspective on this

timeless epic. These new interpretations breathe new life into the narrative by

presenting the story from unique viewpoints, adding depth and intrigue to the

well-known tale. Every marginalised characters have started narrating their stories

and claimed their identity and agency. Some of the recent retellings of *The*

Mahabharatha are: *Shakuni: Master of the Game* by Ashutosh Nadkar (2019) tells

the captivating story of the *The Mahabharatha* from the unique perspective of

Shakuni, who takes centre stage as the unexpected hero. By presenting Shakuni as

the central figure, the narrative challenges traditional notions of heroism and

invites readers to reconsider their perceptions of the characters and events within

the *The Mahabharatha*. It offers a thought-provoking exploration of how one

man's quest for revenge can shape the destiny of kingdoms and bring about the

downfall of even the mightiest empires. *Arjuna the Greatest Lover* by Saurish

Hegde (2021) explores the romantic side of Arjuna, one of the prominent

characters from the *The Mahabharatha*. It reveals his love interests, relationships,

and the challenges he faces as a lover. The story sheds light on Arjuna's emotional

journey and his portrayal as a romantic hero. *Abhimanyu: The Warrior Prince* by

Deepak M.R (2021): Focuses on Abhimanyu, the son of Arjuna and Subhadra,

explores his life and his heroic role in the *The Mahabharatha*. The book chronicles

Abhimanyu's remarkable journey as he confronts a multitude of challenges,

including the legendary Chakravyuha battle. The story highlights Abhimanyu's

bravery and loyalty. *Krishna's Sister* by Priyanka Bhuyan (2019): is a captivating

retelling that revolves around Subhadra, a formidable woman who played a pivotal

role in the epic *The Mahabharatha*. This empowering feminist narrative unveils

the strength and resilience of a woman who defies societal norms, standing as the

sister of the divine Krishna himself. The story beautifully portrays her sacrifices,

unwavering faith in her brother Krishna, and, most important, in herself. Subhadra

emerges as a warrior who not only commands respect but also conquers the heart

of Arjuna, leaving an indelible mark on the tapestry of this ancient epic. *The

Kaunteyas* by Madhavi S. Mahadevan (2016) tells *The Mahabharatha* from

Kunti's perspective . *Duryodhana's Queen* by Priyanka Bhuyan (2021) unveils the

untold story of Kuru Queen ,Bhanumati, who has remained hidden within the

forgotten pages of history. With a unique perspective, the narrative delves into the depths of her experiences and emotions, unravelling the intricate challenges she faces alongside Duryodhana. Their relationship takes centre stage, showcasing the complexities and consequences of their choices. *The Curse of Gandhari* by Aditi Banerjee (2019) focuses on Gandhari, the mother of the Kauravas, and explores her journey throughout the *The Mahabharatha*. Her struggles, sacrifices, and the curse she imposes upon Lord Krishna are highlighted . The story offers insights into Gandhari's perspective and her tragic fate. The review of these mythological retellings explicitly convey the paradigm shift of power that has occurred in the contemporary society.

From these examples of retellings one can understand that the contemporary retellings demythologize the epic, wherein authors bring revered characters down from their mythical pedestals and present them as relatable individuals within familiar settings. The objective is to render the narrative more accessible and in harmony with modern sensibilities, often achieved by appending additional incidents or events that offer justifications for the characters' actions. To construct a coherent modern narrative, certain episodes from the original epic are omitted, and the remaining episodes undergo reinterpretation through a fresh, logical lens. Interpreting the epic is influenced by the evolving social and moral values of a specific society at a given time, as well as the transformed customs, practices, and thoughts prevalent within that society. Numerous women writers

have embarked on the endeavour of feminist revisionist mythmaking, seeking to amplify the voices of women characters within the *The Mahabharatha* and interrogate the patriarchal norms prevalent in society. Through their literary efforts, they aim to challenge and subvert traditional narratives, offering alternative perspectives that empower and validate the experiences of women within the epic. These writers contribute to a broader movement of reclaiming agency for female characters and fostering a more inclusive and gender-equitable understanding of the *The Mahabharatha*. In her work *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction*, Sellers commented that feminist mythmaking is ". . . an act of demolition, exposing and detonating the stories that have hampered women, and as a task of construction – of bringing into being enabling alternatives" (Sellers 30) .

Through their re-visionist approach, women writers try to dismantle the male-centric narrative, and offer a fresh interpretation by infusing the tale with female elements and viewpoints. This transformative process not only disrupts the original author's intentions but also prompts readers to reconsider their own perspectives, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and gender-conscious understanding of the text. In her work *Transforming Memories in Contemporary Women's Rewriting* Liedeke Plate, professor of culture and inclusivity at Radboud University, comments:

Rewriting is not only about change; it is change. It transmutes the stock of

narratives that shapes cultural identity and allows women writers to carve a

space for the expression of female experience within literary tradition they

can legitimately claim their own. Challenging the authority of traditional

representations ,it enables female authorship, facilitating women's access to

print while satisfying their desire to supplement or correct the texts of the

past. (Plate 40)

Throughout history, human society has undergone the evolution of

patriarchal structures, causing the gradual loss of predominance for female gods in

ancient cultures, while male gods assumed greater prominence. The perspectives

embedded within religions and their associated texts have been predominantly

shaped by male viewpoints, assigning women subsidiary roles. Female characters

are often either absent or constructed in a manner that solely caters to the

masculine desires of male characters, serving as catalysts for wars. Epic narratives,

such as the *Ramayana, The Mahabharatha*, and the *Trojan War,* attribute the

outbreak of conflicts to the disobedience of female characters, like Sita, Draupadi,

and Helen, respectively. These portrayals within epics exemplify a male

chauvinistic attitude that misrepresents women. The need for myth re-reading

arises from these misrepresentations.

Moses. I. Finley, American-born British academic and classical scholar, as

quoted by Helene Monsacre in her non-fiction *Tears of Achilles* asserts that:

women are held to be naturally inferior and therefore limited in their

function to the production of offspring and the performance of household

duties, and that the meaningful social relationships and the strong personal

attachments were sought and found among men. (qtd.in Monsacre 33)

Finley identifies two spheres functioning in epic: one very dominating and

powerful and the other an abstract concept that has no validity. The first one is the

masculine sphere and though feminine sphere comes up as a binary, there is in

reality no such thing. Only the masculine sphere exists and it according to Finley

is heroism:

The Homeric warrior effectively has the ability has the ability within

himself to rise above his ordinary nature; and when he does transform

himself from *anthropos* or *heroes*, the combatant in the *Iliad* is situated

exclusively and definitively in the masculine sphere.(qtd.in Monsacre 35)

The masculine sphere exists and it is the sphere of heroism, a place, according to

Finley, has not space for any feminine valour. He says that women "do not possess

the duality that would allow them to access a superior state" and they are

expected to remain as mere woman for hero has "no feminine gender it is the age

of heroes" (qtd.in Monsacre 38).

Monsacre says that in myths and epics women are categorised as mere

mortals whereas men have the opportunity to rise up in rank through heroism.

They attain an equal status as that of Gods by engaging in heroic acts. The space allocated to women is limited whereas men can move around and display their valour. A heroic son is known as the son of a heroic father, the mother's identity is not that relevant and the only happiness a mother can attain is by mothering heroic sons. In the case of Bheeshmar it is different and he is known as Gangaputhra or the son of Ganga. The status of a woman is decided by her husband's status and when unmarried it is determined by the status of the father. Helen, Clytemnestra, and Penelope are queens but they have no independent authority and their power is in their being the wives of kings.

War occupies a huge space in epics. But in war , women have literally no role to play except to accompany the war hero to the gates of the castle and then be present to receive his dead body if he is defeated. Their joys and sorrows depend on the performance of the men in the battlefield. Their future also depends on how men perform at the battlefield. If the men are defeated and the army vanquished then they stand the risk of becoming widows and being sold as slaves in the slave markets.

> Women, children, and old men, are 'marginalized' and excluded from this agonistics society.... For the victors, war allows men to earn great *kleos* 'glory' and allows women to preserve their freedom. For the vanquished, defeat leads to death for men, or, in any case, dishonour, and slavery for women. (Monsacre 46)

In epics three feminine statuses are identified by Monsacre and they are that "of the legitimate spouse/concubine, and the mistress" (Monsacre 44). And of the three, Monsacre says that, "the mother seems to occupy the most influential place." She cites the example of Thetis, the mother of Achilles" (Monsacre 44). In Indian myths, the mother occupies an important space within the court. Kunti is addressed as the lion-hearted mother, Kausalya is an epitome of immense sacrifice, often called the victimised mother, but attains a superior status in the Ramayana as the first queen to the king. Yashoda, the mother of Krishna and Sita, the mother of twin Lava and Kusha, have special importance in epics. Yet their roles are limited to the palace and they just form an elite group of the audience when the valorous heroes display their martial arts.

In ancient mythologies women are blurred and are kept away from the centre of action. Monsacre says that " If women are so strictly confined to these domains of well -codified activities, it is because they can be the source of trouble, danger and malevolence. It is because certain vices are inherent in their nature" (48). Monsacre, feels that this is applicable to women who uses " seduction and attraction in improper ways, women whose power of erotic attraction is excessively displayed and evil- minded" (49). She points out that, "In the *Illiad*, one woman (Helen) and two goddesses (Aphrodite and Heera) are the source of danger and sometimes disaster" (49). Helen's seductiveness is irresistible and all

men desire her. The different examples of reprehensible feminine conduct all apply, more or less directly, to women who use their powers of seduction.

Women in epics were seen as commodities equivalent to horses and cauldrons as it is visible in the quotation from *Illiad* cited by Lilah Grace Canevaro in *Women of Substance in Homeric Epic*:

He brought out prizes from his ships: cauldrons and tripods,

horses and mules and strong heads of oxen,

and well -girdled women and grey iron. (qtd. in Canevaro 11)

Canevaro quotes Helene Foley and notes that "women play a critical role as objects of exchange between men" and notes that Hanna Roisman describes "Helen's position as possession". Canevaro observes that "Homeric women even have prices put on them...that Eurycleia is bought by Laertes for the price of twenty oxen...In the giving of dowries and bride wealth ,women's worth becomes quantified, measured against or along with material goods" (Canevaro 11).

Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* talks about the image of women in myths. She says that it is an image created by men and are fashioned to suit their needs (Millet 46).She says that this is because of the fear of the "otherness" of women. But the notion that patriarchy is the ultimate force controlling force gets established and "the male has already set himself as the human norm, the subject

to which the female is the 'other' or 'alien' (Millet 46). In *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre*, Elaine Aston cites Bryony Lavery's play *Origin of Species* in which Molly, an archaeologist says, "My four-million-year-old ancestor opened its eyes … and stood up… And I realised that what I had found was a woman" (qtd. in Aston12). Aston observes that the "discovery that her ancestor is female enables Molly to re-think the destructive man-made history of the human race which has brought the 'species' to the point of extinction" (qtd. in Aston12). Aston quotes S.Case's observation while dealing with Lacan:

> If I might expand Lacan's metaphor in order to include the possibility of the female subject, 'she' also sees in that mirror that she is a woman. At that moment she further fractures, split once more as the woman who observes her own subject position as both male-identified and female.(Aston 34)

The female subject "cannot appear as single, whole" according to Case continuous as the male can cause because "she senses that his story is not her story," she feels that the female subject is silenced" (Aston 34) and in this context reworking is essential to fill the ellipses. Reworking myth is the only option before feminist writers who want to cover up the exclusion that exists. Revision enables an alternating reading possible, shifting the epic from the male perspective to the female one. Revision according to Adrienne Rich is "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 " (qtd in

Greene, Gayle 1).

However, traditional interpretations of *The Mahabharatha* have

predominantly centred around dominant narratives that reinforce patriarchal,

caste-based, and heteronormative perspectives. The voices and experiences of

subaltern groups, including women, lower castes, and queer individuals, have been

marginalized. Acknowledging the limitations of these dominant narratives, there

arises a growing necessity to reassess and reinterpret *The Mahabharatha* through

subaltern, feminist, and queer perspectives. The subaltern perspective concentrates

on the experiences of marginalized communities, shedding light on their struggles,

agency, and resistance against social, economic, and political oppression. The

feminist perspective endeavours to challenge patriarchal norms, explore gender

dynamics, and foreground women's perspectives. Similarly, the queer perspective

disrupts heteronormativity, explores non-binary identities, and examines

alternative sexualities portrayed within the epic. By examining *The*

Mahabharatha through these lenses, an opportunity arises to unveil hidden

narratives, subversive elements, and alternative interpretations suppressed or

disregarded in traditional readings. This facilitates the amplification of subaltern

voices, challenges prevailing power structures, and fosters a more inclusive and

diverse comprehension of the epic. This also provides an understanding of *The*

Mahabharatha as a hybrid narrative and helps to unveil the intersecting

experiences of subaltern, feminist, and queer identities within the context of *The Mahabharatha*. They highlight the complex realities of individuals who embody multiple marginalized identities, such as Dalit women, queer characters, and transgender individuals.

The significance of exploring contemporary retellings from subaltern, feminist, and queer perspectives lies in their potential to foster social change and empowerment. These retellings offer a platform for marginalized communities to reclaim their narratives, challenge oppressive systems, and articulate their identities and experiences. By granting voice to these communities, the retellings contribute to broader discussions on social justice, equality, and representation. This exploration aligns with ongoing debates and movements about intersectionality, diversity, and inclusivity within literature and society. It broadens the possibilities for a deep understanding of the *The Mahabharatha*, encouraging readers to critically engage with the text, question established norms, and embrace alternative narratives. The exploration of contemporary retellings from these perspectives bears the potential for social change, empowerment, and the creation of more equitable narratives.

The research thesis titled "Traversing the Boundaries: Redefining Subaltern Identities in Modern Renditions of *The Mahabharatha* " critically examines the concept of subalternity within the context of class, caste, gender, and sexuality as portrayed in contemporary retellings of the *The Mahabharatha*. The primary

objective of this thesis is to explore how these retellings effectively challenge established power dynamics, both in traditional and modern ways. By adopting subaltern, feminist, and queer perspectives, the research aims to investigate the transformative potential of these alternative viewpoints in the realm of Indian mythological retellings. The thesis intends to shed light on how these narratives confront dominant discourses, deconstruct prevailing power structures, and amplify the voices of marginalized communities. Through a comprehensive analysis, it will demonstrate how these contemporary retellings offer alternative interpretations, disrupt gender norms, and subvert caste hierarchies. They strive to promote inclusivity and diversity within the literary landscape, fostering an environment that celebrates the multifaceted identities of individuals traditionally marginalized.

The primary objective of this thesis is to examine how these retellings represent marginalized communities and deconstruct dominant narratives prevalent in Indian mythology and subvert the power paradigms. By undertaking this analysis, the study intends to uncover the shared themes, tensions, and dialogues within these retellings. The research seeks to evaluate the contributions of these retellings in challenging existing power structures, reshaping character portrayals and relationships, and fostering inclusivity and diversity within the broader literary landscape. This perspective highlights the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression and the need to address them collectively within the

analysis of mythological retellings. It emphasizes that an inclusive understanding must encompass multiple dimensions of marginalization, recognizing the complex and intersecting identities of individuals within these communities.

The research aims to adopt various methodologies and approaches to conduct the analysis and to arrive at the findings. Within this research, a rigorous textual analysis will be conducted on three selected contemporary retellings of *The Mahabharatha* : *Until the Lions*, *Bride of the Forest, and The Pregnant King.* Through this research, these retellings are closely examined to identify recurring themes, narrative strategies, the representation of the epic in terms of class and caste, feminist, and queer perspectives and also the intersectionality of these experiences. This approach allows to delve beyond surface-level interpretations and examine the intricate layers of meaning embedded within the retellings. Various textual elements and techniques employed by the authors will be analysed, and subalternity on various levels and their challenges will be uncovered. A thematic analysis on the select retellings will be conducted to identify these underlying themes, and a deeper understanding can be gained regarding how the authors engage with and reinterpret the original *The Mahabharatha*. The research also aims to uncover the intersectionality of subalternity which many characters experience in *The Mahabharatha.*

To provide analytical lenses for interpreting the retellings, this research will employ theoretical frameworks such as the subaltern theory, feminist theory, queer

theory and also the theory of intersectionality. Feminist revisionist mythology will frame the background of the thesis. Subaltern studies focuses on the experiences of marginalized groups and their agency in challenging oppressive structures. Feminist theory aims to challenge patriarchal norms and explore gender dynamics. Queer theory examines alternative sexualities and disrupts heteronormativity. This methodological approach enables the researcher to analyse the intricate intersections of subaltern, feminist, and queer perspectives within the retellings, as well as their collective ability to challenge and disrupt dominant narratives ingrained within Indian mythology. Focusing on all three texts, the theory of intersectionality connects the intersecting experiences of subaltern, feminist, and queer identities within the context of *The Mahabharatha*. The analysis focus on characters who encapsulate a range of marginalized identities, including Dalit women, queer persons, and transgender figures. The discoveries shed light on the subtle complexities of these characters and their pivotal contributions in challenging established power dynamics. By engaging with these perspectives, the analysis strives to foster a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of Indian mythology, acknowledging the diverse and multifaceted nature of its narratives. Applying postcolonial theory in the perspective of subaltern to these retellings allows us to critically examine how they address the impacts of colonialism, cultural appropriation, and power dynamics. Within the context of these retellings, the influence of hegemonic discourses will be considered, as well as how they reclaim and reinterpret *The Mahabharatha* within a subaltern

framework. This analysis sheds light on how the retellings engage with and challenge the legacies of colonialism, offering alternative narratives of the subaltern that disrupt and subvert dominant power structures.

The three texts selected for the study include the contemporary retellings of *The Mahabharatha*: *Until the Lions : Echoes from the Mahabharatha* by Karthika Nair, *Bride of the Forest* by Madhavi. S. Mahadevan and *The Pregnant King* by Devadutt Pattanaik. These texts adopt a revisionist myth making approach while reinterpreting *The Mahabharatha* from the subaltern viewpoint. Karthika Nair, a multi-talented artist based in Paris, Kerala-born, has established herself as a noteworthy author, poet, curator and, dance producer. Her literary endeavours include the publication of the critically acclaimed poetry collection *Bearings*. Before embarking on her creative journey, Nair initially pursued a career as a journalist. However, her passion for the arts led her to France in 2000, where she immersed herself in the study of art management. In her innovative masterpiece *Until the Lions*, Nair undertakes the reimagining of the timeless epic, *The Mahabharatha*, through an experimental lens. She tries to portray the "downtrodden of history" of those silenced by giving voice to those characters , whose stories have been overlooked and marginalized.

Drawing inspiration from an insightful African proverb, "Until the lions get their own historians, tales of the hunt will always glorify the hunters," Nair aptly chose the title of her book. Through her poetic exploration, she endeavours to

profoundly examine power dynamics, examining it from the vantage point of those who are deprived of it – primarily the women within *the Mahabharatha*. Nair skilfully weaves together the narratives of nineteen voices, including significant characters such as Gandhari, the devoted wife of Drithrashtra and mother to the hundred Kauravas, the unnamed mother of Drithrashtra's half-brother Vidura whom she names Poorna, Mohini, the female incarnation of Krishna, and even Shunaka, a loyal and perceptive dog. Nair amplifies the voices of the marginalized and seeks to challenge the power dynamics entrenched within the *The Mahabharatha*. The text is selected for the study to explore the voice of the subaltern in terms of class, caste and gender.

The second novel chosen for the study is *Bride of the Forest* by Madhavi. S. Mahadevan. She is a versatile and accomplished editor, writer, book critic and translator who has made significant contributions in various literary domains. With a diverse repertoire ranging from children's books to adult fiction, she has garnered recognition for her exceptional storytelling skills. Her literary works encompass two collections of short stories for adults, namely *Doppelganger* and *Paltan Tales* and an e-novella titled *Swansong*. Her debut novel, *The Kaunteyas*, stands out as a remarkable retelling of the *The Mahabharatha*, providing a fresh perspective through the voice of Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas. Mahadevan's writing prowess extends to captivating fiction crafted specifically for children.

In recognition of her literary accomplishments, Mahadevan received the esteemed AutHer Award 2021 in the Best Author Fiction category. Her dedication to the craft is evident in her commitment to conducting workshops, where she generously shares her knowledge and expertise with aspiring writers. Through her blog, she aims to forge global connections between short stories and writers from diverse backgrounds, expanding their reach to an international audience. Residing in Bangalore, Mahadevan has become an integral part of the literary landscape, contributing through her multifaceted roles as a writer, editor, translator, and book critic.

Mahadevan's latest work, *Bride of the Forest*, published by Speaking Tiger, serves as a bridge between past and present, offering insights into the evolution and continuity of cultural practices. This novel explores the ancient concept of surrogate motherhood, highlighting its existence throughout history. Through her protagonist, Mahadevan weaves a tapestry that connects her identity with other women from epics and legends. She draws attention to the challenges faced by mortal women in epics, even those of royal status, emphasizing that empowerment does not necessarily guarantee a "happily ever after" outcome. By delving into the myth of Drishadvati, a tale of surrogacy found in the *The Mahabharatha*, Mahadevan invites readers to contemplate its cultural significance. The novel portrays the story of a young girl whose fertility is repeatedly bartered for

priceless horses, and it questions the position of women in ancient and contemporary society from a feminist perspective.

In *Bride of the Forest*, Mahadevan presents a fresh perspective on this ancient tale, reframing it as a story of a girl who defies patriarchal norms and ultimately rejects exploitation. Remaining faithful to the original myths and deeply rooted in the world of the *The Mahabharatha*, the novel brings forth a vibrant cast of characters, including Garuda, the divine bird, and proud kings, queens, and their intricately connected relationships. Amidst traditional rivalries, the novel explores the timeless conflict between the asuras and the devas, which manifests as the enduring male pursuit of immortality and, in modern times, as the desire for sons that underlies commercial surrogacy. However, at the heart of the narrative lies the story of Drishadvati, her sacrifices, and her remarkable nobility, captivating and enchanting readers. This thesis critically examines the exceptional literary contributions of Madhavi S. Mahadevan, a highly skilled and versatile writer. By analyzing her thought-provoking approach to surrogacy in *Bride of the Forest*, this thesis seeks to shed light on her significant contributions to the literary landscape, positioning her as a prominent figure in contemporary literature.

The third novel chosen for the study of *The Mahabharatha* from a queer perspective is *The Pregnant King* written by Devadutt Pattanaik . Devdutt Pattanaik, a distinguished mythologist ,leadership consultant, and author embarked on a unique career path after transitioning from his medical background to become

a consultant in leadership and mythology. Serving as the Chief Belief Officer at Future Group in Mumbai, Pattanaik specializes in utilizing the power of myth to provide insights into employee dynamics, company culture, and customer behaviour. His groundbreaking work in incorporating Indian mythology into the realm of business, particularly in the domain of human resource management, has garnered widespread recognition. Pattanaik's expertise extends beyond the corporate sphere, as he is also a storytelling consultant for Star TV and Epic TV, and serves as an advisor to popular shows like *Devon ke Dev Mahadev* and *Mahabharat*. His distinctive and accessible perspectives on leadership, management, and governance have made him a sought-after speaker, lecturer, and consultant for numerous corporate entities.

Since assuming the role of Chief Belief Officer at Future Group in 2008, Pattanaik helped to bridge the worlds of mythology and management. In addition to his work at Future Group, he serves as a leadership coach and inspirational speaker for various organizations. He writes and delivers lectures extensively on the significance of mythology in leadership, entrepreneurship, branding, management, and governance. He also contributes a column called "Management Mythos" to the Economic Times, where he skilfully juxtaposes mythological narratives with modern leadership challenges.

With a remarkable literary output, Devdutt Pattanaik has contributed prolifically to the field of sacred narratives, symbols, and rituals in contemporary

society, with a remarkable repertoire of over 1000 articles and over 50 books. His insightful works explore the enduring significance of these timeless elements. His writings have been translated into various languages, including Marathi, Kannada, Hindi, Malayalam, Tamil, Gujarati, Telugu, and internationally recognized languages. His notable publications include *'Business Sutra: A Very Indian Approach to Management,' '7 Secrets of Shiva,' '7 Secrets of Vishnu,' 'A Handbook of Hindu Mythology,' 'Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana,'* and *'Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the The Mahabharatha*.' From his background in medicine to his pivotal role as the Chief Belief Officer at Future Group, Pattanaik has successfully integrated mythological wisdom into the realm of business. His unique perspectives, extensive research, and engaging storytelling have positioned him as a revered speaker, author, and consultant in various corporate and cultural spheres.

Devdutt Pattanaik has significantly contributed to the realm of contemporary mythological retellings, effectively bridging the gap between ancient myths and contemporary India. Through his extensive body of work, he has played a pivotal role in making mythology more accessible to a wider audience. His profound insights and engaging storytelling techniques have provided a fresh perspective on ancient narratives, enabling a deeper understanding and appreciation of these timeless tales within the context of modern Indian society. This thesis critically analyzes Devdutt Pattanaik's novel,

The Pregnant King, which presents a unique retelling of the *The Mahabharatha* from a queer perspective. Through an examination of the novel's themes, characters, and narrative structure, this research explores the transformative impact of *The Pregnant King* in bringing forth marginalized perspectives and promoting inclusivity within the mainstream consciousness. The thesis aims to offer fresh insights into Pattanaik's contribution to mythological discourse, uncovering the intricate interplay between ancient narratives and contemporary understandings of gender and sexuality.

The thesis consists of seven chapters, each examining the *The Mahabharatha* from a unique perspective and employing various theoretical frameworks. Chapter one serves as the introduction, establishing the significance of mythology in society and comprehensively analyzing mythologies worldwide. It specifically explores the relevance of the *Ramayana* and *The Mahabharatha* within Indian society. Additionally, this chapter reviews contemporary retellings of *The Mahabharatha*, presents the theoretical framework that underpins the thesis, includes biographical information on the selected authors, and delineates the research. An introduction to the research methodology and theories, research framework, objectives, introduction to the chosen authors are also given. Ideas and studies conducted by scholars and theoreticians like Bronislaw Malinowsky, Alan Swingewood, Stuart Hall, Terry Eagleton and so on are used in the introductory chapter.

Chapter two delves into a subaltern perspective of the *Mahabharatha,* drawing on the analysis of nineteen subaltern voices as presented in Karthika Nair's work, *Until the Lions:Echoes from Mahabharatha*. This chapter critically examines the subaltern viewpoints within the epic and explores their significance in shaping the narrative. It questions the dominant perspectives and plea for inclusiveness. While examining the subaltern perspective, studies conducted by writers like Karen.L.Thornber, Antonio Gramci, Ranajith Guha, Wendi Doniger, Romila Thaper, James Fitzgerald, Carl Jung, Michel Foucault and so on finds proper representation in the thesis. In Chapter three, *The Mahabharatha* is analyzed through a feminist lens, focusing on Madhavi S. Mahadevan's *Bride of the Forest*. This chapter highlights the story of Drishadvati, an often underrated yet powerful female character in the *The Mahabharatha*. Drishadvati was compelled to offer her womb in exchange for horses, a depiction that addresses various forms of subjugation experienced by women in a patriarchal society. The feminist analysis illuminates the challenges and agency that women grapple with within the epic's narrative. This chapter critically examines the patriarchal norms through a feminist lens and seeks to challenge the prevailing system of oppression by utilizing mythological contexts. The chapter also tries to subvert the existing patriarchal paradigms and shows a powerful side of women characters of *The Mahabharatha.* For the analysis from the feminist perspective, references from the works of Kelvin Mc Grath, Alf Hiltebeitel, Judith Butler, Alicia Ostriker, Susan Sellers and so on are taken.

Chapter four applies a queer perspective to the interpretation of *The Mahabharatha*, utilizing Devdutt Pattanaik's book *The Pregnant King* as the primary text. The chapter examines how the narrative can be reimagined through a queer lens, challenging traditional gender norms and expanding the understanding of diverse identities within the epic. This chapter accentuates the transformation experienced by Hindu mythology, which originally encompassed all genders, during the colonial era. It underscores the significance of embracing inclusivity in contemporary times. Writers like Tamara Loos, Amara Das Wilheim, Judith Butler, Julian Todd Weiss, Michel Foucault and their works serves as a background for the analysis. Chapter Five explores the concept of intersectionality within *The Mahabharatha*, examining the overlapping experiences of subaltern, feminist, and queer identities. This chapter delves into the complex realities faced by individuals embodying multiple marginalized identities, such as Dalit women, queer characters, and transgender individuals. It also explores *The Mahabharatha* as a hybrid narrative, incorporating various perspectives and identities. Scholars and theoreticians like Kimberly Crenshaw, Vivian May, Patricia Hill Collins, Maylei Blackwell, Anna Carastathis, Ange Marie Hancock are mentioned and their works are cited for the background study.

