



Retelling the Myth of Kunti: Saoli Mitra's *Timeless Tales*

Dr Suranjana Bhadra

Assistant Professor in English, MUC Women's College, Burdwan

The author teaches English Literature in the postgraduate department of English of Maharajadhiraj Uday Chand Women's College, affiliated to the University of Burdwan, where she is an Assistant Professor for more than ten years. Her area of interest is Feminist Theatre. She has some publications in national and international journals.

Abstract

The stories of the epics have gained a sense of timelessness. They have established the codes of culture and values in the society. The myths are replete with the account of women adhering to 'pativrata dharma'. Such pseudo queens have become the cultural icons as they safeguard the patriarchal conventions. In the *Mahabharata* Kunti, the mother and the widow is the symbol of eternal suffering. Though she is much revered and glorified, the epic legitimizes the subjugation and exploitation of a widow caught in the gyres of patriarchy. In performing a signifying function myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion. Referring to Saoli Mitra's *Katha Amritasaman* this paper explores the sufferings of Kunti, the widow and the mother. It retells Kunti's story by unravelling the gaps and silences in the epic. All alone Kunti creates an entity of her own, devises original ways to meet the challenge and the best of all is that, although she respects social norms she is not a slave to them and can override them if necessary. She stands as an integrated woman who performs her duties without being influenced by other considerations. She died as she lived. Unbending.

Keywords

subversion, epic, repression, motherhood

“Your secret has destroyed all of us—the Kurus and the Panchalas are no more. If you had told us at that time that Karna belonged to us, there would have been no war” (Karve 55). After waging a lifelong battle desperately to save her sons, Kunti has been rewarded with this remark by her son Yudhishthira, the other name for Dharma. He blames his mother for the entire Mahabharata war. The stories of the epics have become timeless myths. They have established the conventional ethics of culture and values in the society. These myths narrate the tales of women subject to repression through ‘pativrata dharma’. Such women have become the cultural icons as they safeguard the patriarchal conventions. In the *Mahabharata* Kunti, the mother and the widow is the symbol of eternal suffering. Though she is much revered and glorified, the epic legitimizes the subjugation and exploitation of a widow caught in the gyres of patriarchy. Some years of happiness can never compensate her long life of sorrow, neglect and humiliation.

In the realm of theatre women in India are hardly offered any space of their own. Saoli Mitra, a contemporary woman playwright has dared to question the conventional interpretations of the epics, an emblem of a nation’s cultural heritage. Mitra’s works reflect the ‘metamorphic and transformative’ process of the adaptation of the great Indian epic. Mitra says: “we can suggest that there is a quest for truth and wisdom in the literature that reflects the magic quality of an epic, which resonates for people even today” (xiv). Women on stage are no longer ‘docile’ or the ‘gendered subaltern’ but the loci of protest and subversion. Saoli Mitra in her plays *Nathaboti Anathaboth* (translated as *Five Lords, Yet None a Protector*) and *Katha Amritisaman* (translated as *Timeless Tales*) deconstructs the story of Draupadi, a pseudo-queen who had everything yet nothing. The stories of Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, Satyawati and others have been re-written to bring out their repressed desires, aspirations, hopes, dreams, complexities and dilemmas. In an article “Imaging Women: Resisting Boundaries of Gender in Women’s Theatre in India” (*The Criterion*, April 2013, IV. II) I have already explored the repressions of Draupadi, confined within the domestic roles of motherhood and housewifery. This paper, in the same vein, offers a subversive reading of the mythological representations of Kunti. It thus interrogates the validity of the myth from a woman’s point of view. In her play *Timeless Tales* Mitra has depicted the sufferings of Kunti, the widow and the mother. Her dignity and love for her husband has been often ignored in the epic. The play provides her a potent voice to retell her story.

