

The Subservient Voices: Exploring the Silence of Women in our Epics

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Abstract

Women's bodies and their voices have been essential elements with varying impacts on the narrative structure in literature across time. From male-centric narratives of gallant heroes where women were 'silent' or 'absent' prizes or possessions, a damsel-in-distress waiting to be rescued, to the women with a voice in Jane Austen and the women with questions in Virginia Woolf, the role of women in writing has changed with the shifting position of women in society and the changing definition of femininity. Women writers have portrayed powerful female characters exploring femininity in a new light, subverting gendered hierarchy and the power structures of sexuality, and occupying a position from which they can be heard speaking in their own voices. Ismat Chughtai and Taslima Nasrin are two important female authors in modern Indian literature who address these issues.

This article will attempt to study a number of 'pious' characters from the Indian epics and their adaptations to reflect upon how 'piousness' is treated as a binary to female sexuality. The characters to be studied include Sita, Surpanakha, and Draupadi. This article will also discuss Mahashweta Devi's *Draupadi* and Kalakhsetra Manipur's adaptation of the same to highlight the use of the female body and self-expression.

Keywords: Female body, patriarchy, tradition, expressions, subversion

Remember the fairy tales we grew up reading and the princesses we adored as children? They would have in them that most beautiful lady who would wait to be rescued by a 'prince charming'. The societal construct of gendered roles and the attributes required for these shoes to fit, is thus planted in our minds from a tender age, by enchanting popular culture. Then we grow up to classic plays like *Taming of the Shrew*, and we are all aware of how that unfolds. The handsome ladies in these narratives would be brave and capable, but they lacked the strength to stand up for themselves and thus needed saving, their roles were reduced to a subordinate consort of the 'lead', although, often the female characters were the eponymous ones. Now, closer home, the *roopkotha'r golpo*¹ we heard as bedtime stories, had the same themes as heroic poetry. The persistence of this thematic recurrence even in latency, exists to the day, and has spun across genres. Nonetheless, the undaunted warriors like Devsena, Avantika and Shivgami, were still not as strong as the central male characters of the tale in the movie *Bahubali* (interestingly one of the most popular productions of Indian cinema). That is probably essential for a nation, whose collective consciousness has been built around mythology, thanks to our epics. Sure, we have audacious characters like Bimala and Charulata. But they are fruits of the 'male gaze', and herein lies the importance of *écriture féminine* as mentioned in *Le Rire de la Méduse* by Hélène Cixous, which propagates a deviation from the traditional masculine styles of writing and installs rhetorical writing by exploring the relationship between the cultural and psychological inscription of the female body.² This paper shall aim at examining the women in our epics who fell prey to the 'male gaze' and were silenced by the clever use of language by the male authors, as well as the extensions of the same characters re-created by contemporary female authors in their own retellings and adaptations, and study the difference brought about in these re-created versions of the silenced women by giving them a voice, in an attempt to understand the significance of *écriture féminine* in Literature. Of course, it isn't inappropriate to say that women have travelled far from being portrayed as shadows of their male counterparts to having their own agency today. But we are talking about a democratic nation that subscribes to the notion of *Maryada Purushottam* just as the greater picture tells a different story, as far as the waves of feminism are concerned.³

To begin with, it's vital to trace the significance and location of the concept of 'the ideal man' in the Indian psyche. The fact that Rama, who was a human incarnation of Vishnu in Valmiki's text and has been idolised and worshipped from the bhakti period, points out an interesting improvisation to determine the roles of both men and women. A man making his wife walk on fire twice, to test her chastity, was sanctioned under the umbra of 'dharma'.⁴ Dharma is sometimes an enabler of patriarchal vices; a very important weapon, prescribing a system that allows certain questionable behaviour, and in the process normalizes and approves those practices. Dharma acts as the invisible textbook of 'dos' and 'don'ts' for everyone to measure up to the idea of the ideal man and woman. A man/god's consort has to be a character that can be set as an example for the females of the whole nation. So Sita is a rulebook, and an ideal Indian woman is expected to follow her suit. Created by the clever Indian males as an incarnation of Lakshmi, the wife of the preserver Vishnu, Sita put up with everything that happened with her silently. She is described as a woman with the highest form of physical beauty, who happens to be "pure, light, auspicious and subordinate" as described by Arshia Sattar.⁵ She is a figure of domesticity and submission, or in other words silent and controllable, and only women with these attributes qualify as most eligible candidates for marriage in the Indian society. The newly-wed wife follows her husband silently and accepts the life of a hermit-like an ideal wife. The '*Lakshman Rekha*' can be defined as her