This thesis employs diverse theoretical frameworks and examines *The Mahabharatha* through subaltern, feminist, queer and intersectional perspectives. It highlights the voices of marginalized individuals within the epic and explores

the intersectionality of their experiences. By incorporating contemporary retellings and analyzing specific texts, this thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics at play in *The Mahabharatha* and its significance in contemporary society.

Chapter 2

The Saga of the Hunted: A Subaltern Reading of *Until The Lions*

India is one of the oldest civilizations that has preserved its mythology till modern times. Man's relationship to the transcendent is affirmed by the mythical past. Through myths we try to rediscover the past to adapt it to the present and preserve it for the future. In modern times Indian fiction aims to be socially conscious to find place in common man's life. Attempts are made for the deployment of myths so it can clearly articulate the complex nature of human life. Bronislaw Malinowski, Polish-British anthropologist, proposed a functionalist approach to studying myths that emphasizes understanding the society that produces these stories and how they function within that society. While proposing the functionalist theory of myths Malinowski opines that religious myths arise to underpin and strengthen the societal structure of a culture. These narratives serve to uphold the prevailing power dynamics within a society and legitimize the designated roles aligned with each societal iteration. Myths function as vehicles for expressing, amplifying, and formalizing beliefs. Modern mythological reinterpretation supports this social function of myths proposed by Malinowski. A total reimaging, re arguing and reframing of the mythological texts are done so as to fit to the contemporary mould of Indian fiction and to confirm to the new social order proposed by the modern society. A closer view of these works will reveal the fact that it is an attempt to look at nature, society and relationships from a fresh

and radical viewpoint. Instead of focusing on the content of myths, Malinowski

suggests studying the social context in which these traditional stories are told, such

as when and under what circumstances they are shared. He argues that

distinguishing myths from other genres like legends or fairy tales is challenging

and proposes that their classification should be based on observing their social

usage. To identify a story as a myth, one must analyze its social context through

observation or direct questioning of native informants.

The ancient varna system of dividing the society into the Brahmanas, The

Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas and the Sudras was the base of establishing a social order

and helped in maintaining the undeniable hegemony of the upper class society.

This system of marked the division of society based on class, caste, colour,

gender, occupation and economic status. From the Vedic period the power

structure and social hierarchy followed this division .Through constant

interpellation and negotiations, the people who belong to each class peacefully

reconciles with their positions without questioning it. Mixing spirituality with

varna system cements its unquestionable authority in the society. Brahmanas

claimed their supreme authority in the society by maintaining their pure position

as God's advocates. In *The Mahabharatha* one can find that the varna system is

defended and many characters are subdued and silenced based on this .The

privileged upper class constantly negotiate and establish power over the lower

class people. Thus dominance over the underprivileged became a part of the social

order. British Sociologist Alan Swingewood remarks in his book *The Myth of Mass Culture*, " The dominant culture is a tool of domination and control, a means of mystification and legitimization which obscures the real social relations that lie beneath it"(Swingewood 57).

The contemporary retellings of *The Mahabharatha* unravel the unheard stories of rebellion put forward by these subaltern people and give voice to the voiceless in the pursuit of reestablishing their identity in the modern society. The post-colonial period encouraged the rise of a popular culture to subvert this power discourse of dominant culture. In his famous essay 'Notes on Reconstructing the Popular" British sociologist Stuart Hall remarks, "Popular culture is a form of resistance precisely because it is the culture of those who are oppressed, exploited and dominated within the dominant culture"(Hall 236).

Mythological retellings thus become a part of popular culture which propagates the dominant ideologies of contemporary times to ensure the process of interpellation that benefits the contemporary world. *The Mahabharatha* too supported the varna system of the Vedic times ensuring the supremacy of Brahmins over other classes, maintained the division of labour according to the class system, marginalized the subalterns based on their gender, caste and colour. The epic also served as an instrument of interpellation to establish the power of the dominant class. Varna system became a key factor in determining the power structure of the society and it became the base of the distribution of knowledge

and labour. *The Mahabharatha* too follows this social order and the characters who violate these strict moral and ethical codes are defeated, cursed or punished in the story. A close reading of *The Mahabharatha* reveals that in the name of dharma several characters are denied justice. Despite their bravery, goodness and generosity, they were denied justice because of their subaltern status. Though on the periphery *The Mahabharatha* is the game of throne between the Pandavas and Kauravas, the epic can also be seen as a story of the class struggle prevalent in the Vedic times. Several instances of inter class struggle and intra class struggle are presented throughout the story.

The contemporary retellings of *The Mahabharatha* also portrays the power struggle but with a paradigm shift. Now , the focus is on the voiceless and the marginalized . The epic remains the same but the perspective is subverted to the subaltern. The original text portrayed the power struggle from the viewpoint of the dominant class and it echoed the sentiments of people who controlled the hegemony and power. Hence many atrocities and injustices committed to the marginalized are justified or neglected in the epic. Famous literary critic Terry Eagleton, a prominent literary theorist, in his work *Marxism and Literary Criticism* opines that "Myth serves to justify the dominant ideology of a society, whether that ideology is capitalism, socialism, nationalism, or something else"(Eagleton 37).

When the society changes, myth also changes. Myth is like the anima mundi of the society. Anima mundi represents the concept of a universal soul or spirit that is inherent in all living things and the entire natural world. The idea of *anima mundi* has been a significant concept in various philosophical, religious, and spiritual traditions. Referring to myth as the anima mundi of society suggests viewing myth in a metaphorical sense as the soul or animating force that permeates and unites the collective consciousness of a community or culture. Like the soul of an individual in constant conflict with his outer world, myth shows the conflict between the individual and the society, that between the powerful and the powerless, that between the centre and the periphery. *The Mahabharatha* can also be seen as a testimony of the social codes during the Aryan times and it shows how each class maintains its position in the society strictly adhering to social code of conduct. Even mighty kings follow this code of conduct and several instances from the epic reveals how each class of people including the Brahminical upper class is victimised by this power structure. Though one can see several instances where their rights are denied and are exploited, those acts are justified in the original text using the law of karma or dharma. But in the contemporary retellings these stories are not justified, instead they get a powerful reinterpretation through the words of the subaltern.

According to Karen L. Thornber, Professor of East Asian Languages and Civilizations at Harvard, "Retelling the stories of the subaltern is a crucial act of

mythmaking, a way of resisting dominant narratives and revealing the struggles and experiences of those who have been silenced or marginalized by them"(Thornber 8).

This thesis aims to unearth the possibilities of a Subaltern reading of *The Mahabharatha* and tries to explore the subaltern perspective of the work. The subaltern characters of *The Mahabharatha* portray people, who are doubly marginalized and oppressed, and inferior due to their caste or race or gender. They are the victims of racism or caste system and had to face sexism which nails their inferior positions compared to other characters. Despite their social status they are treated as inferior. The word 'Subaltern' denotes an inferior military rank, it is more generally used as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian Society' often expressed in terms of caste and gender as it is being acquired at birth and is non-changeable. The term subaltern was first coined by Antonio Gramci, and later it was adapted by Ranajith Guha. But the term was popularized through the publication of Gayathri Chakraborty Spivak's essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak". Subaltern is a group of inferior people who contribute nothing to the society and therefore are categorized as voiceless. According to Wendi Doniger, "Retellings of the The Mahabharatha can highlight aspects of the story that are marginalized or silenced in other versions, and can give voice to perspectives that have been excluded or underrepresented" (Doniger 790). She further states , "the text of Mahabharatha is so extremely fluid" and "there is no

single Mahabharatha; there are hundreds of Mahabharathas, hundreds of different manuscripts and innumerable oral versions" (263). The chapter titled , *The Saga of the Hunted: A Subaltern Reading of Until The Lions*, focuses on the poetic fiction of *The Mahabharatha, Until the Lions,* written by Karthika Nair. *Until the Lions* is a poetic tour de force which is a collection of nineteen dramatic monologues rendered by nineteen subaltern characters of the story. This text attempts to rewrite the mythological text around characters marginalized and presents the epic from their subaltern perspective. David Shulman ,in his article "The Widows' Laments " published in *The New York Review* comments:

> Karthika Nair has given us the most eloquent meditation on *The Mahabharatha* in this generation – a lyrical, unflinching exploration of the souls embodied in many of the great epic characters, a moving and intricate weaving together of their destinies and desires……a profound lament for the suffering that all human beings must know. (Shulman)

The voiceless characters of *The Mahabharatha*, like the slaves, sages, peasants, nameless warriors, abducted princesses, tribal queens, gender shifting god and even some newly invented characters like wolves, appears in the book to describe their experiences. Their destinies have been intricately woven together in the great epic and each of these gendered subaltern identities tells their tale which gives the epic a new shade of meaning. The narratives of the great epic are analyzed from the subaltern perspective to present and to critique the

contemporary social realities from a mythical view point. Through a subaltern

lens, the characters are analyzed and their identities are unraveled. The modern

retellings present the story of these gendered subalterns in a new perspective and

they regain their lost voices. They are portrayed as empowered characters ready to

tell their own tales in *the Mahabharatha*. Despite her upper class upbringing, in a

Nair community, Karthika Nair takes a de-classing choice to portray the story of

these subaltern characters.

Sharanya Manivannan, the writer and performer says in her article

published in *The Hindu* "The Mahabharatha Reimagined" says,

Karthika Nair's retelling of the The Mahabharatha is a stunning and

profound meditation on the complexities of human nature, weaving

together the destinies and desires of its characters in a lyrical and

unflinching exploration of the human soul. Through her haunting prose,

Nair gives voice to the many forgotten and silenced perspectives of the

epic, offering a deeply moving and poignant lament for the inevitable

suffering of all living beings. (Manivannan)

Powerful retelling of *The Mahabharatha*, '*Until the Lions*', begins with the

voice of Padavit – the foot soldiers who faced the greatest casuality in *The*

Mahabharatha. Their lives have absolutely no value and they were made to

believe that a casteless, classless paradise is waiting for them is they attain

martyrdom, and they will be freed from the burden of birth, death and rebirth.

These foot soldiers were people from the lower class society who were doubly

oppressed. They were living like foreigners in their own land. They were denied

justice and equality. So through martyrdom they hope to attain their rights. The

father tells his son: "Think if even the pariah, Mahar and Shanar, chamar and

chandal, Dhobi, Bhangi, they whose shades taint the land, so the scholars also

swear – can attain a casteless paradise "(Nair 7).

These lower caste people desperately long for equality in the society. They

were treated with contempt as their shadows were believed to taint the land.

Throughout their lives, justice was denied to them. But in the land of

Kurukshetra, finally, all section of the society – Kings, princes, warriors –

everyone comes to seek their won justice. These untouchable soldiers, who would

sacrifice their lives for their kings, also seek justice. The father of the soldier

never hopes and he says: "Good will fight evil, the elders predict, and new gods

will appear. Dark skinned beings, perhaps like you and I, perhaps – just think – a

lowborn one?" (Nair 12). The hope of having a new God echoes how deeply the

varna system combined with spirituality subjugated these subalterns . They were

'impure beings' who have no access to anything that is good in the society.

The famous Indian historian Romila Thapar observes that :

The shudras were, as it were, the excluded category of the Vedic social system. They were manual workers who, according to the rules of the system, could not have access to the more refined knowledge and learning of the upper castes. They were also denied the right to possess property, their movements were restricted, they could not worship the gods or enter temples, and they were subjected to various forms of economic and social discrimination. (Thapar 109)

To these Dalit people, the battle field of Kurukshetra is much better than the constant battle field of inequality the face every day in the society. For them, the battle field of Kurukshetra is the only place on earth where they could find equality. The fear of death is equal for everyone there, despite their caste. Otherwise, they are mere Dalits who are impure, inferior and uncivilized. Karthika Nair, has tried to voice the agony of the voiceless and portray the urgency of representation without being caught in the preconceived notions of elitism. The father of the soldier expresses his wish to breath air of equality and honour even if he must sacrifice his life and says:

To breath, I grab on to

this grail of noble war that could

confer honour – and flight, can it

be? – to my blood (Nair 12).

The close reading of the great epic can reveal powerful Dalit characters that by their wisdom and calculated moves have changed the destiny of many kingdoms. Many of the recent retellings of *The Mahabharatha* give special focus on the issues of marginalization and how those characters empower themselves in course of time. *The Mahabharatha* has several female characters who are wise and uses their femininity and sexuality to come out of their outcast status. James Fitzgerald opines that *The Mahabharatha* can be called "the Veda of women and Sudras" (Fitzgerald 185) and thus today it is also the narration of the voiceless. The epic presents such complex characters like the 'Panch Kanya' – Ahalya , Draupadi, Kunti, Tara, and Mandodari – who represent two important questions which society asks to a woman – about their morality and femininity. All these women combined the Anima and Animus as proposed by Carl Gustav Jung. He says:

> The anima represents the feminine aspects of the male psyche, eg; gentleness, tenderness, patience, receptiveness, closeness to nature, readiness to forgive….the Animus is the male side of the female psyche : assertiveness, the will to control and take charge, fighting spirit (qtd in Bhattacharya 20-21).

By representing revolutionary characters like Panch Kanyas, *The Mahabharatha* talks about the immense potential of these marginalized characters to come to the center and be powerful. Subaltern characters like Satyavati, portray

this ability which lies in each woman to redefine constrains imposed by the society and regain their position as partakes of general culture. Karthika Nair, through her book *Until the Lions* reaffirms the socialist function of myths in the society. The retellings of these mythological texts serve as the 'axis mundi' from which all social changes arise. That *The Mahabharatha* was composed by the Subaltern sage Ved Vyasa itself is an example of the epic's relevance in revolutionizing the modern society.

After the father of Padavit, the author presents the voice of one of the most powerful woman of *The Mahabharatha* – Satyavati. She belongs to a lower caste fisher folk of the Nishada race. In her character, one can find a strange combination of empowerment and marginalization. She cunningly uses her sexuality to intrude into the Brahmanical upper class. When sage Parasara approaches her with a coitus demand, she carefully manipulates his uncontrollable manly desires to get over her status of lower caste as well as the curse of foul smells which she which she had till then. Sage Parasara immediately succumbs to all her demands and from there, the history of Kuru dynasty was rewritten as a Subaltern Saga. Satyavati gave the sage physical pleasures and a son, but got the elixir of youth and beauty, got rid of her foul smell and got back her virginity. That was the first step to get over the social exclusion she faced. When sexually exploited by a brahmin , she cunningly uses his weakness to make her position

strong in the society. Satyavati knew make her moves carefully, "To rule a man, and his land, you need to learn just how much to give and withhold" (Nair 25).

In *The Mahabharatha*, interclass and intra class struggle continuously maintains the power structure. Those outside the structure like slaves, nishadas, rakshasas are seen marginalized without giving them any choice of resistance. But only a few characters dare to step outside the power boundaries and Satyavati, the fisher queen is that subaltern who changes the destiny of kuru clan. In *The Mahabharatha*, most women characters including queen Draupadi is exploited and marginalized by the power system . But Satyavati is one of the strong woman characters who seems powerful. Satyavati waited to push her pawn at the right time and when King Shantanu of Hastinapur got enamored by her beauty and offered her the position of a queen in his palace, she made the right demand. She not only wanted to empower herself, but also to lift the curse of subalternity from her future generations too. This subversion of power was initiated by her father who was the fisher king. Though he was a fisher king , he had the confidence to bargain with the king Shantanu and his son Devavruta when Shantanu asked for his consent to marry his daughter. He didn't consider himself any less to the real king and he refuses the kings request and says, "I do not care for wealth, power or position. All I care about is the welfare of my daughter and her future children "(Ganguli1: Adi218).

Satyavati wanted her sons to be the future rulers of Hastinapura. Sensing his father's un quenching lust and devotion to Satyavati, Devavrata comes to meet her and orders her to marry his father. However, Satyavati along with her father was adamant and their calculative minds make another clever move and challenges Devavrata to prove his love towards his father by giving up his right to the throne of Hastinapura. The moment she makes this demand, the future history of Hastinapura is rewritten as a Subaltern story. The dark skinned, foul smelling subaltern fisher woman is raised to the position of power.

Jayatri Ghosh , in the work "Satyavati: The Matriarch of the *The Mahabharatha*" , observes that "Satyavati's life was marked by a series of negotiations, in which she sought to assert her own desires and interests within a patriarchal system that sought to deny her agency and autonomy" (Ghosh 34). Satyavati was not satisfied with Devavrutha's abdication and again demands her celibacy to avoid any future threat to her children. Thus *Until the Lions* tries to unravel the saga of glorious Satyavati and how she rises from her doubly oppressed state of subalternity to that of the level of glorious matriarch and the queen of Hastinapura. Even though Shantanu is the king , neither he nor his son denies the demand of Satyavati and that is another example of her undeniable power over them. She carefully uses her sexuality and feminine charm to change the destiny of her subaltern Nishada tribe and this retelling of *The Mahabharatha*,

Until the Lions echoes the socialist function of myths to evoke a change in the society.

As quoted by Manash Firaq Bhattacharjee, poet, writer, and political science scholar from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, in his review in Guernica magazine says:

> Karthika Nair's *Until The Lions* (from an African proverb, quoted by Chinua Achebe, in a 1994 interview with the Paris Review, that "until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter") responds to that mighty question with mighty skill as she lets loose her lions upon us. Nair plays conduit to her lions, the women of the tale, roaring to tell us what those who authored and controlled their lives denied them and how they gave them a raw deal. (Bhattacharjee)

Karthika Nair, while introducing the queer subaltern character Amba or Shikandi asks the relevant question which is the root cause of marginalization that a woman face, "Why do Kings and law makers regents sons – the whole bloody race – never think with their heads, just ask a woman what she wants"(Nair 34). Satyavati's game for the throne of Hastinapura does not end with her marriage to Shanthanu. When she loses her son Chitrangada, she seeks alliance from the kingdom of Kasi very powerful at that time. She knew that the three beautiful daughters of the king of Kasi, Amba, Ambika and Ambalika – will not choose

Vichitravirya who is not so smart, as their husband. She seeks the help of her stepson Bheeshma and orders him to abduct those girls. Following her command, he abducts them on their wedding day. The elder one wanted to marry Shalva of Saubala. So she refuses to marry Vichitravirya. Satyavati asks Bheeshma to send her back to Shalva. But Shalva rejects her as she was stolen and seized by Bheeshma. Shalva returns her to Bheeshma. Bheeshma too rejected her as he was bound by his word to Satyavati about his celibacy. Being rejected by both men, Amba, was deeply wounded and she felt that in that palace of Hasthinapura, -'how anile oaths outweigh breathing woman' (Nair 40). Bheeshma was more concerned about his own integrity and social status and the honour of his family and in the effort to do what is right, he ended up in doing wrong to Amba for which later he had to pay with his own life.

Amba was ruthlessly rejected and she was advised to return to her country. But she was convinced that Bheeshma caused her sufferings and wanted to take revenge on him. She went to the forest and observed extreme rituals to please Lord Shiva. Eventually Lord Shiva was pleased and she was given the boon that she would play a vital role in the death of Bheeshma. In the extreme desire to quench the burning vengeance inside her soul, Amba killed herself to speed up the process. She was reborn as the daughter of King Drupada. As per the blessings of Mahadeva, she was reborn with the memory of her previous birth, and she was dissatisfied with her woman form in the new birth too. She feels that her new life

as a female will again be an impediment in her goal of vengeance, "…my shade;

stood baying beseeching, craving freedom from this faultless, futile woman's

form, and seeking another – minted, invincible – self, a self that slays " (Nair 41).

Shikandi was reborn as man with the help of an Yaksha and with the new

form he feels that he could achieve victory over the majestic Bheeshma because he

knew that in this world of marginalization man always has an upper hand. That

was the moment of triumph when he could kill the old self which defeated him a

thousand times. "This self, the pyre I wore for long years, then blazed as only

death stars should …."(Nair 42). Shikandi thus rises to a respectable position of a

man, a warrior. It was the fire of unworthiness, unhappiness, burning inside the

body as a woman, throughout his life. He feels extreme relief and happy after

adopting the life of a man. "I scour softness, scrub grace from the skin till what

glows is pure steel; unfurl my woman and fly it…then peel and burn the breast"

(Nair 43).

Dr. Satya P. Mohanty in the work *The Subaltern and the Epic: The The*

Mahabharatha in Literary and Cultural Criticism observes that Shikhandi

undergoes a profound metamorphosis that extends beyond the physical realm,

encompassing intricate shifts in both societal expectations and psychological

dynamics. Navigating the intricate and oppressive gender roles embedded in his

society becomes an integral aspect of this transformation. Shikandi could satisfy

her burning vengeance by killing his arch enemy Bheeshma. This victory of

Shikhandi ,a queer and so marginalized – is the victory of the subaltern over the upper class. The fire of vengeance burning inside her is the fire in each subaltern for recognition, respect and acceptance from the society. Her transformation as a man Shikhandi's real war against patriarchy that has denied her respect, justice and agency. The retellings of *The Mahabharatha* talk about the rise of subaltern and the recognition they achieved from the society. Shikhandi is one of the powerful subaltern voices in The *The Mahabharatha* as she fights twice with the system -one as Amba , the powerful woman who sacrifices her life in fire to fight against the injustices of the patriarchy towards a woman , another as Shikhandi who again fights with the system to make his queer position a respectful one by killing the mighty Bheeshma.

Karthika Nair invented the character Shunaka, an independent and free spirited…. to expose the falsities of human race. Born out of author's imagination, Shunaka comments on the false practices of Brahmanical upper class society and how justice is denied to the subaltern. The animal forms related to epics are often considered as having supernatural powers . In the Iliad, the gods frequently take on animal forms and interact with the human characters. For example, Zeus transforms into a golden eagle to signal his support for the Trojans, while Athena becomes a vulture to inspire the Greeks in battle. These animal forms are presented as a contrast to the mortal characters subject to weakness, mortality, and moral ambiguity. The animals that speak in myths highlights the importance of

intellectual and spiritual inquiry, and serves as a reminder that wisdom can come from unexpected sources. Similarly here, Shunaka is intelligent and it warns his kin to be careful about the human race as they do injustice to their own kind. He is proud of the equality and justice that prevailed among his kind. He says, " We take no master, We claim no terrain. But men kill and kill again, scorch the rivers, rape the earth and deluge jungles with death all to prove manhood " (Nair 47).

Shunaka rebukes human kind for this insensitive and treacherous nature. He wonders how insensitively Pandavas used the Nishada family to escape from the fire. Nishada family sacrificed their life in the place of Pandavas. There was no value for that life. Nishadas were also forest dwellers and were outcastes. In *The Mahabharatha* the Nishadas are seen exploited by the upperclass . Shunaka further talks about the injustice performed by the upper class people by citing the example of Ekalavya. Ekalavya belonged to the nishada clan who were ruthlessly used by the upper class to satisfy their needs. Ekalavya became the epitome of symbols that mark the subaltern torture in the name of caste and class. Knowlegde has been a powerful weapon to establish power over others. The right to get education and knowledge was only for the upper class and those who violate this would be punished severely. Foucault makes a remark in his book *Power/Knowledge:*

> Power and knowledge are not simply two different things; they are two
> aspects of the same thing. At the same time as we discover knowledge, we

also create power. 'Knowledge' opens up new objects of knowledge and, as a result, closes off others. Moreover, 'knowledge' confers power on those who possess it and can deny it to those who do not. It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power. (Foucault, 52)

Here Foucault wants to assert the point that one who owns knowledge owns power in the society and knowledge is a powerful weapon to negotiate power over the subaltern.

Despite being the son of the nishada king Hiranyadhanus, Drona rejects Ekalavya due to his social status a low born tribal and with the intention of not allowing a marginalized to come to the periphery by defeating his favourite pupil Arjuna. Caste system has a permanent mark in human soul. Despite his extreme skill in archery, Drona did terrible injustice to Ekalavya by demanding the thump from his right hand as Guru dakshina. He orchestrated this action to guarantee the continued success of his favored pupil, Arjuna. Being the royal teacher, a devout Brahmin, he couldn't permit the victory for individuals considered of low caste. Drona considered Ekalavya's attempt to acquire the knowledge of archery as a war against the class system and challenging the power system. As a brahmin, he couldn't accept that and he silenced the boy forever .

The author asserts that it is his Brahminical upper classing that prompts Drona to do this inhuman act. Ms. Nair invented this character Shunaka to comment on the caste system that prevailed in ancient times – how ruthlessly were they suppressed, how brutally were they marginalized the subaltern in the society. Shunaka becomes the voice of the voiceless and the author purposely chooses a non-human to voice this because she wants to assert the point that humans have failed to present the subaltern condition of another human. Shunaka warns his kin about human and says:

Dear sister, do not bear their sky,

it holds bold – the blood of kin.

Do not share their bread, it seeks

lifeless earth: the final sin. (Nair 48)

In the recent mythological retellings of Ramayana and *The Mahabharatha* , such marginalized and ill-treated characters are brought to light and readers are made to understand the pain of their untold saga.

Satyavati explains how she played the game to win over the upper class kings and Brahmins and how she had written *The Mahabharatha* as a story of success of the subaltern. She wanted her son Vichitravirya to be powerful and for that she demanded her stepson to abduct the princess of Kashi. She knew that the

future will not be good for the abductor. But she purposely does it. That abduction changed the fate of Hastinapura. She says , "You would think I'd fortell all the grief, the trials that come of using women as requital, but I didn't. Instead, I swore and crowed in brazen delight. By then...I had transformed from human to royal" (Nair 58).

Satyavati, nailed the supremacy of the subaltern over the fate of Hastinapura on that day. In the book *Until the Lions*, Karthika Nair talks about the game of dice played by the subaltern characters against the power of the upper class society and it can be called a prototype of the subaltern resistance of the modern times and how myths can represent the functionalist theory of Malinowsky by portraying the social changes of an era through the modern retellings, "….For we never had a choice./Hunger or royal dungeons are yet more spears to tear out /Entrails – war but swifter end. Now leave, lest range find voice" (Nair 73).

Karthika Nair also gives voice to other marginalized characters like Dhrupada's wife who never got to speak her mind in the epic. She is addressed as 'woman without a name'(Nair 63). Madhusraba Dasgupta, a scholar of mythology, in her essay "Usable Women: The Tales of Amba and Madhavi" observes that :

> …the literature of the age testifies to the subordination of women's
>
> interests to those of their male relatives or to power structures such as

dynasty or government in which they had no decision-making roles, to the

point of silencing women's voices or even erasing them from the narrative.

(Dasgupta 43)

Despite being the queen of Panchala and the mother of Sikhandi, Draupadi

and Dhrishtdhyumna her voice was never heard in the epic. Her daughter

Draupadi was forced to live her life with five husbands, her son Sikhandi had to

live a dual life, her son Dhristadhymna was forced to fight in the war and loses his

life. Yet she never got to speak. She was marginalized and moves to the

periphery of *The Mahabharatha*, never to be seen or heard. In the book, she pours

out her heart – how frustrated was she, when Drupad used her children to take his

revenge on his enemy Drona, how much she felt tortured when she saw that a

normal life filled with love, hope, laughter, and desire was denied to her children.

She feels deeply wounded when her right as mother was taken away from her and

she laments, "For they were never mine, these brands from Dhrupad's

inferno…..Not mine: even young, they had suckled paternal dreams" (Nair 65).

She tries to justify the vengeance of Sikhandi by interpreting it through the eyes of

a mother. But she never could justify the vengeance of Drupada as he too had

betrayed Drona. She feels anger and is frustrated when Drupada ignores his

daughter Draupadi as he did not find a useful weapon for his vengeance in her.

Later he uses her as a weapon to bring home the greatest warriors to fight against

Drona, "For Dhrupad's designs sing vilest /around his daughter – the price, it

/seems, for being born…" (Nair 68).

Dhrupad's wife as a subaltern portrays the helplessness of a woman, despite

being a queen, in a patriarchal society. In *Until the Lions* , these subaltern

character become powerful and they retaliates to these kind of marginalization and

says, " …do not cajole; do not feign pity, nor kinship, nor entice with promises of

unseen treasures – justice , safety, freedom" (Nair 73). By using Bheeshma ,

Satyavati could find two queens for her son Vichitravirya. But he fails to produce

heirs for his kingdom, and carry – on her fisher – queen dynasty. Soon

Vichitravirya dies and Satyavati finds herself in a dilemma as how to secure

Hastinapura's future. It was as if her Karma had back fired on her. She once

demanded celibacy from Bheeshma to win over the upper class society. She

thought she could continue her dynasty through her son. Fate brings her back in

front of Bheeshma again. For Bheeshma, she was always a "Daseyi", and he had

accepted her neither as the queen nor as his step mother. She pleads him to forget

his vow of celibacy and tells him to get sons through Ambika and Ambalika. But

Bheeshma sticks on to his oath of celibacy. The destiny of Hastinapura was to

continue the subaltern saga. Satyavati learns the fact that in scripture it says, "Any

rishi can cease his manhood to restore a lineage facing early extinction" (Nair 82).

