

SILENCE OF KUNTI: AN INQUISITIVE ANALYSIS OF MADHAVI. S. MAHADEVAN'S *THE KAUNTEYA* AND B. R CHOPRA'S *MAHABHARATA*

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Abstract: This article presents an analysis of the portrayal of Kunti's Silence from the literary and cinematic epic retellings. Literary and cinematic representation in S. Madhavi Mahadevan's *The Kaunteyas* and B R Chopra's *Mahabharata* are studied through the in-depth exploration of Third-World feminism in Uma Narayan's *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third World feminism*. The paper examines the contemporary cinematic narrative in contrast to the depiction of thoughts in the modern retellings of the *Mahabharata*.

Keywords: Silence, Kunti, Retelling, Third-World feminism, Cinematic Representation.

1 Introduction

In the late 1980s, there was an increase in the viewership of television programs in India. A new kind of revolution was witnessed when shows like *Buniyaad*, *Hum Log* and *Rangoli* were a rage and with them, there was an increase in the production of television serials. The themes were independence, post or pre-partition, social issues, mythology, devotion etc. In 1988, the magnum opus of the television version of *Mahabharata* on Doordarshan was created by B. R Chopra. With a total number of 94 episodes, the show is a television adaptation of the original epic *Mahabharata* written by Vyasa in Sanskrit. Chopra's *Mahabharata* along with Ramanad Sagar's *Ramayana* brought a new wave of television consumption (Kumar 2020). Every Sunday in the late 1980s was religiously devoted to the consumption of the television versions of Indian epics. The society which grew up listening to the stories and folktales from the epics, started connecting with the cinematic version which was presented to them on their television screens. These television mythological legends were widely beloved nationwide, with viewers writing letters to share their feelings about the episodes. Chopra and Sagar paved the way for the modern versions of the television mythologies but nothing could surpass the popularity of the original television versions of the mythologies. In the year 2020, when the world was in quarantine due to the coronavirus Doordarshan re-aired *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The rebroadcasting of these TV myths also turned out to be a huge success. These series once again regained popularity among the viewers. This time, they caused a big stir on both television and the internet. However, the depiction of epic women characters in the TV mythologies continues to be highly disturbing.

The silence of the woman on the television is disturbing and questions the authenticity of the written form. The views of television are highly dominated by women, therefore the shows are produced and written about women and their interests. Woman is represented to be quiet, gentle, vulnerable and submissive. Ideally, they were the most obedient daughters, the sweetest sisters, the perfect mothers and idealistic wives (Kumar 2020). This paradigm of gender representation on television can lead to a mass culture which overshadows the social and educational background of its viewers (Kumar 2020). Kumar further mentions that the consumption of mass media on television played a key role in moulding and recreating opinions and reconstructing images and dominant cultural values of society. Thus, the portrayal of the silence of the epic women characters on the television screens is the most perturbing, as

theoretically the mythological drama was televised to strengthen the nation-building theme added with the promotion of moral values and tradition. Contradictory the promotion and acceptance of silence of epic women in the mass media validates, appropriates and accepts the regressive thought process of the society. The purpose of this paper is to present an analysis of the portrayal of Kunti's silence from the literary and cinematic retellings. Literary and cinematic representation in S. Madhavi Mahadevan's *The Kaunteyas* and B R Chopra's *Mahabharata* are studied through the in-depth exploration of Third World feminism in Uma Narayan's *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third World feminism*.

1.1 Review of Literature

The original epic *Mahabharata* is written in Sanskrit. Recited by Sage Vyasa and written by Ganesha, the epic is considered a widely read text from ancient Indian literature. Over 1,00, 000 verses are written and composed to exhibit the grandness of the epic narrative. The *Mahabharata* focuses on the Pandavas and Kauravas, two divisions of the Kuru clan, detailing their epic Kurukshetra battle for the Hastinapur throne. The epic deals with the themes of dharma, brotherhood, fratricide, familicide, devotion, justice and the battle of Kurukshetra. The epic researcher P. Lal mentions, the huge hulk of *Mahabharata*, spanning over 18 books can be split into three distinct parts, the first four Parvas are preparatory, introducing the characters as it were, Parvas 5 to 11 are actual war books while Parvas 12 to 18 constitute the epilogue, the aftermath of the war. There are numerous mythic characters, humans and supra-humans whose destiny are inextricably interlocked (Lal 1991). These numerous characters are characterized to establish the foundation of the dharma. Over the years, the epic has been retold, re-narrated and adapted in multifarious languages and translations, but what continues to trouble is the representation of the silence of the women characters in the epic.

