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SOCIO-CULTURAL ASSIMILATION OF EPIC HEROINES INTO STATELY TRENDS

An account of altering narratives: Sītā and Draupadī

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Abstract

The central theme of this paper is to attempt at capturing the disfiguration of the epic characters of Sītā and Draupadī owing to the dominant politicisation of the original narratives over the centuries, with the obedient image of Sītā being the entire opposite of her strong character in the Vālmīkian version, and at the other end of the spectrum, the modern versions of Draupadī portraying her as the epitome of strength unlike her patriarchal vulnerabilities and submission in Ved Vyāsa's Mahābhārata. Referencing from a close reading of Vālmīki's Rāmāyaṇa, translated by Vivek Devroy alongside Kaliprasanna Singha's 19th-century Bengali translation of Vyāsa's Mahābhārata and Kisari Mohan Ganguli's English prose translation of Mahābhārata, and with utilising historical phasing of an array of the originally mentioned narratives, the paper responds to this impasse by insisting on a double move, one, to recover Sītā and Draupadī's portrayal in the primary texts, and second, to argue against the historical nature of the later retellings as being rather ideological reconstructions.

Introduction

The imagination of the epic heroines those of Sītā and Draupadī have gone through significant transformations over the centuries, reflecting the shifts in socio-religious values and gender politics at the time and also of the present. The present-day retellings, especially in and through literature and popular media, project these two women as symbols for virtue and rebellion, respectively; while Draupadī gets recounted as a defiant queen who at once challenged the injustice against her and consequently, upheld her dignity, Sītā comes to be revered as the resilient, pious consort of Rāma. However, these portrayals are rather the very opposite of and at contrast with their original characterisations as done in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* and Ved Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* and, wherein the greater background of patriarchal expectations largely shape both the roles and the responses of these women, although the ways in which they choose to navigate within and through them are quite different. The shift from a 'textual' to a 'cultural' Sītā and Draupadī then demand for a more nuanced examination of how the narratives against women get only selectively remembered, reinterpreted, and/or erased, in context of both time and history.

In both Kaliprasanna Singha's Bengali prose translation of the *Mahābhārata* and Kisari Mohan Ganguli's English prose translation, Draupadī's autonomy appears only on the surface, since both translators follow the Sanskrit original closely without altering her character in any substantive way. At her Svayaṃvara, Dhṛṣṭadyumna announces that she will be the Vīryaśulka and will marry the archer who completes the Lakṣa-bheda trial, yet the vocabulary used by him in introducing her to the *Sabhā* presents

her as a prize to be possessed, as he expresses, "Hear ye assembled kings, this is the bow, that is the mark, and these are the arrows. Shoot the mark through the orifice of the machine with these five sharpened arrows. Truly do I say that, possessed of lineage, beauty of persons, and strength whoever achieveth this great feat shall obtain today this my sister, Krishna for his wife." (Ganguli 476) Her refusal to marry Karṇa too is not an act of a personal defiance but an action which falls in alignment with the embedded patriarchal notions and caste hierarchy as part of the 'codes of honour'. The crucial moment when Kunti unknowingly instructs her sons to share whatever alms they had brought in and results in Draupadī being married to all five Pāndavas without asking for her consent, with Yudhiṣṭhira justifiying this decision later by telling King Drupada that the brothers have a custom of sharing any 'utkṛṣṭa vastu' or 'excellent object', further upholds her position as a prized possession. Her silence in the face of Arjuna's marriage to Subhadrā, which she greets with humour rather than hurt, further underscores her internalisation of patriarchal norms (Singha, 253). Even the popular story of her mocking Duryodhana in the Māyā-made *Sabhā* is misattributed; it is Bhīma, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva who laugh, and not Draupadī (349). The epic text, therefore, portrays a woman whose emotional complexity and social constraints are far removed from the fiery image projected in later cultural memory.