territory, inside which she is the wife of Rama and hence 'safe'. This line is a very important trope to decide the limits of women. Stepping outside the confinement of this domestic hemisphere, she 'pays the price' for disobeying a man.⁶ This line also acts as the division between civilization and wilderness and Surpanakha who is the polar opposite of Sita has been created for the sole purpose of teaching women their rights and limits. This character, unlike Sita, who is outside the periphery of the '*Lakshman Rekha*' or the domestic border is part of the wilderness, or in other words is untamed, insubordinate and vocal. She is hence described as inauspicious and unchaste. But the major opposition between Sita and Surpanakha was in terms of sexuality, which was not sublimated in Surpanakha and hence she was posed as a "threat", eventually bearing out as a binary opposite of Sita. She expressed her sexual desire towards Rama, for which her face was mutilated by Lakshman, because it is unacceptable and punishable on grounds of sexual transgression, for a woman to be vocal about her desires. (Tulsidas had already mentioned "ढोलगंवारसद्रूपसुनारीसकलताड़नाकेअधिकरी" enabling men to find it in their power to thrash women.).⁷ Surpanakha is not marriageable as she is definitely not pious. Chastity is the most important criterion to qualify for an ideal Indian woman (whose ultimate goal in life was to be a dutiful and devoted wife to her husband) and a vital theme in the epics. Nevertheless, despite being tricked by Indra, Ahalya was considered unchaste by Gautama Rishi and cursed till she was rescued by Rama. She was the victim of a man's trickery, another man's fury and was also rescued by a man. This woman, who hadn't harmed a living soul, never found a voice to vouch for her innocence. So, Indra's trickery and sexual activities outside wedlock don't compel Indrani to take the same step as Gautama, but Ahalya's 'crime' is unacceptable.⁸ Renuka Devi was ordered to be beheaded by her husband for committing the sin of looking at a man, but spared when his fury died down. Women survived at the mercy of men, and suffered as their men saw fit to punish them, whenever they defied the men's definition of piousness. In fact, it is so crucial to keep the ideal Indian woman chaste and untouched that Kamba in his Ramayana, did not let Ravana touch Sita to keep her purity intact and the concept of Maya Sita was introduced in The *Kurma Purana* who got abducted instead of the real Sita, while the later hid herself in fire⁹. Abduction is an important motif because female bodies are considered as the properties of men and exploited time and again unquestionably, especially during war, of which Aseefa is one of the many examples.¹⁰ War crimes against women always boils down to physical assault, which strips them of their honour.

Abduction and abuse are practised to taint the honour of the rival team's property, i.e. their women. Female bodies serve as the object of desire, the object of pride and an object to induce shame, fear and authority. Apart from Sita, Tara was also abducted by her brother in law Sugriva, who took her as his wife after dethroning Vali. Tara lacked the agency to have a say in this episode. The deafening silence of Tara, Ahalya and Sita despite their sufferings, is a quality, Indian men suggested their women possess, which was broken in the later retellings of the Ramakatha like *The Liberation of Sita* by Volga who makes the subaltern speak. The character who is strong enough to be a single mother, finally starts questioning the horrible injustice done to herself and other ignored females of the epics that are justified by systematic subjugation of women as also the confounded silence of the ideal man' against all the violation. The act of calling Ahalya 'characterless' by Rama infuriates Sita. She empathizes with Surpanakha and a sense of sisterhood is created as opposed to the harem conflict usually expected from women.

The character of Surpanakha is portrayed as a rejection against the act of conforming to the mythological impressions of femininity. She is secluded for being unchaste, but has her own belongingness with nature and is a complete individual with an agency and her own identity.

