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A FEMINIST READING OF PATRIARCHAL HEGEMONY AND GENDER ROLES IN SELECT
TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

The presence of issues related to patriarchal dominance and biased gender roles form a part and parcel of all feminist texts. Indian writers have been portraying women's inferior status in the family and larger community since ages. With the growth of revisionist literature, many authors have been retelling stories from *The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharata* and several Indian myths and religious texts to explore the under-represented women's voices. These unidimensional narratives, sugar-coated from the patriarchal perspective, are being revised in order to explore the possibility of alternate retellings. The stories of the two heroines in our great epics, Sita and Draupadi, form the most popular subject matter of such revisions. Whereas writers like Devdutt Pattanaik has represented these central protagonists without much revisions of their original tales, in the works of authors like Amish Tripathi, Divakaruni and Pratibha Ray, Sita and Draupadi are presented from quite different perspectives than the original ones. Thus, revisionist texts do not hesitate to present a Sita as a warrior and the minister of Mithila or a Draupadi who hates to cook, openly admires Karna and does not hesitate to oppose her mother-in-law. In addition to the shift in perspectives, revisionist texts also serve the purpose of exploring unexplored voices like that of Sita's sister, Urmila or Karna's wife, Uruvi. However, even though stories of different times and places, the narratives of these women portray the pre-dominance of patriarchal hegemony in varied ways. This paper is an attempt to study the feminist strands in the stories of Goddess Lakshmi, Sita, Draupadi and Uruvi in select revisionist texts, while exploring the common strands of gender inequality and patriarchal subordination that they are subjected to. The study also seeks to probe into the different phases of their lives to establish a connect in the ways they act and react in similar situations.

Keywords: feminism, patriarchy, gender, birth, marriage, abduction, exile, anticipation, rescue, freedom

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Feminism in India as an organized movement began in the mid-18th century as a marked protest against social evils, such as, the practice of 'Sati', 'Child Marriage', etc. Much alike their counterparts all over the world, feminists in India sought equality in gender roles – prominently, on the issues of equal wages, equal

access to health and education, equal political rights, among other things. Indian culture being male-dominated right from ancient times, had many layers of prejudice which found representation in literature as well. Inequality in gender roles was prominent in every walks of life. The timid and shy woman, with her head covered, hidden in the confines of the house, restricted to the four walls of the kitchen and her numerous responsibilities was the general portrait of every Indian woman. In the well-known works of Tagore, who was a great champion of women's causes, as well as many other writers, we see the portrayal of "...women hidden behind the barred windows of half dark rooms, spending centuries in washing clothes, kneading dough and murmuring verses from 'The Bhagavat Gita and The Ramayana' in the dim light of sooty lamps." (Desai, 120) Over the years, many notable writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Kamini Roy, Ismat Chughtai, Kamala Das, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, and many more have constantly been on the path of showcasing the status of Indian women in the family and larger community. With the growth of revisionist literature, several writers like Devdutt Pattanaik, Amish Tripathi, Kavita Kane, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Pratibha Ray, among a host of authors, have been retelling tales from *The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharata* as well as several popular myths in order to represent the unexplored and unidimensional women's voices, which have remained suppressed since ages. This paper seeks to explore the impact of patriarchal hegemony and biased gender roles reflected in a few select texts from a feminist perspective. Moving across different points of time, the study takes into consideration the lives of the characters of Goddess Lakshmi in Balaram Das' *Lakshmi Puran*, Devdutt Pattanaik's Sita in *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of The Ramayana*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Draupadi from *The Palace of Illusions* and Kavita Kane's Uruvi from *Karna's Wife* and the narrative technique employed in all these works that strings their lives together. Further, the paper keeps in focus Pattanaik's Sita whose life revolves around her birth, marriage, exile, abduction, anticipation, rescue and freedom and applies the same sequence to the lives of Goddess Lakshmi, Draupadi and Uruvi. Whether a goddess like Lakshmi or Sita to a powerful princess like Draupadi or Uruvi, their feelings are the same and their sagas speak volumes about patriarchal domination that they are subjected to. They are all embroiled in feelings of anger, intimacy, pride and revenge which shape their characters and the plot of their stories as well.