She remembers her son Vyasa the sage born of a Brahmin – Nishada conjugation.

She feels happy by the fact that her own son Vyasa could help her in finding an

heir to the throne. Vyasa was summoned to the court and that was the first time Satyavati meets her son.

Being a sage, Vyasa was obedient to his mother and he agrees to help her. During the Vedic times , using Brahmin sages for procreation was seen as an act often depicted as a sacred duty, and the resulting child was seen as of divine origin. Sometimes, the child born of a Brahmin sage and a royal woman was even considered the legitimate heir to the throne. Through this act of procreation with the Brahmin , the power and the purity of the brahmin is once again established. Satyavati becomes doubly victorious then, as a mother and a subaltern as she could continue her Fisher queen dynasty. In that pursuit of winning the Kuru dynasty with that of a subaltern dynasty, Satyavati does heinous deeds. She does injustice to her stepson by denying him his birth right as well as his right to live a normal life. She also takes advantage of the sorrow of her daughter in laws mourning on the death of their husband. She bids Ambika to sleep with Bheeshma, and she succumbed to her will, she sends Vyasa to her chamber instead of Bheeshma. The sight of the unwashed, fowl smelling Vyasa was unbearable to Ambika and she closes her eyes. Sensing the act of disrespect, Vyasa curses her and she gives birth to a blind son, Dhritharashtra. Though Hasthinapura got an heir, he was not competent to rule the kingdom. Hoping to get a healthy heir to the throne, Vyasa was again summoned, and this time Satyavati tries all means to get a healthy grandson. Ambalika was given enough coaching to tolerate the sage

without rousing his wrath. But when he comes near her, Vyasa sees Ambalika

becoming blanched and pale. Hurt by his own ego, Vyasa curses her son to be

weak and infertile. Deeply frustrated Satyavati pleads her son to impregnate

Ambika again. Satyavati takes conscious effort to make it a pleasant experience to

both Ambika and the sage. Ambika was given proper counseling to accept him.

Satyavati wanted a healthy heir to continue her Fisher queen dynasty – a

subaltern one to establish permanent supremacy of her race over the Kuru clan.

But this time there occurred a twist in the tale that Ambika sends her maid Poorna

to Vyasa and she succumbed to his male ego and he blesses her with a healthy

baby – a baby who is wise and powerful. Satyavati persuades Vyasa to

impregnate Ambika again, but he then says, " …no good comes from forcing a

woman, ever with the noblest of reasons. Ambika does not wish to sleep with me,

and it is her heart we should heed" (Nair 105). Furious Satyavati summons Poorna

to punish her. The words of Poorna become an eye opener for Satyavati. She

realizes in the pursuit of establishing the supremacy of her subaltern clan, in the

Kuru dynasty, she has transformed herself from a queen to a ruthless monarch –

one who has sanctioned rape on her widowed daughter – in – laws to satisfy her

obsession to secure the pedigree of future heirs. The words of Poorna make her

realize that she was obsessed with her position in the center and in the pursuit of

her movement form the periphery to the center. She did many wrong doings and

destroyed so many lives and Poorna questions, "But why, queen, why benighted

so many lives? - Pallid stepson, despoiled broken daughters, now a line of

damaged heirs?" (Nair 190).

Jayatri Ghosh in her essay "Satyavati: The Matriarch of the *The*

Mahabharatha." Published in *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval, and*

Modern India, edited by Mandakranta Bose observes :

> Satyavati embodies the paradox of a woman who is both empowered and
>
> disempowered within a patriarchal order. She is able to control her own
>
> destiny to a certain extent, but this control is limited by the larger forces of
>
> social and political power that are dominated by men. (Ghosh 42)

Poorna, the maid of Ambika, who performed the conjugal rites with Vyasa to save

her queen Ambika from killing herself, is a subaltern character who gets

representation in *Until the Lions*. Poorna is the one who made Satyavati realize

her faults and its through her that Satyavati understands what she ordered to

perform was a ruthless act of rape. Poorna says, "…what you sanctioned –

schemed – is defined rape, sex under duress – its wrath will haunt the Kuru lineage

until pralaya" (Nair 90). She speaks about the marginalized life of a 'Daseyi' –

someone who has no right over her own life, no right to deny even sex with a

stinking sage. But she becomes the symbol of the spectator. She witnesses

everything with an impartial eye, one who understands the right and wrong that

happens inside the palace. When Poorna regain her voice in this retelling, one can understand the game of thrones played by Satyavati, through an impartial eye.

Sauvali is another marginalized character in the *Mahabharatha* who is silenced yet played a vital role by bearing the child of Dhritharashtra. Sauvali recalls how she was summoned before king Dhritharashtra to perform the conjugal act. King could not tolerate his growing impatience of waiting for the birth of his heir to the throne. Gandhari had been pregnant for two years and could not deliver. King could not bear to wait any longer as he wanted a son before Pandu could produce one to fulfill the dream of procuring an heir, Sauvali was summoned. She was chosen by the priests of the court as the most fertile womb in his country. Nobody asked her permission as dasis were the private possession of the kings and, "when the king decides to take you, no one comes to the rescue: the gods are his, myth and legend too, his own"(Nair114).

In the narrative, Sauvali vividly describes the profound suffering she endured during her sexual encounter with the king. Her captivity was not limited to herself; her relatives were also imprisoned, compelling her compliance with the king's demands. Her body became a mere territory controlled by the king, subject to his desires until he received the news he expected. Upon conceiving, Sauvali suddenly gained favor within the palace, receiving love and respect from all, providing her with a brief period of feeling human and respected. However, her status deteriorated after giving birth; she was marginalized and denied her rights as

a mother. Moreover, with the birth of Gandhari's hundred sons, Sauvali's child became redundant to the story. Despite her persistent efforts, she was unable to see her son. Only after numerous pleas did the queen promise that her child would eventually visit her hut, offering a glimmer of hope for their reunion. From that day onwards Sauvali started her endless days of waiting for her son:

> Each day, you wait with tireless gaze scorching the path to your hut. Each day, you clean the bare insides of your home till they gleam in pain. Each day, you repeat the story you will tell you son, even as you hear the distant chant of the unkindness of eyes. (Nair 117)

Sauvali just hopes that one day her son will get to learn the stories of her sufferings. She leaves an amulet for her son in the palace and she makes a plea in her mind that her son will rewrite her subaltern story of defeat and sufferings with a new story of success and she also hopes that he will write a new history of the subaltern in the center, as the hero and will take revenge for all the sufferings inflicted upon his mother as she was living a life of a Daseyi. She says, "And, for one might, remember, ants too can take wing – that is a choice you will have as well" (Nair 119). Sauvali while unraveling her tale of sufferings speaks about the discrimination she had to face due to her inferior position in the society and echoes the hopes of the subaltern that one day they too can overcome their inferior position, and one day they too can soar high with no chains.

Though they are subaltern who lack agency , all these women characters of *Until the Lions* negotiate power through their actions in a subtle yet powerful way. Foucault observes in his essay "Critical Theory/Intellectual Theory: an Interview with Gerard Raulet." from the book *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings*, edited by L. Kritzman that:

> Rather than being located within particular institutions such as the State or the government, power operates through power relations which are multiple, have different forms and can be in play in family relations, or within an institution, or an administration. (Kritzman 38)

According to Foucault, Power is a performance rather than something concrete in a place. These women of *The Mahabharatha* are seen as active agents who negotiate power through performance. Each of their actions contribute to redefine the equations of power in the epic. While some characters use the institution of marriage or their motherhood to get into the power structure , other characters use their sexuality to come to the centre.

Gandhari, the wife of Dhritharashtra, who later become that queen of Hastinapura and the mother of hundred sons also voices her anxiety, fear, despair she felt occasionally in the book, *Until the Lions*. She felt deeply sad to realize that it was her brother Shakuni that inflated the hatred between the Pandavas and Kauravas. Shakuni wanted to take revenge on Kuru dynasty for destroying his

sister's life. So he fed his sister's son with hatred, distrust and greed for power. Gandhari through this book, gives voice to her untold agonies about the wrong doings of her children, the frustrations she felt about the injustices performed by her husband and brother. She also talks about the sadness that she felt as a mother, a sister, a wife and above all as a queen, as she could not stop or correct the destiny of her kids and land. Though she was the princess of Gandhaar, she was forced to marry the blind prince of Hastinapura and thus blind folded her own eyes to prove her virtue to the world. Though she became the queen of Hastinapura, she could not stop the unjust activities performed by her husband in his pursuit of getting back to power. She became the mother of hundred and one children, she could not stop them from their greed and she felt powerless, a subaltern in the patriarchal world and she yearns:

> I'd halt time, force him back to the day a million eyes rained on Gandhar's earth to carve out your grave that I have been carrying for all these years, made heavier each day. I'd force time to halt, return, and I's kill you myself while you were still a child. (Lions 128)

Gandhari was completely wronged by the Kuru dynasty, first by Bheeshma when he killed her father through a barbarous attack on Gandhara to secure her hand for the blind Dhritharashtra, then by her husband, then by her sons and even then, she had to remain silent. Though she was the queen of Hastinapura and the mother of hundred mighty sons, her subaltern condition remains unaltered.

Another prominent woman character , Hidimbi, the Rakshasa woman of the forest, makes an expression of her own soul and thoughts in *Until the Lions*. The Rakshasas were outcastes and as Sheldon Pollock, an American scholar of Sanskrit observes that, "Outsiders are made other by being represented as deviant - sexually, dietetically, politically deviant" (Pollock 283). These outsiders could not mingle with the centre and there were strict restrictions regarding their space and performance. This can be seen through Bheema's relation with Hidimbi. In *The Mahabharatha* one can find several instances where Rakshasas and Nishadas were exploited and used by the upper class to fulfil their selfish motives. Kunti and her sons escape from the fire by faking their death sacrificing the life of a Nishada woman and her sons. Similarly Kunti and Pandavas skillfully uses Hidimbi to escape from the forest. Paula Richman, an Emerita William H. Danforth Professor of South Asian Religions at Oberlin College, comments about this in her article "Why Did Bhima Wed Hidimbaa?" published in the book *Reflections and Variations on the The Mahabharatha* and edited by TRS Sharma, that the marriage between Bhima and Hidimbi creates alliances and establish political power, and to challenge and transform the norms of gender and kinship that govern Hindu society. Though Hidimbi is the first daughter -in-law of Kunti , she didn't give that position to Hidimbi by denying a ritualistic marriage. Thus Hidimbi is used by the pandavas and 'othered' her by denying her rights.

In *The Mahabharatha*, one can only find Hidimbi as a mere shadow of her husband Bheema and her brother Hidimba. But Karthika Nair gives her voice to echo the woes of her heart. Early years of her life, she lived in great fear as she knew her brother was a brutal murderer, a Rakshasa who was brutal enough to kill his own sister if needed. So she feels relieved when Bheema kills him and she instantly gets attracted to Bheema and proposes him directly. He declines her love and even insults her by calling her a Rakshasi and a demon – sorcerous. But Kunti intervenes and tells him she too is a woman and reminds him to behave respectfully towards her. With Kunti's blessings they get married. Soon Hidimbi had to return Bheema to his family and she was left alone in the forest with their new born child. Though that child was the first grandson of Hasthinapura, he was never accepted by the family as he belonged to the subaltern rakshasa clan. She painfully remembers how he was rejected by the family and remarks, " Bheem's family had no use for children until they turned harvestable, biddable, wed able or expendable, machines of war" (Nair 152).

Hidimbi is one of the powerful women character of *The Mahabharatha* . Bheema is seen throughout the epic as a protector. But Hidimbi protects and tames Bheema. Hidimbi sharpens the war skills of her son by giving him training in the forest. She teaches him how to refine the skills of smell and touch and teaches him valuable lessons of the forest like "kill for need and not for pleasure" (Nair 153). In Hidimbi, one can see all the good qualities of a wife, - the chastity,

devotion, courage, and respect – everything that a woman needed to get the recognition of the society. But her birth in the Rakshasa clan prevents Kunti and Pandavas from accepting her as a member of their family. Though called a Rakshasi, she converted Bheema into a human by taming the wilderness in him. Even when he left her, she remained a chaste wife and a dutiful mother to her son. She gave back Bheema when she realized the great truth about him and says, " …these men were to remain sons and best brothers – they could seldom grow into husbands, and never fathers…."(Nair 155).

Yet Hidimbi loved Bheema unconditionally, kept in touch with Kunti, and updated her from time to time about the growth of Ghatolkacha. Hidimbi even questioned Kunti when she asked Draupadi to be the wife of all the five Pandavas without her consent. When Bheema was really in need of a help during the Kurukshetra war, Hidimbi sends her son to help his father though she knew that she was going to sacrifice her son. Hidimbi becomes the symbol of pure earthly love, sacrifice, and dignity. While in the original epic these exploitation of the 'others' by the upper class is justified , in this mythological retelling of the *Mahabharatha*, Kartika Nair gives her the dignity and respect that Hidimbi deserves. Though a subaltern and seemingly powerless, her actions are purer and much more powerful than that of the upper class and subverts and challenges the power. Instead of being protected ,tamed and ruled by pandavas, Hidimbi protects them ,rules them and tames the wilderness in her husband Bheema .

In the novel, subaltern figures like Dussala and Ulupi emerge as significant voices articulating their grievances. Dussala, the lone sister among a hundred Kauravas, grapples with the awareness that she is the sole mourner for her brothers. Despite acknowledging their sins, she feels that , "They deserve more; once dead, even sinners should belong" (Nair 165). This retelling of the epic allows Dussala the platform to vocalize her lamentations, a privilege denied to her in the original *The Mahabharatha*. In her expressions of grief, she individually commemorates each brother, detailing their unique characteristics. Within the confines of the retelling, Dussala seizes the opportunity to voice her longing for her brothers, a sentiment overshadowed in the epic. Her belief in the neglect of her brothers' memory in the grand tapestry of *The Mahabharatha* is encapsulated in her assertion that, "…the bards will sing only victors' odes – psalms on the lost dead don't greet spring" (Nair 173).

Many more subaltern characters appear in the retelling of *The Mahabharatha*. Ulupi, like Hidimbi, recalls how much she loved Arjuna. She was the daughter of Kouravya, the queen of Nagas. Ulupi is also another subaltern character in *The Mahabharatha* who is 'othered' and exploited. In the first golden years of his exile, Arjuna meets Ulupi and both instantly get attracted to each other. Their coitus bear fruit and thus Aravan was born. Like Hidimbi, Ulupi too had to return Arjuna to his family, "For though men of Kuru enjoy a history of forgetting wives and lovers" (Nair 177). She teaches him various skill s to win

heaven and earth and in return he gave her his seed to remember him always. Like Hidimbi who protects and tames Bheema, Ulupi teaches the mighty Arjuna several techniques of war. This reveals the hidden power which these women exercised over the great warriors. Ulupi had to face the wrath of her father and her ancestors for choosing an earthly being. But she stood with Arjuna as a devoted wife and even when he deserted her, she lived her life as a chaste wife. During the war, Aravan was sent to the war field to assist his father and hoping to claim his legacy Ulupi yearns for Arjuna's recognition and says, ".… I ask that you extend to my son/ the courtesy ,the care you'd outpour on ally;/ the candour you'd unveil before equals" (Nair 179). Ulupi yearns for that recognition at least for her son. She didn't want her son to be treated as an alien by his own father. But Aravan had to sacrifice his life in Kurukshetra war to claim his position as Arjuna's son and Ulupi even in utmost sadness, laments, "… grant him his lineage, complete with sheen:/ watch him stroll towards death, his pulse the serenade" (Nair 179).

Ulupi had to sacrifice her son to get his father's attention and recognition. By granting this sacrifice, Ulupi can be seen as waging war against the class system which denied the agency and justice to the marginalized. Krishna tries to convince Ulupi and Aravan for their great sacrifice saying that: "…a sacrifice will bring him greater glory" (Nair 184). Aravan, in preparing for the impending sacrifice, issues a unique demand—he refuses to face death as a virgin and seeks a wife to mourn his passing. Despite the reluctance of other women to marry him,

Krishna, in the form of Mohini, accedes to Aravan's request, showcasing a subaltern's assertion of power over the supreme deity. This episode underscores the subversion of power dynamics as Ulupi and Aravan transition from the periphery to the centre of the narrative. Aravan's ultimate sacrifice, though foreseen, becomes a pivotal moment, challenging and overpowering the established order. In this act, Ulupi emerges as a woman of exceptional courage, transcending conventional maternal roles. Aravan, replacing Arjuna, sacrifices himself at the altar of Kaali, thereby ensuring the success of the Pandavas. This narrative arc exemplifies how the triumph of the Pandavas is intricately woven into the sacrifice of a subaltern, reshaping the power dynamics within *The Mahabharatha*.

Uttara, the wife of Abhimanyu, was pregnant when he lost his life in the battlefield. Abhimanyu lost his life in the most unjustifiable combat performed by his own kin. Uttara was not given a chance to speak her mind in *The Mahabharatha*, as she was a woman destined to obey the orders of the society. However, in the retelling, she bursts out her suppressed emotions. She questions the relatives. The authorities, her parents as well as her in laws about the injustice they did to Abhimanyu. She questions the Kuru dynasty:

 ….why brand us your own, made in your image? What we are is deadly

  disposable spawn, born beings (not bloodless, imperfectly designed) then

programmed to break enemy battalions, smash unbreakable armored discs

and self – combust for father by glory. (Nair 215)

Uttara could not understand why children always are being treated as war

weapons to ensure the glory of their fathers. Many children in *The Mahabharatha*

from Bheeshma to Abhimanyu had to sacrifice their life for their father's glory or

pleasures. She could not bear the grief that her son could not even see the face of

his father. The future generation would sing gloriously about him. They would

hail him as a true hero. But they cannot feel the grief of his wife. What they need

is a great hero, a martyr always glorified for his sacrifice. Uttara, the grief stricken

wife, tells her unborn son, "Choose, child, while still unborn; choose, for we no

longer can choose to remain free" (Nair 219). She knew that once she gives birth

to her son, she would lose all authority over him. Then the king and other elders

would decide what his life must be, how long he could be alive, and how and

whom he should marry. The mother has no hold over her son's life.   So she does

not want her child to be born. In *The Mahabharatha*, one can only hear about the

heroic deeds of Abhimanyu in the war and about how heroically he lost his life in

the warfront, which will be always remembered by the future generations. But

Uttara speaks about the ugly side of the war, the story of lost lives, the sufferings

of a widow and the fate of fatherless children. She laments on the fate of women

powerless in a patriarchal society. Kunti, the powerful mother of Pandavas, who

never speaks with any repentance in *The Mahabharatha*, opens her mind in this

retelling of Karthika Nair, about the injustice she did to her first born and she clearly admits, "No mother can ever love each of her sons alike" (Nair 223).

In various mythological texts, maternal figures often assume the role of powerful matriarchs, wielding influence over their sons and actively participating in the prescribed duties and rituals befitting a queen. However, despite their elevated status, societal constraints often shackle these mothers, rendering their voices unheard and actions circumscribed. A poignant illustration of this paradigm is evident in the character of Kunti, who, despite being the mother of an emperor, grapples with societal norms that necessitated her abandonment of her firstborn son to become Pandu's wife.

Even when reunited with her son Karna in Hastinapura, Kunti finds herself unable to openly embrace him or bestow the maternal affection owed to her abandoned child. The constraints imposed by society become starkly evident when, during the wartime, Kunti is compelled to negotiate with Karna, revealing his true identity as the elder brother of the Pandavas. This strategic move, ostensibly aimed at sparing the Pandavas, inadvertently becomes the catalyst for Karna's demise as Kunti exploits the truth to extinguish his fervor in attacking his brothers. The novel offers a reinterpretation of Kunti, presenting a revised version of her character that highlights the intricate interplay between maternal authority and societal constraints in the mythological narrative. Kunti knew that she was doing injustice to Karna, but she found herself in helpless situation, "…were I

now, in public, to own Karna, none of my sons, child would ever own Kuru" (

Nair 224).

Until the Lions presents the powerful sacrifices of many mothers like Kunti,

Ulupi, Hidimbi, wife of Drupad, and many others who had to sacrifice the life of

their sons in the Kurukshetra war. Though marginalized in terms of their gender,

they were powerful and they nail their claim over the victory of the Pandavas

through these sacrifices . Though they were enchained in the name of dharma,

they are seen as waging war against their subaltern status continuously through

their actions. In the original text, their wishes were never asked, their agony was

never seen, their frustrations were never heard by the patriarchy. However, in

Until the Lions Karthika Nair portrays these unheard and unseen agonies,

frustrations and the wishes of these subaltern characters through this novel and

narrates how these subaltern characters subverts the power paradigms and gains a

prime position in the text.

Instead of directly presenting the story of the mighty warrior Karna, in

Until the Lions his story is narrated through the voice of his wife Vrishali.

Vrishali, is portrayed as talking to the king of Hastinapura after the death of

Karna; Karna was alienated from the power structure and was treated as a

subaltern by the ruling class and the brahmins like Parasurama . Vrishali recollects

all the injustices which Kuru dynasty did to Karna . She talks about the loyalty

shown by Karna to Duryodhana. Even when his mother Kunti met him with the

request to fight for the Pandavas as their elder brother ,he didn't change his loyalty. Though he was the friend of Duryodhana , he adhered to his dharma. Karna was ruthlessly exploited by the dharma system and the varna system of the society. Deeply wounded by the injustices that they did to Karna. Vrishali makes a prayer to the king, ".…let blood from his jugular cleanse your heart of anger , repair your pain. It was his last dream Please his soul , end the fratricide .Ring out the war ,Let the hatred go… (Nair 229)

Vrishali became deeply heartbroken as she had to witness the death of her eight sons and brothers. Only her youngest child was left with her . Deeply wounded ,she leaves her youngest child in the hands of the king and follows the path of her husband by choosing death. Characters like Vrishali and Bhanumati rarely appear in *The Mahabharatha*. But in the retelling they too voice their woes. Bhanumati, the wife of Duryodhana, too voice her agony on the day of Duryodhana's death. Her voice echoes the helpless cry of a woman who knows that her husband will lose his life and she will eventually become a widow . She too is the epitome of womanhood and chastity and though she knew that her husband has done many injustices, she stood by his side , prayed for his victory and with great grief she accepts Duryodhana's death with a brave heart , "For tonight prayers cower in shame and all Gods flee/ Like widows, words weep : shed sound , try not to be" (Nair 235).

Karna, on whom subalternity is thrusted upon , is glorified through the words of his wife Vrishali and she explains how he questioned the hegemony of the elites , how his unbeatable skills of war threatened them and how he suffered from his subalternity. Karthika Nair has found these lost voices of subaltern characters like Vrishali who were purposely got no representation in the original text. Not only mothers but wives like Uttara, Vrishali, Bhanumati who had to sacrifice their husbands and silently suffered their widowhood also get their voice in the retelling of the epic. They also become powerful and questions the ruling class about the faults in the power system they follow in the name of dharma and varna.

Like the royal women after the Trojan war in Homer's Iliad, the women characters of *The Mahabharatha* also were forced to live a life full of sufferings as they have lost their husbands, fathers, sons and brothers. These women were bound to be a part of their dharma and forced to compensate for the dead, impotent, weak or absent husbands. But despite their weaknesses in the physical conditions, they are mentally strong and act much stronger than their male counterparts. In *Until the Lions*, the author meticulously explores the representation of intersectional subaltern identities, offering a close examination of gendered subalterns to elucidate their experiences and articulate their concerns. Through this lens, the author portrays these gendered subalterns as empowered and resistant entities that challenge the prevailing hegemony of power. By

encompassing diverse representations across class, caste, and gender, the narrative becomes a platform for the voices of those who resist various manifestations of power, fostering an environment conducive to intersectionality. This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of the multi-layered oppression and suffering experienced by these individuals on different levels. James Scott, the famous American anthropologist in his book *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* observes that, "Resistance is not simply a reactive or oppositional stance, but an active and creative force that can generate new forms of power and new possibilities for social transformation"(Scott 198).

Myths are not just lifeless artefacts of the bygone days, but they are more like the living entities and are often rewritten, reinterpreted and retold to conform to the norms of the present society. The voices of these subaltern characters in the epic unearth the dark, hidden areas of exploitation exercised by the hegemonic power structures in the society over them and explores the trauma, frustration and struggle experienced by these characters of *The Mahabharatha*. They not only echo the struggle , but also subverts the power paradigms by portraying their strength and narrating their role in the epic . The timeless quality of the epic is sustained by these retellings. During the post-colonial period most of the marginalised got back their identity and agency. This paradigm shift of power can be noticed in the contemporary retellings of the epic too as myths represent the cultural consciousness of the society.

In *Until the Lions* , the author speaks through nineteen subaltern voices that echoes different perspectives of the subalterns about the epic *The Mahabharatha*. In the book , one can notice a paradigm shift of power in terms of class, caste and gender as opposed to the original text. Through the lens of the socially inferior and outcast people, *The Mahabharatha* is reinterpreted and voiceless and the marginalised make a shift in their power structure and they regain their agency and identity. As James Fitzgerald has quoted in his essay "Women's Voices in the *The Mahabharatha*", "*The Mahabharatha* is not simply a story about men and their heroic deeds, but is also the 'Veda of women and Sudras', a rich and complex tapestry of women's voices and experiences, struggles and triumphs, challenges and opportunities" (Fitzgerald 185).

The mythological retellings thus can be viewed as a discourse on power subverted in the subaltern perspective and it becomes the saga of the hunted glorifying the physical, mental and emotional strength of the marginalised who were forced to remain subaltern in terms of their class, caste and gender. In the third chapter the thesis will further explore the marginalisation that women face in the patriarchal society. From a feminist perspective a detailed analysis of a contemporary retelling of *the Mahabharatha* will be done with the aim to uncover the subjugation that women face in our society.

Chapter 3

Voices of the Forgotten: A Feminist Revisionist Reading of
Bride of the Forest

….I am an outsider….our existence is marginalized. This is a home for the

decrepit and discarded. We live as if lost in the dark, confusing maze with

no star to guide us out of it. Who are we? What is our calling? When will

we know? Who will tell us? (Mahadevan 171)

-The above words uttered by the central character, Madhavi, in the novel *Bride of*

the Forest echoes the predicament of any woman in a patriarchal society and also

poses the perennial questions that linger in her mind for which she longs to find

answers.Myth act as a major force in formulating the dominant ideologies of the

society and retelling mythologies provide platforms for critically examining these

dominant ideologies so as to conform to the contemporary society. According to

Geetha M Patil in her essay 'Myth Clarify Man's Place in the Universe' remarks:

Myth clarify man's place in the universe. They are like mirror that reflects

men's inner self, they touch the dazzling heights of transcendence, explore

the depths of the unconscious. Myths interpret human life and in the

contemporary context, they make clear the modern sensibility or the

modern consciousness (Patil 21).

According to ancient Hindu scriptures, observance of dharma set power paradigms in the society . Manu Smriti can be considered one of the core texts that teaches the rules of dharma in the ancient society. But now a paradigm shift is needed to conform to the norms of contemporary society. The challenges associated with adhering to dharma are more formidable for women. The female existence, considered akin to a tapa or a strenuous spiritual discipline, is undeniably committed to a noble purpose, primarily the well-being of the family. This perception stems partly from her pivotal role as a mother and partly from the prevailing social constructs of the ancient times. Even then women, from time immemorial, have tried her best to observe her stridharma in the best ways. Actually a close reading of all mythological texts vouch women having much more knowledge of dharma in general. As observed by Kelvin McGrath in his work *Stri Feminine Power in the The Mahabharatha* women are:

> …more connected with how the world of right dharma functions on earth. They have a privileged relationship with dharma, which is not always accessible to men; a relationship which is . . . more mundane and immediate . . . this concerns speech and its projected morality . . . Women . . . often declaim upon the subject of dharma. (McGrath 155)

The evolution of the concept of dharma for both men and women is discernible through the pervasive repetitions of performances in various facets of life, a transformation vividly depicted in mythological retellings. These narratives

serve as potent vehicles for expressing shifts in societal paradigms while maintaining the fundamental integrity of the stories. While the core narrative remains unchanged, the altered focus introduces novel perspectives on dharma, particularly concerning the duties assigned to women.