Mahadevan is an Indian author of children's books, short stories and novels based on the modern retelling of the *Mahabharata*. Her retellings emphasise the story from the female perspective. She gives voice to the voiceless epic women characters from the *Mahabharata*. Mahadevan's work often explores themes such as identity, culture and the complexities of modern life. *The Kaunteyas* is a retelling of *Mahabharata* narrated from the perspective of Kunti, an epic woman. The text centres on the lives of Pandavas and their widow mother Kunti. The purpose of the text is to give voice to the voiceless character of Kunti, where her silence is illustrated as her strength. *The Kaunteyas* present an unconventional perspective on the epic, delving into the emotional and psychological complexity of the character of Kunti and her sons, Pandavas. The text takes the readers into the journey of Kunti from a foster child to the queen mother of Hastinapur.

B. R Chopra was a prominent Indian filmmaker and television producer, famous for his influential work in Indian television and cinema. Chopra's most acclaimed project is the TV adaptation of the *Mahabharata*, which was aired in 1980. The show has become an influential cultural phenomenon in India and is celebrated for the precise depiction of the epic. It was deeply associated with the characters and themes of the epic.

Uma Narayan is a feminist scholar whose works highlight postcolonial feminism and its theories associated with the Third World. Her work *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third World Feminism* is a pivotal work that critically explores the intersections of feminism, culture and identity in the context of the Third World. Narayan tries to argue against the binaries often created between Western and non-Western women. Her work focuses on the necessity of understanding the diversity of feminism in the context of different cultures and

traditions. The text is divided into five chapters and each chapter focuses on the Third World cultural perspective of feminism against the Western perspective of feminism. Narayan's work explores the themes of cultural relativism and feminism, intersectionality, critique of Western feminism and cultural identity.

1.2 Research Objectives

Even though the story of *Mahabharata* and Kunti's character have been extensively read, the portrayal of her silence continues to be disturbing in both the original narrative and its retellings. This study explores the theme of the portrayal of Kunti's silence from the literary and cinematic retelling. To investigate this study's theme, qualitative comparative textual research methodology is analyzed. The paper also explores the concept of Third World feminism by Uma Narayan in the context of Mahadevan's *The Kaunteyas* and Chopra's *Mahabharata*. This study also examines the contemporary cinematic narrative in contrast to the portrayal of thoughts in the modern retelling of the *Mahabharata*.

2 Feminism and Third-World Feminism

The aim of the term "Feminism" is to constitute a world for women beyond women's liberation or equality (Mehrotra 2001). The word feminism derives from the French term *feminisme*. Historically, feminism was initially referred to as the women's movement in the United States in the 19th century. The women's movement comprised of diverse collection of groups all aimed at advancing the position of women. A.J Jaggar in his 1983 work, "Feminist Politics and Human Nature" states that in the early 20th century 'feminism' in the United States was introduced to refer to one particular group of women's rights advocated, namely which ascribed uniqueness of women, the mystical experience of motherhood and women's special purity. During the 19th and 20th centuries, the movement was marked as the 'First wave of feminism'. The agenda of the first wave was to focus on legal issues, particularly women's suffrage. However, it neglected the issues of women of colour, instead focusing on the rights of white women. As a response to the limitations of the first wave of feminism, the second wave of feminism emerged in the 1960's focusing on women's equality in all aspects of life. Third-world women's oppression was neglected by the second wave of feminism. Thus, the ideology of 'Third World feminism' emerged. Third World feminism is the result of the assumption by the West that the challenges faced by women around the world are the same as White Women. Herr mentions that "during the second wave white feminism in the West the concept of feminism have assumed that women everywhere faced similar oppression by their sex/gender". The Third World feminist rejects the Western doctrine and argues that feminism should not be categorized as white feminism, as women's oppression worldwide is influenced by their local and national circumstances (Herr 2014). Uma Narayan's *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism* highlights the presence of Westernized political agendas in various Third World settings. She further asserts that how Western and non-Western cultures were "totalizations" pictures that cast and promote the values and practices that are ascribed to a specific privileged group within the community. These values and practices of the culture later become the common whole of the entire community. Her work focuses on the necessity to question the 'selective labelling' of the Hindu fundamentalists to characterise Indian feminist issues as the symptom of Westernisation. However, these Hindu fundamentalists skillfully use contemporary techniques to propagate their ideological messages. Third-world feminists are 'insiders' in the sense that they are often both familiar with and affected by the practices, institutions and policies they criticize (Narayan 1997). Therefore, defining the doctrines of Third-World feminism is emphasized in Narayan's *Dislocating Culture*, as opposed to the feminist doctrines of the West.