Tales from the great Indian epics abound in stories of gender inequality and patriarchal subordination. The story of Amba turned Shikhandi serves as a classic example of patriarchal hegemony and its effect on women's lives. Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Stone Women* echoes the anger of Amba - "She was only a woman, she was to be disregarded and ignored; her will, her emotions had to be set aside as nothing because she was a woman". (*The Stone Women* 19) What was her fault? That she was not submissive like her sisters, that she had chosen Salva and not the feeble Vichitravirya as her life's companion. As Amba flees the inner courtyards of the home that had nurtured her and brought her up, her thoughts are that of the trappings within the rooms that she had grown up in as a princess. Her mother who mattered to her, her father and his pride, her sisters who were her soul mates and friends and the people around her right from the nurse to the others in the household. It was freedom from those rooms that had trapped her spirit and her love as she was born a girl. The narrative retellings of the like have the same bearing in the lives of Sita, Draupadi and Uruvi, not to leave behind the Goddess Lakshmi. Born as one of the daughters to the King of Kashi, Amba is the oldest of the three sisters followed by Ambika and Ambalika. The story of the swayamvara of the three princesses and the expression of her love for Salva marks the beginning of the great epic *The Mahabharata*. A question which generally comes to mind concerning the princess of Kashi is whether Amba had expressed her feelings and given voice to her love for Salva or was it pride, anger, revenge of a rejected woman that went unnoticed and shunned that led to a war of such magnitude. The same is true of the other women characters as they evolve from the perspective of women in revisionist writings considered for study in this paper. What gives strength to the reader and the conviction in some of these characters as women of today along with their feelings and context is the narrative that runs strong in all the selected works. Whether the character is reminiscing or is speaking in the first person or the omniscient narrative in Pattanaik's *Sita*, the characters are brought alive impugning the situation that they are in. So, while Chitra Divakaruni has her Draupadi in reminiscing and bringing together her memories of childhood, Uruvi in Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife* speaks in the first person, while Sita in Devdutt Pattanaik's work comes alive with an omniscient narrative. The narrative is

what builds these retellings of India's greatest epics seamlessly, weaving them together to bring alive the stories of these women and their connect to each other. Situations may have been different but the feelings that Sita or Draupadi or Uruvi go through along with a goddess like Lakshmi is complex and disturbing. What intrigues us is not the narrative employed in these novels, but of how the narrative strings together eventful retellings of their lives, with most of the events being traditional and yet so contemporary.

The theme is so well strung into a garland of memories and situations as the narratives bring together the story of the women who are spread in our canvas from being goddesses to princesses to ordinary woman. Their lives are embedded in the same themes: of having been born at a time when the culture of patriarchy was predominant, where women hardly resisted and seldom revolted or protested against the male dominated world that they existed in. Thus, Amba who going forward plays an instrumental role in *The Mahabharata* cannot be ignored. From her story and in the narrative of Shashi Deshpande, we go through a tumult of emotions as we feel pity for the young lady who dares to reject Vichitravirya and with him the power of Bhishma. It is worth noticing how she dares to stand against the norms of masculinity and patriarchy while escaping the degradation in the hands of Bhishma only to go through a series of emotions and further degradation as Salva walks away, as Vichitravirya mocks her and shames her very womanhood by questioning her fidelity, and finally as Bhishma shields himself behind his vow. The princess of Kashi, a young lady who had dared to express her feelings, is trapped in the inner rooms of the narrative of Shashi Deshpande as she writes, "She was neither a daughter, nor a wife, nor a mother. What was she then? Amba, Amba, Amba.....the name came to her from a distance like a faint echo." (*The Stone Women* 19) From there on begins the journey of revenge, revenge against the society that had made women like her a pawn in the hands of men. Yet there are women in these retellings, searching for an identity of their own and as well as for freedom which rightfully is theirs. Stories are used in these novels to illustrate points of power relations, of racism, of human feelings, of gender politics and the search for a cultural identity.

Devdutt Pattanaik in *Sita* has beautifully portrayed the different phases in the lives of women through the one-liners at the beginning of every episode which speak volumes about the association and significance they carry in the lives of the other characters in the selected revisionist retellings and that which has been referred to in this paper as a common line of reference to the lives of these women. Taking those one-liners as the point of reference, this paper seeks to explore the impact of patriarchy and gender roles in the lives of Lakshmi, Sita, Draupadi and Uruvi as reflected in the revisionist texts taken for this study.

Birth

"She was born of the earth and raised amongst sages." (*Sita* 7)

