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RE-READING MALE IMAGES OF WOMEN IN THE *MAHABHARATA* AND BHABANI
BHATTACHARYA'S *MUSIC FOR MOHINI* WITHIN THE FEMINIST PARADIGM

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ABSTRACT

Feminism as a theory has focused to survey the core of marginalisation that women faced throughout ages. As a theory, it also explores the way in which women have been depicted and framed in literature. Since literature plays a crucial role in propagating ideas and male has used it as a tool in the post Vedic age to confinement of women to restricted roles. In the modern age, a change in the perspective of male authors could be seen through their representation of women in the form of characters. This study entitled "Re-reading Male Images of Draupadi in the *Mahabharata* and Mohini in Bhabani Bhattacharya's *Music for Mohini* within the Feminist Paradigm" examines and analyses women's status in the post Vedic age and modern age and gives vivid picture of the conditions of women in the male authored texts. The present study looks at the representation of all the main women from the concerned texts and tries to investigate how women have been depicted in literature. The analysis is based on the theoretical framework of feminist theories of Elaine Showalter and Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert in understanding the position of women in male authored texts and navigates how literature has been used to dominate women through their depiction in texts.

Keywords: Feminist literary theory, post Vedic age, Modern age, Indian literature, binary opposition.

This paper titled "Re-reading Male Images of Women in *The Mahabharata* and Bhabani Bhattacharya's *Music for Mohini* within the Feminist Paradigm" tries to trace down the development of the notion of "second sex" (to use Beauvoir's words) and the depiction of women characters and biases attached to them in the post Vedic and Modern texts within the broad spectrum of Indian Literature. The analysis will focus on the examination of two women characters—Draupadi from the Indian epic *Mahabharata* written by Vyasa and Mohini from the novel *Music for Mohini* and is based on the feminist literary theory. The study aims to re-evaluate the writers' depiction of female characters in Indian epic the *Mahabharata* and in the modern Indian English novel of Bhabani Bhattacharya from the feminist perspective in order to examine whether there is a change in the status and biases/prejudices attached to female characters in the writings of male authors.

Feminism is a movement budded and bloomed in the twentieth century struggling for women validation in the male dominated society. The first phase of feminism began from the 19th century till the early 20th century whose primary focus was mainly on women suffrage, alongside other legal rights. Mary

Wollstonecraft was one of the significant figures in British feminism as her ideas attracted the thinking of women, and helped to shape or awaken the minds of those who struggled for the between the sexes socially and morally. Later on, Wollstonecraft's *Maria* discussed the women's several desires that brought her a lot of criticism.

Another significant feminist theorist from the 20th century was Virginia Woolf, while the other feminists were struggling for the rights in politics, Woolf's ideas focus on women as a writer and as a character in fiction. Her remarkable work, *A Room of One's Own* (1929) argues that a woman should have economic independence and private space to become a writer (96). The second phase started in the United States and spread to other parts of the world. It advocated against a range of inequalities that include sexuality, family, reproductive rights of women etc. Prominent feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir's work, *The Second Sex* (1949) gives a detailed analysis of subordination of women and greatly influences feminist criticism now. It also advocated against the definition of woman within the patriarchal structure. Thus, in this text, Beauvoir makes an attempt to understand how women have been rendered as a deviation of the "normal male sex"—the other of it (*The Second Sex* 247-276).

In the third wave, the focus of Feminism shifted to academics associated with Marxism, Psychoanalysis and Post-structuralism that deal with issues of language, sexuality, writing etc. Feminist critic Elaine Showalter in her notable work *Towards a Feminist Poetics* introduces the notion of Gynocriticism. Gynocriticism aims to create a distinctive female canon where the female identity is liberated from the masculine definitions and oppositions. In this regard, it is worthwhile to mention Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Mad Woman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* – a seminal gynocritical text.

In the present time, feminism exists in various types that continue to improve and enhance the situation women. In India, some of the notable Feminist includes, Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833) who fought against sati, polygamy, and child marriage. Another feminist Jyotirao Phule (1827–1890) worked with his wife for the upliftment of women in India; Savitribai Phule and friend, Sadashiv Ballal Govande also set up a centre against infanticide, to help widows in labor. Tara Bai Shinde (1850–1910) was a woman activist whose work *Stri Purush Tulana* is well thought-out as the first modern Indian feminist text. India could also be called as a glorious vault of Literature that pictures the social, economic, political scenario from the past. For instance, the remarkable epic *The Mahabharata* written in the post Vedic era depicts the society of that period. In Hinduism, the head of the family was known as the "Grihapati" (the master of the household). The status of the woman was restricted within the four walls of the house. Indian men enjoy the right to make primary decisions in the family and the role of the women therefore had been minimised.