The whole construct of 'femininity' has been traditionally well guarded, with such constraints placed on her free movement within the multiple possible senses of her identity, be they of gallantry or subtle relenting into the patriarchal constructs. In this course of thought, sometimes even the so-called construct of 'brave feminism' is artificially induced into places and characters

where it does not belong, and the superimposition paints the whole character in a colour which makes the persona embody what the construct wants her to be, rather than what she is. If feminism were all that was to do with the freedom of the suppressed gender class, then such superimposition of feminist outspokenness on Draupadī takes away the very essence of her characterisation, and thus the freedom of her character to be what it was is sacrificed. Such a superimposed 'brave feminism' on a character that doesn't ascribe herself to it not only indirectly ties her up in how society wants to see her and not what she actually is, but also maligns the predominant essence of the epic. In the older and more politically significant epic of the contemporary period, *Rāmayana*, the other side of the same coin of overt extremist injustice is expressed.

The subversion of Sītā has initiated an idea of womanhood characterised with silent resilience and whose desires are limited to the husband's will, and assimilating into this trope has been the traditional picture of the ideal feminine. However, in the original and the oldest reading of the epic, we find Sītā to portray a character quite contrary to such a superimposition of patriarchy. What has acted against the character of Draupadī should have acted in favour of Sītā were she not pulled down and made silent with the raging demand of silent resilience as the ideal of femininity. Instances in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* show her discontent with her husband's orders, crude verbal attack on her husband's kin, and explicit expression of her desires defying the very cultural norms that were supposed to grow setting her as an example, a portrayal far more complicated than the image of the silent sufferer revered in devotional traditions. Her aggressive speech to Lakṣmaṇa in the *Araṇya-Kāṇḍa* does not merely breach the ideal for a 'sister-in-law decorum',

but also reflects her strongly-held beliefs of her importance in Rāma's life, an aspect that of a confident lover rarely acknowledged in hagiographic retellings. In interpreting Sītā through a sanitised lens for supposed political pragmatism, such moments are often ignored because they do not conform to the upheld narrative of the suffering, silent wife. Thereby, just as Draupadī's image has undergone cultural re-workings to aptly fit feminist ideals, Sītā's depiction, at the sharp juncture of contrast, has also been sanitised to accordingly meet the patriarchal expectations of 'wifely obedience' and goddess-like virtue.

Cultural Shifts in the Understanding of Sītā: From Egoism to Idealisation

The figure of Sītā of the *Rāmāyaṇa* has come to be an emblem for the idealised feminine virtue of silent resilience, portraying unwavering devotion to one's husband, and a meek submission to patriarchal expectations. Her image has been deeply ingrained in cultural consciousness in such a manner that it eclipses the more complex and resistant dimensions of her character as found in the earliest versions of the epic, when looked in correspondence to the prevalent cultural tropes which present her as self-sacrificing, soft-spoken, and docile. The Tulsidāsian rendering of Sītā in the *Rāmacharitmanas* elevates her status and origin as the epitome of gentle obedience and spiritual purity, in accordance with the cultural shift from classical to Bhakti traditions, wherewith the ideal of womanhood transitions from moral agency and emotional realism to submissive devotion and symbolic purity, and thereby making her meek and subservient to the robust characterisation of Rāma, as

illustrated by his quote, "The pair of Rāma and Sītā shone as if beauty and the sentiment of Love had met together in human form. Her companions urged her, Sītā, clasp your lord's feet but Sītā was too much afraid to touch His feet." (Saran 274) In contrast to this imposed image, however, the oldest extant version, the Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa,* holds a Sītā such wherein her agency, emotional expressiveness, and assertiveness are evident throughout the text, wherein she actively dissents when she feels wronged and often critiques the decisions of her husband Rāma as well. A key instance over the same is traceable with his mention of Sītā's verbal attack on Lakṣmaṇa in the *Araṇya-Kāṇḍa*, at the time of Rāma being out to hunt the golden deer. Suspecting foul play, she accuses him of holding ill-intent towards her, and her denouncement is not merely emotional, but also bases itself upon cruel egotism and underlying implications of Lakṣmaṇa's susceptible lust. She expresses, "O ignoble one! O one who lacks compassion! You have no love or affection for your brother. That is the reason you are unconcerned and do not go to the side of that one with the dark complexion. Perhaps this is what you had desired for a long time. That is the reason you have brought me to the forest. O Soumitri! There is no doubt that I will give up my life in your presence." (Debroy 2:94) Her words, emotionally insulting to the 'familial *dharma',* reflect her deep anxiety for Rāma's well-being but also an assertive stance at the polar opposite of the stereotypical image of a soft-spoken Sītā.