Mitra has been influenced by Irawati Karve's *Yuganta* which provides a feminist interpretation of the epic. Norman Bowra states that *Yuganta* "studies the humanity of the Mahabharata's great figures seen through her eyes, the Mahabharata ... becomes a record of a complex humanity and a mirror to all the faces that we ourselves wear" (qtd. in Mitra ix). The epics retain contemporaneity by encouraging human beings to delve deeper into the complexities of human civilization. The metanarratives being quite incredulous to Mitra, she employs disruptive mininarratives in her plays through interweaving discourses and plurality of voices.

Epics are the representations of a nation's culture. In India the *Mahabharata* has inspired the life and culture of India thoroughly.

The *Mahabharata* is not merely a great narrative poem; it is our *itihasa*, the fundamental source of knowledge of our literature, dance, painting, sculpture, theology, statecraft, sociology, economy—in short our history in all its detail and density". (Bharucha 97)

The epics provide the essence of history and culture. The first translator of the *Mahabharata* into Bengali, Kashiram Das, compares the tales of the 'epics' to 'amrita' or divine nectar and the listeners or the readers are considered to be ever blessed. In (*TT*) the chorus sings:

The Mahabharata tale is like amrita, divine
 We seek to find that truth, that sign,
 And through this quest we are blessed.
 At Vyasdev's feet we pay our respects,
 Yes, we pay our respects. (Mitra 97)

Mythical women religiously served the role of an all-sacrificing, devoted wife. Husband was for women a divine incarnation, a god gained through the ritual of marriage. Thus epics gain the status of a patriarchal genre. While evaluating the mythical representations of women, Mitra moves beyond the cultural borders of signification to mirror the possibilities of subversive meanings. Her deconstructive strategy is manifest in her assertion:

The words of the Mahabharata
 Are ineffable, like amrita,
 In every age there unfold
 New meanings from the old. (6)

In her play new meanings unfold that defamiliarize the conventional patriarchal assumptions. Saoli Mitra confers Kunti humanity, dignity and individuality—all that has been denied to her in the epic.

Deconstruction of myths can be related to Roland Barthes concept of ‘myth’ as discussed in *Mythologies* (1972) and *Elements of Semiology* (1967). To Barthes myths signify the complex system of images and conventions framed by the society to perpetuate and authenticate its own meaning. Myths are symbolic of the accumulated knowledge of the society, the ideologies operating within the social framework. Myths provide interpretative archetypes for deciphering the meaning of the world where we inhabit with a view to exploring the present through the past. Barthes also calls myths ‘metalanguage’ because it is a second-order language used to interpret the first-order language. In performing a signifying function myth “hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion” (Barthes 129). Myth distorts reality and naturalizes it, thereby transforming history into nature. To encapsulate the tragic predicament of women in myths Saoli Mitra successfully subverts myths and folklores to demystify what is said or accepted and what remains unspoken or repressed in the representations of traditional theatrical performance. The plays shatter the veil of illusion regarding the construction of traditional myths, thereby disrupting the accepted normal codes of conduct by ‘laying bare’ the underlying void, terror and vacuity in the contemporary world of women. The audience is introduced to a real world devoid of all illusions.

In order to seek the favour of gods and beget a son, Shurasena, Kunti’s father gave away her daughter Pritha to Kuntibhoja. Better known as Kunti, the assertive and dignified princess chose the impotent Pandu as her husband only to endure lifelong suffering. She has been denied the love of the husband whom she loved and desired so much. On the contrary, Pandu was more attracted towards the beautiful Madri and met death to quench his desire for her. On her husband’s insistence to have sons, Kunti, the neglected wife, was successful in rewarding him with three sons by the help of special mantra. She did not want Madri to be stigmatized as barren, so she even gave a mantra to Madri, the favoured wife of Pandu. But her strong determination comes to the forefront when she refused to be degraded to a mere womb producing male heirs at her husband’s insistence. Underneath virtual jealousy Kunti reveals her unfulfilment in marriage when she sees dead Pandu in Madri’s arms: “Princess of Vahlka! / You are fortunate indeed --/ I never had the chance to see/ his face radiant in intercourse” (qtd. in Bhattacharya). While Madri had the bliss of death, Kunti had to endure

widowhood and rear five children in the hostile court. Kunti's nobility was acknowledged by Madri. She said: "No Kunti, you are noble. I know you will love my sons like yours. But I don't trust myself to do the same" (Mitra 112). Indeed Kunti never differentiated between her sons and Madri's. The epic states that when the Pandavas were banished, Kunti had cried her heart out that day. "At least let Sahadev stay back with me, I cannot live without him!" (Mitra 156).