Ever since the beginning, from the pages of Holy Scriptures to the History, it has been witnessed that "Women", the Goddesses, or any mythological character, had always been considered the 'other half' of their "respective men". They have been subjected to bear the burden not only as a life giver in her womb, but to caress the tomb of expectations laid down by the patriarchies. The attempt to elaborate the term Patriarchy is rather multifaceted and deep, because the term itself is a psychological, emotional, physical threat. Quoting the literal meaning of patriarchy, it is a social system in which the father in a family is considered to be the head of the house, having the power over women and children, and in which heredity is drawn through male.

The meaning holds different aspects. The impact is too harsh, too distinct and too exploitative. This idea leads to subjugation and restriction on the part of women, as well as the essence of it could be felt even now. The mythological character Sita is known for her *Agni Pariksha* to prove her chastity, once she is saved from the abduction of the Demon king Ravana. This raises a question mark on Lord Rama's role as a husband and his duty to save Sita's honour. The main concern is why Sita was forced to prove her chastity? Was it justified to go to such an extremity for the sake of pampering the male ego? The answers to these questions lie on the foundations framed by the society and the so-called supreme beings-- "the men". Literature from the ages proved to be a major tool for propagating ideologies. Thus, the qualities imposed on women, and their duties towards the husband were internalised psychologically among the common women, slyly in the form of myths.

Modern age began to commence in India with the arrival of the British. The status of women underwent significant changes in post Independent India. As a result, the exploitation of women has been reduced to a great extent, and women were provided equal opportunities. For instance, remarkable development was seen in doing away with gender inequalities. The practices of Child marriage, Sati Pratha, Devdasi, Pardah Pratha, prohibition of widow remarriage that were the brutal obstacles for women were being questioned and removed by the social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and others. In addition, in India, many women reformers participated in India's freedom struggle.

Even after so many years of civilisation, the most significant question that comes up is that whether women are really free from all the societal rules and forms of patriarchy or not because women have been victims of domestic violence, physical assault, and dowry. It is sad to see how the world of women has been narrowed down. The patriarchy is not only a threat to female, but male too bear the burden of this concept. A man has a constant pressure from the childhood to support his family. Why does a wife or a daughter cannot share the responsibility equally? A wife is more than an emotional support; she has the capacity to share the burden of her husband to balance the family. All these complexities arise, for we have restricted our roles as 'superior' and 'inferior' beings. The society could function more flexibly if we attempt to blur the distinction between gender roles.

The concept of feminism as a theory tries to understand the discrimination or the burden that men too share under the roof of patriarchy. Feminism is not gender specific. It has been widely been popular among women because women have been objectified and have been considered as an inferior sex. The imposition on women to behave, to eat, to talk, to walk in a certain way, denying agency had compelled women to walk out of their comfort zone and fight for their rights. Time has witnessed the subjugation that women have been through, the rights that women enjoy now, sprouted as an idea which initially seemed as a farfetched goal to ever achieve. The women have not just been marginalised in reality, but they have been confined as characters in male authored texts or fictions.

Themes often explored in feminist texts include discrimination, objectification, oppression, patriarchy, stereotyping etc. Women have been objectified in texts; the stereotypical ideas attached to women to maintain a certain code of conduct have been fanned through portraying "women" as an ideal wife, daughter, lady, mother in fictions. Virginia Woolf states that men have efficiently subjugated women to find their confidence as a more superior sex. Male in their fiction would generally categorise female characters as fragile and weak because it allows men to portray male as more capable. On the other hand, the women writers reflect the frustration of male writers in depicting the women as inferior or second-class citizen and also the subordination they suffer in reality in their writing.

Elaine Showalter one of the major feminist from the third wave of feminism, lively involved with issues such as language writing, sexuality, representation of in male authored texts. She in her work "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" forwarded the idea of "Gynocriticism" that centred on female subjectivity, language and literary career of women with respect to men and to launch "new form" based on female understanding and experience against male centric literary creation (Showalter 184-187).