3 Portrayal of Kunti's Silence: Literary and Cinematic Retelling

"When there is no voice there is silence".
(anonymous)

Silence depicts the absence of voice or word. The word "silence" is derived from the Latin word *silentium* which is defined as "muteness, state of being or keeping silent; a forbearing from speech or utterance". The culture of silence is widely witnessed in literary and visual forms. Silence as a category is not considered as fixed and it also provides a means of signifying the underside of prevailing cultural practices (Dauncey 2003).

Dauncey affirms that silence can also be the product of fear of speaking out of place. The facets of fear and silence can be explored in analyzing the character of Kunti. The silence of Kunti's character is most disturbing when despite knowing the truth about Karna's parentage she chooses not to speak. In *The Kaunteyas*, Karna was born when Kunti was unmarried and was born out of summoning the sun god. This summoning was the result of the boon given to her by sage Durvasa. Fearing the outrage and the black lash of society over her premarital pregnancy, Kunti immediately abandoned Karna. Afterwards, when for the first time she came across the young Karna in the court of the Hastinapur she remained silent and her silence resulted in the massive destruction of the Dvapara Yuga (Mahadevan 2017):

He is alive. How will the Pandavas react when they learn who he is? They will not see a thing beyond what is obvious to all: sutaputra. They will not be able to live down the shame of it. It has taken us years to make a place in Hastinapur, and nothing is settled yet... I must not put my sons' future in peril. One false step and I will pull everyone with me deeper into this quicksand... (Mahadevan 263)

In the above reference, the silence of Kunti can be examined with two implications, in the first implication her silence can be indicated as a product of fear, a fear of losing the better future of her sons and the second implication, her silence can be the result of her gender, thus, the absence of speech is a product of social subordination. Contradictorily, in Chopra's *Mahabharata*, the moment Karna enters Hastinapur to claim his title of the best archer, Kunti recognizes him and decides not to disclose it. Chopra astutely adds the voice of the narrator who says nothing about her inner turmoil but instead, a piece of background music plays and she faints. Here, Chopra is doubly silencing Kunti's voice. Chopra is denying the voice of her inner soul as well.

Uma Narayan in her book opines that the injunction to be silent came from the mother who shares her conjugal sufferings with her daughter while simultaneously silencing the voice of her daughter, "The same mother who complained about her silencing enjoined me to silence, doing what she had to do since my failures to conform would translate as her failures to rear me well". Thus focusing on the perspective that the silencing of the woman comes from the mother who complained about her silencing while simultaneously silencing the voice of her daughter. She further mentions that the dynamics of the bond between a mother and her daughter may be seen as reflections of the relationship with the nation of the culture in which the individual is raised (Narayan 1997). As Narayan points out, both the mother and the culture send conflicting messages to the daughter, while encouraging the daughter to be confident, impolite, and self-assertive they also silence her voice. To illustrate, Kunti initially instructs her five sons to share the prize won by Arjuna but realizes her mistake upon learning that Arjuna won Draupadi. She then asks Draupadi to accept her decision and become the shared wife of her sons. Thus, the silence of woman by a woman. This silencing of women can also be the outcome of the culture, politics and the dominant patriarchy which are in the position of the policymakers hence influencing individuals' relationships.

Third World feminism opines that the labelling of the daughter as “Westernization” or the accusation of lack of “respect” for the culture is the result of her raising her voice (Narayan 1997). Hence this voice must be subdued in the name of cultural and patriarchal norms. In *The Kaunteyas* and Chopra’s *Mahabharata*, Kunti, an epic woman couldn’t voice out her agony, sorrows and dilemma after the untimely death of her husband, King Pandu. The patriarchal and cultural norms appropriate for a widow forced her to keep herself muted throughout the narration.