However, the *Rāmacharitmanas* largely omits this instance and/or reduces it to the sincerities of devotion. Tulsidās reframes Sītā as the virtuous one whose sufferings are not but signs of inner conflict or ego but instead, tests of her 'divine purity'. Her interactions with Lakṣmaṇa are carefully sanitised to align with the Vaishnava ideals of ideal womanhood, as one can see in the

translation by Madhava Śaraṇa: "When Sītā heard the cry of distress, she was seized with excessive fear and said to Lakṣmaṇa, "Go quickly, your Brother is in great peril." Lakṣmaṇa answered with a smile, "Listen, mother! By the very play of Rāma's eyebrows the entire creation is annihilated; could He then ever dream of being in danger?" But when Sītā urged him with words that cut him to the quick, Lakṣmaṇa's resolution for such was Hari's will." (705) The rebuke of Lakṣmaṇa by Sītā has been skipped over; the dialogues of Sītā where she was to accuse Lakṣmaṇa of his reluctance to go and check on his brother didn't make a part of his reiteration of the epic. By suppressing Sītā's psychological realism, the Bhakti tradition converts her into a theological symbol rather than a human character with flaws, desires, and insecurities. Later on in the same chapter, we find her accusing herself of her abduction and hence being extremely timid towards her self-identity; "Ah! Lord of Raghus, peerless champion of the world, reliever of distress and delighter of the suppliant, ah! The sun that gladdens the lotus-like race of Raghu, for what of mine you forgot showing mercy? Ah! Lakṣmaṇa, the fault is none of yours; I have reaped the fruit of the temper I showed." Manifold were the lamentations that Videha's daughter uttered. "Though boundless his mercy, my loving lord is far away. Who will apprise the lord of my calamity?" (Saran 706) In the original epic, however, such a self-abuse of Sītā would be absent.

Furthermore, in Vālmīki's narrative, Sītā's identity as a lover often supersedes her role as a dutiful wife. Her insistence on following Rāma to the forest is born not merely from *dharma* but from a romantic, almost possessive impulse: she fears being separated from her beloved more than she dreads the wilderness; "O Lord! Earlier, in many kinds of ways, I have given you pleasure. Therefore, with you, I wish to leave for the forest...The idea of being brave

and dwelling in the forest appeals to me. Because of my pure soul and love, I will be without any taints. I will follow my husband. My husband is my divinity. Even if I die, I will be fortunate in remaining with you." (Devroy, Vol. 1, 209) Here, although Sītā apparently appears to be submitting to Rāma's authority, in the exact context through this dialogue, she in fact, defies his orders. Rāma had asked her to stay back taking care of his father and family and worshipping his brothers. However, Sītā uses this gentle assertion to express her personal desires which overrides her duties as a "griha-vadhu". The contrast is highlighted through Urmila, her sister married to Lakṣmaṇa who chooses to stay back. Her emotional life is central to her character, unlike in the *Rāmacharitmanas*, where Sītā's 'devotion' is in itself, devotional and static. This is further supported by the replacement of Sītā with '*Māyā Sītā*' during the phase of her abduction in the Tulsidāsian text. It is not a mere attempt to protect her purity, but an absolute refusal to let her be the one who suffers, questions, or falls. While one can arguably consider this to be well-intentioned in devotional terms, the move further fades the moral and emotional individuality that she had with the original epic. The Bhakti-era Sītā is a 'mute-goddess', while Vālmīkian Sītā, a not-so-perfect-woman, yet an individual with her own agency.

The most blatant instance of her self-assertion follows in the *Araṇya-Kāṇḍa*, whereupon being confronted by Rāvaṇa, she exclaims, "After abducting Shachi, Indra's wife, it is possible to remain alive. However, it is impossible to remain alive after abducting me." (Devroy, Vol. 2, 103), holding herself to stand out not only as Rāma's beloved but as the woman whose divine power arguably exceeds even that of Shachi, the Queen of the King of gods, Indra. It is a direct challenge to Rāvaṇā's authority as well as a reflection