Navigating the intricate balance between svadharma (personal duty), sadharanadharma (societal duty), and stridharma (women's duty) becomes a formidable challenge for women. The patriarchal design of a woman's life introduces numerous pitfalls within the constructs of both stridharma and svadharma, complicating the fulfillment of these roles. Mythological retellings, by emphasizing the complexities inherent in women's duties, provide a lens through which to scrutinize the challenges arising from societal expectations and underscore the nuanced evolution of dharma in the context of gender roles. As Hiltebeitel, Columbian Professor of Religion, History, and Human Sciences at George Washington University, remarks, "….there seems to be a considerable gap between what men prescribe as women's svadharma and what women can make of it as a law of their own" (Hiltebeitel 498). This chapter aims to provide an understanding of what has been expected from a woman according to dharma proposed by and what she could actually perform if she rises to her womanly power. In Judith Butler's book *Gender Trouble* she opines that gender is performative and this is rather a constantly shifting and evolving concept created and recreated through social interaction. She also suggests this performative

aspect of gender means it is possible to challenge and subvert traditional gender norms through acts of resistance and non-conformity. This shift in the paradigm is the focus of contemporary feminist mythological retellings . `

The post-colonial period and the impact of feminism have proposed a need to change the ideologies of contemporary society. All marginalized sections of the society, especially women, identified the fact that their place in the patriarchal society is weak and they are just puppets in the hands of a male-centred destiny. Patriarchy viewed women as either 'doomed to immorality' or elevated as a perfect virtuous women, one who possess extra ordinary qualities of a perfect wife, mother, daughter, and every other role into which she is in. Patriarchal society has always viewed feminine sexuality as a reason for social chaos and often advocated the need to confine and restrict women to maintain peace and harmony in the society.

Even before the feminist movements in the 20th century, women have expressed their disagreement to the patriarchal view: for example, the disagreement on the age old injustice towards women was pronounced by the gender even during the bhakti movement. But their reactions were singled out as they were not in collective, and were not strong enough to tear down the traditional patriarchal view of the society. Wendi Doniger, while compiling Hindu myths quotes author Vrinda Nabar's article published in *Hindustan Times* titled " Feminist retellings of Hindu myth: Return of the Devi", and remarks:

Our Devis were far from demure and asexual. They exhibited an

earthiness almost akin to machismo and were, many of them , embodiments

of contemporary feminism's basic principles. Little wonder then that

feminist resurrected this Devis and highlighted attributes long glossed

over. (Nabar)

The feminist trends in the modern retellings of our myths portrays these

reactions of women to demolish and overthrow the conventional patriarchal

notions. Writers like Irawati Karve, Sharad Patil, Mahashweta Devi created a new

version of Draupati to express their protest. Every period of Indian Literature has

witnessed its own rereading of the mythological texts of *Ramayana* and *The*

Mahabharatha. Myths have always been determiners in the Indian society. Indian

writer Amish Tripathi observes that, unlike the limited discussions about Zeus or

Amun Ra in Greece or Egypt, the Indian mythology centred around figures like

Ram, Krishna, or Shiva remains vibrantly embedded in the Indian psyche,

constituting an integral aspect of the collective consciousness.

In recent years, there has been a remarkable surge in the reimagining of

mythology within Indian literature. Contemporary mythological retellings exhibit

a significant departure from traditional power paradigms, offering narratives that

adopt feminist, subaltern, and marginalized perspectives. These retellings provide

a platform for previously voiceless characters in our myths to recount their own

stories and assert their rightful positions. The infusion of this modern sensibility

and consciousness has inspired contemporary writers to interpret the great epics from diverse viewpoints, employing various characters. Each reinterpretation or retelling contributes a distinct identity and novelty to the epic, captivating the reader with a fresh and compelling narrative.

Ved Vyasa's extensive composition of over one lakh verses in the *The Mahabharatha* falls short in addressing the injustices experienced by characters such as Madhavi and Draupadi. The patriarchal lens through which myths are often interpreted fails to do justice to the female characters, relegating them to marginalized roles. In both the *Ramayana* and *The Mahabharatha,* women characters are predominantly silenced and subjugated, functioning as mere ornamental props to embellish the hero's achievements. Despite their initial status as princesses, leading female characters like Draupadi, Sita, Kunti, and Mandodari, upon marriage, assume roles as queens characterized by suffering, sacrifice, and unwavering obedience in the fulfilment of domestic duties. The emergence of feminist discourses has paved the way for a reconsideration of the roles and possibilities of women characters in popular Indian myths. Through the lens of revisionist mythology, contemporary retellings afford these women characters newfound agency and power, akin to revered goddesses such as Durga, Kali, Lakshmi, and Saraswathi. This transformation allows them to transcend their traditional positions, enabling them to attain reverence and influence in a patriarchal society.

After the rise of feminism in the late 1960s, a deliberate attempt to describe women's experience through literature became a dominant theme. The feminist movement of the contemporary society ,by using the powerful tools of resistance and activism ,has brought a strong challenge to the existing patriarchal norms. This has subverted the popular social, political, cultural and literary discourses . As a powerful tool of social change and a mirror to reflect the truth, myths have been retold, recreated, rewritten and subverted the existing paradigms of power to negotiate the new social order rooted in equality. Ailicia Ostriker remarks in *Stealing the Language:*

> …Old stories are changed utterly, by female knowledge of female experience, so that they can no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy. Instead… they are corrections; they are representations of what women find divine and demonic in themselves; they are retrieved images of what woman have collectively ad historically suffered; in some cases they are instructions for survival. (Ostriker 215)

The contemporary literature questioned the patriarchy that subjugated and dominated female characters and marginalized them ignoring their existence even. Susan Sellers, British author, observes in her work *Feminist Literary Theory* that, "Feminist rewriting can thus be thought of in two categories: as an act of demolition, exposing and detonating the stories that have hampered women, and as a task of construction–of bringing into being enabling alternatives" (sellers189).

The third chapter of this thesis aims to analyse the shift in the paradigms of power in the contemporary mythological retellings of *The Mahabharatha* from a feminist viewpoint by analysing the untold saga of a much underrated female character - Drishadvati, in the novel, *Bride of the Forest.* Through the character Madhavi, one whose sacrifice is hailed as the story of 'the salvation of kings by a maiden', the study aims to analyse how the feminist perspective in this mythological retelling has reinterpreted the power paradigms of patriarchy in *The Mahabharatha*. Hers is the first known story of a 'womb on rent' in our mythology. The story unravels the brutal attitude of the patriarchal world, how a woman's fertility was constantly bartered in exchange for horses. Though many feminist readings of *The Mahabharatha* have focused on the story of Draupadi, Madhavi has been ignored by all. Being brutally treated by the patriarchy, she demands a fair treatment in the light of feminism. This chapter aims at exploring the self-hood of the character and re-establishing the lost identity of a woman from an Indo –Centric and feminist perspective. Even though there are many powerful female characters in *The Mahabharatha*, like Ganga, Sathyavathi, Gandhari, Draupadi, only the heroic deeds of the male protagonists were highlighted in the traditional renditions.

In this study, the focus is on the muted feminine voices and the power of silence exhibited by the female characters, like Madhavi, the daughter of King Yayati, the arrogant queen Devayani, her friend Sharmista. Their sacrifice, quest

for liberation, and their nobility is analysed from a feminist consciousness. The perennial quest of the male for his immortality and desire of the patriarchal world to get sons are all discussed and criticized in this book. The resistance that these characters impose is their reaction against the system of patriarchy. For these women characters , the life in the palace was highly suffocating, they wish to go back to the forest to declare their liberation. Forest is the symbol of earthiness, the image of joy, freedom and serenity. Madhavi Mahadevan's book, *Bride of the Forest*, presents an unforgettable story from *The Mahabharatha*, the story of a bold and powerful woman who is extremely radical in rejecting the norms of patriarchy and by doing that she reclaims the identity as well as the agency.

The process of fictionalization affords authors the opportunity to direct attention towards facets of the initial narrative that may have been marginalized or underestimated, as opposed to merely sensationalizing the plot. A reimagining that seemingly simplifies the original work might, in fact, serve as a deliberate effort to underscore and censure injustices inherent in the source material but not sufficiently emphasized. This method of fictionalization grants writers the latitude of creative license to reframe and imbue existing stories with novel and discerning significances. Unlike the much hailed queen of the Pandavas, Madhavi's story is seen only as a fleeting reference in the epic. But like Draupadi ,Madhavi too is a powerful presence in the story as her story throws light on our understanding of notions like morality, sthridharma and ethics in the ancient and the contemporary

world. The story addresses the same question that Brodbeck and Black ask in their

book *Gender and Narrative in the The Mahabharatha* whether there is a,

"monolithic strīdharma for all women in all situations," or whether a woman's

"modes of speech and behaviour depend on whether one is a wife or widow,

daughter or mother, sister or friend, renunciate or queen" (Brodbeck and Black

16).

The story analyses how patriarchy cunningly utilizes their women in the

guise of dharma and how Madhavi is graceful, compassionate, generous and kind

even while she was aware of being exploited. She was unquestioningly submissive

to her father and because of that she was hailed as virtuous by the society. Her

character strongly poses a challenge to the patriarchy. Her "silence is something"

as Murakami remarks, "which we can actually hear"(Murakami 148). It echoes

the pains inflicted upon a woman by treating her as a material possession, yet she

embodies enormous strength enough to raise her father to salvation. The writer

portrays a new perspective of a woman whose silence is not her weakness but a

symbol of her enormous strength . Brodbeck and Black, researchers in the

Department of the Study of Religions at the School of Oriental and African

Studies, University of London, in their book *Gender and Narrative in the The*

Mahabharatha remarks, "…despite the undoubted patriarchal bias of the text, it

nevertheless offers ample opportunity for the exploration of female subjectivity

and the articulation of female agency, in ways that are both subversive and normative" (Brodbeck and Black 2).

Madhavi in *Bride of the Forest* is one of the unexplored, yet powerful female characters in *The Mahabharatha*. Readers know only about the plight of Draupadi, the injustice she had to face as a wife and as a queen. But the story of Madhavi is even more heart breaking. Pure injustice is inflicted on her by her father Yayati, who pawns her life to Gaalav. Gaalav, the disciple of Vishwamithra, accepts her even after realizing that it is an injustice and like Yudhishtira who pawns Draupadi in a game of dice, Gaalav for his selfish motives pawns Madhavi's life and her womb is given for rent. All four kings whose children she bore, fails to give justice to her. She is treated like a commodity, and is thrown away after her usage. Strangely enough, the paradox lies in the fact that these powerful men are reduced to nothing in front of her. Madhavi Mahadevan has wonderfully narrated the story in a feminist perspective and has done total justice to her character.

In her interview to *The Times of India*, the author was asked why she chose Yayati's daughter Drishadvati as the protagonist of her novel, she said:

The *Mahabharatha*, is always taken to be a story about men, heroes and war, and this story is somewhere in the backdrop. Yayathi's daughter Drishatvati's is a story of women's exploitation. But when one connects

the dots from the beginning to the end, one realizes that it is also a story of

her journey into self-hood, ultimately it is a story of redemption for herself

and for the entire class. (Mahadevan)

Bride of the Forest, is undoubtedly a feminist reading of an episode in the

great epic and the myth has been retold and re-viewed from the women's point of

view. Not a conventional feminist approach rather the author uncovers a mindful

journey of a woman in search of her own self. When the story unfolds, many

aspects and illusions of the patriarchy lay open and can understand that not only

women, but men also are victims of these patriarchal norms. The book tries to

project all kinds of social evils related to the system of patriarchy like how women

are subjugated and men are stereotyped. Drishadvadi embodies the spirit of a

modern feminist. Though she performs the duties imposed on her, she remains

powerful and claims her freedom. According to Alf Hiltebeitel, it is accurate to

assert that the female protagonists in the *The Mahabharatha* transcend the role of

passive subjects subjected to male desires or violence. Instead, they emerge as

dynamic agents who actively influence both the trajectory of the narrative and the

fates of the characters within it. The novel begins with Drishadvati's journey as a

child to meet her father Yayati for the first time. Her mother had declared

abruptly that she was going to live with her father. While leaving the forest, she

painfully asks a question to her mother to that, "Will I ever come back to this

forest?" (Mahadevan 5) for which her reply was, "No one leave entirely. There is

always a fragment to return to" (Mahadevan 6) and it can be a prophecy of the fate which she would encounter. Her journey begins from the womb of the forest and once she comes out of the forest ,her womb is exploited by the world outside and her journey ends when she comes back to the forest leaving the corrupt world behind. But throughout her journey, Drishadvati is seen as an image of a powerful woman whose will and strength has never been destroyed even after the brutal experiences she had to undergo. Bandlamudi's observation regarding Draupadi is equally applicable to Madhavi, as it delineates her dual role where she assumes the roles of both a victim and a triumphant figure simultaneously.

Madhavi.S.Mahadevan's novel traces the journey of Drishadvati in the form of a Bildungsroman -a journey from her childhood through adolescent to adulthood . In Metka Zupancic's interview with Divakaruni titled "The Power of Storytelling: An Interview with Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni", Divakaruni comments on placing Draupadi as the central character and says :

> …placing a woman in the center of your work is radical enough, giving her the humanity, allowing her to tell her story. It makes her into a hero because she is interpreting the world for us through her eyes. . . . She is the teller of everything, and everything in the book is what she has seen, heard, and interpreted, sometimes on a literal level, but sometimes through dream visions, which is also a part of the mythic tradition. (Zupancic 92)

In the same way Madhavi.S.Mahadevan has attempted a rereading of the epic through the eyes of Drishadvati and questions dharma and echoes the shift in the paradigms through her silences and sufferings. Feminist political movements have eliminated the traditional separation between the political and the aesthetic, incorporating the concept of a mythopoeic imagination into discursive spheres. This constitutes a significant endeavour to redefine the nature of female subjectivity by re-examining power dynamics and questioning the legitimacy of established power centers within the socio-cultural framework.

Drishadvati emerges from the womb of the forest as a timid girl trying to search for her identity. For that, first she had to meet her father, who is introduced as an "important man", "who owns everything" (Mahadevan 7). Here the writer poses the first notion of patriarchy – to be the owner of everything including the life of women. Owning something is a new concept for Drishadvati. She thinks about her forest where no one owns anything. Forest is symbolic of the life of a woman which owns nothing and gives everything. Everything in the forest belongs to the tribe or to nature. Even mother's milk is not only for one child, but any child who needs milk can have it from any mother of the tribe. So Drishadvati feels surprised when she hears ownership. She clearly understands that in this place "where one man owned everything, she was going to be all alone" (Mahadevan 8). The writer suggests the difference between life in the forest and that in the kingdom. Drishadvadi's journey in search of her identity and selfhood starts from

her journey to the palace of Yayati. But eventually she loses both her identity and self-worth. Life in the forest devoid of all the glitters of material pleasures is more natural and respects all forms of life. Here ownership is the first step of inequality. Drishadvati is like a migrant in the kingdom of Yayati and she is not welcomed there. The queen Devayani hates her just because she is an illegitimate child of Yayati. She is immediately sent to Sarmishta. From the forest her journey begins but with no choice on her destiny. She is reduced to a mere object that can be handed over to anyone as per the owner's wish. There was always a lack of motherly love in her life and this has set a new mould of independence and fearlessness to her life .

In the opinion of Dr. Pradip Bhattacharya ,the former IAS officer and a scholar of *The Mahabharatha* remarks in his book *Pancha Kanya: the five virgins of India's Epics:*

> The Kanya, . . . remains alone to the last . . . The absence of a mother's nurturing, love, modelling and handing down of tradition leaves the kanya free to experiment, unbound by shackles of taught norms, to mould herself according to her inner light, to express and fulfil her femininity, achieving self-actualisation on her own terms. (Bhattacharya 106)

The theme of patriarchal subjugation and objectification is also reflected in the story of Devayani and Sharmishta which is interwoven with the story of

Madhavi. Devayani is a mere commodity used by Kachh to acquire the

Mritasanjivani for devas. Being deceived by Kachh, she fasted until death. Even

this news is welcomed by the society as it is expected from a woman to choose

death if a man deserts her. It says, "Devayani had chosen death by grief, her name

acquired a certain morbid glamor. Starving suited her" (Mahadevan 57). For

Devayani, it is her revenge to Kachh and to her father Sukracharya, who is

partially responsible for her grief. "It gave her temporary power that she defied her

father with her refusal to take in even a morsel….." (Mahadevan 58-59).

Devayani's grief and her decision to fast until death are portrayed as her

greatest strength and protest rather than her weakness. In feminist revisionist

myth making ordinary patriarchal concept of a woman as weak and sentimental, is

always subverted and is presented as their greatest strength. Readers also feel that

power of Devayani when she says 'no' to even the most delicious food items for

days. Devayani was living an isolated life in her ashram, being a victim of the

patriarchal notions and the author says:

> She had been brought up to believe that to become a wife and mother was
>
> to achieve the highest social standing a woman could hope for. She, the
>
> daughter of an illustrious guru, would become the wife of a sensitive noble
>
> and handsome young Brahmin who would surely make his mark in the
>
> world. (Mahadevan 65)

The identity of a woman is closely associated with her home and her homely duties. Home becomes an integral part of her life and her duties, especially motherhood, is glorified and is almost given a seat of sanctity in the society. The dharma of a woman according to *Manusmriti* is, "Women have been created for the purpose of serving husbands. With that goal in view, they should act in a manner agreeable to their husbands and look after their households with utmost care" (Doniger 147).

The prevailing patriarchal norms have rigidly defined the roles and expectations for women, relegating them to a subordinate position in society. Women are confined within the boundaries of domesticity, considered to be shadows of men, with their ultimate achievements measured solely by their roles as wives and mothers. Devayani, like many others, becomes a victim of this restrictive ideology, and her grief stems from the realization of her limited agency within this framework. After a conflict with Sharmishta, Devayani finds herself in a well, from which Yayati rescues her. Her subsequent demand for marriage to Yayati, despite her lack of knowledge about him, highlights her desire to seek an alternative path in a society that offers her limited options. Yayati's attempts to dissuade her prove futile, underscoring the profound impact of societal norms on individuals' choices and aspirations. This portrayal in the narrative serves to shed light on the complexities of gender roles and the struggle for agency within a

patriarchal context. She says, "Marriage for every woman is a gamble, ….no one can say how it will turn out" (Mahadevan70).

Devayani's decision to marry a man she barely knows is emblematic of the societal expectations and constraints imposed upon her by the prevailing norms. Her belief that marriage to Yayati is her redemption stems from the notion perpetuated by patriarchal ideals, wherein a woman's worth and salvation are closely tied to her marital status. The criteria of a mere touch of hands serving as the basis for choosing a life partner reflects the absurdity of such beliefs, critiquing the egocentric nature of patriarchy that positions men as saviours and women as passive victims in need of rescue.

Revisionist retellings of mythology refer to the reimagining and reinterpretation of traditional myths and narratives with the aim of challenging, questioning, or subverting established norms, perspectives, or power dynamics. These retellings often emerge as a response to evolving societal values, cultural shifts, or a desire to give voice to marginalized characters and perspectives, this aspect of the narrative acquires a nuanced exploration, elucidating the irony and ridicule in the idea of marriage as a means of redemption for women. The retellings effectively challenge and expose the inherent flaws within patriarchal constructs that seek to control women's destinies, denying them agency and relegating them to subservient roles. The portrayal of Devayani's predicament serves as a powerful commentary on the restrictive and oppressive nature of

gender expectations, prompting readers to critically examine the pervasive influence of patriarchal ideologies on societal perceptions and norms.

Injustice happens to Sarmishta as well. When Devayani makes an unjust demand to send Sarmishta along with her to the palace as her servant, Shukracharya uses his power to do it and the king Vrushaparva yields to this unjust demand and decides the fate of his daughter. These two men do not think about Sarmishta. That a father is the owner of his daughter's life and the daughter has no right to express her will, decides Sarmishta's life. From the life of a princess, she is stooped to the level of a servant, to obey the command. Here Sarmishta's fate reminds that the dharma of a daughter is to help her father uphold his dharma even if she must sacrifice her life. But Sarmistha emerges to be powerful and she takes revenge on sacrificing her life in the name of dharma by living her life with Yayati.

Devayani tries her best to rearrange her life and to pretend she is a highly successful woman as a queen, as a wife and as a mother. In the society these are norms and standards to decide the success and failure of a person. But the patriarchal society has no means or standard to measure a woman's happiness. That question, whether she is happy or not itself is absurd. Devayani, proves herself to be a brilliant actress in the show called marriage. The author says:

…passion, which many believe essential to a happy marriage, had fled

permanently from Devayani's life. It had been replaced by an asset more

important to the day today running of a domestic set up! Reason. Thus, as

marriages of, Devayani's union with Yayati bore all the hallmark of

success. Its defining feature was stability. The running of the kingdom was

to Devayani, an extension of the management of her household.

(Mahadevan 81)

She was following her dharma as a wife as proposed by Hindu scriptures by

dedicating herself to her husband with unwavering devotion, ensuring the well-

being of the family through childbirth, and proficiently overseeing the affairs of

the household with both efficiency and grace. The ruler of the kingdom was

Yayati, however one who ruled the kingdom was Devayani. Women, even though

intelligent, powerful, and skilled, are forced to remain in the shadow of her

husbands. Yayati indulges in all kinds of pleasurable activities and establishes an

extra marital affair with Sarmishta. In a patriarchal society, the concept of

dharma, chastity, morality, household duties all are to be kept up by the women,

not men. Devayani comes to meet Sharmishta when she becomes a mother.

Devayani had no clue about the parentage of Sharmishta's child. But after their

meeting, a Devayani gets a strange nightmare and she experiences depression:

….. night after night, the heft of her days and the secret life that sluggishly

flowed below them slowly stifled her. Her tortured cries rang out, jerking

her upwards from the pillow. In those pain wracked moments, she asked

herself this question: will I never heal? And the answer came in the form

of another question. How can I heal when the most vital part of me is

lifeless? (Mahadevan 87)

Devayani's womanhood was not honoured. Yayati's indifference to her and

the lack of love, passion, and desire, has turned Devayani to a lifeless being. But

Yayati's secret relationship with Sarmishta was becoming more intense and

intimate. The relation was revenge and redemption to Sarmishta as she was left

abandoned by her father. Yayati knew that Devayani was a good wife, but he felt,

"…..marriage is a sacrament that binds us for life, but it kills desire" (Mahadevan

90).

In the patriarchal landscape, distinct and disparate notions of justice prevail

for men and women. While men enjoy the liberty to live as they please, women

are bound by the strict observance of dharma, compelled to safeguard the honour

of their fathers, husbands, and families at the cost of their own desires. Societal

customs and traditions serve as chains that confine women, subjugating them to

prescribed roles and responsibilities. The characters of Devayani and Sarmishta

exemplify two contrasting facets of womanhood: one fettered by the burdensome

duties imposed under the guise of dharma, wherein personal inclinations and

desires are subordinated, and the other embracing a life of autonomy, unfettered

by societal norms.

Through the portrayal of these contrasting female characters, the author presents a profound exploration of woman's experiences and choices within the prevailing patriarchal order. The narrative highlights the stark contrast between the two lives, suggesting that the latter, where personal fulfilment is pursued unabashedly, embodies a more gratifying existence. This depiction resonates as a poignant critique of the gendered expectations imposed on women, urging readers to question the oppressive norms that curtail their agency and potential for self-fulfilment. The narrative celebrates the significance of self-love, underlining it as a powerful form of love that can lead individuals, particularly women, to a sense of profound fulfilment and liberation from societal constraints. By juxtaposing these two contrasting perspectives of womanhood, the author sheds light on the pressing need for gender equality and the dismantling of archaic norms, advocating for a world where women can unapologetically embrace their desires and aspirations. Devayani discovers Yayati's secret affair with Sarmishta and the truth literally shatters her. She reports the matter to Sukracharya on his visit to the palace and declares, "….I can no longer stay with this man who does not treat me with dignity " (Mahadevan 98). Devayani rises to her power and strikes back by regaining her identity and agency and by renouncing the dharma of an obedient wife .Yayati was terrified by this sudden reaction from Devayani. He could not believe his ears and after the initial agony, he regains his male ego and begins an inward search in the patriarchal dictum to support all male atrocities performed in the society and comes up with an appropriate one and says to Sukracharya, "…the

wife say that a man who refuses a woman, when she is in her reason, is guilty of the sin of slaying embryo…..I wanted to save myself from that sin and of course, save her virtue too" (Mahadevan 99).

The furious Sukracharya curses Yayati to suffer from old age before time so he will not indulge in earthly pleasures. On his continuous plea for pardon, Sukracharya gives him an option by allowing him to exchange his old age with any of his sons. Yayati being selfish, begs his sons to exchange their youth with him, and only Puru, Sarmishta's youngest son agrees to help him. In our society, every woman will suffer the displacement in the name of marriage. But in the case of Drishadvati and Sarmishta, this displacement is forcibly implemented much earlier by their parents. Drishadvati, longs for the freedom of her forest, misses how she used to enjoy her life there. When Drishadvati comes of age, Sarmishta advises about her womanly duties and the importance of giving birth to a male child. She takes herself as an example and says that she was blessed by the birth of her three sons. Drishatvati could not understand why the society considers only the birth of sons as something auspicious, and she hears Sarmishta saying the same comment, "sons are what a man dreams of" (Mahadevan 117). Then she asks her doubts, "why does he dream of sons? Why not daughters?" (Mahadevan 117). For this question, Sarmishta tells her that one of the core concepts of patriarchy which can be seen in all texts related to mythology, culture and history or India. She replies:

Of all the things a man pursues in his life, a name is the most valuable.

Name is power. Name is blood. Name is flow. Genealogy connects the

visible to the invisible. It is the line drawn, segment by segment, from

father to son to grandson. A straight line is preferable….A fence against

non – existence. Man needs the fence because immortality is denied to

him. He is not God. Thus he hungers for sons. (Mahadevan 117)

The pathetic fate of a woman in our society is inextricably woven with the
ambition and desire of the man in her life. She has no life and desire of her own.
The strange contradiction of her life is that her womb is needed for procreation.
She can give birth to a son. He motherhood is respected only when she gives birth
to sons. At the time of marriage, elders give her the blessings "puthravati bhava."
She helps her man in his pursuit of imperishable name and honour by giving birth
to sons. Women are an instrument to be used to fulfil this wishes of men.
Drishadvati could visualize her future life and with much disappointment she asks
the perennial question, "A man wants sons, but what does a woman want?"(
Mahadevan 118). In our society there is no space for a woman to ask questions.
She obeys her man, follows the culture and tradition. She cannot dream, question
or decide her own future. What she can do is to obey and follow. Sarmishta
answers her question in a wryly manner saying:

…to men, women are young or they are old, other than that we are just

women, undifferentiated. All must obey their rules. Our value lies in what

we can do for them. Warm their beds, bear their cons, care for their

families, and extend their influence in the world through the connection we

bring. How can we want anything different from what they want for us? To

breath, to breed. These are all that gives meaning to a woman's life. To

become a mother, the mother of sons, that is her highest destiny.

(Mahadevan 118)

Sarmishta just hopes that one day a woman will be strong enough to ask

this pertinent question. What does she want in her life and will begin to live a life

that she desires and will dare to dream for her. Feminine reading of mythological

texts probes into such relevant questions and problems which still remain

unchanged even after centuries. Patriarchy has imposed a social construct called

virginity to control the sexuality of women. This is prevalent in many countries

including India. In all mythological texts, one can find the reference to virginity.

The purity of a woman is decided based on her virginity. When Draupati was

forced to accept all five siblings as her husbands, she was given the special boon

that when she finishes a yearlong life with one husband, her virginity will be

restored before she starts her life with her next husband. In *The Mahabharatha*,

the chastity and purity of a woman is determined by her virginity. The same boon

is given to Drishadvati too. The wandering ascetic who visits Sarmista's house

meets Drishadvati and while giving her the customary blessings, he tells her she

has no need of his blessing ,"Putravathi bhava" because she will give birth to

sons. So instead he gives her a strange boon. After giving birth to every son, her virginity will be restored. Drishadvati, does not understand the meaning of such a strange boon. This proves how much patriarchal society gave importance to the virginity of a woman. No one talks about the purity of a man. No one has ever thought about it either. Because for society, man is always pure, no matter what kind of life he leads.