Silence has numerous connotations associated with it. The reason for the silence differs depending upon its narrative context and upon the analytical mode employed to explicate it (Duncey 2003). The representation of silence of a character also represents the superiority and marginalization in the hands of the patriarchy. When the silence of a woman or marginalized character is depicted on the screen it unknowingly becomes the characteristic of that particular character and that is the case with Kunti. Kunti’s character is written in such a manner which is to remain silent throughout the narration, however, she is given a voice when any blame is to be laid on her shoulders. In *The Kaunteyas* and Chopra’s *Mahabharata*, women were oppressed and marginalized in the name of dharma. The purpose of dharma is to determine the moral rights and duties of each individual along with the behaviours that enable social order, right conduct and those that are virtuous, but in subjugating the woman dharma plays a pivotal role. It acts as an invisible text of ‘do’ and ‘don’ts’ established for the idea of the ideal man and woman (Datta 2021). The critics of literature believe that the voice is sometimes considered as a challenge to the threat posed to social harmony by outspoken behaviour and a pretext for the investigation of social and ideological issues. As a result, the silence of a woman is more acceptable in the power play of the dharma over the silence of a man. Kunti was adopted by King Kuntibhoj, she was named Pritha at the time of her birth. When she was adopted by the King, her name was changed from Pritha to Kunti, “Pritha, pledged away before her birth, had no place to call her own, but I, Kunti, belonged to a kingdom” (Mahadevan 15). Likewise, Kunti had no choice in the matter when her husband King Pandu married another woman named Madri. The portrayal of silently understanding betrayal in cinema is seen as crucial. In Chopra’s *Mahabharata*, Kunti exuberantly embraces her husband’s infidelity by warmly receiving his second wife Madri. This unsettling episode prompts various inquiries about her spouse’s unfaithfulness, treachery, and unshown rage, and still he stays quiet.

The qualities which are stereotypically associated with women are silence and passivity. The reasoning for such association is the representation of the women characters by the male writers, directors, producers and editors in the written, verbal and visual forms. Stuart Blackburn mentioned in “Speech and Gender: Indian Versions of the Silence Wager”, that in 1987 Ruth Bottigheimer studied the Grimms Tales, where the researcher Bottigheimer investigated not only the external female voices but the internal ones as well. According to the study, there are 5 levels of silence:

Historical (external voice or pen), Narrative (silence as a narrative motif), Textual (internal speech of the story characters), Lexical (words for speak that either validate or question what is said), Editorial (authorial or editorial comment on what is said by the story characters) (Blackburn, 172)

Summing up Bottigheimer’s observation in context to Kunti’s silence in the text, *The Kaunteyas* can be interpreted as historical and textual silence, while Kunti’s silence in Chopra’s *Mahabharata* can be interpreted as editorial silence. Instead of voicing out Kunti’s emotions upon encountering Karna, the author’s comment was added in the form of a background song sung by a male singer, as portrayed in Chopra’s *Mahabharata*. Bottigheimer also argues it would be unfair to claim that only female voices are silent in literary and cinematic portrayals; male voices also experience silence, but their silence is short and chosen, while female silence is

extended and punitive (Blackburn 1999). Dauncey stated that there are two different styles of silence which are widely adopted by artists as a literary strategy: Loud and Soft. The first one is self-destructive and it is considered like an apocalyptic perspective, which might result in destructing the narration of the text, this style of silence in literature when not addressed properly might result in the danger of collapsing into the ‘negative silence’ (Dauncey 2003). Contradictorily, the soft style of silence in literature is more subtle and reticent, and it also has a long-term impact on the literature and culture. Kunti’s character is defined by her soft silence, as it has affected both the story and the reader’s thoughts. She embodied the silent epic-woman archetype, distinct from other characters who were vocal and clear in their intentions and words. She is seen as a character with the potential to alter the narration’s tone, but instead ended up being the driving force behind the battle. Her silence also prompted many questions within and outside of the narration. The ‘literature of silence’ is often viewed as a phenomenon which has a positive effect on the literature of the future (Dauncey 2003). To some critics, silence is a form of speech and acts as a positive element in a dialogue (Pattanaik 2024). The impact of their silence can be seen in literature and culture from the past to the future. Both in *The Kaunteyas* and Chopra’s *Mahabharata*, Kunti finally disclosed her secret to the Pandavas, ending her prolonged silence. However, the disclosure caused a rift between Kunti and her five sons:

Nothing was ever the same again. The secret that I had kept all these years to protect my sons had, by its revelation, drawn a rift between us. The Pandavas did not know how to behave with me. I had become a mystery to them. They tried not to judge me, but it was strange. (Mahadevan 386)