of her self-upheld respect and high esteem for herself. Herewith, she does not invoke her husband's power as a deterrent, but rather through it asserts her own status as a sacrosanct and divine being, refuting the acknowledgement of which, apart from being epically immoral, is also fatal for the refuter's existence, thereby constructing her as a figure of divine threat, similar to a goddess of wrath or *Shakti* than a meek housewife. In Debroy's translation of the *Sundara-Kāṇḍa*, Sītā tells Rāvaṇa, "You are a low and evil-minded person...My husband is like a lion, and you are like a jackal.". (Devroy, Vol. 4, 36) Her language is deliberately degrading, reversing the power dynamic and establishing that she sees herself as a figure of such moral and personal stature that even the most powerful *rākṣasa* is unworthy of her presence. In her isolation, she exclaims, "Do I not possess any qualities? Why am I suffering misfortune in this way? I am the beautiful Sītā who deserves the best." (Devroy, Vol. 4, 28) She refuses to accept that her suffering is just and warranted, and thus, instead appeals to her own *guṇa,* her beauty, virtue, and worth as reasons why she should not be enduring this torment. This bold self-assessment reveals an super ego and a confidence in her individual value that is striking if seen in the context of later adaptations of the epic literature. While later portrayals transform Sītā into a paragon of meek endurance, Vālmīki's Sītā owns her self-worth and finds it incomprehensible that someone like her should suffer, thus, reasserting her human, emotional, and moral complexity. Later, when Hanuman first meets her in Aśoka Vāṭikā, Sītā does not consent to ride on his back and return to Rāma immediately, not because of fear or weakness, but because she wishes her rescue to come through Rāma's own merit as her husband, preserving both her dignity and Rāma's *kshatriya dharma*. She says, "How can I touch another male's body, even if it is for rescue?" (Devroy, Vol. 4, 20) Here too, Sītā is acutely aware of the sanctity of

her own body and its symbolic significance. Her body is not an object to be rescued in a pickup operation at any cost; it is a site of *dharma*, of both feminine chastity and spiritual resolve, and thus, deserves wars to be fought for her. She reasserts her autonomy by choosing the manner of her liberation.

The portrayal of Sītā as a purely self-effacing wife then is insufficient and fundamentally misleading. Even during the harrowing *agnipariksía* (fire ordeal), which Ram demands to prove her purity, Sītā maintains her agency, forcefully reminding Ram of his royal duty and his unduly harsh attitude towards her. As Mukti Lakhi Mangharam in her article explains, when Rāma insists that Sītā bathe before appearing before him, he exposes her to the "unenlightened, barbaric codes of 'mere mortals'" and humiliates her by subjecting her to the gaze of others. She writes, "Rāma's 'fall' means that Sītā must remind Rāma of his own divinity as well as hers." She who 'revered her husband as a god' asks Rāma a forceful question that reprimands him for acting in a way that is not consistent with their divinity: "Why do you speak to me, O my heroic husband, As any ordinary man to any ordinary woman?" (247). In another mournful rejoinder to Rāma, she also asserts her own godly status: "I am called Janaki, Daughter of Janaka, But I was born of the earth, I am Sītā the Furrow. Did you ever consider My exalted birth before passing judgment?" (249). In reminding Rāma of her own as well as his divinity even as he proudly asserts that he is a 'mere mortal,' Sītā asks that Rāma behave *dharmically* towards her (91). The notion of Sītā as a self-abnegating, virtuous wife is not an intrinsic feature of her original character but rather a later ideological imposition.

Such moments shape together a narrative and context of and for Sītā as a woman who commands the moral authority around her and defines the terms of her own honour. Rāvaṇa's eventual death then gets foreshadowed in the Vālmīkian text not simply by Rāma's heroism alone, but also, perhaps more crucially, by Sītā's curse-like assertion that no man who violates her individuality can survive. One might argue that Vālmīki's Sītā, for all her flaws and emotional excesses, is also, more radically, *human*; she argues, protests, doubts, and loves with intensity, making her culturally subversive. Reclaiming Sītā's full character, her discontent, her decisions, and her defiance, then, is essential to understanding the radical potential embedded in her epic, especially in utilising her narratives in the contemporary contexts.

Draupadī: Misunderstood or Over-Understood?

Draupadī, on the other hand, is not merely a sum-total of moments of her assertiveness and rhetorical criticisms against the injustices that she faces; instead, her complex epic narrative well-portrays her emotional conflicts and ethical struggle as she seemingly readily submits to the prevailing patriarchal norms of her context. Yet the significant chunk of the present-day interpretations present her as the ancient advocate for resistance and defiance against those very patriarchal notions, in their tendency of what arguably can be termed as 'superimposed feminism'. While these interpretations can be understood to be crucial amidst the need for institutional inclusion and societal reform for women, these also necessarily risk the replacing of one form of prescriptive identity for another—imposing a singular, feminist agenda to

Draupadī may only amount to a misreading of her narrative in accordance with the desires of the present rather than the actual substance of the past.