After Pandu's death she returned to Hastinapur with five children. The people of Hastinapur questioned the identity of the father of her sons. Such suspicions evoked a sense of fear and awe in the mind of the mother. Though the Pandavas were received as princes, they were not acknowledged as the sole heirs to the throne. Surrounded by enemies and immersed in a sea of sorrows, she protected the helpless fatherless children even without the support of relatives and allies. A widowed daughter is an unwelcome burden. Hemmed in by adverse forces, Kunti began her struggle for sustenance. The mother desperately tried to make Yudhishthira aware of Duryodhona's plan of burning them alive in the jatugriha. Kunti invited and plied with drink an untouchable woman and her five sons in the house-of-lac. They were burnt to ashes with Kunti's full knowledge. The epic thus holds the image of a fiend like queen. Kunti had to save her sons – that was the only purpose of her life. To rescue her own children she had to bear the burden of guilt for the rest of her life. As Irawati Karve says: "She had foiled the plot of her son's rivals. As a Kshatriya woman that was enough for her" (49). Kunti's foresight prompts her to convince Bhima to marry the rakshasi Hidimba for the safety of the friendless five. She says: "a grave problem faces us/ You know Hidimba loves you.../ Have a son by her./ I wish it. He will work for our welfare (qtd. in Bhattacharya). Indeed Ghatatkacha rendered much help to the Pandavas during the war. Such desperate attempts of the mother to safeguard the lives of her sons can hardly be overlooked. It was Kunti who wanted Draupadi to be the wife of all the five sons. This act could weld the sons of Kunti and Madri into an unbreakable bond. "Towards her own sons she was stern and dutiful, while there was a bond of genuine affection between her and Madri's sons" (Karve 50). After fulfilling her duties she looked forward towards a peaceful life. As usual her hopes were in vain. Her sons gambled away the kingdom and had to go for exile. This was too much for the old frail mother. She had to stay behind with Vidura. This position of dependence was harder for her to accept that all the hardships she had to endure all her life. Kunti suffered greater agonies as she had to live among her enemies and see their prosperity. Meeting Krishna she burst into tears recollecting the sad experiences of her life. In spite of

her laments she never fails to encourage and support her sons. Though she married a great king, she became a widow and was deprived of her right to queenship. She was even deprived of her right to the queen-mother's position. She reminded her sons that it is shameful for her to live on other people's charity. While narrating the story of Vidula, the wise woman, she used her words as a lash to spur his sons to fight. Yudhisthira replied: "All the iron in the world has been collected to mould your anger, pitiless and revengeful heart. The mother answered: "A love which is weak and undemanding is like the love of a female donkey. You are a kshatriya. You must either defeat your enemies or be killed" (Karve 53). The dutiful mother invokes her sons to fight for justice. Kunti desires to be autonomous even while bound by the patriarchal society. She achieves this desire by being psychologically autonomous. She is the representative of an assertive modern woman who can stand on her own. She creates an entity of her own, devises original ways to meet the challenge and the best of all is that, although she respects social norms she is not a slave to them and can override them if necessary.

Questions regarding her motherhood arise in relation to her unacknowledged son, Karna. Karna rejected her as she had discarded him after his birth. Throughout her life she had to repent for such an action. But when she discovered him she could not call her own. She steeled herself and bore the anguish in her, choosing the greater good of motivating her sons to win the kingdom over evil. After the war, Kunti confessed her wrongs before Yudhisthira. All she could do was to cremate him according to the rites due to his status. Kunti the mother was defeated. The Kathak in *Katha Amritasaman* explains: "The *Mahabharata* refers to destiny, to divine will, but these people did not surrender themselves to any divine will! For, everyone knew that if there were a war, all would be over" (171). At the end of the war a trains of widows are represented on stage. They come and stand in front of the dismembered bodies lying in the battlefield of Kurukshetra. "Thousands of widows. / Along with the hundred Kaurav wives. / With them Kunti, Gandhari" (178). There is nothing but cry of desperation.