Drishadvati's fate comes in the form of Gaalav. The fate was decided when Gaalav, the Brahmin and disciple of sage Viswamithra tries to commit suicide as he could not give his *gurudakshina* of hundred *Shyamkarni* horses. He thought that his life was destroyed and he was doomed as he could not fulfil his guru's demand. But Garud meets him and tells him that there might be a way to attain his wish. Garud along with Gaalav fly to the eastern region to try their luck and on the way they take a rest on a mountain. It was a deserted place, but they met a tall lean woman named Shandili. She introduces herself; however Garud and Gaalav wanted to know more about her – whose mother she is, whose wife she is, whose relative she is – as if a woman's name is not enough to claim her identity. But she says nothing leaving Garud and Gaalav feel something mysterious about her. Gaalav wondered how she could live there alone and remarks, "It was unthinkable for a respectable woman to live alone" (Mahadevan 145). A woman is not expected to live a lonely life. She should be taken care of and should be in the protection and company of a man. Gaalav repeatedly ask her, in whose company

she was living there and also explains the danger of living alone in such a place. Then she says, "I know how to look after myself" (Mahadevan 147).

This strong answer from Shandili was a shock to Garud and Gaalav. Garud immersed in thoughts and he feels more and more suspicious about her. But when he woke up from the thoughts, he was shocked to discover that his body was shortened and he has lost all his strength. He understood that something bad has happened to him because of the bad thought and suspicion about Shandili. In utter helplessness, Garud burst out, "We cannot wait to get away from here. How could anyone leave alone a woman as beautiful as she is, lives here without any thought of safety? It is not appropriate for a well born woman to live without a male…" (Mahadevan 154).

These words from Garud echo the basic attitude of a patriarchal society towards women. This institutionalized practice embedded in our society encourages and ensures the subjugated and dependent lives of women. A woman has no right to live an independent life, alone. In the guise of protection, from all dangers, men in reality are ensuring her subjugation and subordination. According to *Manusmriti:*

> Men must make their women dependent day and night, and keep under
> their own control those who are attached to sensory objects. Her father
> guards her in childhood, her husband guards her in youth, and her sons

guard her in old age. A woman is not fit for independence. (Buhler IX: 2-3, 197)

Garud wanted to protect Shandili because that is how he is also trained in this world. Shandili rebukes this idea and says:

You believe that there is something shameful about a woman who has no man to protect her….Perhaps you also believe that a woman cannot leave her home…I am not a destitute widow, I may not have a son, but I am no object of pity. Nor does my living alone imply that I am of easy virtue. I prefer solitude because I have chosen the path of liberation. (Mahadevan156)

The author here challenges the age-old patriarchal beliefs about a woman, the idea about her incapability, dependency and subordination. The woman has to live her life only in the shade of her husband and her only choice is to become a dutiful wife and a fertile mother who can give birth to sons. In ancient India, the act of practicing *'Sati'* or widow burning reaffirmed the idea that women are not entitled to live after her husband's death. Even if she lives, her life would be miserable and meaningless. Therefore she is forced by the society to burn herself in her husband's funeral pyre and thereby make her name immortal as a virtuous woman. Shandili challenges this patriarchal idea and claims that a woman has the power to protect herself and the path to liberation for man and woman is solitude.

She also warns Garud, "…Don't judge a woman for how she looks or the way she lives – if it does not fit your ideas of a woman." (Mahadevan 156). This advice given to Garud is advice to society . Feminist revisionist mythmaking affirms the individuality and agency of women . Instead of hailing the dharma of a man to protect a woman and dharma of a woman to obey her man and depend on him , the retellings of mythologies upholds woman as an independent being capable enough to live her life alone and to protect herself.

Garud gets this kind of an idea about women being helpless from her mother Vinita who always laments about her slavery. She, along with her sister Kadru was married off to Rishi Kashyap, who had several wives. They were also mere puppets in the hands of their father Daksh and their husband, Kashyap. One day Rishi Kashyap simply declared that he was done with his romantic life and discarded his wives as if they were nothing to him. Vinata and Kadru were terrified by the verdict and says:

> We were fearful of the future. One male of any age is enough to be the
> guardian of a dozen women, but without a male, a dozen women of all
> ages are not considered as sufficient to get on with this world. Though
> widowhood is a curse, even a widow is respectable as long as she has a
> son. Then how were we to live without a husband or sons?
> (Mahadevan 148)

This lament of Vinita and Kadru echoes the reason for the plight of every woman in a patriarchal society. They are the victims of their belief or what they were made to believe, that they cannot live an independent life. Even if they dare to live independently, they will be treated with disrespect and will be a social outcast. As explained in *Manusmrithi*, in teenage a woman should be protected by her father, in youth, she should be protected by her husband and in old age, she should be protected by her son. Women cannot be let free. *Manusmrithi* advocates equality for women and stresses that women are the most precious element of a society to be protected. But patriarchy has misinterpreted the idea and believed that a woman cannot live independently. This patriarchal belief forces Vinita and Kadru to demand sons from Rishi Kashyap when he leaves them. Vinita implanted this belief in the mind of her son Garud and this is the reason he thinks low about Shandili. Shandili teaches Garud a big lesson which actually echoes the feminist perspective that claims freedom from these outdated beliefs.

Garud and Gaalav approached Yayati with the demand of giving them enough money to buy eight hundred Shyamkarni horses. But the financial condition of Yayati was bad, and his pride did not allow him to admit that. Instead, he makes an intelligent move offering his daughter instead. All female characters in this novel face the same injustice from their fathers. Marriage is the most important decision in a man's life, but a woman has no choice in the decision other than accepting what her father says. She is just given off as a

commodity which her father possesses. Yayati, who has not even seen his daughter's face properly, or has given her any fatherly love and care, takes the greatest decision of her life. To escape the curse of a Brahmin, he uses her as a tool. He boasts about his daughter's qualities, " For her beauty alone, devas, asuras and rajas have solicited her. Moreover, she is well trained in the household arts and has a sweet adjusting temperament" (Mahadevan 162).

Patriarchal stereotypes and gender roles are expressed through Yayati's words. When a woman comes of age, her father gives her to another man like a property and from that moment onwards she is expected to behave like a multi – tasking, mature woman. This is her dharma to obey her father without questioning him. Drupadi in Yajnaseni also faces the same fate , "To honour Father's vow if my dharma as a woman was harmed, let that be so. . . . Even if my dharma was destroyed, my father's dharma must be preserved" (Ray 46).

Until time of her marriage, a woman is given training in her family. Her own family will advertise her womanly qualities; so she will be sold easily in the marriage market. She would be trained to do the household chores, to behave in a pleasing manner and above all, to obey her husband. Madhavi too is sold to Gaalav by her father Yayati. Here Yayati does another crime which no father has done in the history of mankind. He gives his daughter to another man not as a partner, but as *'daan'* and tells him:

….what makes her truly invaluable to Kshatriya families is prediction in her horoscope – that she will have sons who are destined to become chakravarti samrats … thus she will enrich four royal lineages. If that were to become known, kings will offer entire kingdom as bride price…

(Mahadevan 162)

 Yayati makes his intention very clear. He is not at all bothered about his daughter, her desires or her life. He wants to have four grandsons who will be chakravartis and thus his lineage will grow all around the country. He longs for power and name. For that he gives his daughter to Gaalav and tells him to give her as daan to mighty kings without sons. Thus Gaalav can accumulate the money he needed to buy Shyamkarni horses. Gaalav, though realizing that it was injustice to that girl, had no other choice other than accepting it. The way she was handed over was equally brutal. Dhishadvati was caught by the king's men, they bound her hand and foot and she was gagged and blindfolded. She resists as much as she can but was of no use. She is treated worse than an animal and is handed over to Gaalav. Galaav, not able to adjust with the new responsibility of taking care of a woman, gives freedom to Madhavi to go back to her home. But for Madhavi it was a much awaited moment of exile. She wanted to be free. Even in her father's home she was a foreigner with no freedom or life. Madhavi finds freedom while partaking in this trade . For her the life outside her home is much better than the subjugation she faces at home . Here one can notice a paradigm shift from woman as a homely

being to woman as a social being . Madhavi knows that she is not chained in a proper marriage with Gaalav .So she doesnot have to be chained in the dharma of a woman and she chooses her life with Gaalav and is ready to face her fate .

A woman experiences marginalization in her own home. From her childhood, she will be trained like an animal to learn all womanly qualities that will make her fit into another family and will be constantly reminded that she is not a member of her home and one day she must leave everything and will be sent to her husband's home. So she will live as an outsider in her own house. For Madhavi, Gaalav was like a door to freedom from this domestic torture. A woman is much stronger and powerful than a man and patriarchy actually fears this strength in woman. Madhavi's mental strength and endurance is symbolic of the power that women exhibit in mythological retellings. Madhavi along with Gaalav did not believe that he could get eight hundred shyamkarni horses by giving her to mighty kings. Deeply frustrated, Gaalav again thinks about committing suicide. But Madhavi, sensing his despair, stands by him and tries to console him. She understands that Gaalav, like her, is a victim of fate. When Gaalav was stuck and terrified in front of the rules imposed by the society, Madhavi, with her immense strength, consoles him and reassures him she will give birth to sons who will become kings. With much contempt, she speaks about father Yayati and remembers how he deceived her and Gaalav. But when Gaalav

proposes to send her back, she resists. She feels that when released from a prison she was ready to do anything for him to enjoy that new found freedom.

Assisted by her half-brother, Madhavi expeditiously reaches Ayodhya, undergoing a transformation befitting her newfound status as a princess. However, King Haryashva faces an unsettling predicament - his lineage is bereft of a male heir, crucial for succession to the throne. This scenario exemplifies the clear lens through which a patriarchal society perceives women. In a disheartening turn of events, Madhavi's father, Gaalav, offers her to King Haryashva as an exchange for the much-desired eight hundred Shyamkarni horses.

In this portrayal, the notion of a woman's agency is stripped away, reducing her to a possession that can be transferred from one man to another, perpetuating a sense of male entitlement over female lives. Gaalav's act of bartering Madhavi, without considering her own wishes or desires, highlights the disregard for women's autonomy in a society governed by patriarchal norms. Even more disconcerting is Yayati's role in this narrative, for he not only consents to Gaalav's proposition but also encourages the king to further bestow Madhavi upon other rulers to fulfil a prophecy. This depiction underscores the immense injustice faced by Madhavi, as her father and society as a whole prioritize male heirs and disregard her own well-being and aspirations. The incident also draws a stark contrast between the treatment of male and female children, where a daughter's life and choices are often shaped by the desires and decisions of the men around

her. *The Mahabharatha's* original text in Adi parva it further amplifies the oppression endured by Madhavi, as it reveals Yayati's act of compelling her to abandon her husband and marry one of her own half-brothers, solely to satisfy his yearning for a male heir. For this demand Madhavi protests and says:

> O king, the ancient practice of the virtuous is to give the daughter to a person of equal status, but never to one of unequal status. It behooves you not, O king, to command me otherwise." But the king, disregarding the words of Madhavi, replied unto her, 'What thou sayest, O Madhavi, is not agreeable to the ways of kings. Do thou, therefore, obey me in this. (Sukthankar Section LXXXVII)

In the name of dharma, Yayati has inflicted pure adharma on his daughter. Haryashva, along with the royal astrologer, does a thorough checking on the property they were about to buy. Madhavi had to stand naked in front, for the royal astrologer to certify her virginity and her child bearing capacity. Then Haryashva invites Gaalav to consider the two hundred shyamkarni horses he would get once she gives him a son. He also advises him to give her to other kings also to obtain enough horses. Myths always represent the heart and soul of the society; so Madhavi bartered for horses reflects the nature of the society where women have no right to speak, to decide and even to object to violating her body. To the confused Gaalav, thinking about the feelings of Madhavi, Haryashva reassures him saying, "….I am a practical man, munikumar Gaalav. We both

know that we need this transaction to go through. There is too much at stake. Are we going to talk about the maiden's feelings now?" (Mahadevan 196).

K.R.Jagannathan's in his book *Draupadi: The Fire-Born Princess* says about Draupadi, Yajnaseni stands forth as the quintessential figure of victimhood, a woman who has endured profound injustice, bias, and degradation at the hands of men, both individually and collectively. She embodies the plight of the oppressed, the persecuted, and the subjugated, perennially subjected to male aggression and dominance. This comment on Draupadi can be applied to Madhavi also as both have experienced same emotional torture of being forced to accept more than one man without their consent.

 Kate Millet rather observes in her book *Sexual Politics*:

> Patriarchy's chief institution is the family. It is both a mirror of a larger
> society; a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole. The family is
> organized around a sexual hierarchy, with clear distinctions between male
> and female roles, ascribed respectively to the public and private spheres.
> The family is not a political institution, but its intimate structure and ideals
> of behavior are grounded in power relationships that are fundamentally
> political in their implications. (Millet 33)

The hierarchy within the family is marked, and men control everything in the life of a woman- like her choices, her mobility, her sexuality, reproduction. In

the story also Yayati hands over his daughter to Gaalav, Gaalav gives her to Haryashva and a deal is done. No one ever talks about Madhavi's feelings. Gaalav's conscience pricks him while doing this injustice, yet he thinks, "….I cannot think of that. There can be no space in my life for her – if I want to make a place for myself in this world" (Mahadevan197). This reflects the attitude of the male dominant world towards a female. To add on, Haryashva's words about her reveal what patriarchy expects from a woman, "She is no doubt trained to bear her responsibility. Remind her that she is bound to you now by her father's word, that she must uphold the honour invested in her" (Mahadevan 197).

A woman is expected to obey her father's words and her husband's demands without saying a word against that. Like Yudhishtira who pawns his wife in the game of dice, Gaalav without asking her opinion, pawns her repeatedly to several kings to obtain eight hundred shyamkarni horses. Madhavi gets upset when she hears this. That was an insult not just to her woman hood, but to her motherhood too. After using her to get an heir to the throne, she is thrown to the hands of another king with the same yearnings. With much anger and frustration, she told Gaalav, "….My father gave me to you, but he at least did what was within his rights. What right do you have to pawn me repeatedly?" (Mahadevan 200). She reveals how much the king and the royal astrologer ill-treated her in the guise of examining her purity, without even considering her as a human. She explained everything that happened there to Gaalav and demanded, "My body, it's

mine, she said. What else does one have? No one should take it from me. It is

sinful. Don't do this to me."(Mahadevan 201) Feminist retellings projects woman

aware of her rights and is ready to fight for it. Susan Bordo, the American

philosopher, remarks, "The body is always already political, because it is always

already a site of struggle, a site of power relations, a site of resistance" (Susan

143). The body is not just a physical entity but a cultural and social one that

reflects and reproduces power dynamics and social norms. By recognizing the

political dimension of the body, we can better understand and challenge how it is

used to reinforce and perpetuate inequality and oppression. Here Madhavi

unabashedly reclaims the power over her body.

This is the voice of every woman, their plea, in this patriarchal society. Her

body is continuously violated to attain selfish motives. It is as if she has no right

over her own body. They were always treated as a saleable property. But Madhavi

possesses immense feminine strength to face even this kind of an adversity with

courage and tries to boost confidence of lamenting Gaalav, who by that time has

ended his life. She faces the fate with dignity and courage. Patriarchy believes that

women are weak and have no courage to face anything and she needs to be

protected. However in reality, women are much stronger than men and Madhavi

proves it. She accepts her faith and saves Gaalav too.

In the traditional system of marriage, women must satisfy her husband.

Though bought as a commodity, Madhavi is no exemption. Maids clean her body,

she was properly adored with ornaments and was properly decorated to become the king's favourite. Supriya, the experienced royal courtesan gives her advice regarding, how to satisfy the king on bed. When Madhavi asks her how can she invite him wholeheartedly when she did not love him, Supriya mockingly says, " Love!... that's the fatal disease for women like us. We must be all things to all men" (Mahadevan 207).

In the male dominated world, there is no space for the feelings of a woman. She satisfies her husband and to obey the orders of all men in her life. But women while obeying all these orders are constantly longing for love. 'Love' is that one disease with which she is exploited by all men she encounters. Madhavi, though She is the daughter of Yayati, and gets the same treatment in bed. Like any other ordinary woman, she too had no other choice than to obey the men, thinking about the ways to satisfy him and act according to their orders. No one is bothered whether she is enjoying the act or whether she has any demands of her own or not, or whether she too is enjoying or not.

According to Doniger, *The Mahabharatha* shows a much respectful attitude towards polyandrous women especially while depicting characters like Draupadi and Madhavi and says:

The text took shape during a cosmopolitan era that encouraged the

loosening of constraints on women in both court and village. The king used

women archers for his bodyguards in the palace . . . Women served as spies. Female ascetics moved around freely. Prostitutes paid taxes. The state provided supervised work, such as spinning yarn, for upper-caste women who had become impoverished, widowed, or deserted, and for aging prostitutes. If a slave woman gave birth to her master's child, both she and the child were immediately released from slavery. Thus women were major players during this period, and the The Mahabharatha may reflect this greater autonomy. (Doniger 133)

 "In this world the rules are made by men for men. When it comes to sharing her bed, even a well – born woman has no alternative; while she wants him or not, she must submit her body to her lord and only to him" (Mahadevan208).   The man can have multiple partners and pleasurable experiences, but women are forbidden from such pleasurable deeds. The wife brings a mortal code of ethics and authenticity to a marriage. But men lose all passion when they feel they are trapped in fidelity. So they go in search of other women and with them they enjoy shared passion and pleasure. Supriya also comments, "…without mutual pleasure, what is it but a degradation of one's body" (Mahadevan 208).

In marriage what a woman experiences is usually the degradation of body. Her body is constantly misused and her feelings are dried up. Yet she has no other choice. However, a man has a lot of choices awarded by society as his natural

right. Supriya also gives her advice which a patriarchal society gives to all women, "….try to be satisfied with all that destiny has given you". (Mahadevan 210). The paradox lies in the fact that a woman's fate is intricately woven within the fabric of a society predominantly governed by men. In an attempt to provide solace, Haryashva endeavours to console her by invoking the notion of destiny. Despite her futile resistance, he engages in a physical union with her, driven by the aspiration for procreation. However, this interaction lacks the essential element of 'love,' rendering it a soulless, purely physical act. She says, "….though I offered myself up to him, it was an empty package, the gift missing. Like a body at its own funeral, I was only present. My soul had made its escape. It had fled the scene" (Mahadevan 212). Here, the author, through the analogy of Madhavi, is trying to analyze what happens in a marriage and how women are treated publicly and in private. Even a woman of high birth is ill-treated by the patriarchy. The family status, education, beauty, wealth, nothing can change the condition of women. Royal astrologer also tries to molest and take advantage of Madhavi's helplessness.

The only time when a woman is treated well with some love and respect is when she conceives. Madhavi, too, gets special treatment from the palace. It was because she was a carrier of a special gift – a son. Madhavi too enjoyed her growth as a mother. But hers and her son's fate was already decided by the king. It was promised that the baby would be given to the third queen and all

arrangements were made. Nobody bothers about Madhavi's feelings. Not only her

woman hood, but also her motherhood was disrespected. She was a carrier of the

future king. The mother tempts her to run away from that palace with the baby.

But for a woman, in this male created world, there is no place for a woman to

hide. She consoles herself and thinks, " One day he will understand….Men's

dreams are built on woman's pain"(Mahadevan 229).

Gaalav returns to Ayodhya right in time to take back his property and his

next deal is ready with the king of Kashi. Haryashav showers her with gifts,

ornaments, and gold. But for Drishadvati, a deeply wounded mother and woman,

nothing is enough to compensate for her loss. She rejects everything and orders,

"Take it all back…Tell Haryashav from me that he will remain in my debt forever

because he cannot reimburse me" (Mahadevan 233). Madhavi here regains her

agency and her attitude shifts from the voiceless to the voiced. This reaction of

Madhavi echoes a paradigm shift which can be found in the feminist mythological

retellings. The notion that women are silly beings who can be bought by

showering her with gifts and can be easily pleases after committing all injustices

to her is questioned by Madhavi and she maintains her self-respect by rejecting

those gifts from the king. Here Madhavi once again claims the supremacy of

women over men by reminding the fact that only a woman can give a heir to the

throne and even mighty kings should be indebted to women for that. Patriarchy

may try to subjugate women in all possible ways but the fact they need woman to

get their heirs and they too have come out of the wombs will always remind them of their inferior position to women. Gaalav feels angry at this, that decision making is not a woman's choice. It's all for a man to decide, including the treasures of a woman. But Madhavi remains adamant in her decision and here a shift in the sthridharma of blindly obeying her lord is subverted.

Madhavi is then given to Divodas, the King of Kasi. Even gods are jealous of him. Even Mahadeva had to leave kasi due to his order. He possesses a lot of magical powers. But when Gaalav finds that Divodas could also offer him two hundred horses, he becomes angry and tries to walk away. Madhavi, sensing his arrogance towards her, refuses to follow him. She feels that instead of showing courtesy towards her for what she had done for him, he considers it as his right, as an owner has on his property. She feels, "yes I am angry too, I no longer care. If he needs any more help from me, he will have to ask for it. I am not going to make it easy for him "(Mahadevan 250).

Here one can find Madhavi demanding equality and respect from Gaalav which shows she could overcome the rules imposed by the patriarchy. Gaalav , like any other man in a patriarchal society, cannot tolerate a woman's disobedience and walks away immediately. Madhavi does not understand this attitude of Gaalav. Till that moment, though she had to face a lot of sufferings, she never held him responsible for it. Instead, she always felt he was more unfortunate than her. Madhavi, painfully realises that Gaalav is using her and she

laments, "We are in this together I had thought. He suffers and I suffer for him. We have to see each other through. Now I know that we have nothing in common. He is only interested in using me "(Mahadevan 251). Without even looking at her, he just left the palace. He has no sympathy for her, ignoring her having been suffering everything for him. Madhavi feels a sort of disgust towards her own existence. Whoever belonged to her; her mother, father, and Gaalav, everyone did the same injustice to her showing the same indifference to her and thinks, " Am I not living this curse for him? Far from any sense of belonging, I have not received even a word of sympathy from him. Why him alone? They have all used me. I have all used me. I have ceased to exist in everyone's eyes. I am nothing other than a mare to be bred"(Mahadevan 252).

Patriarchy exploits women completely. They use women whenever needed in the way they like and then throw them away. Their condition is worse than animals. She understands well that the kings she met only need her womb – she was merely a womb on lease. Her identity, her existence, her dreams had no place in society. Her only destiny is to fulfil the promise of Gaalav to fulfil the dreams of redemption of great kings by providing them sons, to become the mother of great kings. She painfully realizes that, "In this land of heroes, I will remain nameless, invisible. But isn't the fate of other royal women too?" (Mahadevan 252). Self -realisation is the first step towards liberation. Madhavi, instead of

taking all injustices in the name of dharma, can recognize the right and the wrong. This realisation actually helps her to grow out of the set boundaries.

Divodas, the second king to whom Madhavi's womb is given to produce the heir, is more a romantic soul compared to Haryashva. Madhavi could easily connect with him and communicate with him. He is satisfied with Madhavi as he could find understanding and respect in her. According to him a royal woman should possess those qualities. Madhavi slowly learns that possession and pleasure are the two things that a man seeks in a woman. Each man in her life taught her the same story in different ways. Even her child would be hers only for nine months. Once the child comes into the world, the baby will be known in its father's name – he will carry the name and the social status of his father. Madhavi slowly understands that in a patriarchal society a woman owns nothing, not even herself. " I am just goods in a transactions that is entirely between men ……What sets me apart – from those other women, who take the seven vows – is that my womb is on lease." (Mahadevan 264).

Drishadvati gave a son – Pratardan – to Divodas. Before she could get out of fatigue and tiredness of giving birth, Maharani of Aryavarta comes to take her soon along with her, to her kingdom. This time Gaalav is unjust to Madhavi, and he does not appear before her, and explains her nothing and takes his payment in advance for giving her womb for rent. She is not given even a few days of rest. Divodas was her ideal man. He tried to protect her, gave her the ideal life that a

woman would always long for. Though for a few days, Divodas was a perfect husband to Drishadvati, on the day of completing one year as per the contract with Gaalav, Madhavi was taken to the next king – Ushiner . Ushiner is old when compared to Divodas or Haryashva. His old soul is filled with grief for his dead son Devaan. At first he thinks that he cannot make a son through Madhavi, but slowly her beauty overpowers him. But for her, it was the same experience; again her body was invaded by the master. She feels, "In the many aggressions of this body it is only the futile dying echoes of touch that have remained with me – it's corpse. The cold nothingness of it" (Mahadevan 276).

In the realm of Ushiner's palace, the narrative unfolds with a recurrence of the same events as Madhavi assumes the role of a queen and begets Shivi, the future king of Aryavarta. However, her journey does not end there, as she returns to Gaalav's presence after fulfilling her duty of bearing heirs for the kings. A poignant aspect of this tale lies in the fact that Gaalav's quest for the eight hundred Shyamkarni horses remains unfulfilled, leaving him disheartened to face his guru once more with a sense of failure. It is during this time that Garud, perceptive of Gaalav's emotions, becomes aware of his feelings for Drishadvati. In response to Garud's inquiry, Gaalav reveals that Drishadvati was offered to him as a substitute for the requested horses. Despite her assistance in obtaining six hundred horses, it proves inadequate for Gaalav's ambitions, leading him to grapple with conflicted emotions, dampening his ability to reciprocate her affections.

The depiction of Gaalav's inner turmoil and his struggle to reconcile his desires with the circumstances underscores the complexities of human emotions and the impact of societal expectations on personal relationships. The narrative serves as a window into the constraints imposed by patriarchal norms, where individuals are compelled to navigate their emotions within the confines of societal dictates. Moreover, Madhavi's journey exemplifies the hardships faced by women in a male-dominated society, where their value is often tied to their ability to produce heirs for their husbands. The narrative illuminates the constraints on women's agency and the inherent limitations of their roles as mothers and wives, even as they are instrumental in shaping the future of kingdoms. By exploring the internal conflicts faced by characters like Gaalav and Madhavi, these retellings provide a platform to question and challenge traditional gender roles and advocate for more inclusive and compassionate portrayals of human experiences in literature and society.

Gaalav has to know about the strange birth of Viswamithra and why he demanded shyamkarni horses. Vishwamithra is the only one left who possesses shyamkarni horses. Gaalav with a defeated mind meets his guru and he makes a strange offer. Like he bartered Drishadvati for shyamkarni horses earlier, he offered her to Viswamithra too, and explained her strange capacity to give birth to sons as heirs. To his great surprise, Viswamithra readily accepts the offer, as he also wanted a heir to his kingdom. Gaalav painfully understands that his role in

her life is over and he addresses her, " Drishadvati, daughter of Yayati, he said, you have rescued not me alone, but your father and four other kings. You have been our deliverance. O sinless one, I thank you for the kindness you have done" (Mahadevan 307).

Gaalav feels defeated in front of her power. Madhavi's victory over Gaalav is actually the victory of every woman against patriarchy. Drishatvati, thus becomes the most powerful woman in *The Mahabharatha*. Though brutally treated by the patriarchy, and by the norms of the society, she with her inner strength, becomes the reason for the redemption of all men that comes in her life. Yet she never loses her character and faces life with courage and calmness. Madhavi is never a pathetic figure for the readers. Instead, she is a saviour, a mighty woman, who is much superior than rishi Viswamithra. Even his years of sadhana and super powers could not give him the path to redemption. So Madhavi, with her inner strength proves to much powerful than all those mighty kings. When they portray themselves as selfish and helpless throughout the story, Madhavi remains the epitome of selflessness. Her sacrifice and obedience are not signs of her weakness, but of immense strength. Pleased by her service, when Viswamithra asks her what she wants in return, she only says that she wants 'Mukti', or the release from all these earthly dramas. But even rishi Viswamithra could not release her from her fate. Then Drishadvati asks a relevant question which every woman wants to ask in this patriarchal society, " A mare may be

released from harness, but a woman cannot be set free from bondage. Why not

Gurudev?" (Mahadevan 308). To this question, Viswamithra explains what is

expected from a woman and says, " A chaste woman does not create her own

independent existence. She follows her stri dharma. She accepts that she is born a

daughter, reborn as wife and reborn again as mother" (Mahadevan 308).

This indicates that a woman must die again and again in her life to be

reborn into a new role. Yet she has no right to die or be reborn for herself, for

living a life that she wants to live. After being used by all those selfish men,

Drishadvati is sent back to her own father's place. Drishadvati is hailed as an

extraordinary woman by then and had gained many titles like obedient daughter,

the reborn virgin and the woman exchanged for horses. To be reborn as a virgin,

was the most fascinating one among them. Patriarchy invents the concept of

virginity to exercise control over their women, their sexuality, their desires, and

everything. The 'special aura of chastity' was bestowed upon Madhavi when the

news spread she was reborn as a virgin every time after giving birth to a child.