Lakshmi is seen by all of us as the Goddess who rests at the feet of Lord Vishnu massaging the feet of her consort. Balaram Das's Lakshmi, the partner of Vishnu as revered by all of us, the epitome of beauty, prosperity and power is born out of the churning of the ocean. In other words, she is the daughter of Varuna, the god of the sea, the very symbol of generosity. Thus, she is the daughter of the ocean, powerful and angry and abundantly forgiving and generous. Lakshmi leaves the comfort of her father's home, the ocean, the subterranean realm to rise to the materialistic world to help mankind. While Lakshmi surfaces from the water, Sita is born out of a furrow, hidden within the moist earth as a baby till King Janaka finds her while ploughing the land. Devdutt Pattanaik's narrative on the birth of Sita brings the human element into the life of Sita. The story begins with how the farmers invited Janaka to be the first to plough the land, thus, drawing the connect between mankind and farming. As Janaka begins to plough the land much to the happiness of the farmers around, he stops to discover those tiny fingers of a baby. Affectionately, he gathers the child in his arms and names her 'Sita' for he felt that "she was found in a furrow, she who chose me to be her father." (*Sita* 10) Contrary to Sita who is both loved and revered in Hindu mythology as the epitome of 'Sanskriti', Draupadi is "impatient as mustard seeds, spluttering in oil" (*The Palace of Illusions* 3) and is destined to change the course of history. Draupadi is born out of Fire - the fourth element of 'Panchabhuta' and that which guards the Universe. Drupada like Janaka becomes a father to Draupadi. Born after the invocation made to Lord Shiva by the strong King Drupada, Draupadi emerges from the flames of fire, one of the elements of nature. Uruvi is a lot more human with the 'gift of healing' and is bestowed on the King of Pukya, Vahusha, and Queen Shubra.

An analysis of the records of the birth of all these women showcase the divine aspect attached to the way that they had come to the land of the mortals. The birth of Sita and Draupadi, one from earth and the other from fire, plays an important role in understanding their natures and their course of life. These are no ordinary women and their births pronounce the enormous changes that they would bring about to their immediate environment and the society at large.

Marriage

“Janaka told her to bring happiness into marriage, rather than seek happiness from it” (Sita 23)

The exalted position of these women represented in their births and their familial or parental status do not remain always the same. Marriage and situations thereafter, changes their superior positions. Lakshmi in Balaram Das' *Lakshmi Purana* implores Lord Jagannath to forgive her only mistake since he had promised her father that he would forgive ten transgressions of hers when he got married to her. It was Balabadra who saw her entering the sweeper woman Shriya's house and thus declared her to be contaminated. As the older brother he instructs his younger brother not to permit her enter their house. Lord Jagannath obeys his older brother and closes the door of the temple for her. She is abandoned by her husband despite the promise made to her father. She chooses to go and build a hut for herself rather than go back to her father's house. Like Lakshmi, Sita is as strong as her Lord Rama and can bend the bow like he could. However, her Swayamvara is with a clause that whoever bends the bow can win her as a 'prized possession'. This swayamvara plays an important role in the lives of these strong women. While Sita is won by Lord Rama during the swayamvara; Draupadi has to fight her own battle of winning her destiny, Arjuna, by insulting Karna so that Arjuna can walk away with his prized possession. Uruvi's swayamvara, is another display of not only the male dominated world that they existed in, but also a revolt against the norms of society. She has to fight her battle to select Karna during her swayamvara and rebel against casteism in society.

The practice of 'Swayamvara' ('swayam' – self, 'vara – groom', literally meaning the choice of one's own groom) reflected a liberal practice of allowing women complete freedom to choose their husbands. However, a more focused look at the swayamvaras of Sita, Draupadi and Uruvi portray the lack of real liberty in the choice of husbands. While Sita's swayamvara was more of an orchestrated one with her father putting a clause of bending Shiva's bow, Draupadi's swayamvara was hardly one which offered her a choice at all. Uruvi was more resolute in her choice but nevertheless had to struggle to marry someone beneath her social class. Patriarchal domination is also witnessed in their lives post marriage. Goddess Lakshmi's ordeal reflects her demeaned status in a patriarchal setup.

Exile

“She followed her husband to ensure he never felt incomplete” (Sita 63)

Lakshmi is banished from her own household as Lord Balaram, who is Lord Jagannath's brother finds it objectionable that she has visited the house of a Chandala woman. To him, Lakshmi as a wife is like a pair of sandals. He emotionally blackmails Jagannath to choose between brotherhood and his wife. Lakshmi is banished from the abode of her Lord for supporting an untouchable and is sent out like an orphan to please the brother. Kaikeyi's unreasonable demand from King Dasharath and Lord Rama's determination to ensure that his father's vow is fulfilled has Sita banished from Ayodhya not once but twice so that kingship and reputation is not tainted. A prized possession that was won in an ego battle between Karna and Arjuna only to be lost in the same speed and insensitivity by Yudhisthira is the story of Draupadi. As Uruvi enters the Suta household she is both a victim of society and that of her low birth family that she chooses to get into. Uruvi's battle is not only with society which rejects her for having chosen Karna but a battle with the fact that she marries an already married man who is in love with Vrushali and has fathered her children.