Draupadī's rejection of Karṇa at her Svayaṃvara, often highlighted as the key moment of her assertiveness, is but only an upholding of caste hierarchy, as her rejection of Karṇa came not out of personal preference but rather because he was the son of a charioteer or *'suta'*; "On seeing Karṇa, Draupadi loudly said, *"I will not select a Suta for my lord."*" (Ganguli 479) Secondly, when Arjuna marries Subhadrā and brings her to Khaṇḍavaprastha, Draupadī is 'tricked' into accepting her; "Arjuna sent her into the inner apartments dressed not as a queen but in the simple garb of a cowherd woman. But when she arrived at the palace, the renowned Subhadrā looked handsomer in that dress. The celebrated Bhadrā of large and slightly red eyes first worshipped Pritha. Kunti, from excess of affection, smelt the head of that girl of perfectly faultless features and pronounced infinite blessing upon her. Then that girl of face like the full moon hastily went unto Draupadi and worshipped her, saying, "I am thy maid!" Krishna rose hastily and embraced the sister of Mādhava from affection and said, "Let thy husband be without a foe!" Bhadrā then, with a delighted heart, said unto Draupadi, "So be it!" From that time, O Janamejaya, those great warriors, the Pāndavas, began to live happily, and Kunti also became very happy." (Ganguli 549) She has to accept it with cheerful resignation, reinforcing the image of the dutiful wife who suppresses personal desires for the sake of family harmony. These episodes suggest that Draupadī's much-celebrated strength lies not in rebellion but in her ability to endure and conform to qualities highly prized in the Brahmanical-patriarchal value system. Consequently, her fall in the *Mahāprasthānika Parva* is also blamed upon her failure of as a dutiful wife

to all her husbands, owing to her rather partiality for Arjuna; "Bhimasena of great strength addressed king Yudhishthira the just, saying, "O scorcher of foes, this princess never did any sinful act. Tell us what the cause is for which Krishna has fallen down on the Earth!" Yudhishthira said, "O best of men, though we were all equal unto her she had great partiality for Dhananjaya. She obtains the fruit of that conduct today, O best of men."" (Ganguli 6455)

Draupadī's internalisation of the very patriarchal norms becomes the most evident with the harrowing disrobing scene in the *Sabhā Parva*. As Dushāsana attempts to molest her in the court, Draupadī cries out in anguish, but by referring to her own 'chastity' and 'ritual purity'; she rather cries, "I am a woman who never allowed herself to be seen even by the sun or the wind...and today I am standing in the middle of this *Sabhā*, exposed." (Singha, 245) Her protest is founded not upon the wrongness of sexual violence, but instead on the fact that the very act so happening against her is unthinkable in regards to a woman of her *satitva* (chaste virtue). She indeed cries for her modesty, privacy, and her status as a wife, but rather presents the violation against them as an offence against the patriarchal codes of womanhood instead of them being against her very individual personhood, and asserts her right to dignity, but only in and through the language so sanctioned by the very norms that have come to silence her. At a further instance, when Satyabhama, the spirited wife of Krishna, curiously asks her for how is she able to command such a devotion and reverence from the Pāndavas, Draupadī's reply is deeply revealing not of power or passion, but of restraint and servitude. She says she never allows herself to be moved by kāma (desire), krodha (anger), or ahaṅkār (pride) in her dealings with her husbands. She states, "I think that to be eternal virtue for women, which is based upon a regard for the husband. The husband

is the wife's god, and he is her refuge. Indeed, there is no other refuge for her. How can, then, the wife do the least injury to her lord?" (Singha, 694) She also adds that she refrains from enjoying anything, be it food, fragrance, or adornment, which the Pāndavas do not indulge in. Her conduct is based not on mutual affection or equality but on total submission and self-effacement, glorified as wifely virtue.[1]