Sharmishta believed this would save her from the sense of shame whenever she

had to sleep with a new king. DR. Kavitha Sharma concludes that "within the

patriarchal framework women acquire chastity not necessarily through fidelity to

one man but by allowing their sexuality to be regulated by men whether as wives

or daughters." (Sharma, Dicing xxxiv). This sense of shame, honour, chastity are

few of the several traps which society has laid on women to keep them in bondage

and suppression. These things matter only to women and should be observed only by them. Prathibha Ray laments through her Yajnaseni about this :

> I would get angry, 'Chaste woman! Unchaste woman! In the same way why don't the scriptures speak of chaste men and unchaste men? Are men's heart made of gold that sin cannot tarnish them? Have the scriptures prescribed lists of sins only for women?. (Ray 94)

Family's honor and name is always determined by the chastity of the woman of the family. After being saved from the curse of a Brahmin by handing over his daughter, Yayati at last decides to marry her off to a king. Along with Puru, Drishdvati's swayamvara is also declared. Her will was not enquired. Like any other girl in a patriarchal society, the family decides her fate again. But deep within, Madhavi was perplexed, " But that is not what I want. Having a wider choice of husbands – is that freedom?" (Mahadevan316). By offering her a husband through swayamvara, Yayati thinks that he is doing the most favourable thing for his daughter – a chance to get what a woman desires in her life. Women are more practical. They want what is within reach, "….husband, children, household. A safe place in society. This is what gives every woman an identity…." (Mahadevan 318).

According to social norms, a woman has only one desire. All her desires are concentrated on her family. No other identity can be claimed by her. She is a

homely being. Yayati offers her a husband as a means of purgation, as a consolation prize for all the sufferings she has undergone. But Madhavi's reaction becomes an unexpected one. She feels those men who have come for the swayamvara are all strangers, " I have nothing in common with these people. How can I spend a lifetime among them? All those women before me, they were nothing but birds in gilded cages. I want to be free, then how can I spend a lifetime in a palace?" (Mahadevan 319). Madhavi ,at last liberates herself from the dharma of a woman imposed on her by the society and from the moral and ethical code of conduct which a woman should follow. Now she is clear about her path of freedom. She knows what she wants in her life .She is now the all-powerful 'Sakti' who has unleashed the goddess within her. The shift in her character and attitude indicate the shift of paradigm in the contemporary society where women realise the power within them.

Madhavi, after rejecting all her suitors, finally chooses forest. She feels that only the forest is hers and she could find solace in the forest. The author, through the story of Madhavi, wants to convey that a woman wants only freedom and identity in her life.. Madhavi realizes that the palace, her suitors, her comfortable life in the palace, nothing could give her real happiness. She goes back to her real home, the forest from where she came. Years later, all her sons come in search of her in the forest. Madhavi requests them to give their virtues to her father Yayati to help him to attain swargalok. Yayati's own merits were not enough to raise him

to swargalok. Obeying her commands, her sons give their virtue to their

grandfather Yayati. Even then it was not enough to raise him to swargalok. At last

his daughter Madhavi steps in and says, "Whatever merit I have attained through

my actions, I give to you" (Mahadevan 327). Yayati, with the merit of his

daughter, rises to heaven. Madhavi offers him purgation. Until then, Yayati

thought that only sons could give moksha to him. But the author wants to stress

the fact that daughters are equally important as sons.

The novel *Bride of the Forest* stands out among the various feminist

retellings of the *The Mahabharatha* due to its unwavering commitment to

portraying the saga of a woman in a remarkably realistic manner. Unlike other

renditions that may alter the story or excessively glorify female characters while

vilifying male characters, this novel remains grounded in authenticity. The

protagonist, Madhavi, is depicted as an obedient daughter and a dutiful wife in a

patriarchal society, where her silence coexists with immense power, surpassing

that of any other female character in the epic. Despite enduring brutal treatment

from her father and a selfish man who enters her life, Madhavi maintains her

composure and equilibrium. She refrains from harbouring ill thoughts or seeking

vengeance but instead extends sympathy and support to those who inflict pain

upon her. Remarkably, she becomes the solution to their mental anguish,

exemplifying her unwavering calmness, mental fortitude, and unwavering

determination, which render her a true heroine. Despite not claiming her rightful

place in the palaces, Madhavi's inner strength surpasses that of all the kings in Aryavartha. Her character mirrors the essence of mother earth, akin to 'gaya,' possessing boundless giving power while retaining immense strength.

From a feminist perspective, this novel illuminates the silent yet formidable power that resides within Madhavi, affirming that a woman possesses unparalleled strength even in the face of a patriarchal society's attempts to subjugate them. By showcasing the resilience and indomitable spirit of Madhavi, the novel challenges societal norms that seek to undermine the agency and power of women. Through her unwavering calmness and compassion, Madhavi emerges as a symbol of feminine strength and resilience, breaking free from stereotypical portrayals and highlighting the inherent power of women in shaping their destiny.

The new wave of mythological retellings in modern Indian literature sheds light on a transformative perspective of women and their quest for selfhood. In *Bride of the Forest*, Madhavi.S.Mahadevan masterfully explores the subconscious of a woman within a patriarchal society. Instead of adopting a radical approach, the author meticulously unravels Madhavi's life, portraying her selfless roles as a daughter, wife, and mother, which ultimately lead her to self-realization. With each rebirth, Madhavi unveils a new facet of herself, culminating in a profound understanding of her inner strength and identity. Madhavi's journey to selfhood is not about competing with patriarchy or establishing superiority over men. Rather, she discovers an immense strength within herself, realizing that she no longer

needs a man's validation or presence to find contentment. Despite being portrayed as the archetypal traditional Indian woman, Madhavi harbours a rebellious spirit, challenging outdated notions of dharma and power structures.

Unlike many stories where women seek help from men to solve their problems, Madhavi takes a different path. She offers assistance to the men she encounters in her life, fulfilling their promises, providing them with heirs, and even aiding her own father Yayati to attain swargalok through her virtuous actions. This portrayal exemplifies Madhavi's extraordinary power, surpassing that of any man in her life. In redefining the dharma of a woman, Madhavi transcends the role of a mere receiver and transforms into a giver. She breaks free from the image of a fragile woman protected by men and emerges as a powerful figure safeguarding the dharma of others, ensuring the continuity of their dynasties. Her actions subvert the traditional role of a daughter, and she becomes instrumental in Yayati's journey to swargalok. Through Madhavi's story, the author conveys a powerful message to society – that women are indispensable, and men need women to complete their lives. Madhavi exemplifies 'Sakthi', embodying boundless strength and resilience. Her narrative challenges societal norms and emphasizes the significance of empowering women, recognizing their true power, and acknowledging their pivotal role in shaping a progressive and harmonious society.

The third chapter of this thesis explores the realm of contemporary *The Mahabharatha* retellings and their transformative impact on challenging and rewriting patriarchal norms. Through these retellings, the characters who were once relegated to the shadows of their male counterparts now reclaim their agency and take centre stage in the narrative. The thesis focuses on the crucial theme of reclaiming marginalized voices and deconstructing dominant narratives. *Bride of the Forest* serves as a compelling exemplar of a contemporary retelling that portrays the unyielding stance of a real woman within the patriarchal world. It illuminates the protagonist's journey of dismantling her age-old image as weak and submissive, ultimately transforming into a powerful symbol of goddess Sakti. The analysis in the thesis shows how this transformation unfolds, as the character transcends societal expectations, displaying immense strength and endurance. The thesis explores how the protagonist challenges traditional notions of womanhood, becoming an agent of redemption for mighty kings and revered rishis, including her own father. In doing so, she emerges as a formidable force, dispelling the notion of women as passive and powerless entities in the epic. The protagonist's journey serves as an inspiration and a testament to the resilience and empowerment of women within the epic narrative, thus contributing to a broader discourse on gender dynamics and social change.

The fourth chapter of the thesis makes a further exploration of subalternity in terms of gender but from a queer perspective. It tries to identify how the novel

The Pregnant King challenges traditional gender norms, disrupts heteronormative structures, and empowers marginalized voices within the epic narrative. By promoting inclusivity and advocating for acceptance of queer identities, this contemporary retelling offers a groundbreaking contribution to the broader discourse on gender and sexuality in Indian mythology. The novel sheds light on the complexities of queer identities and the societal pressures faced by individuals outside the gender binary. The thesis explores the gender roles within the epic narrative, embarking on a paradigm-shifting journey that challenges established norms of parenthood. It analyses the protagonist's unique experience of pregnancy and childbirth as a male character which serves as a powerful critique of conventional heteronormative concepts of family and parenthood expanding the boundaries of societal constructs.

Chapter – 4

Transgressing the Margins: A Queer Reading of *The Pregnant King*

Ancient Indian scriptures and mythological texts were democratic while presenting different aspects of the ancient society including sexual fluidity. They have never displayed a homophobia and were receptive about the queerness and other gender based concerns. Indian mythological texts have never tried to eulogize heteronormativity nor have they tried to enforce it in society by claiming it as the only 'natural' way of expressing sexuality. *The Mahabharatha* is authored by the great sage Ved Vyasa during the third century. Even, the presence of a third gender or queerness was accepted and one can find several queer characters like Shikandi, Brihannala, Mohini etc in the story.

Vedic literature properly represented gender and sex based on the nature or prakriti. Female is categorized as Stri prakriti and male as Purush – Prakriti and those who belong to the third sex is categorized as tritiya –prakriti. Sage Valsyayana when wrote his seminal text *Kamasutra* gave equal importance to the sexuality of the third gender along with that of heterosexuals. During the Vedic period, third gender were neither denied their rights nor denied their sexuality. More than that ancient India viewed trans people as a symbol of good luck and they were often invited to attend functions and ceremonies. They were socially and legally accepted as law exempts them from the dharma of procreation and

could live independently. Queerness was much visible from the Vedic period and it continued till the colonial rule. The colonial rule denied the rights of most sections of the society including the queer community. Anti-sodomy law passed by the British in 1861 started a homophobia in the Indian society. This homophobia combined with the religious taboos proposed by religious institutions suppressed homosexuality and queerness. This homophobia created by the colonial rule continued in the post – colonial period too, as different hegemonic centers negotiated for heteronormativity. The post-colonial India viewed queerness as a challenge to the Hindutva philosophy of the country and began to view it through the lens of perversion and hence rejected it completely. Queer identity began to be viewed as an abnormal state brought from the western culture due to colonialism. Nationalism and nation-hood glorified procreation as the sacred duty of it citizens and hence propagated homophobia in our country. In the post-colonial period, most sections of the society got back their voice. But queer community was the sexual subaltern who was silenced. Early retellings of *The Mahabharatha* purposely overlooked the queer representation of adhere to the moral codes proposed by the Hindu philosophy of the society. Such stores when presented were other worldly or supernatural permitted only to Gods.

In the 21st Century Indian literature, sexual subaltern have tried to regain their voices through various texts including mythological retellings. *The Mahabharatha* has always been like a living entity that always negotiated the

dominant philosophy of the society. It has a great impact or a function to perform

on the lives of Indian people through various medium like literature, television

adaptations, debates, cinemas etc. Each section of the society gets its

representation through the contemporary mythological retellings. As Devadutt

Pattnaik remark in his book, *Shikhandi and other Queer Tales that do not tell you*:

> A woman reading of Hindu mythology in western academia is literal and so
>
> locates patriarchy in Satya yuga when structure is respected, and queerness
>
> in Kali Yuga, when structure collapses. This would lead to the conclusion
>
> that Hindu mythology endorses Brahminical hegemony. It would satisfy the
>
> need to replace traditional Hindu ideas with modern ones to create a fair
>
> and just society. (Pattnaik 6)

Most religions strictly enforce a moral code of conduct on the sexuality of

people to ensure its absolute control over their lives. They not only propagate

heteronormativity but also condemn non-normative practices in sexuality as a sin

or a taboo. All religious scriptures advocate what is acceptable and what is not in

sexuality. Different religions practice different ideologies and follow different

belief systems. But in sexuality one can find a universalization of

heteronormativity as the only socially acceptable sexuality to be practiced within a

marriage for procreation. All other forms of sexuality are associated with the

concept of abnormality and hence those people had to experience their sexuality

with a sense of shame, fear, guilt etc. thus Vedic scriptures and laws, which once

sanctioned and accepted the third genders with reverence and respect, were

reinterpreted and renegotiated and the present day Hindu religious scriptures also

glorify the dominant beliefs on heteronormativity. Contemporary society

propagates the concept of 'homophobia' saying, homosexuality is against our

Hindu tradition and will bring a blow to the Hindu culture. This 'new Hindu

culture', which is quite different from traditional one is a by-product of the

colonial rule in India.

Nicholas B. Dirks Franz Boas Professor of Anthropology and History,

Columbia University, remarks:

> Cultural forms in newly classified "traditional" societies were reconstructed
>
> and transformed by and through colonial interventions, creating new
>
> categories and oppositions between colonizers and colonized, European and
>
> other, modern and traditional, West and East, even male and female.
>
> (Dirks 3).

Colonial rule has established its power over everything in our country, including

the Vedic scriptures which formed the crux of Indian culture. Tamara Loos ,

American and gender studies scholar, in the article, "Transnational Historian of

Sexualities in Asia" says:

> ….the colonial influence imposed imperial sexual mores and gender norms,
>
> including the demand that male and female be clearly distinguished

categories according to Western sensibilities, rearranged and delegitimized

local sexual and gender norms. (Loos 1310)

Ancient Indian epics, mythological texts, scriptures, and art forms exhibit a

notable tolerance towards the diverse representation of sexuality. Within the

narratives of the *Ramayana* and the *The Mahabharatha*, numerous queer

characters and instances of gender fluidity are portrayed as normal facets of

existence. A meticulous examination of Vedic scriptures unveils a level of societal

civility in ancient India that was arguably more accepting of queerness than certain

contemporaneous Western civilizations. The foundations of ancient Vedic

philosophy appear to have accommodated various expressions of sexuality,

acknowledging homosexuality and other forms as intrinsic elements of human

diversity. Remarkable figures such as Lopamudra and Maitreya from Vedic

philosophy were revered as lesbians, forming intellectual and physical

partnerships with other women. Hindu scriptures and mythological narratives

further illuminate the prevalence of queerness and diverse expressions of sexuality

among Hindu deities, presenting these behaviours as normative within ancient

Indian society.

An illustrative example is found in the Odisha version of the queer

Ramayana, where Rama and Sita are portrayed with queer inclinations. Notably,

on the initial night of their marriage, Rama assumes the attire of a woman, waiting

for Sita. Additionally, the narrative depicts Hanuman's observation of 'Rakshasas'

engaging in kissing, symbolizing instances of homosexuality. In the context of the *The Mahabharatha*, a notable seventeen queer characters are identified, affirming that ancient India demonstrated a remarkably progressive and open-minded approach towards homosexuality and queerness. This recognition of diverse sexual orientations and expressions challenges preconceived notions about the conservatism of ancient Indian society, suggesting a nuanced and accepting perspective on human sexuality within its cultural and mythological narratives.

In ancient art forms also we can notice that queer sexuality is portrayed with reverence. In the Khajuraho paintings, detailed portrayed of homosexuality can be seen. Even in 'Kamasutra', sage Valsyayana has given equal importance to homosexuality. As part of the Tamil Bhakti tradition, there is the story of Shiva becoming a woman to help his wives Gouri and Ganga. In many bhakti literatures, one can find instances if such queering, the 'go-between', to perform certain divine functions. In his book *Shikhandi And Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You*, Pattanaik comments about the idea of Kannada poet, mystic Basavanna , "….I wear these clothes only for you, sometimes man sometimes woman, I make wars for you, O lord of the meeting rivers, and will even be your devotees' bride" (Pattnaik 52). In the realm of divinity there is no place for fixed gender patterns. There all merge to become one with God.

To teach the patriarchal society that a woman can be as wise as a man and should be treated with equal respect, Yoga Vasista tells the story of Chudala who

turned herself as a hermit Kumbhaka. Kumbhaka helps the king to become a

hermit as he has given for heterosexuality. Other ancient master of sexuality like

Gorikaputra, Srivatsal, Koka Pundit etc. have perceived homosexuality and

queerness as a normal thing in the society. Not only in Khajuraho, but also in the

paintings of Ajanta and Ellora, one can find the portrayal of same sex love. Even

in many famous temples of ancient Inida like Puri, Tanjore, Rajrani temple of

Bhuvaneshwar, Sun temple of Konark etc. display sculptures and images of queer

sexuality. This portrayal of queer sexuality in divine places is a testimony that it

was accepted in the society.

Hindu mythology, which is deeply rooted in karma, has always taken a liberal

stance on queerness and their sexuality. It has a more democratic way of

approaching various wishes related to the society. Moreover Hindu mythology

was neither didactic nor revolutionary. Rather it looked upon the world as it was,

and never demanded changes in the society. In his book *Shikhandi And Other*

Queer Tales They Don't Tell You, Pattanaik comments:

> Hindu mythology focuses on how we see the world: what is seen and
>
> unseen and why some things are seen and other unseen. Nobody is forced
>
> to widen the gaze using laws or propaganda for that simply sparks
>
> resentment that festers underground. (Pattnaik30).

Hindu mythology rather focuses on dharma and the karmic consequences of one's actions. According to this philosophy of karma, every action performed by an individual, despite whether it is good or bad has consequences. Thus Hindu mythology focuses on adjusting people to the diverse aspects of the society rather than changing the society itself. So it gives importance to queerness well. Vaishnava monk Amara Das Wilheim explains how ancient Hindu philosophy was more tolerant towards the queer community. Through his book, *Tritiya Prakriti: People of the Third Sex*, he remarks, "Early Vedic teachings stressed responsible family life and asceticism but also tolerated different types of sexualities within general society" (Wilheim213)

Like any other story from Indian mythology, *The Mahabharatha* too has many queer stories and seventeen major characters of *The Mahabharatha* exhibits queer tendencies. It is always valued as having a great influence on Hindu culture and religious sensibilities. It also displays queerness adopted by the dominant discourse of the society in ancient India. Though *The Mahabharatha* too veils queer characters as a part of divine intervention, it never blurs their presence nor undermines their role. Satyavati, the fisher queens' son Vichitravirya is one such queer character who displays homosexual affinities and Satyavati also knew about it. The most important queer character in *The Mahabharatha* is Shikhandi, who is portrayed as a transsexual. Born as the daughter of king Drupada, Shikhandi later changes her sex by the help of Demi – God yaksha and becomes a man. Different

versions of *The Mahabharatha* explain his conversion. One version says that Shikhandi was brought up as a man and king Drupada even made her marry to a woman. But on the wedding night her wife understands that Shikhandi is a female and later in order to satisfy the wife, Shikhandi changes his sex with the help of a Yaksha and accepts his masculinity. Another popular version of this conversion is that to kill Bheeshma, Shikhandini became Shikhandi as Bheeshma would never fight with a woman. Shikhandi is presented as an important character in *The Mahabharatha*.

The Mahabharatha introduces the narrative of Bhangeshwara, exploring a queer perspective within its intricate storyline. Positioned as a sub-plot, Yudhishtira queries the departing Bheeshma on the comparative sexual pleasure experienced by men and women. Bheeshma, in response, asserts that only an individual who has lived both gender experiences can genuinely address such a question. Subsequently, Yudhishtira seeks counsel from King Bhangeshwara, who, having lived as both a man and a woman, performed a yagna to become the blessed parent of a hundred sons. While the yagna succeeds and he is bestowed with the desired blessing, an oversight in offering tributes to Lord Indra incurs his wrath. Indra, in response, curses Bhangeshwara to transform into a woman—a perceived affliction in that era. Consequently, Bhangeshwara gives birth to a hundred sons, with the first set acknowledging him as their father and the second set recognizing him as their mother. However, Indra intervenes once again,

cursing that Bhangeshwara's offspring will engage in fatal conflict. In the face of

impending tragedy, Bhangeshwara acknowledges the consequences of Indra's

wrath and seeks redemption. Upon rectifying his mistake and seeking forgiveness,

Indra offers to revive one set of children. When asked which group he wishes to be

resurrected, Bhangeshwara chooses those who referred to him as their mother,

deeming the maternal role more meaningful and blissful. When given the choice

of returning as a man or a woman, Bhangeshwara expresses a preference for

womanhood, citing the perceived greater pleasure derived from sexual experiences

by women. This narrative of Bhangeshwara can be interpreted as a portrayal of

bisexuality, shedding light on his inclination towards the heightened satisfaction

derived from living as a female.

   The Mahabharatha delineates the narrative of Arjuna, the formidable

Pandava warrior, undergoing a transformation into the eunuch Brihannala, a

consequence of divine curse. This episode in the *The Mahabharatha* reflects the

prevailing sensibilities of the dominant discourse of that era, which construed

gender binaries and queer identities as outcomes of divine interventions. The

portrayal of Arjuna as Brihannala presents a striking contrast to his usual

character, characterized by submission and possessing qualities traditionally

associated with femininity. The transformation of Arjuna back to his original form

from Brihannala is depicted in the narrative as a restoration of natural order. This

portrayal aligns with the societal perspectives of the time, wherein the reversion to

his original state is presented as a return to the accepted normative construct. *The Mahabharatha,* through the transformation of Arjuna, thus reflects and reinforces the prevalent cultural norms and perceptions surrounding gender roles and identity. Arjuna's transition showcases, as Judith Butler remarks in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, "such temporality and fluidity of human bodies, sexuality, sex and gender defies the natural and rigid ideas of sex, gender and sexuality"(Butler 132). Though Arjuna becomes a eunuch as a part of a curse, it proves to be a blessing as it helps him to complete one year in disguise without being noticed by the enemies.

Arjuna and Ulupi's son Aravan is another character in *The Mahabharatha* who marries a queer woman. Aravan sacrifices his life willingly in the Kurukshetra war to ensure the victory of Pandavas. But before the sacrifice, he gets married. *The Mahabharatha* also displays and supports heterosexuality and marriages and portrays it a part of dharma. Only married men were given proper cremation after death and Aravan wanted to consummate before death. But when no woman comes ready to marry a man to die the next day of marriage, Krishna becomes a beautiful woman, Mohini and marries Aravan. The following day, Aravan sacrifices his life, Mohini mourns for him as his widow and he gets a decent farewell. Mohini, the female avatar of Lord Vishnu is found in many mythological tales and can be perceived as queer avatar. Lord Krishna is also comfortable with is feminine side clear from his company with gopikas.

Within *The Mahabharatha*, an intriguing portrayal of cross-dressing emerges as a revered practice. Bhima, for instance, dons feminine attire and makeup to eliminate Keechaka, thereby elevating cross-dressing to a position of honour. Another rendition of the *The Mahabharatha* in Tamil recounts the tale of Vijaya (Arjuna) and Krishna, where Krishna disguises as a woman to beguile Pormannan. This strategic ploy leads Pormannan to slay his own father and relinquish sacred items, securing their victory. Though Pormannan feels deceived upon discovering the ruse, Arjuna amends this by arranging his marriage to Arjuna's sister. This narrative also presents cross-dressing within a virtuous context. Similarly, Samba, Krishna's son, embarks on cross-dressing, mimicking his father's form to jest with visiting sages from the Yadhava community. Adopting the guise of a pregnant woman, Samba enquires about the impending child's gender, provoking the sages' anger. Their resultant curse predicts Samba's future role in delivering a fatal iron rod, leading to the Yadhava clan's downfall and Krishna's demise. These episodes, whether seen as blessings or curses, distinctly underscore the prevalence of queer narratives within Hindu mythology. These queer stories frequently play pivotal roles in reshaping narratives. The introduction of Shikhandi in the Kurukshetra war or instances of cross-dressing often pivotally influence the main plot's trajectory. Queer tales and characters have consistently occupied a fundamental role within Hindu mythology. Their significance is unequivocally underscored by their integral place within society. In the Indian mythological retellings one can find the strong presence of such queer

characters. The functional theory of myth asserts the fact that myth is like a social reformer who aims to change the society and to fit in according to the popular demand of the dominant discourse. The contemporary mythological retellings tend to normalize, validate and accept the gender fluidity, queer sexuality and various aspect of queerness and its viewed end presented not as a curse but with a more positive attitude which is intended to convey the sensibility of the contemporary Indian society in this regard.

To analyze how the contemporary retellings of *The Mahabharatha* dealt with queerness, the tact of *The Pregnant King* written by Devadutt Pattanaik, is taken. The textual analysis in the light of queer perspective serves as an example of how contemporary societies have changed their approach to queerness and give an example of myth as a reference. *The Pregnant King* is the story of King Yuvanashva and his dilemma on his gender role as a father and as a mother. Society, from the ancient time, has certain fixed notions about gender roles and sexuality. Through the character of Yuvanashva, the author poses questions on society's attitude on gender fluidity, power struggle and the identity crisis of queer community. Yuvenashva's story questions the rigid social influence on the feminine and masculine roles assigned to the individuals. What the author wants to highlight is that even kings could not overcome this social structure. The story of Yuvanashva is relevant in contemporary times as it tells the story of a man who has feminine feelings and is ready to take care of it. In the contemporary society

also one can find many men who allow their wives to work and are ready to take care of babies and household by reversing the gender roles. Society accepts only the binary structure and all other sexual minorities are comfortably neglected. All types of gender fluidity were mercilessly suppressed and silence. Society has created the gender binaries and has assigned definite roles to them. Those who fail to fit into the construct of feminine and masculine must face, as Judith Butler explains, 'punitive consequences', that is, "those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished"(Butler 522).

Devadutt Pattnaik has carefully woven Yuvaneshva's story with that of other queer stories in *The Mahabharatha* like Arjuna's life as eunuch Brihannala, Aruna the charioteer of the Sun God who dress up like a female and got impregnated by both Indra and Surya, also the story of Somavat transformed to Somavati, story of Ileswara, who, being a female and male for fourteen days each. Thus the author explores different experiences of queer people who are silenced and subjugated on various revels just because they did not fit into the social structures. Julian Todd Weiss remarks about heteronormativity in his work *The Gender Caste System: Identity Privacy, and Heteronormativity, Law & Sexuality* that it is :

> a power to define our place in the hierarchy, to control those below us, and to be controlled by those above us" and "to step out of the hierarchy is to lose power and control, to lose congruity. To separate sex and gender is to

disassemble the coiled binary structure from which our power, control and sense of congruity derives. (Weiss 185)

In the pursuit of this strict role of heteronormativity, specific gender roles are assigned to male and female as well as these roles in a married life like husband, wife, fatherhood motherhood etc. Any deviation from the set code of conduct is a threat to the hegemony of power structure in the society. Yuvanashva's story questions femininity and masculinity and their roles assigned by the society. He accidently gets pregnant by drinking the magic portion meant for his wives and the baby begins to grown on his left thigh. From that unique experience of being caught between masculinity and femininity, Yuvanashva starts his implacable battle against the puritanic attitude of the society which purposely disregard the existence of queer where by showing the attitude what Foucault wrote in his book *The History of Sexuality*, "there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see and nothing to know" (Foucault p.4)

That his pregnancy on his thigh questioned the sanctioned sexual norms was an ample reason to certify it as abnormal and other worldly by his doctor Asanga and his mother Shilavati, who was waiting for the birth of her grandson, too reacted to it in a harsh way and she even tells him to get rid of it and says, "What if it is a monster, a parasite….cut it out. Get the monster out of his body…"(Pattnaik 193). Society disregards what is outside the social norms or structure. Hence Yuvanashva is forced to be silent about this transformation and

he had to face severe rejection from his family members including his mother. His

wives, his mother did not even let him know that he had given birth to a male

child. Later when he comes to know about his child's existence, his motherly

feelings were not considered and he could not meet his child. Shilavati gives clear

orders to restrict him from meeting his child with the presumption that, "let the

motherhood remain with the women" (Pattnaik 202). After lot of negotiations with

his mother, Yuvanashva gets permission to spend time with his son with a promise

that he would keep it as a secret.

Every society has its own culture and its own truth which every citizen has

to follow and the fact is, as Foucault points out in *The Will to Knowledge*, "the last

glimmer of truth is conditioned by politics" (Foucault 101). Yuvanashva

desperately search the history of his predecessors to seek validation for this gender

fluidity. He could trace a few instances from the past like the story of Aruna, who

masquerades as Aruni and bears children of both Surya and Indra. But those

children were cursed to be monkeys implying that children born out of a queer

sexual relationship cannot be categorized as humans and are cursed to live a

different life away from human society. Another story is that of king

Bhangashvana who experienced both fatherhood and motherhood but only

Pandavas knew about this. To validate his stance, the desperate Yuvanashva

approaches Pandavas to know more about Bhangashvana. But Arjuna refuses to

share the tale and tells him that: "Some stories are not meant to be remembered "

(Pattnaik 241).