However, the rift is not acknowledged by Chopra and instead, he mentions the curse of Yudhishther after discovering Kunti’s secret. To popular belief, her character was depicted as a flawless representation of a perfect mother and the ideal of a goddess who gave up everything for her children, disregarding her fears and challenges as a woman. She was illustrated as a goddess rather than a woman. Narayan has substantiated the labelling of women as goddesses in her significant work on feminist theory and postcolonial studies. Narayan posits that “Indian culture saw women as “goddesses” ...”, for instance, Kunti’s silence can also be attributed to the phenomena of representation of the epic woman as a symbol of a goddess by male authors. The cinematic representation of an epic woman as equivalent to the goddesses and the dominance of male gods as strong, masculine, macho-centered heroes is a result of Hindu fascism (Sengupta 1991). Sengupta further mentioned in her work, “Sexual Politics of Television Mythology”, that this Hindu Fascism of the epics focuses on two aspects, first, disregarding the aspects of female and male sexuality where it proves to be uncomfortable with masculine, puritanical and heterosexual worldview. Second, it focuses on the complete and total sub-versions of any dissenting voice within the female characters. Therefore since Chopra’s *Mahabharata* was aired during the late 80’s the time when Hindu Fascism was at its peak, hence the subversion of the female voice became the new normal in television mythologies. Television mythologies present an intricate portrayal of epic women as goddesses, shaping viewers’ perception of women as divine beings through a unique narrative. The TV epic asserts female identity and sexuality in one of two ways, either they are ignored or they are castrated (Sengupta 1991).

Narayan in *Dislocating Cultures- Identities, Traditions and Third World Feminism* also emphasizes how the representation of the colonized woman became an expression of the oppressiveness of the entire colonial cultural tradition. Therefore the depiction of epic-women’s silence in the literary and cinematic canons also becomes the reflection of the oppression of the cultural traditions of the Third World nations. Female characters’ stories being narrated by male writers can also be a factor in the silencing of women in literature and cinematic canons. The female silences are a denotative of women’s cultural absence by concentrating attention on the specificity of women’s

writing (Showalter 1981). Thus raising the necessity of women's writing. Narayan argues that Third World Feminists must focus on addressing changes within their circumstances so that their agendas are not discredited by references to "unchanging traditions." In additionally, she also postulates the need to reinterpret the "public" roles for women:

I also wish to point out that appropriate "public" roles for women also continue to be reinterpreted to make some changes, but not others, consonant with the 'preservation of tradition' at particular times.

Therefore, thus focusing on the necessity to reinterpret and rewrite the stories of the epic women. Epic women like Kunti, Sita, Gandhari and Draupadi must be reinterpreted and rewritten, they must be given a chance to narrate their version of the story. The focus on the role of the woman in the context of society leads to the subjection of her voice and further marginalizing her. This subjection of women in the form of mass communication on television is menacing the minds of the viewers. However, this portrayal of women must be reinterpreted and rewritten, as suggested by Narayan. She further highlights the necessity for the feminists of the world to be suspicious of locally prevalent pictures of 'national identity' and 'national traditions' both because they are used to privilege the views and values of certain parts of the heterogeneous national population. For instance, Chopra's *Mahabharata* is written and narrated with the mindset of forming national traditions by portraying the women characters as goddesses, and addressing them as "devi" The writer focuses on creating a perfect image of a woman. The television epic also emphasizes portraying the epic women as the image of "weaker sex" rather than raising the voice for gender equality for women (Kumar 2020).

4 Conclusion

Both *The Kaunteyas* and Chopra's *Mahabharata* are modern versions of the original epic *Mahabharata*. They emphasize the importance of a modern approach towards rendering the literary and cinematic adaptations of the original epic. Both the text and television mythology stress the significance of revising and reinterpreting the epic, emphasizing the need for epic women to have a platform to share their perspectives in the narrative. Mahadevan in *The Kaunteyas* emphasizes the requisite need to write the epic from the perspective of the epic women characters, especially the ones who are constantly muted by the male writers. Chopra's *Mahabharata*, on the other hand, emphasises the necessity of altering the narrative of television in portraying female characters on the screen.

However, his work is the most accurate cinematic representation of the original text. In recent times, there is ample literature written and produced on television illustrating the stories of the epics. Despite there being an abundance of works written or visually presented on the themes of the epics, what remains perturbing is the silence of the epic women, especially in the context of the cinematic representation. However, modern readers are keen on reading the epics from a woman's point of view, but the television versions of the epic have a different story. Such as, a show like *Siya Ke Ram* is one such example, the show was written from the perspective of Sita, but unfortunately, it couldn't gain popularity among the viewers as the viewers are more inclined towards the mythological shows glorifying the heroes rather than the heroines. Muting women in films is a highly harmful act against women's representation, highlighting their oppression by patriarchal societies and state influence on media. It also indicates that the patriarchy wants the stories of the heroes to be heard over the unheard stories of the heroines. Hence, to sum up, it can be said that like the literary standards, it is necessary for a change in the portrayal of epic women in cinema to be embraced in electronic media, giving a voice to women characters and shifting the focus of storytelling to include the female perspective. This shift towards more women's stories written by women writers is the requirement of the time. In the future it is important to raise the voice and the concerns of the epic-women characters as not representing them on a large

scale leads to misinformation and distressful images about those characters.

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