Shalini Shah in her article *On Gender, Wives and Pativratas* coins a term 'pativratisation', where she argues that the characterisation of Draupadī in the Mahābhārata shows a clear instance of the process where a more truculent and assertive woman is moulded to fit the ideal of a devoted wife. "The transition of wife from patnī to a mere pativrata—a process that can be termed as 'pativratisation', is most apparent in the portrayal of Draupadī, one of the central female characters in the Mahābhārata." (Shah, 80) In accordance, Draupadī ends her reply by proclaiming, "Husbands are the only way for women," (Singha, 695) a line that reaffirms her complete acceptance of patriarchal ideology. Her words highlight how the epic idealises a woman who is utterly devoted, unassertive, and obedient, the same instances finding mention in Shah's article. Even though popular and modern re-imaginings portray Draupadī as bold and questioning, Kaliprasanna Singha's translation of the *Mahābhārata* paints a contrasting image of a woman firmly grounded in the duties of *stri-dharma*. Herein, additionally, her polyandry too is not a symbol of her sexual autonomy, but rather an extra dimension in her submission to her in-laws, whereby she belongs to all the five-men equally, as an object. The Mahābhārata, as one may have deduced, is a text not clear of

[1] Translated from Bengali by the authors

its claims to the absolute; its ambiguity makes it thrive, between competing *dharmas* and between the conflicts amongst duties and desires, powers and vulnerabilities. And Draupadī belongs to that space of ambiguities and contradictions. To make her a symbol of pure resistance or unqualified feminism is to extract her from that space and place her in a narrative that might resonate with modern sensibilities, but at the cost of historical and literary truth.

True feminist reading must be one that allows for the freedom of the character to be what she is, not what we wish her to be. In Draupadī's case, this means accepting the paradoxes, the silences, the outbursts, and the retreats, all the fragments that form her identity. Only then can we do justice to the spirit of the text, and to the character herself. It is not to argue that the varied themes presented in the said texts have been faultily misinterpreted for the anachronistic projection of modern values onto ancient texts, but while traditionally there have been a plethora of literary superimpositions to match the local drive in the cultural retellings which almost creates a tradition of its own, the newer retellings often try portray a version of feminism which seems rather odd when contrasted alongside the original versions—feminist superimpositions. Such superimpositions of ideals where they originally do not belong also aligns with Showalter's critique of feminist tendencies which often overshadow the softer undertones of a woman's voice which she tries to study as a 'gynocritique'; Showalter maintains that Feministic criticism acquires political overtones as it is often mixed with socialism or Marxism, and men happened to spearhead the Feminist movement and Feminist criticism tend to follow the male-oriented tradition and writing. As a result, the cause

of women has never received its due attention and justice and is described as it is." (Karmarkar, 36)

Agency and Morality

The question of agency in the epics is not simply about whether it exists or not, but about how each woman's choices are shaped by the moral and cosmological structures of her world. Both Sītā and Draupadī act within the frameworks of *dharma*, *nyāya*, and *pativrata-dharma*, even when these very systems restrict them. In this sense, their agency lies not in open defiance but in navigating, and sometimes bending, the codes that govern them, yet they come to diverge sharply and in contrast to each other in how their respective processes have unfolded and how the present cultures have come to remember them.

Sītā, in the devotional retellings of Tulsidās and in modern nationalist adaptations, is turned into Lakṣmī incarnate, a figure of divine chastity whose strength lies in her faithful submission to her husband who is Vishnu's incarnation. As Mukti Lakhi Mangharam notes, this 'desexualisation' of the epic rises from the anxiety to control women's voices and bodies, aligning moral virtue with quiet endurance and self-denial (Mangharam, 76–80). The result is that Sītā's earlier moral clarity and emotional boldness, her ability to question, protest, and even rejection of her husband are glossed over. Her agency becomes devotional rather than ethical, and her character is absorbed into the ideal of the *pativrata* wife that continues to shape the ideal Hindu wife.

Draupadī's story has moved in the opposite direction. Where Sītā's agency has been steadily diminished through sanctification, Draupadī's has been amplified by modern feminist readings in literature and performances. Because she was never deified, and because her polyandry made her an awkward fit within the patriarchal idea of monogamous purity, she became an ideal figure through whom contemporary writers could explore female strength and defiance. Yet in this process, much of her moral complexity has been lost. In Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*, Draupadī exercises agency not to challenge patriarchy directly, but to work within the social and moral logic of her world. Her questions in the *Sabhā Parva* or her restraint before vengeance stem from a desire to uphold *dharma* and *nyāya*, not to overturn them. Her invocation of Krishna, her insistence on ritual purity, and her loyalty to her husbands— her tendency to seek moral coherence in the face of the contradictory are the very patriarchal expectations from her rather than a rebelling for freedom of choice.