Arjuna, who himself has experienced the life of a queer, by living as

Brihannala for one year, also wants to discard even the memories of those years

from his life and says, "Please do not ask me to remember those years…it is

terrible to appear as a woman and still have a man's heart." (Pattnaik 242). Arjuna

explains how society determines various activities related to specific gender and

how because of those social prejudices the son of king Virat had to display

extreme aversion to his sister's archery skills and she in turn objects her brother's

interest in dancing. By explaining the social norms and roles, Arjuna tries to

dissuade Yuvanashva from seeking validation to gender fluidity from the society.

In order to maintain the heterosexual codes queer communities are silenced or

neglected. Society has a clear way of negotiating power over the existing structure.

The powers given to the female are not given to the male and vice versa. So queer,

also are forced to stick to one gender to get access to the power enjoyed by one, if

not they are forbidden from enjoying the identity of both.

When Yuvanashva wants to quench his womanly desire to enjoy

motherhood by making Mandhata call him mother. Queen Simantini stops him by

reminding him the dire consequences. She reminds him that he would lose his

power and even the throne if he tries to satisfy his femininity and gender roles are

not transferable. She says, " To be a mother you must be a woman….If you are a

woman, you have no right to sit on the throne" (Pattnaik 258). Simantini also

reminds him that as a king, it is his duty to portray and present the perfect picture

of his family in front of the society, otherwise, it will affect his family members

too, "….let the world see you as it wants to see you. A great king with three wives

and two sons….Be a father. Leave motherhood to me. I am your wife" (Pattanik

259).Simantini also reminds him about his own karma towards two youngsters –

Sumedha and Somavati – whom he punished for tampering his identity. Earlier

Somavati was Sumavat and both were Brahmin boys ready to get married to two

daughters of a woman. But for that they had to own a cow each. Sumedha got

one cow. But Somavat could not find one. Yuvanashva organized a cow offering

ceremony and in that ceremony Somavat and sumedha appeared as a married

couple. But their identity was caught and they were imprisoned.

WhatYuvanashva could not pardon was Somavath appearing as a woman.

Somavat when cried about his existence as a man, a Yaksha named Sthunakarna

offered him femininity and took away his man hood. When Yuvanashva came to

know that Somavat has become Somavati, he refused to accept that also because

Somavati was a male child at the time of birth. According to Yuvanashva, one

should not alter his gender determined at the time of birth and says, "You are born

a man…..Yor are forever a man"(Pattnaik 159). When Somavati and Sumedha did

not accept this verdict and was not ready to accept the royal order, Yuvanashva

gave them capital punishment as a warning to the people to stick on to

heteronormativity and gender roles prescribed by the society. When Yuvanashva

had to face the gender conflict himself and tried to get the validation from the society, Simanthini reminds him about the consequences, "The world must not know that you are an aberration. They will cast you into the same pyre into which you cast those two boys"(Pattniak 259).

Yuvanashva, when realized that he could no longer hold the yearnings of his womanly desire to be accepted by his son Mandhata as a mother, decided to publicly confess the truth about his identity. But no one, including his son Mandhata, was ready to accept the truth and his family and society equally dismissed the truth and conveniently called him as insane. Even his wives, his mother who clearly knows the authenticity of his revelation too discarded it to stick to the social norms. Yuvanashva feels defeated and ostracized by his family and by the society. His predicament is same for all queer people even in the modern world, when people must fight for their identity. Yuvanashva also gets warnings from the bards that his story will soon be disappeared from the history and will be erased from the memory of people. The most contradictory element of his story is that the deity of his country was Ileswara, who himself is a transgender. But though Hindu mythology has so many stories of queer people, they have tendency to associate queerness to divinity asserting the social idea that queerness is not a part of ordinary human life and only gods can practice it. Only the queerness associated with Gods are accepted in a positive light. Otherwise all other human stores of queerness are associated with curse or punishment which

reminds the society that it is not acceptable. Yuvanashva's story of being rejected

by his son, his mother, wives and his people reminds the queer community about

their predicament in a Hindu society.

The problem encountered by queer people traces way back to the beginning

of mankind. The story of Yuvanashva affirms that fact as his story seems to have

happened almost twenty three generations before Thretha Yuga. But in *The*

Pregnant King, Pattnaik presents Yuvanashva as a contemporary of Pandavas so

that his problem as a queer could be discussed with many other queer stories from

Mahabharatha. In *The Pregnant King*, the author first discusses the "varna-dharma

and ashrama", expected from the citizens of Ila Vrita. It provides a general idea of

the society of that time. Thus the author focuses on what is expected from a king,

how important it is to father a son who will be the future king, how Shilavati,

despite being a capable person, just became a regent of the kingdom because of

the gender bias and Yuvanashva's futile struggle to get validation from the society

for his gender fluidity. Yuvanashva finally realizes that he cannot change the rigid

rules of the world and to search his own self and identity, escapes from his place

and accepts vana-prasta. Throughout the story, one can find Yuvanashva caught

between his femininity and masculinity, "I am not sure that I am a man. I have

created a life outside me as men do. But I have also created a life inside me, as

women do. What does that make me? Will a body such as mine fetters or free

me?" (Pattanaik 221).

Sexual orientation or identity is not inherently biological; rather, it is a social construct influenced by particular historical and cultural settings. An individual's life to a large extend depends on society's interpretation of a man's life and certain code of conduct developed by the society. Society designs the norms and behavior of its citizens and defines their gender roles and sexuality too. Individuals are expected to follow this without questioning to be socially acceptable. Pattanaik's queer tale from *The Mahabharatha*, *The Pregnant King* questions this stereotyped gender roles and heteronormativity and tries to provide a counter narrative to view humans beyond preconditioned system proposed by the society. He says, "this book is a deliberate distortion of tales in the epic…. My intention is no to create reality but to represent thought process" (Pattanaik VII)

In human life, people encounter numerous occasions of tug of war between the gender roles and their sexuality, and their personal desires clash with their social obligations. Retelling of mythologies creates opportunities to look at these problems from old and new perspectives, urging the society to understand the socially constructed concepts of gender and sexuality from a new perspective. Mythologies remind people that, "the human way is not the only way in this world" (Pattanaik 33). The novel discusses how the socially created concepts of gender and sexuality actually contradict the reality that they experience. Pattanaik, through this retelling, urges people to search beyond what they perceive, to accept aberration, to understand outside the set patterns which society categorize as

natural. "There is more to life than your eyes can see. More than you can ever imagine. Nature comes from the mind of God, The finite human mind can never fathom it in totality". (Pattnaik,190)

Pattanaik points to the gender dichotomy through the characters like Prasenajith, Shilavati, Nabhaka, from the beginning of the novel. He points to gender being a socially constructed reality. Shilavati, the daughter of the king of Avanti, is a woman with "a man's head and a woman's body"(Pattanaik27), and she is portrayed in contrast to her brother Nabhaka. Shilavati, in spite of being very intelligent and had interest in ruling the country, was never allowed to enjoy the privileges enjoyed by her brother. From the very beginning, she understands her fate as a woman, "….just as a man's destiny is bound to his lineage; a woman's is bound to her body. Both are determined at birth and are immutable" (Pattanaik 27). She understands that her role as a woman is that of a daughter, a wife and become a mother and not to learn dharma shastra and become a king of her country. She would confine herself in the room of her desires never to disclose it to anyone. Stereotyping gender roles lead to such discriminations. The roles assigned to female are that of a caring, nurturing woman and not that of an intelligent, strategic ruler. Shilavati had the immense desire to rule the country. She could satisfy her desire by marrying the price of Vallabhi, Prasenjit. Prasenjit had no desire to be the king, but he too was trapped in the gender roles assigned by the society. He could not show his weakness and could not pursue the things that

make him happy. He was a nature lover and a romantic, while Shilavati was a complete ruler in her mind. His premature death provides her with the opportunity which she was waiting for. The kingdom of Vallabhi comes to her hand. She could not sit on the throne of the king because of her gender. She becomes a regent, a substitute not because she lacked capability or intelligence, but only because she was a woman. Pattanaik shows how much society assigned the gender roles blindly followed. But Shilavati was ready to bear all the gender discriminations and continued to be the efficient ruler of Vallabhi. Even when after her son's marriage, she was not ready to give up her power, as in her eyes she was a complete ruler, a true king. The powerful character of Shilavati questions the discrimination faced by women despite being efficient. The author proves this injustice by saying that on her death, she would be described in Yama's book "as the dutiful daughter of Ahuka, loving sister of Nabhaka, obedient wife of Prasenajit and doting mother of Yuvanashva", and he writes nothing about "her long and glorious reign" (Pattanaik 321). Shilavati is portrayed in the shadow of all male characters in her life and she sadly tells her son, "Let social truths triumph over personal truth. Let go of your story as I have mine" (Pattnaik321). The personal truth like gender roles and sexuality have no place in the society, it wants to expose only the constructed reality.

The strict religious codes and patriarchal norms direct the gendered reality not only for women and queer community, but also for men. The characters in the

novel like Prasenajit and Nabhaka are real contrast to the character of Shilavati.

These two men, though had the boon of a royal birth, never wanted to be rulers.

Instead they wanted to pursue their passions like art and hunting. This too is not

expected from men of royal birth.   They are expected to behave in a way suitable

for a king. They must be courageous, intelligent, and strategic rulers who have to

clearly know of dharma sastras. Ahuka, who was frustrated to see his son

violating the gender codes of society remarks, "…you must be king because I,

your father, am a king. All men are bound to their lineage" (Pattanaik 25).

Nabhaka and Prasenajit are also victims of gender roles assigned by the society.

The characters of two Brahmin boys, Sumedha and Somavat are also very

good examples of the expectations of gender roles and sexuality imposed by the

society. To obtain a cow as the gift, these two Brahmin boys appear in the court

of Yuvanashva as married couple. But the queen recognizes their identity. As a

man dressed like a woman was not accepted by the society, the boys were arrested

and thrown in the prison for bringing such disgrace to an auspicious occasion of

Yajna. Meanwhile, Sthutakarna, the Yaksha, offers to help Somavat to transform

into a real woman through which, the Yaksha too could regain his lost manhood

and Somavat's problem could also be solved. The boys agree to it and Somavat

transforms to Somavati. The boys were relieved that at least society would then

accept their relation as they become a normal couple. But contrary to their belief,

the king Yuvanashva and the society did not accept Somavat's transformation to

Somavati and declares that such change of sex was unethical and against the

dharma sastras. Somavat was born as a man and should continue as a man

according to the social code of conduct. When Sumedha and Somavati plead to

allow them to explore the newly found sexuality and life, Vipula remarks:

> Accommodating your feeling is out of question…..by demanding that the
>
> rules of social conduct be modified for your feelings, you challenge the
>
> very foundation of civilization, foundation that have served Ila-Vrita well
>
> since time immemorial. Your feelings threaten every one's order. Give up
>
> your feelings and embrace dharma or suffer the consequences.
>
> (Pattanaik 160)

These words echo how much the society imposes it rules and regulations in

the name of dharma, on the lives of its citizens. Even slight violation of these

codes of conduct, was severely punished and was viewed as a threat to the existing

order. Such attack on the queer sexuality was highlighted in myths to remind

people about the consequences which they must face if they violate them. But the

mythological retellings of the present scenario allows the society to look into such

problems with a rational mind which allows them to understand their mistakes

which their ancestors committed in the name of dharma and allow them to look

with a broader perspective.

Society not only controls the gender roles, but also designs the sexuality expected

to be followed by its citizens. The sexuality and gender construct of the society

has a profound impact on its political and cultural construct. Society accepts

hetero sexuality as the only normal idea and clearly displays homophobia as well.

In *The Pregnant King*, Pattanaik conveys how intensely society negotiated

heterosexuality through myths. The episode of Sumedha and Somavati is a clear

warning to the society that if they go against the social norms, they will be

severely punished. Even when Somavat changed his gender to get the validation

from the society as a heterosexual couples, the king and his people does not accept

them and considered their marriage illegal and 'adharma'. The seal of adharma,

on homosexuality and the severe punishment of death that followed, is intended to

give clear message to conceal such things that goes beyond the social norms.

Sumedha and Somavati were not ready to live a life suggested by the society,

rather accept the punishment offered to them by the society. Gender roles and

sexuality are more personal than cultural. People feel it inwardly rather than they

show that outwardly. Sumedha and Somavati become the symbol of the queer

community who wanted to connect to their true feelings and express them, who

wanted the society to acknowledge their existence rather than being marginalized

and neglected. Sumedha and Somavati accepted their reality and through their

death they claimed their redemption and says, "We will not live a lie because it is

convenient to your dharma" (Pattanaik160). When they were burnt alive, they did

not protest. The accepted it and succumbed to their fate. They hoped that the

flames that consumed their body would soon purity the gender and sexual codes of the society and would accommodate the gender fluidity and queer sexuality as well. Because for them,"….a life outside flames was even more painful" (Pattanaik 163).

Myths negotiate the social norms and remind people about the consequences that they must face when they violate this. Thus when Sumedha and Somavati after their death came to cross Vaitarani, Yama did not allow them to carry their identity as husband and wife. They wanted no other identity. Then they had to come back to earth as Brahma Rakshasas and proclaim Yuvanashva as their creator. This is to give a message to the society to follow dharma to get salvation. At the same time, myth offers an opportunity to look at the hypocrisies of the society in the name of dharma and warns that all these injustices done to these sexual minorities would come back to their creators and they must search for their own purgation by correcting their mistakes. Sumedha and Somavati tricked Yuvaneshva and make him drink the magic portion intended to be given to his wives. His karma strikes back. He understands how horrible a life torn between two identities is, how much a queer person is tortured in a society by silencing his gender and sexuality, how death and renunciation of life is a redemption to a queer man rather than a punishment. Sumedha and Somavati remind him:

It was not vengeance father. It was the only way to make you part of our truth. Vallabhi rejected us for wanting to be husband and wife. You reject

Vallabhi because you want to be a mother. You feel our feelings. You

understand…. (Pattanaik 323)

Pattanaik's narrative strategically elevates a queer protagonist to illuminate

the intricate dynamics that ensue when a gender-fluid individual grapples with

societal expectations entrenched within a gender-stereotyped milieu. In the

portrayal of Yuvaneshva, initially birthed into the archetype of an impeccable

man, resplendent in his roles as a sovereign, son, and adherent of dharma, a

sudden twist occurs upon his unwitting consumption of a magical elixir. This

catalytic event propels him into a paradoxical realm where he finds himself

ensnared between his internal realm, which resonates with the essence of

motherhood, and the external manifestation as a male ruler of Vallabhi. The

ensuing turmoil is wrought with an ardent desire to be acknowledged as a 'mother'

by his offspring, most fervently by his son, Mandhata. In his earnest entreaties,

Yuvanashva navigates a complex web of pleas and persuasion, yet finds himself

adrift in a sea of rejection. The weight of societal expectations, particularly those

concomitant with regal personages, exerts an unyielding influence, nullifying his

aspirations to reframe conventional norms.. No one accepts his reality and it was

against the expected reality of a king. Yuvanashva, while experiencing the

incessant torment, is made to realize the extent of the torture inflicted upon

Sumedha and Somavati. Even his own son Mandhata rejects his request to call

him mother. Mandhata understands that if he is revealed to the public as a man

born from another man, he too would be seen as an aberration and this could affect his personal and kingly prospects. He says, "Social truths matter over personal truths" (Pattanaik 293). Deeply sad and disheartened by this duality, Yuvanashva yearns for a solution. "When will my son Mandhata accept that I am his mother? When will my family accept the truth of my life? When will Vallabhi stop laughing?" (Pattanaik 341)

Yuvanashva felt sad and frustrated as no one, not even people who knew the truth, believe him in public and stood by his side. He understood that people will only believe what is convenient, even if it is a lie. He sadly realizes that, "My people laugh and see only what they want to see. They don't see me, the real me" (Pattanaik 305). At last he wanted to get freedom from all lies and to establish his identity and to escape from the frustration of suppressing his truth. He renominates his throne and proclaim his truth to the world. He wanted to seek parallel references from the past to validate his experiences and he could find similar experiences in the stories of Arjuna as Brihannala, Aruna, Shikhandi, and Bahugami. Pattanaik's narrative ingenuity thus manifests through Yuvanashva's poignant story, evoking contemplation on the inherent tensions between individual self-discovery and the gravitational pull exerted by prevailing societal paradigms. Through the prism of this profound exploration, the narrative extends an incisive invitation to interrogate the inherent complexities engendered by non-normative gender and sexuality within the tapestry of societal constructs.

In Yuvanashva's court, the bard comes and tells the story of Bahugami. Through these stories of gender fluidity, the author is trying to assert the fact that Yuvanashva's case is not a singular one, similar instances have happened and history has purposely neglected it. Bahugami's marriage with a handsome prince never got consummated. She waited for many years and the impatient Bahugami wanted to find the truth behind her husband's strange behavior. To her complete astonishment, one night she finds that "her husband dressed in a sari, complete with the sixteen love –charms of a married women"(Pattanaik 212). The furious Bahugami threatened her husband that she would disclose his identity to the world. The price begs her pardon and tells her his reality of being caught between the body of a man and the mind of a woman. Bahugami couldn't bear this reality and she kills herself after castrating the prince. Later she becomes a Goddess and the price becomes her priest. Whoever becomes priest in the temple of Bahugami, castrates themselves and dresses like a woman. This story of Bahugami reveals how such gender deviations were part of divinity and not accounted as a natural phenomenon, or part of a normal life. Bahugami, who castrated and punished the prince later became goddess, which symbolize that God will only allow socially accepted gender dichotomy and will punish anything that doesn't fall into that normal category.

Yuvanashva also finds similar stories from The Mahabharatha as Pattanaik has presented Yuvanashva as a contemporary of the Pandavas. Several stories of

gender fluidity can be seen in The Mahabharatha like the episode of Shikhandi, Arjuna as Brihannala, and Krishna as Mohini. Shikhandi's story is the most discussed one among these because she could use her gender ambiguity as a weapon to kill Bhishma, the great warrior. Born as a woman with the unquenching desire to kill Bhishma, she was waiting for her chance. But she understands that though she dresses like a man, and has married a woman, she is not accepted as a man by the society. It is due to her burning desire to become a man, which she accepts the help offered by a Yaksha and exchanges his masculinity with her femininity. Bhishma would never raise his arms against a woman and Shikhandi remarks, " I have become a man of convenience with a weapon called womanhood"(Pattanaik 272). With the newly found masculinity, Shikhandi consummated her marriage with his wife and a child named Amba was born after ten months of Kurukshetra war. This again confuses the society whether to accept Shikhandi as a man or as a woman. Her child Amba was also considered as abnormal as she was born of the union of two women. Later Mandhata was convinced by Yuvanashva and he marries Amba.

When Arjuna assumed the identity of Brihannala, a eunuch, he traversed the realm of gender fluidity. Remarkably, this transformative episode ushered an unprecedented sense of liberation. Unlike his customary role as a man dictated by societal gender norms, Arjuna found himself unburdened from conforming to these expectations during his time as a eunuch. In recounting his eunuch

experience, Arjuna's disposition is characterized by a resolutely positive outlook.

He portrays the conventional gender roles, societal strictures, and regulatory

constraints as profoundly stifling forces, underscoring the constricting nature of

the societal paradigm.He says that the life of a eunuch was "…..liberating actually.

I could get away with anything. I could dance and sing as I pleasesd. I had to

answer no woman or man. I was no one's husband or wife." (Pattanaik 246).

Krishna too had to change to Mohini to satisfy Iravan and to grant his last

wish. But while changing to a woman, he knew very will that this story will never

be accepted by the society as it will not accept the marriage of any one with a

queer identity. Krishna as Mohini says, "let me do tonight what must be done.

Few will understand this, fewer still will accept this. A temple needs to be built in

memory of this event for no society will ever enshrine it " (Pattanaik 252). Even

Krishna was sure that the conservative and heteronormative society will not accept

queer sexuality and gender fluidity. They will associate such stories of gender

transformation only as part of divinity or divine curse and will never consider as

part of normal society and life.

Similar instances are quoted by bards as per the request of Yuvanashva,

like the story of the charioteer of Surya, Aruna, who transformed to female of

Aruni to watch the dance of Apsaras in the king's court. Enchanted by the beauty

of Aruni, Indra chases her and makes love to her and so does Surya. Aruni gives

birth to two sons, but later gives them to the lord of monkeys, Riksha, the king of

Kishkindha. Yuvanashva was surprised to hear that Aruni gave her sons to the king of monkeys and for that the bard replied, "May be children born of a man are fit only to be raised as monkeys" (Pattainaik 218). These words of the bard cause excruciating pain in Yuvanashva as Mandhata was also born from a man. But in his case, the only difference was that he never changed his gender to give birth to a child. In his same body he experienced both fatherhood and motherhood. He wanted to know whether there was any such story similar to his. Bard then cites the story of Ila, who transforms to a woman by the spell of a Goddess. As a man Ila had many wives and children. When he was cursed, he pleads for mercy and Goddess gives him an option that "Ila's masculinity will wax and wane with the moon. He would be all male on full moon days and all female on new moon nights." (Pattanaik 313). Thus Ila experiences both femininity and masculinity in the same body. Gives birth to kids as a mother, while fathered them too.

Ila had many identities as father, mother, husband, wife, son, and daughter in the same body. But the end result of his life was that of chaos as his children fights and kills each other. Ila had to make a sacrifice of own life to give life to his dead children. Society could never accept Illa and the strange truth of queerness associated to him. So they changed Ila to Ileswara, the God of Vallabhi, thus purposely divinity given to him to get the acceptance from the society. But this story was never accepted as a true one. It was perceived as an imagined reality for "men cannot be mother, and mothers cannot be kings" (Pattanaik 317).

Yuvanashva, recognizing the societal reluctance to embrace his unconventional truth, concludes that the most viable means to normalize this deviation is to cloak it within the realm of divinity. Angirasa, in agreement, extends the mantle of divinity to Yuvanashva in the form of Neelakantha Bhairavi, likening him to the enigmatic truth embodied by Lord Shiva, whose blue throat signifies a truth that challenges established order. Angirasa acknowledges Yuvanashva as a truth so confounding that it necessitates compassion and patience until society attains the wisdom to comprehend it fully. In the eyes of Angirasa, Yuvanashva epitomizes boundless possibilities existing within the world. His existence serves as a persistent reminder of the potential for the unknown, urging society to remain receptive to unexpected revelations. Angirasa advocates the worship of Yuvanashva in the divine manifestation of Yuvanashvar, embodied as Nilakantha Bhairavi. This narrative underscores the transformative power of embracing the unknown, urging individuals to transcend societal constraints and recognize the infinite possibilities inherent in unconventional truths. But Yuvanashva understands that his ambition will remain a dream and slowly he accepts his new divine form and says, " I am both. I am the terrifying embodiment of society's unspoken truth. I am also yet another of nature's delightful surprises. I am the soul. I am also the flesh. This is who I am" (Pattanaik 343).

Consequently, Yuvanashva's transformation into a deity underscores a recurring motif wherein divinity is harnessed as a means of societal assimilation.

In this profound narrative exploration, Pattanaik systematically dissects the intricacies surrounding gender fluidity and sexuality, as articulated by the tenets of queer theory. Skilfully interweaving mythic narratives with contemporary reality, the author adeptly elucidates the myriad challenges confronting queer individuals – the enigmatic quest for self-identity, the fervent yearning for societal affirmation, and the pervasive misapprehension underlying prevailing constructs of gender and sexuality. The novel's narrative architecture, juxtaposing timeless mythos with the fluidity of present circumstances, provides an insightful prism through which the tribulations of queer individuals are poignantly unveiled. Through the novel Pattanaik exposes the profound incongruities and distortions entrenched within the societal fabric. This masterful narrative voyage concurrently adheres to, while also interrogating, societal norms, mirroring the ethos of a society meticulously shaped by a delicate interplay of conformity and individuality.

Myth serves as a vivid template mirroring the complex tapestry of society itself. As myth embraces the contours of social order, it inherently captures the essence of human idiosyncrasies. Yet, beneath its veneer of conformity, myth unveils the subtle interstices that offer glimpses into the inescapable entanglement of societal dictates with individual lives. Pattanaik offers a compelling narrative exposition, shedding light on the multifaceted ways society exerts dominion over

its denizens, while simultaneously ushering the need for a profound shift in the prevailing conceptions of gender and sexuality.

In contemporary society, the prevailing perspective often regards "sex and gender as performative acts" rather than recognizing them as inherent individual expressions or distinctive traits, each distinct for every person. However, society tends to overlook this intrinsic diversity, opting instead to prescribe rigid gender roles and uphold heteronormativity as the exclusive and accepted standard governing matters of gender and sexuality. Pattanaik, through the narrative tapestry of *The Pregnant King*, artfully unveils a clarion call for a transformative shift in this prevailing disposition. Judith Butler observes:

> If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking of subversive repetition of that style.(Butler 520)

Through the novel *The Pregnant King* , Pattanaik aims to break the age old gender identity and performance and calls for a transformative shift in perception. Despite the passage of centuries, marginalized sectors of society persistently find themselves relegated to the periphery, their voices muted and their identities stifled. The saga of the pregnant king, echoing across time from the epoch of *The Mahabharatha* to the contemporary landscape, attests to an enduring stasis in

societal attitudes towards the queer community. While numerous strides have been accomplished in various realms, propelled by advances in science and technology, the circumstances of queer individuals have remarkably remained unaltered. Homophobia, tragically, persists within the societal fabric, with queer individuals often being castigated as anomalies.

The retelling of myths assumes a profound mission – that of instigating paradigmatic shifts. Through this narrative renaissance, the aim is to kindle transformation, enabling these marginalized segments to reclaim their rightful place in the societal mosaic. By revisiting age-old narratives, society is invited to embark on a journey of introspection and evolution, whereby attitudes evolve, and the marginalized find solace in the restoration of their dignity and voice. Having explored the contemporary reinterpretations of the *The Mahabharatha* through a queer prism, this investigation will subsequently endeavour to traverse the landscape of intersectionality as manifested in the subaltern experiences elucidated within these selected retellings. The chosen narratives intricately weave tales of characters grappling with subalternity across multifaceted dimensions, each narrative strand offering a distinctive vantage point. In Chapter Five, the spotlight shall shift towards the intricate tapestry of intersectionality, thus becoming a pivotal juncture where varied strands of marginalization converge, intertwining and resonating across diverse strata of societal hierarchy.

Chapter-5

Converging Paradigms of Subalternity in the Contemporary Retellings of

The Mahabharatha

In contemporary literature, narratives infused with intersectionality have emerged as a significant force, challenging traditional storytelling norms and ushering in a fresh perspective on familiar tales. Intersectional narratives encompass literary creations that interweave diverse viewpoints, themes, and narrative techniques, amalgamating various genres, voices, and cultural shades. By seamlessly integrating an array of perspectives, intersectional narratives establish an inclusive realm where marginalized voices are empowered, and the intricate facets of human experiences are probed. These narratives serve as a platform to address pertinent societal concerns, redefine notions of identity, and deconstruct entrenched power hierarchies. Ange Marie Hancock, an academic researcher from University of Southern California, comments that the concept of intersectionality has a multidimensional role to play as it , "identifies the hegemonic, structural, disciplinary, and interpersonal playing fields upon which race, gender, class, and other categories or traditions of difference interact to produce society" (Hancock 74). The essence of intersectional narratives' significance lies in their capacity to envelop readers in an immersive and intellectually stimulating literary journey, fostering a profound comprehension of the human condition and the complexities ingrained within society. As Vivian May, Associate Professor of Women's &

Gender Studies at Syracuse University, remarks, "intersectionality is meant to be applied to real world problems, to unsettle oppressive logics, to plumb gaps or silences for suppressed meanings and implications, and to rethink how we approach liberation politics" (May 7).

Myth, being a mirror to the contemporary world, tries to fill these gaps in the society. Modern retellings of the The Mahabharatha through an intersectional lens offer a captivating reimagining of this ancient epic. By challenging prevailing power dynamics, amplifying the voices of the marginalized, and promoting inclusivity, these adaptations breathe new vitality into the mythological narrative. Functioning as a reflective mirror of society, the *The Mahabharatha's* intersectional narrative unveils a deeper understanding of the intricacies woven into societal fabric and human experiences, thereby prompting introspection and societal advancement. Embracing the multiplicity of perspectives, these reimagined renditions stand as a testament to the enduring influence of mythology, continuously shaping and reshaping cultural narratives within the dynamic landscape of evolving societies.