In the above-mentioned essay of Showalter, the critic states that "the feminist criticism involves feminist reading or feminist critique of texts to understand the image of women in literature and the stereotypes and beliefs attached to women flourished via literary texts" (Showalter 184-193). It helps in deciphering the relationship of women with literary texts. Its principal objective is to deal with subjects of study that concern the tradition and the literary canon of women's writings.

Feminist criticism is based on male creative theory based on the experiences of men. Feminist critics respond to male creative theory. Showalter suggests that the dependence on male theory needs to be stopped and the female critics should instead create a literary canon that is specifically women centric. Feminist critics have sought to modify, revise or question the male critical theory. Showalter proposed four models based on linguistic, biology, psychology, and culture. Linguistic model analyses whether male and female use language differently. It considers whether biology, social preferences or cultural factors could affect the language of the

gender. It also talks about oppressor's language; language that has been used by male authors to dominate women. A feminist approach might mean women centred approach that assumes the centrality of women and seeks to interpret experience based on women's consciousness.

In the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi has been seen as a woman who was the victim of male conflict. The conflict between the Kauravas and the Pandavas led Draupadi to lose her dignity in the royal gathering. The objectification of woman is reflected here. The women were seen as entities and their identity were reduced to their husband's possession. In the game of dice, the Pandavas staked their wife along with other royal material belongings and kingdom. The supremacy that a male possess over a female is seen here. Draupadi was to be shared among the five Pandavas brothers as husbands. But since she was so pious, she would regain virginity every time she had sexual experience with each of the Pandavas. Thus, the concept of virginity is always been given utmost importance in male authored texts as well as in a male dominated society. Since Draupadi was considered to be extremely virtuous, her regain of virginity suggests the purity that is attached through/to virginity. The male authors specifically propagate the ideal nature that women were supposed to be. The silence and sufferings without being rebellious is seen to be celebrated in India and are given a position of Goddess.

Draupadi as a character viewed through feminist lens gives us the idea of her as a revolutionary figure. In the *Cheerharan* episode of the Mahabharata, when Draupadi was forcibly brought to the Sabha to dishonoured by the Kauravas, she was furious and in shame. Instead of silently tolerating the injustice to her, she questions the other royal men present in the Sabha about their role in protecting the honour of a woman. She questions the duplicity of male's behavior towards women; on the one hand, they view women's chastity and honour as the dignity of the family, but Draupadi, the daughter-in-law of the Kuru vansh was openly molested in front of everyone. She questions Dharma (duty) and the misdeeds in the name of Dharma. She could not be stripped naked because Krishna saved her modesty that again symbolises the body of women as an object of sexuality that has to be protected in order to preserve the dignity of a woman. Her revenge led to the Great War between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, which is not considered personal in the epic, but is rather considered as a war against an evil society represented by the Kauravas. Thus, Draupadi represents *Stree Shakti* (woman power) by preserving both her individuality and chastity. The treatment of Draupadi in the epic is quite appreciable; despite being dark-skinned and a woman, thus she has been doubly marginalised, she ends up becoming the central figure in the *Mahabharata*.

The modern age literature sees a difference in the depiction of women as characters like the titular figure Mohini from the novel *Music for Mohini*. In *Music for Mohini*, Bhabhani Bhattacharya has created the character of Mohini to bring into disrepute the stereotypical expectations of patriarchal system and its society on women. Mohini is seen as a representation of modern women who are privileged with proper education, but becomes a victim of a conservative society where her individual identity is dissolved. For instance, Mohini gives up singing as a career and focuses on teaching village women along with Jayadev to eradicate orthodox and conservative ideologies. Her marriage in a conservative family has split the protagonist's life between her identity as an educated independent former radio star and her identity as a traditional woman. Jayadev expects Mohini to alienate herself from orthodox and conventional roles. Mohini teams up with her husband to fight against discrimination that led to class oppression and domination on women. It is quite ironical because he himself has suppressed his wife's desire to become a singer. Bhabani Bhattacharya also presents the uncivil convention of how parents and family elders display their daughter to the groom to be party to be examined by it that she is suitable for becoming a bride in typical Indian families before marriage (Bhattacharya 49).