Abduction

“Her body could be imprisoned but never her mind” (Sita 101)

Lakshmi's vrata and her worship and blessings in each household continue till her husband returns to her. Her strength lies in the fact that she does not go back to her father's house to seek refuge, but brings back all that belonged righteously to her back home. While at the forest, in the final year of exile, Ravana approaches Sita in the form of a hermit. He abducts her and forcefully grabs her and pushes her into his

chariot. Abducted by Ravana, Sita is not found to be helpless, but is alert. She ensures that she takes out her jewels one at a time to ensure that Ram follows her and is able to trace her whereabouts while at the same time she is heartbroken and sad. Shamed in a court, yet strong and vengeful is Draupadi. She is lost as a daasi, a slave to the Kauravas. As a revenge, she is disrobed by Dushasana and Duryodhana in public and in the presence of the senior members of the family and her five husbands. When everybody else is a witness to her shame, she prays to Krishna for the protection of her womanhood. Here is Draupadi who is won by Arjuna as a prize at the swayamvara only to succumb to the power of patriarchy. Her spirits are undeterred as she seeks revenge throughout the epic against the Kurus. Uruvi enters a family that is considered below her caste and yet builds around her not only the love of her husband but faces the society that avoids interacting with her or is repulsive to her very presence. However, "she could not run away from the humiliation of such a life, and each snub forced her to recall her mother's words of caution, warning her of how people would treat her after her marriage to Karna. She felt a strange stirring in her heart. It was bruised pride." (*Karna's Wife* 50) The stories of these women reflect their presence of mind and undeterred determination even in adverse circumstances.

Anticipation

"From her faith came her patience" (*Sita* 149)

Lakshmi stays away from Jagannath, builds a home of her own, is persuasive about her point of equality and continues to fight her battle with her husband till he comes back to her door step and is filled with remorse for having abandoned her. Seen from the point of view of women's rights, Balaram Das' text serve as "...an example of a piece of literature which talked of women liberation and had given birth to the spirits of feminism." (Maharana 17) Sita stays in Asokavan, day and night, while she is in Ravana's Lanka. She balances her thoughts, is a virtuous woman, upholds the values of womanhood and patiently awaits her Lord to come and save her. Her faith in Lord Rama is what makes her stronger despite the torture and taunts around. Even though Hanuman offers to fly her to her husband, she refuses and tells him that it is only Lord Rama who has to defeat the evil Ravana and save his wife. Draupadi is destined to change the course of history, is headstrong in her actions of revenge, brings about the destruction of the Third Age. Born to destroy the house of the Kurus, it is Draupadi who asks the blind King Dritharashtra for the freedom of her husbands for in her patience was her victory, her revenge, her role in moving the world from 'Adharma' to 'Dharma'. Uruvi reconciles herself as the outcaste's wife, is torn between her love and morality, unable to forgive Karna, resigns herself to fate - "The thought of parting from Karna was unbearable, but then she remembered, the outrage at the Kuru hall and shuddered with renewed shame and horror, reminded that she could not respect the man she loved anymore." (*Karna's Wife* 104) Uruvi's reaction to Karna's follies showcase her "...upbringing where an environment of free choice and independent decision reigned" helping her to grow up "into a straightforward and independent personality." (Saba Anish) Even in their anticipations, these women come out as strong-willed ones, not ready to succumb to defeat of any kind.

Rescue

"Lanka desired her submission. Ayodhya demands her innocence" (*Sita* 203)

Caught in the battle of inequality, Lakshmi struggles with power relations within the family and outside to bring about social equality. However, towards the end, her belief in traditions and the supremacy of the male, has her surrendering resigning her anger to the lotus feet of Lord Jagannath which clearly goes to reflect the power relations between men and women. However, Sita refuses to go back to Ayodhya where she is humiliated and her very character has been doubted and fights a silent battle of resilience and goes back to Mother Earth. These women are traditional and yet modern in their thinking. They are driven by anger, loneliness, ambition, death, desire and yet win over their situations and their actions are an act of survival.

Freedom

"He remained trapped in culture, but nature set her free" (*Sita* 255)

As a common strand in all these novels, the narration through these stories goes to show that all the male characters in these retellings, albeit very powerful and supported by society, are trapped in the culture of patriarchy. They are stereotypes who abandon their wives for family reputation, for reverence to the

brother, for friendship and passion, for social status and power, while all the women break away from submission to male domination and create an identity of their own.

A common strand that runs through these retellings is the transformation of the woman from that of being a 'prized possession' to being a 'victim of patriarchy'. All of these women including the Goddess Lakshmi are domesticated by the culture and the society that they live in. Their lives are identical as brought out by Devdutt Pattanaik in his novel *Sita* whose one-liners are used as the common strand to represent the stories of these women so much alike and yet so different from each other - women who are strong, have an identity of their own, have identical feelings of anger, pride and revenge and that which they overcome or conquer in their own way and style.

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