Intersectionality is a theory which emerged as part of black feminism in the pursuit of exposing different layers of suppression. Regarding the origin and development of the theory Vivian May comments ,

While the late 20th Century certainly marks the emergence in the critical

lexicon of the term "intersectionality", by Kimberle Crenshaw, and while

the 1970s and 1980s were shaped by wide-ranging discussions of the

interplay among systems of gender, class and sexuality, it is inaccurate to

suggest that the last forty years constitute the only historical moment in

which the examination of intersections among systems, identities, and

politics has been pivotal in the history of feminist thought in general and

Black feminist thought in particular. (May10)

Kimberly Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality to explore, "the

various ways in which race and gender intersect in shaping structural , political

and representational aspects of violence against women of color" (Crenshaw1224).

In contemporary discourse, the concept of intersectionality has expanded its

theoretical domain to encompass a myriad of dimensions. These encompass a

diverse spectrum of attributes, such as age, ethnic background, physical

capabilities, religious beliefs, national origin, social caste, professional

engagement, educational attainment, and even the hue of one's skin. Collectively,

these facets contribute to the intricate web of an individual's multifaceted identity

or identities. Intersectionality "…offers ways to evaluate a situation from multiple

stand points , creates room to identify shared logics while accounting for

differences and can be used to approach tensions or contradictions as having logics

and implications of their own, rather than treating them primarily as problems to smooth over" (May 65).

The Mahabharatha displays intersectionality while portraying subalternity. Crenshaw says, "It specifically addresses the manner in which racism, patriarchy, class oppression and other discriminatory systems create background inequalities that structure the relative positions of women, races, ethnicities, classes – and the like" (crenshaw 178).

Though the theory of intersectionality is basically a black feminist theory, the theory can be applied for analysing the age old marginalisation which our Indian society inflict upon subaltern people. Their experiences bear striking semblance to the experiences of black women. In this chapter , the theory is used to analyse how contemporary retellings of *The Mahabharatha* convey intersectional experiences of subalternity and thereby challenging the power domains of the society. The texts chosen for the study also presents *The Mahabharatha* as an intersectional narrative, thereby emerges as a counter-narrative that challenges the conventional notion of a prevailing culture and an exclusive body of work, fostering a reconsideration of established power dynamics. By incorporating subaltern voices from different socially marginalised sections, the retellings unveil the complexities of class, caste, gender and social inequality. These perspectives shed light on the struggles and challenges faced by marginalized characters, providing a deeper insight into their motivations, desires, and agency. Through the

subaltern lens, the epic's themes of injustice, discrimination, and power dynamics gain greater depth and resonance. It provides a deeper insight into their motivations, desires, and agency, allowing readers to empathize with their journeys and understand their actions from their own perspectives.

The concept of intersectionality in Karthika Nair's *Until the Lions* is intricately woven through a skilful fusion of traditional mythological elements with contemporary storytelling techniques. Nair's poetic prose breathes emotional depth into the characters, fostering a profound resonance with the readers. By reimagining the narrative from the standpoint of the subaltern, the epic's themes acquire heightened relevance within the context of a contemporary society grappling with persisting issues of social inequality and discrimination. In ancient times, society was intricately divided along the lines of the varna system, leading to distinct separations based on class, caste, gender, colour, occupation, and economic status. Within the *The Mahabharatha*, these divisions are evident, resulting in numerous characters being deprived of agency and power. Those who dared to transgress these prescribed boundaries faced divine curses or royal punishments, thereby reinforcing the social division advocated by the varna system. The traditional rendition of the *The Mahabharatha*, thus, perpetuated and endorsed the prevailing societal hierarchies.

In contrast, the contemporary retellings of the *The Mahabharatha* unveil the intricacies of caste, class, social inequality, and gender bias. In the present-day,

as society fervently advocates for inclusion and social justice for all strata, genders, castes, and communities, the contemporary retellings echo the call for inclusiveness. Nair's *Until the Lions* exemplifies this sentiment by presenting nineteen subaltern voices from diverse backgrounds, spanning class, caste, gender, and sections of society. These characters exhibit intersectionality of experiences, as they navigate through multifaceted struggles, both internal and external. Through these intersectional experiences, the characters in *Until the Lions* challenge the prevailing dominant discourse and resistance against societal norms. This approach allows for a refined understanding of the complexities faced by characters who defy societal constraints, unveiling a hybridity of resistance against oppressive structures. The contemporary retellings, including *Until the Lions* thus serve as powerful literary tools to advocate for inclusiveness, social justice, and empowerment for individuals across diverse social strata, embodying the transformative potential of intersectional narratives in addressing contemporary issues of marginalization and discrimination.

The original portrayal of the *The Mahabharatha* exemplified sentiments and power struggles emblematic of the prevailing hegemony. While the epic did encompass characters from the lower strata of society, their agency and autonomy were conspicuously absent, effectively justifying their subordinate position within the narrative. However, the contemporary retellings of the *The Mahabharatha* have ushered in a transformative shift, endowing marginalized characters with

newfound voices and agency. Through these retellings, the subaltern characters

eloquently articulate their experiences of subjugation across various strata of

society. As a result, the resounding voices of these marginalized characters

reverberate with a hybridity of marginalization, embodying multiple perspectives

and experiences.

In this renewed narrative landscape, the diverse perspectives of these

characters offer the audience a multifaceted understanding of the epic, fostering a

profound appreciation for its nuances. By amplifying the voices of the

marginalized, the contemporary retellings transcend the traditional boundaries of

the *The Mahabharatha*, generating new plots and subplots that centre around these

empowered characters. This metamorphosis engenders a richer and more inclusive

portrayal of the epic, enabling audiences to engage with the text from fresh

vantage points. Through the exploration of intersectionality in marginalization,

contemporary retellings challenge the hegemonic representations of the original

The Mahabharatha, paving the way for a more comprehensive and socially

conscious literary landscape. The voices of the subaltern characters in these

retellings not only rectify historical misrepresentations but also establish a

dialogue that reflects the evolving societal consciousness and contemporary

concerns. The integration of subaltern perspectives imparts a dynamic and

transformative dimension to the narrative, fostering empathy, inclusivity, and an

exploration of diverse human experiences. By rectifying historical

misrepresentations and amplifying marginalized perspectives, these retellings inspire a dialogue that reflects the evolving societal consciousness and contemporary concerns and they foster empathy, inclusivity, and a deeper exploration of the diverse human experiences that have been historically sidelined in the *The Mahabharatha*. As a result, contemporary retellings transcend the traditional boundaries of the epic, presenting a transformative and dynamic narrative that resonates with a modern audience.

In Karthika Nair's *Until the Lions* the character Padavit emerges as a compelling embodiment of complex intersection of marginalized experiences. Hailing from a lower stratum of society in terms of caste and occupation, Padavit's narrative reflects the dual marginalization he faces. As he contemplates sacrificing his life to attain martyrdom, his aspiration to elevate his subjugated position reveals the struggles of individuals caught at the nexus of multiple societal inequalities. Satyavati, the matriarch of the Kuru dynasty, embodies intersectional experience, representing marginalization in terms of class, caste, and gender. Her actions, such as seeking the aid of sage Parasara to overcome physical limitations, exemplify her resistance against Brahminical hegemony. When she strategically employs her beauty to captivate a king, she wages a personal battle against the class system that denied her justice despite her lineage as the daughter of a fisher king. Satyavati's manipulation of her sexuality to wield influence over the king which forced him to deny the birth right to his son, serves as a powerful challenge

to the patriarchal norms that perpetuate the notion of women's inferiority. In her

multifaceted portrayal, Satyavati embodies intersectionality that assert agency and

identity in defiance of oppressive systems. American social theorist Patricia Hill

Collins, in her book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge,Consciousness and the*

Politics of Empowerment remarks, "…like men, women are, unsurprisingly human

beings and thus are capable of both compassion and cruelty, co-operation and

competition, selfishness and altruism." (Collins 1773). Satyavati is a character

who embodies this trait.

Amba, a character in the *The Mahabharatha*, exemplifies profound intersectional

experiences that reflects gender and patriarchal discrimination. Although born into

royalty, Amba's life takes a tragic turn when she is abducted by Bheeshma and

subsequently rejected by both King Shalva and Bheeshma himself. These events

expose the harsh reality of patriarchal injustice that she faces despite her noble

birth. Frustrated by her powerlessness in the face of such discrimination, Amba

tragically chooses to end her life, seeking rebirth as Shikhandi. Shikhandi's

transformation from a woman to a man with the help of a Yaksha represents a

poignant symbol of a queer identity emerging from Amba's past struggles. As a

warrior, Shikhandi seeks vengeance against Bheeshma for the injustices inflicted

upon Amba. However, Bheeshma's declaration that he will not fight against a

queer individual poses a unique challenge for Shikhandi. Leveraging this

vulnerability, Shikhandi tactically confronts Bheeshma, eventually succeeding in

defeating the undefeated warrior. This act of killing Bheeshma, an iconic figure, by a queer individual assumes powerful symbolism, embodying the fight against conservative societal attitudes towards queer individuals. In Shikhandi's portrayal, intersectional gender experiences emerges as they embody both a woman fighting against patriarchy and a queer person challenging hegemonic norms. The portrayal of Shikhandi stands as a powerful testament to the agency and empowerment reclaimed by those navigating the intersections of gender, patriarchy, and queerness within the epic narrative.

Ekalavya, hailing from the Nishada clan and the son of their king, embodies a compelling intersectionality of marginalization and subjugation, primarily shaped by class and caste distinctions. His denial of education due to his lower birth and the grievous act of guru Drona demanding his thumb as guru Dakshina exemplify the oppressive forces that deprive him of his right to education. Karthika Nair's portrayal of characters like Poorna and Sauvali, who serve as 'dasis' in the palace of the Kuru dynasty, further elucidates intersectionality of subalternity, highlighting the intersectional mistreatment they endure concerning class, caste, and gender. These marginalized characters vividly articulate their experiences of ruthless exploitation by the hegemonic powers, amplifying the significance of hybridity within their narratives. A notable instance of intersectionality occurs during the conversation between Poorna and Satyavati, where opposing forces negotiate their power dynamics. Poorna boldly criticizes

Satyavati for coercing her widowed daughters-in-law to sleep with her son Vyasa against their wishes. In this interaction, Satyavati embodies two contrasting personas—the subaltern, and the queen of the Kuru clan. The interplay of contrasting forces within Satyavati further accentuates the multifaceted nature of her character, enabling a deeper understanding of her struggles and decisions as a subaltern and as a queen. In this manner, Nair's portrayal of intersectional characters and their resistance to hegemony contributes to a socially conscious interpretation of the *The Mahabharatha's* themes and power dynamics.

Hidimbi, the spouse of Bheema and a member of the rakshasa clan, confronts marginalization at the juncture of gender, class, and caste within the *The Mahabharatha's* narrative. As a denizen of the forest, her very existence is circumscribed by societal norms that relegate her to the outskirts, branding her an outcast. Despite her superior civility and potency compared to Bheema, her potential remains overshadowed. She acts as a civilizing force, taming the wild within him and imparting her wisdom. Hidimbi, the Rakshasi, stands as another intersectional figure within the *The Mahabharatha*, embodying the complex interplay of class and caste. She stands as Bhima's wife and Kunti's daughter-in-law, yet her outcast status denies her entry into their realm. Despite her prowess in combat, surpassing even Bhima's skill, and her devotion as a loyal spouse, the Pandava family withholds respect due to the intertwining biases of class, caste, and gender. This bias extends even to her son Ghatolkacha, Kunthi's first

grandson, who remains unrecognized. In *Until the Lions,* Nair deftly lays bare

such intersectional experiences of the subaltern, endowing them with voices that

were previously muted and narratives that were overlooked. Hidimbi, while

relegated to an outcast status, emerges as a paragon of civility, rivalling other

female characters. She brazenly challenges Kunti, contesting her request for

Draupadi to marry her five sons. This revisioning of Hidimbi's narrative

showcases how intersectionality shapes and defines her experiences, underscoring

the societal undercurrents of bias, exclusion, and the silencing of marginalized

voices. Through these stories of the subaltern are brought to the forefront,

commanding attention and shining a piercing light on their struggles for

recognition and validation.

Through the voice of Vrishali, Karna's wife, Nair probes into the

intersectional experience of the formidable warrior, Karna, who is relegated to the

status of a subaltern. Despite ascending to a position of power, Karna remains

ensnared in a web of grave injustices perpetuated by the upper echelons of society

due to his designation as a son of Suta. Karna's valour, bravery, and martial

prowess come under repeated scrutiny and suppression by the privileged upper

class, even though he has been elevated to a prominent status. While Duryodhana

bestows upon him the title of the king of Anga, Karna is persistently subjected to

psychological torment emanating from the royal household of Hastinapura. This

unrelenting marginalization persists, even though he has proven himself to be a warrior surpassing Arjuna in numerous ways.

In a poignant instance, even during the swayamvara ceremony, Draupadi dismisses Karna's candidacy, citing his subaltern background. This public denial exemplifies the dissonance between Karna's perceived status as a subaltern and his intrinsic recognition as a kshatriya, resulting in the emergence of disparate identities within him. Nair's portrayal illuminates the complex interplay of forces that shape Karna's identity. The conflicting realms of his public image as a subaltern and his internal self-acknowledgment as a Kshatriya intersect, generating a profound inner turmoil. This dynamic intersectionality underscores the challenges faced by Karna, as he navigates a society characterized by bias, discrimination, and the struggle for authentic self-recognition.

In the second novel chosen for the study , *Bride of the Forest*, Madhavi. S. Mahadevan presents intersectional experiences of subalternity through several characters. The story focuses on the intersectionality of gender or gendered subalternity. The main character of the novel, Madhavi, herself is an example of such experiences. She comes from the forest to the palace of Yayati with her mother who is a forester.   This space where she belongs is what sets her lower class status and when it combines with her status of gender, Madhavi experiences double marginalization. Though she is king's daughter, she was not allowed to live in the palace along with other children of Yayati. Instead she was sent to the

house of Sharmista as a helper. She does not get any consideration or affection

from her father. Instead, she is treated as a mere commodity to be handled over to

anyone as her father is her owner. The character Sharmista, daughter of King

Vrishaparva, becomes an illustration of dual marginalization. Offended by

Sharmista's actions, Devayani implores her father, Sukracharya, to decree a

lifetime of servitude for her. Despite recognizing the inherent injustice, the king

finds himself constrained to heed the guru's command, a stark reflection of the

societal hierarchy where obedience to a Brahmana takes precedence over a

Kshatriya. Sharmista's experience encapsulates a twofold marginalization,

stemming from both her gender and her class. As a woman, she is compelled to

acquiesce to her father's decisions, devoid of alternatives. Within this context, the

prevailing social structure reinforces her vulnerability, accentuating her

marginalization. Throughout the *The Mahabharatha*, numerous narratives mirror

the complex interactions of intersectionality, showcasing the convergence of

gender, class, and power dynamics.

The narrative of King Yayati underscores a recurring predicament

reminiscent of Sukracharya's dilemma when confronted by Galav, a Brahmin

youth, who requisitions the Shyamkarni horses. Fearing the potential

consequences of incurring a Brahmin's ire, Yayati, in a similar vein to

Sukracharya, extends his daughter as a form of compensation, envisioning her as a

progenitor of offspring. Drishadvati's experience is fraught with multilayered

marginalization, manifesting on distinct strata. Not only is she relegated to a subordinate status within the palace, but her father's act of 'daan,' whereby he bestows her 'womb on rent' to a Brahmin, epitomizes her lack of agency over her own body, emblematic of her subjugation as a result of her concurrent class and gender inferiority. The narrative intricacies of Garud, a reference intertwined within the storyline, further mirror intersectionality through the lens of marginalization. The accounts of Kadru and Vinitha, King Daksha's daughters offered in union to Rishi Kashyap, echo the interplay of intersectionality as their privileged lineage fails to shield them from the dual forces of Brahminical class hierarchy and patriarchal subjugation.

Bride of the Forest, as a literary work, serves as a canvas upon which these intersectional experiences are vividly painted. The narrative apparatus of the contemporary world enables characters to vocalize their encounters and stand against the oppression perpetuated by prevailing hegemonic forces. The very fabric of this retelling encapsulates the hybrid nature of cultural identities and the intersecting facets of experiences showcased by subaltern personas, ultimately demonstrating their capacity to confront and challenge the oppressive structures imposed upon them. Vivian May remarks, "intersectionality is an ontological project that accounts for multiplicity and complex subjectivity, reconceptualizing agency, and attends to simultaneous privilege and oppression" (May 34).

The Pregnant King by Devdutt Pattanaik portrays a vivid example of intersectionality, where various dimensions of identity and experience intersect and intertwine, shaping the characters' lives and the narrative. This novel probe into the interplay of gender, sexuality, societal norms, and personal desires, demonstrating how these facets interact and influence each other. It artfully highlights society's proclivity for binary perspectives, while sidelining and undermining the spectrum of sexual minorities. The suppression and silence inflicted upon diverse expressions of gender fluidity become poignantly evident. The author deftly underscores that society, with its deeply etched gender binaries and ascribed roles, constructs a pervasive normative framework that not only influences individuals but also systematically marginalizes those who exist beyond the confines of this binary. Through Yuvanashva's story, one can introspect on how societal constructs intersect and shape individual experiences, simultaneously shedding light on the pressing need to recognize and celebrate the diverse tapestry of human existence, where the narrative of gender fluidity and its intersection with power structures demands its rightful place within the broader discourse of humanity. In the story of Yuvanashva, a profound interrogation of the conventional notions of femininity, masculinity, and the roles ascribed by society takes centre stage. The story lays bare the intricacies of this constructed social framework, which sustains and perpetuates heteronormative values. His journey, catalyzed by an unexpected twist of fate – where he inadvertently consumes a magical elixir intended for his wives, resulting in his pregnancy with the embryo

nestled on his left thigh – becomes a testament to the deeply embedded intersections of gender, identity, and power. Yuvanashwa's story becomes a symbol of the mythology's attempt to what Vivian May calls "unlearn social imaginaries" she says, "intersectionality's attention to multiplicity is key to its invitation … To unlearn prevailing social imaginaries: it directs our attention to alternative worldviews" (May 53).

Society's power dynamics intricately manoeuvre the existing structure, segregating and assigning distinct powers to the female and male domains. This process inevitably restricts queerness, compelling individuals to gravitate towards a singular gender identity to access the privileges conferred by a specific power dynamic. Should they deviate from this established binary, they are effectively barred from embracing the entirety of both identities. Arjuna, having intimately experienced a queer existence by adopting the identity of Brihannala for a year, now finds himself yearning to sever even the recollections of that period from his consciousness. Like Yuvanashva, Arjuna also get this intersectional experience of a man and a woman by adopting the identity of Brihannala. He then understands how society constructs that dictate distinct roles and actions based on assigned genders. He cites a poignant example from his own life, where, governed by these deeply ingrained prejudices, the prince of Virat recoils at his sister's archery prowess, while she, in turn, opposes her brother's affinity for dance. The novel *The Pregnant King* is rich in portraying characters with intersectionality as queerness

itself is intersectional . As writer Dill remarks, it talks about the experiences of

"people whose identity crosses the boundaries of traditionally constructed groups"

(Dill 5).

By giving prominence to such characters, contemporary retellings of

mythology attempts to rewrite the existing power paradigms. Yuvanashva as a

king is the symbol of strict social codes which only supports the established

patterns. He is the symbol of the powerful social order. But his accidental

pregnancy makes him understand the viewpoint of the 'other' and his queer

experience urges him to change his perspectives. Like Arjuna who experience the

otherness through Brihannala, Yuvanashva's intersectional experience urges him

to deconstruct the social structure. Commencing as an unwavering moralist and an

authoritarian ruler, Yuvanashva, as the tale progresses, evolves into an individual

harbouring both masculine cognition and feminine experiences. This convergence

engenders a balanced identity, emblematic of equality and justice, resonating with

the very ethos contemporary society clamours for.

The pregnant King presents many characters and situations where their

expected gender roles clashes with their desired sexuality. These intersecting

experiences offers a platform to rethink and redesign the contemporary social

norms with regard to this. Shilavati, the mother of Yuvanashva, is a stark contrast

to her husband Prasenajit and her brother Nabhaka. Both men never wanted to rule

the kingdom but their gender role force them to do so. Whereas Shilavati dreams

to rule the country and is interested in politics. But being a woman society will not accept her as a ruler. It will accept only a king and not a queen. When she takes over the control of the kingdom when Prasenajit dies, she is accepted only as a reagent of the country as her son was a minor . Here the intersecting experiences of gender roles expected by the society and their individual wishes constantly clashes with each other and though portrayed as being the power centre, in reality they are powerless.

 The characters of two Brahmin youths, Sumedha and Somavat, serve as poignant exemplars of the societal impositions regarding gender roles and sexuality. The attire of a man impersonating a woman clashes vehemently with societal norms, leading to their arrest and subsequent imprisonment for what is perceived as a disconcerting disruption of an auspicious Yajna ceremony. Somavat changes his sex to a female and becomes Somavati in the hope of getting acceptance from the society. Yet, contrary to their optimism, the king Yuvanashva and society at large reject Somavat's transformation into Somavati. Their pronouncement is rooted in a resolute stance, deeming such alterations in gender as ethically incongruent with the dharmasastras – the guiding principles of righteous conduct. The social narrative vehemently asserts that one's birth-assigned gender is to be steadfastly maintained, prevailing over any inclinations or identities that may deviate from established societal norms. This narrative of Sumedha and Somavat, which proposes intersectionality of gender and sexuality, unveils the intricate interplay of societal expectations, moral frameworks, and individual experiences. Their

journey serves as a profound testament to the challenges encountered by those who challenge or transgress the conventional boundaries of gender and sexuality, laying bare the complex dynamics within which these individuals navigate their identities in the face of societal expectations. However, their poignant quest for acceptance resonates with the overarching dominance society holds over individual expressions of gender and sexuality.

The Pregnant King presents several characters who experience intersectionality of gender and sexuality and narrates such experiences as a challenge to the existing social norms. Arjuna explains his queer experience as Brihannala quite liberating as it gave him a chance to hide from the societal expectations of performing his manly role. Krishna as Mohini also finds the experience of intersectionality a unique one. Surya's charioteer Aruna transforms to Aruni and both Indra and Surya gave her two sons. Bard of the court explains the story of Ila, who experience a man and a woman in the same body. In his initial masculine embodiment, Ila fulfils roles as a husband and father to multiple spouses and children. He experience intersectionality and femininity and masculinity manifests within Ila's singular body. Simultaneously a mother who births children and a father who begets them, Ila navigates an intricate matrix of identities as father, mother, husband, wife, son, and daughter in the same body. These roles intersect with each other, challenge each other and when asked whether the experience of a man or a woman is better , he chooses the life of a woman. The intersectionality of gender roles made him realize that.

The contemporary retellings of *The Mahabharatha* portrays such intersectional experiences and their resistance to hegemony as an attempt to do what Maylei Blackwell calls a "retrofitted memory" . Prof.Maylei Blackwell, interdisciplinary scholar activist, oral historian, and author of ¡Chicana Power! remarks:

> Retrofitted memory is a practice whereby social actors read the interstices, gaps and silences of existing historical narratives in order to retrofit, rework and refashion older narratives to create new historical openings, political possibilities, and genealogies of resistance. (Blackwell 102)

This study aims to uncover the intersectionality of characters, aiming to recontextualize mythological narratives in order to address gaps and silences within them. Anna Carastathis opines that intersectionality explores, "…identities are inseparable, intermeshed, and internally heterogeneous, complex unities constituted by their internal differences and dissonances and by internal as well as external relations of power" (Carastathis 942). The subaltern characters' intersectional experiences related to caste, class, gender, and sexuality are analysed and different layers of marginalisation and the intersectional experiences are explored. Through this exploration, the study highlights how these characters continuously challenge the societal norms, ultimately deconstructing established power structures and prevailing paradigms.

Chapter -7

Recommendations

The exploration of the contemporary retelling of *The Mahabharatha* using contemporary theories within the texts *Until the Lions, Bride of the Forest,* and *The Pregnant King* offers a rich field of study with various directions for further research and development. Apart from the perspectives discussed in the thesis, contemporary retellings of *The Mahabharatha* offers a wide range of scope in research .

The trajectory of future research on retellings of *The Mahabharatha* necessitates a multifaceted exploration, incorporating diverse perspectives and thematic dimensions. A comparative analysis with other contemporary retellings can be done, using current theories. This approach promises to unveil commonalities, unique contributions, and interpretive disparities among various renditions, offering deep insights into the dynamic evolution of the epic within different cultural contexts. Another scope of research in this area is a transnational and global examination of these retellings to discern their resonance beyond cultural origins. Investigating how these narratives engage with global discussions on subaltern identities, feminism, queer issues, and interconnectivity of their experiences in diverse cultural milieus will enrich our understanding of universal significance of myths and cross-cultural impacts.

Another focus of the research can be the exploration of reader reception and its impact on the audience. Surveys, interviews, and ethnographic research will contribute to our understanding of how these retellings resonate with audiences from diverse backgrounds. Uncovering the impact on readers' perspectives, attitudes, and awareness of subaltern, feminist, queer, and interconnectivity issues will shed light on the transformative potential of mythological narratives in contemporary society. Beyond textual explorations, the study of multimedia adaptations and performances, including theatre, film, visual art, and digital storytelling, adds another layer of complexity to the analysis. Understanding how these adaptations amplify or transform messages and representations from the original texts provides valuable insights into the dynamic interplay between traditional narratives and evolving forms of artistic expression.

Future research can also be exploring hybridity in the retellings of *the Mahabharatha. The Mahabharatha*, a cornerstone of ancient Indian literature, emerges as a dynamic and complex narrative marked by its inherent hybridity. This analysis probes into various facets of its hybrid nature, aiming to unravel the complex and subtle layers that contribute to the epic's richness. An examination of the original *Mahabharatha* as a hybrid narrative is imperative. This entails a meticulous investigation into how the epic amalgamates multiple genres, styles, and voices, reflecting a synthesis of diverse influences and storytelling traditions within

ancient India. Within the fabric of *The Mahabharatha*, an exploration of voices and perspectives can be done. The epic incorporates a myriad of narrative voices, including those of women, marginalized characters, and non-human entities. Unraveling the interplay of these voices within the narrative fabric elucidates their contribution to the overarching thematic tapestry, offering insights into the layers of representation and agency. A scrutiny of characterization within *The Mahabharatha* will unveil another layer of hybridity. Characters in the epic exhibit complex identities, both in terms of their social roles and psychological traits. This analysis endeavors to delve into how these multifaceted identities relate to overarching themes of subalternity, gender, and sexuality, shedding light on the intricate web of character dynamics.

Narrative techniques and intertextuality within *The Mahabharatha* constitute another dimension of exploration. By studying the employment of frame narratives, embedded stories, and cyclic storytelling, one can discern how these techniques create layers of meaning and intertextual references, contributing to the complex structure of the epic. The investigation of hybrid spaces within *The Mahabharatha*—ranging from grand palaces to forests and battlefields can be done. These settings, examined as hybrid spaces, represent different facets of the characters' journeys and experiences, adding symbolic depth to the narrative landscape.

The hybridity of *The Mahabharatha* is also manifested in its combination of mythological and historical elements. By blurring the boundaries between these

realms, the epic presents a unique hybridity that influences the reinterpretation of the narrative in subsequent retellings. Diverse forms of storytelling, including dialogue, monologue, poetry, and prose, are integral components of *The Mahabharatha*. An examination of these forms contributes to the diversity of perspectives and voices within the epic, elucidating the complex ways in which the narrative unfolds.

The reception and adaptation of *The Mahabharatha* in different cultural contexts and time periods form a critical area of inquiry. By analyzing how its hybrid narrative elements are interpreted and reimagined by various cultures and storytellers, one gains insights into the enduring adaptability of the epic. Building a bridge from the original to the contemporary, the analysis connects the hybrid narrative elements of *The Mahabharatha* to modern retellings. By exploring how these retellings build upon or subvert the hybridity present in the epic, one contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the evolving interpretations and adaptations of this timeless narrative.

The study can focus on the influence of postcolonial and postmodern theories on the interpretation and reinterpretation of *The Mahabharatha's* hybrid narrative. This analysis will reveal the discourse surrounding the epic's broader implications for literature, culture, and social change. This multifaceted exploration will offer a comprehensive understanding of *The Mahabharatha's* enduring relevance and its capacity to adapt to changing cultural contexts and interpretations.

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