Mohini too, despite being an educated girl who condemns superstitious beliefs, falls into the trap of believing in such superstitions under the influence of her mother-in-law. An incident from the text that supports the statement is when Mohini becomes ready to give her skin from her breasts to satisfy the Goddess in the temple to bless her with a child after staying barren for two years. In fact, Bhattacharya intends to portray the ill effects of the society and also to outline the conflict between traditions versus modernity in his novel. The role of Mohini, therefore, as a feminist icon is limited. This is so because her freedom has initially relied on her father's supportive nature and later, towards the end, Mohini loses her earlier identity as a radio star into traditional Indian woman.

Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert's "The Queen's Looking Glass: Female Creativity, Male Images of Women, and the Metaphor of Literary Paternity" becomes relevant to the study as the essay inspects the dual images of women as 'angel' and 'monster' as depicted by the male authors through their representation of women characters. The male authors have created dual versions of female characters often as the binary opposites of 'angel' and 'monster'. The angelic version is attached to the Victorian concept of 'Angel in the House' which many feminist critics believe that the angel concept has been the most revolting confinement ever imposed on women. The women who are categorised as angels are those who are naive and ideal women who fit into the male desires in a woman. The essay navigates the 'monstrous' side of woman throughout history, who is rebellious and imprisoned in anger. Gubar and Gilbert extends the idea of "literary paternity" that allows men to have complete ownership on their works (Federico 12 - 23). Since they have complete authorship, they treat women as man's property and therefore portray her according to their desires. Helene Cixous' essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" stated that "there is a close relationship between women's body and their writing, which have been suppressed by men" (875-893). Women have allowed themselves to believe that they are inferior to write and such ideologies have been deeply planted through ages.

The binary opposites categorised as angel and monster in a woman character have revealed the highly biased nature of male's creation of women characters. Thus, from the epics to the modern fiction, the angelic version of a female has been glorified. When the concept being applied to *the Mahabharata*, Draupadi is not celebrated or sung in epics like her other equivalent character of Sita. It is important to note that Sita is praised only for her virtuous nature and her selfless devotion towards her husband lord Rama. Sita is celebrated for her wifehood and not her womanhood. On the other hand, some Indians consider the character of Draupadi as shameless and characterless for her polyandrous marriage with the five Pandavas. The extent of Draupadi's experience of humiliation, pain and suffering could be comprehended. Despite being humiliated, she is able to regain her dignity by destroying the Kauravas. Draupadi could therefore, be said as the first feminist icon in Indian literature. Her vows in the epic portray her vengeance as well as her resistance against male oppression.

The notion of 'binary opposition' in modern fiction enables to explore the injustice and discrimination of women in contemporary Indian writings when they fail to fit into male expectations. Bhabani Bhattacharya creates binary opposition to explain the dichotomy between modernity as illustrated by Ruplekha and Mohini, and stereotypical conventions through Mohini's grandmother and in-laws. Here, the writer does not try to categorise woman into angel or monstrous figure, but he tries to highlight the marginalisation that different women suffer throughout the novel. Thus, while the binary opposites seen in the post Vedic age text of the epic is to preserve the idealisation of woman as good and chaste, the modern fiction uses polar opposites to explore the discrimination of women.

The role of literature is to provide an area of study for all the sections of society and not just confined to those who exercise powers. However, the male writer attains ownership of a literary text in the past as a medium to trick women into believing that they are inferior characters and portray their lives through male lens. Their roles have been confined into textbooks as a mother, pious, meek, dutiful wife who relied on men for everything. For instance, the post Vedic age, has attached women's sexuality to purity of woman and dignity of the family. The glorification of virginity has not just been witnessed in the past; it is prevalent in contemporary India too, categorising women into good and bad. Feminist literary criticism, thus, plays a crucial role in uprooting such notions and shaping the dynamics of women's place in the society. It navigates the roles of women in reality and also scrutinises the women characters as depicted in male-authored texts, assert identity based on their experiences and debunk the roles confined to glorify motherhood or wifehood.

While the feminist sensibility in Vyasa through the *Mahabharata* is reflected through his strong character like Draupadi who presents the modern concept of individualistic feminine consciousness, still it cannot be ignored that she is the victim of humiliation and marginalisation at the hands of patriarchal figures. Her role is overshadowed by male characters. Bhattacharya's feminist sensibility lies in his attempt to highlight the sufferings and marginalisation of women and the evil aspects of the patriarchal society. Therefore, women characters face more biases in a Post Vedic male-authored text than in its Modern counterpart. Usage of binary

opposition as a discourse is more prevalent to subjugate women in Post Vedic male writings to sustain the concept of ideal woman that fits the standards and desires of men in women.

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