Identity, although playing a major role in keeping Rama, trapped in the identity politics of a dutiful Aryan king, from getting liberated in Volga's rendition, however, did not stop Sita from finding her deliverance from these identities. At last, she tells Rama – "I am the daughter of Earth, Rama. I have realised who I am. The whole universe belongs to me. I don't lack anything. I am the daughter of Earth." However the author had to face threats for tempering with the myths which had given the people their deity and the agency to control their women.¹¹ Qurratulain Hyder in her *Sita Betrayed*, created a whole new Sita, like Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi, who is a woman of the modern age, but a similar victim of patriarchy, shunned and judged for being who she is (and her sexual relationships that went against her namesake's path of piety) abandoned and unaccepted, she embarks on a journey in search of a home in a post-partition India and Pakistan, between which she is torn. In this novella, the intertextual reference of Padmavati is used, whose character is significant only for her beauty and is the classic example of women as property, falling prey to the male gaze and an 'object' for political conflict.¹² Her attempted abduction is a testimony of why the possession of women is a recurring motif we find in almost all narratives, even in the Mahabharata. Interestingly, Draupadi, can be viewed as a distorted mirror reflection of Sita for sharing a common fate by getting defamed, nearly abducted by Jayadratha, put into trial, punished, violated but hardly ever deified for having a voice. Although she kept silent when she was asked to be shared equally among the Pandavas, she did raise her voice when Yudhishthira placed her at stake, although he was himself a slave of Duryodhana by then. She is also said to have washed her hair with Duryodhana's blood after the later was killed in the battle of Kurukshetra, for the molestation she had to face thanks to Karna, who also called her unchaste for having five husbands (an occurrence in which she had no say and had to just accept her fate). Draupadi although one of the '*panchakanyas*'¹³ is not deified as widely as Sita, (for the lack of absolute silence in response to the crimes against her) and is worshipped only in some parts of Tamil Nadu by the Draupadi Amman sect that considers her as an incarnation of Adi Shakti or Mahakali.¹⁴ Speaking of Kali, who is symbolized for being fierce and belligerent, despite all her strength still appears as an auxiliary to her husband. The most widespread interpretation of Kali's extended tongue involves her embarrassment over the sudden realization that she has stepped on her husband's chest. Kali's sudden modesty and shame over that act is the prevalent interpretation that rekindles the story behind the birth of Kali which is somewhat similar to the creation of Eve from Adam after Lilith had rejected him. Devi Mahatmyam¹⁵ appears from the body of sleeping Vishnu as goddess Yoga Nidra to wake him up in order to protect Brahma and the World from two demons, Madhu and Kaitabha. When Vishnu woke up, he started a war against the two demons. After a long battle with Lord Vishnu, when the two demons were undefeated, Mahakali took the form of Mahamaya to enchant the two asuras. When Madhu and Kaitabha were enchanted by Mahakali, Vishnu killed them. So Kali's beauty and not her strength is used as an assistant of Vishnu's prowess to ultimately bring down the asuras by a man.¹⁶ Kali appears unclothed for being free of worldly illusions and her incarnation, Draupadi, is molested by Kichaka, attempted to be stripped in front of the entire court before being saved by a man, Krishna. The *cheelharan* or disrobing of Draupadi was later justified with the substitution of Draupadi in the place of the four Pandava brothers who had originally laughed at Duryodhana on account of his fall in Vyasa's text. The laughter of Draupadi is of paramount significance and is marked for bringing her the misfortune of being disrobed by Duryodhana since a woman shouldn't find it in her to laugh at a man. This laughter was subverted in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*. That has the *vastraharan* of Draupadi as its *rohstoff*. The eponymous character Dopdi Mejhen, described as 'the most notorious female' allows us to view the subservient's identity vis-à-vis the hegemonic structures seen through the policemen and

Officer Senanayek. Thus, Dopdi's body becomes a site of both the exertion of authoritarian power and of gendered resistance. Dopdi bears the torture as she is raped by many men through the encouragement of the voice of another man Arijit speaking the patriarchal language of law. However, the attack on her body fades this male authority's voice as she rises from a state of powerlessness and confronts the army officers with her bare body, that was violated and tortured is also in reverse used as a weapon. Her refusal to be clothed goes against the phallocentric power, and the exploitation of her body gives her the agency to step away from the hegemonic patriarchy and also refuses to call them "man". As she walks (in the words of Mahashweta Devi) "naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts. Two wounds" the sound of her laughter terrifies the armed man, who had ordered to "make her" and clothe her thereafter. The sight of her mutilated body is disturbing to her audience. Dopdi does what Draupadi couldn't, while her husbands "hid behind the rules" in the words of Devdatta Pattanaik from *Hearing the Silence of Sita*. When Kanhailal created a theatrical adaptation of Mahashweta Devi's story from the collection of *Breast Stories*, he essentially introduced the character of Dopdi by a young woman who was soon after replaced by the aged Sabitri. This, according to me, was to trigger an essence of the exploration of not just a female body but of motherhood for which he replaced a young female who is commonly considered an object of desire by an elderly figure who is the symbol of motherhood to disturb patriarchy and view femininity as not something apart from sexual. The female body and its expression intimidate phallocentrism.