Voice and Silence

Voice and silence form the binaries through which the cultural memory of Sītā and Draupadī has evolved. In Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, Sītā speaks with gravitas. In her rebuke to Lakṣmaṇa, in her confrontation with Rāvaṇa, and in her final appeal to Mother Earth, her speech becomes the spear for her negotiations. Yet, with the epic's retelling over the centuries, her speech and her spear, become blunted, and eventually, discarded, turning the first into prayer and the latter into devotion, and a silence that comes to represent obedience and tolerance (Mangharam, 80–82). Draupadī, on the other hand, begins in silence and later learns to speak. In the *Mahābhārata*, her most

powerful words come only after she is humiliated in the Kuru court. After being dragged into the court she grieves saying, "What can be more distressing to me, than that though high-born and chaste, I should yet be compelled to enter this public court?" (Ganguli 747) Her inquiry is thoroughly based upon the right of her high birth and purity, not a universal concern. She stays silent in the face of Karṇa's derogatory comment, "The slave, the son, and the wife are always dependent. They cannot earn wealth, for whatever they earn belongeth to their master." (Ganguli 749) Nevertheless, she asks whether Yudhiṣṭhira had any right to wager her at all, a question but rooted in the logic of *dharma*, and not in a modern vocabulary of women rights, yet profound, exposing the contradictions in the prevalent social order itself. Both Sītā and Draupadī, then, have been rewritten whilst revolving at the axis of voice and silence, with the truth of their characters lying somewhere in between.

Conclusion

Sītā, with her revised image of the compliant, suffering wife quietly enduring injustice in the name of virtue has overwritten the textual reality of a woman who defied her husband's orders and refused to be defined by roles imposed upon her. Her subversive acts, veiled under centuries of reverent interpretation, show us a woman who was not simply a passive symbol of sacrifice, but an agent of moral protest and personal dignity. Yet, through cultural conditioning, this complexity has been rubbed off to serve a narrow archetype of 'ideal womanhood', reducing her to a pedestal more than a person. Mukti Lakhi Mangharam in her *"Rāma, Must I Remind You Of Your Divinity?"* argues that such "altering renditions of the epic contemporary

retelling of the Rāmayaṇa have desexualised the epic to reflect conservative attitudes towards marriage, sex, and sexuality, which have been harnessed by nationalist and patriarchal discourses". The paper condemns the notion of an inherently inflexible and intolerant Indian ancient literary culture by highlighting the epic's feminist messages and its sanctioning of alternative sexualities "Contemporary retellings of the Rāmayaṇa, including Sagar's television serial, have desexualised the epic so that it reflects extremely conservative attitudes towards marriage, sex, and sexuality" (Mangharam, 76)

Conversely, Draupadī has suffered from a different, though equally reductive, fate. Rather than being silenced, she has often been made to speak with a voice that is not how she has been painted in the epics. Modern readings, in the eagerness to reclaim her as an active feminist icon, have projected onto her a monolithic model of resistance that eclipses her character with its emotional, spiritual, and narrative subtleties, erasing the very contradictions and tensions that make Draupadī true at the core of the text as she stands as a mirror to the ancient customs, with her anger, her questions, her pain, and her sense of honour rooted in a patriarchally assimilated worldview, one that however, cannot be wholly captured through the modern ideological lens.

Together, these two figures reveal both the limits to and dangers of interpretive freedom, both being victims of larger cultural impulses to make the female characters fit into easily consumable categories. A responsible engagement with these epics, crucially, must resist both the silencing and the superimposing. It must present Sītā not just as the quiet wife but also the

woman who speaks, resists, and walks away, redeeming her of the good girl image, and must let Draupadī be not just the fiery rebel but also the anguished, vulnerable, morally entangled woman who navigates her fate within the constraints of her patriarchal context. In doing so, we restore to them not only their voices, but their agency and with it, the possibility of rethinking what womanhood, resistance, and dignity might have meant in the epic imagination, and what they can still mean today.

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