Kunti shows her unbending will in her final acceptance of death. She leaves the comfort of the court to live in the forest with Gandhari. When her sons try to stop her she says: "I have no longer wish for enjoyment of this life. This is the time for me to practice austerity, serve my parents-in-law and thus attain heaven so as to meet my husband" (57). Finally she accepts death in the forest fire calmly. Fire rescued her from the pain of being alive. The epic declares her the incarnation of *siddhi*, consummation of womanhood and the

archetype of a single mother who sacrificed herself for the well being of her sons. In the article “One-in Herself: Why Kunti remains a Kanya”, Pradip Bhattacharya remarks: “Kunti’s maturity and foresight, the ability to observe life closely and use the learning from experiences to arrive at swift decisions benefitting her children, set her apart from and above all characters in the epic, except perhaps Krishna”. She stands as an integrated woman who does what is true without being influenced by other considerations. She died as she lived. Unbending.

The play *TT*, have been performed by a single woman performer in ‘kathakatha’ style (a story, a narrative). The unnamed Kathakakurun or kathak is the young woman narrator who re-tells the story of all women in her own voice. The kathak’s subversive comments and multiple role playing indicate the interconnections between the two worlds—the contemporary and the mythological. The result is the denaturalization of everyday reality through distortion of traditional history. She addresses the audience as ‘babumashai’ (Good Sirs) which shows her rural background and lack of institutional education. But she is self-assertive, intelligent and critical. Often she expresses her annoyance, agitation and empathy while narrating the tales. She sings, dances and speaks in rhymes to express herself more prominently. She is gorgeously dressed in a saree and cheap ornaments. The actor does not dress up as an Indian widow to represent Kunti. The focus is more on psychological autonomy of Kunti and not on the concept of social castigation of a widow. Apart from the kathak there is also the chorus. They sing and play Indian musical instruments like tabla, flute, conches and the gong to intensify the impact of the narration on the audience. Thus the stage setting, costume, music and dance show the influence of folk theatre of Bengal (Jatra). But the continuous intrusion of the narrator, through her comments alienates the audience from getting emotionally engaged with the stage performance. Such a technique unfixes the peripheries of the real and the unreal. Mitra’s politics of theatricality reveals her concern over finding out new ways of expression and representation by the fusion of rhythmic language, dance music, folk tales in her latest dramatic experiments.

In *TT* Mitra reconstructs new identities of women. The kathak here calls the valiant Bhishma “the grand old patriarch” (Mitra *TT* 78) who silently watched the humiliation of women—“He heard the heart-rending wails of his clans women at the end of the Kurukshetra war. Then there’s more. For example—but no, Stop! Shame on me!” (78). The kathak’s gesture of silencing herself suggests the silencing of women throughout history. From the myth of Procne and Philomel to Draupadi women have been exploited and mercilessly

silenced whenever their voices threatened patriarchy. The artfulness of theatrical devices produces the effect of defamiliarization. Mitra, by 'laying bare' her devices of stagecraft gives enough scope to the actors and audience to create new meanings. It prevents the audience from accepting the world of fiction as the reality. Her theatrical art is not limited to any external reality but creates an unreal world of its own. By distancing the actors from the roles they are playing, Mitra shows that the characters are not abstractions but they are the actors, living, pulsating human beings at the present time. The actor, distanced from the stage roles, masks his internal self while unmasking the roles that he plays. What remains is the reality of the stage which is as real as our dreams. Being subversive and disruptive; these stage devices practiced by Mitra makes the play appear 'strange' to the audience and they too participate in the strange experience to explore hidden truths and create new meanings. Such theatrical presentation has the power to subvert the masculine dominance in theatre and society, providing women a 'space' to retell their old tales.

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