Because the very men who rape the women are uncomfortable at the sight of the same violated bodies, they want the damaged bodies to be clothed. What the male author is incapable of portraying for being bound by patriarchal language is explicitly exhibited by women writers when they reconstruct the character created by men for the sole purpose of subjugating women. This is broken when a female recreates these characters, like Shakuntala Vaidehi recreated Kalidasa's timid heroine in her short story *An afternoon with Shakuntala*, where an aged Shakuntala, who is resolved and embraces her fate with dignity very fearlessly, voices her desires towards Dushyant, acknowledges that she had refused to notice the red flag and brought about her own doom by falling for an elderly married male who wasn't ready to offer her martial commitment, with much grace states that she shall not twist her moments of love with the man simply for vindictive intentions to victimize herself as his prey for a more dramatic narrative, calls Durvasa's curse a "poetic excuse" introduced by Kalidasa to enable men of their selective forgetfulness and justify a king's infidelity and irresponsibility, while conversing with the narrator who is interviewing her.¹⁷

While men used motifs of curses and cunning use of language to conceal the acts of their protagonist's promiscuity and unfaithfulness, female writers gave these silenced women the voice of reason. When men create female characters they are almost always secondary or tertiary, but the same characters re-created by women find an agency. They created a self-loving Surpanakha in a world where women are told to be sacrificing in the words of dharma and self-love is considered an attribute of antagonism in case of females who are but always supposed to prioritize a man's interest before her own. They create a questioning Sita, interrogating her unquestionable divine husband, a laughing Draupadi walking with her head high and a strong Shakuntala who does not need a man to survive, hence refusing to accompany her husband and her son to his land when he asks her to come along. They refuse to be controlled by their men and clarify that it is not okay to keep practising intellectual oppression in the guise of worldly law. It is not okay to violate the personal space of a woman just because she is going through trial. It is not okay to witch-hunt,

label women, shame them, punish them or tag them as the weaker sex. Through these renditions, through *l'écriture feminine* silenced women are reborn like a fearless phoenix.

Notes

¹ *Roopkotha'rgolpo* are Bengali fairy tales about prince and princesses, enchanted faraway lands, often containing liminal creatures, magic realism and celebrating the bravado of fearless warriors in epic proportions.

² Elaine Showalter, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 'Writing and Sexual Difference', 1981, pp. 179-205, published by The University of Chicago press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343159>

³ Feminism has hardly stepped into the rural lives, where women are still victims of patriarchal notions, and female-centric Literature, as well as female authors, are alien to these sections of people since educating females remains out of the question in these areas. Not to forget how much work needs to be done to attain a state of gender equality for the urban/educated class as well.

⁴ Dharma roughly translates to 'duty' or 'religious duty' and following the path of dharma is non-negotiable for 'a good Hindu'. The laws of life in the Indian society were mainly dictated by dharma, which of course were decided by men. More details on dharma can be found on the link -<https://iskconeducationalservices.org/HoH/practice/dharma/>

⁵ Arshia Sattar, *The Rāmāyaṇa by Vālmīki*. Viking, 1996.

⁶ The Lakshman Rekha was a line drawn by Rama's younger brother Lakshman, who had left Sita in their abode of panchavati to look for Rama, as insisted by Sita, after they heard Maricha's cry. Lakshman had warned Sita that crossing this line would only bring her trouble and Sita was abducted by Ravana as soon as she stepped outside the line

⁷ A 'chaupai' from Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas*. These verses specify the entities including drums, villagers, shudra (lower castes of India), animals and women, who deserve thrashing in the words of the poet.

⁸ Ahalya was tricked and seduced by Indra, who posed as her husband, cursed by Gautama for infidelity and liberated by that curse by Rama.

⁹ <https://www.hindu-blog.com/2011/08/mayasita-story-of-maya-sita.html?m=1>

¹⁰ Aseefa was a young Kashmiri girl who was abducted and gang-raped by Hindu men as an extension of the everlasting Hindu-Muslim conflicts and tension.

¹¹ <http://feminisminindia.com/2018/09/25/liberation-sita-feminist-review-volga/>

¹² *Padmavat*, written by Malik Muhammad Jayasi, is an epic poem about the title character's heroic life and sacrifice. The most beautiful woman of her time, she was the wife of Ratan Sen and an object of desire for Alauddin Khilji, who waged a war to possess her. Padmavati performs self-immolation by jumping into the fire in order to protect her honour, after learning of her husband's death.

¹³ <https://www.starsai.com/panchakanya-ahalyadrapadikuntitara-mandodari-five-virgins/>

¹⁴ <https://www.astroved.com/astropedia/en/temples/south-india/drauladi-amman-temple>

¹⁵ Lilith is considered the first wife of Adam, who was created during the same time and from the same clay as Adam. She is said to have left Adam after she refused to be subservient to

him. Eve was then created from Adam's ribs, as his subservient but the powerful Lilith came to be known a demon instead.

¹⁶ <https://www.ancient.eu/Kali/>

¹⁷ *An Afternoon with Shakuntala* is like an elaborate epilogue of Kalidasa's poem, about ancient characters with a new-age wisdom. The first person narrator interviews Shakuntala, who pours her heart out to her interviewer, in this short story by Shakuntala Vaidehi.

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