



# GENDERED NEGOTIATIONS OF BELONGING : INTERTEXTUAL IN GENDER REPRESENTATION

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the gendered negotiation of belonging through an intertextual analysis of gender representation across selected literary texts . It explores how gender identities are constructed , contested and redefined through dialogues between texts, traditions and social- cultural- contexts . By employing intertextuality as a critical framework , the study highlights how narratives borrow , revise or resist earlier representations of gender to negotiate questions of inclusion, exclusion, and belonging . This paper argues that gender is not a fixed or isolated category but a relational and discursive construct shaped by textual interactions and historical power structures . Through close textual analysis , the study reveals how intertextual references enable marginalized genders to articulate agency, challenge normative identities and reimagine spaces of belonging .

**Index Terms** – Intertextuality, Cultural Discourse, Identity Construction, Gendered Belonging

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Hindu epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, which are immensely old, have prevented cultural identity from being shaped on the Indian subcontinent for thousands of years. These stories with their intricate narration of human relationships, moral dilemmas, and societal structures still have their own kind of appeal to the readers who keep on reinterpreting them as they see fit. The set of feminist perspectives that have been presented has uncovered hitherto overlooked dimensions of female agency and identity which can be found within the ancient narratives. An analysis of the female figures as well as their deeds in these epics is when we find the enthralling tapestry of resistance, assertion, and negotiation that challenges the simplistic interpretation of the texts as patriarchal only<sup>1</sup>. The ancient texts contain example after example where women are making decisions, expressing dissent, and shaping the course of events implying the feminist elements were always part of the narrative although they are often hidden and need a really careful analysis to be tested. In this manner, mythological symbolism reflects the main values of a certain culture as well as acts as an engine for social changes in the process of the renewal of ancient tales by new generations.

## II. Feminist Undercurrents in the Ramayana

The Ramayana, commonly depicted as a portrayal of Rama's proper masculine disposition, is in reality such a sophisticated structure of female figures endowed with the ability to assert their voices, smarts, and will in the face of patriarchal conventions. That is, in the context of these the women social performance is ongoing in which these women are consistent in their power to produce the outcome in the narrative<sup>2</sup>. The epic represents society where women's freedom was highly exercised and they were not limited to choose between just living in the hermits' a body or the palace. They negotiate power and identity through this presentation, which contrasts their decision-making as a princess or monk's wife with modern society's belief in ancient women's total control. Women's figures as Kaikeyi, Sita, Tara, and Mandodari who act as decision makers and are often blindly along are never highlighted in the scriptures. Theirs is the case of individuals who follow the counsel of their minds—merits or demerits notwithstanding. As such, their role is not as add-ons to male characters but as protagonists who direct the storyline in a way that is conclusive<sup>3</sup>.

## III. Kaikeyi: The Warrior Queen

Kaikeyi's portrayal in the Ramayana presents an especially compelling case study in the idea of female agency and the power it brings. Prior to Rama's exile, Kaikeyi was a warrior queen, who is portrayed as the charioteer of her husband King Dasharatha during a fierce battle between the Devas and Asuras. She not only acquired the two boons as a result of her feat for the king but was also able to dispose of Rama from the kingdom and consequently to place Bharata on the throne by her political will. Thus, this act can be interpreted both as a woman's verdict of the political power that is solely the result of her own work and as her intention to manipulate power for her son Bharata. Her freedom to make this irreverent decision is not taken away by the poem even if it shows the painful consequences of the decision and thus it can be viewed not only as inherently evil<sup>4</sup>. Kaikeyi's depth as a character is emphasized in the text since her actions are rooted in the power she has been given by her husband for her loyalty rather than from sheer malice or jealousy. Her story implies that the world of Ramayana was a place where women could be highly ranked generals and exercised a significant influence on the political sector, thus challenging the existing stereotype of ancient Indian society as a conservative and gender-biased society in the modern viewpoint.

## IV. Sita's Silent Resistance

Sita, frequently depicted as the epitome of wifely fidelity, presents an alternative viewpoint on her defiance and autonomy through a feminist lens. Her deliberate choice to accompany Rama into exile is the true impetus for her decision, as she resisted Ravana's coercive tactics<sup>5</sup>. Rama's execution of the Ashvamedha Yagna before Sita's golden effigy in the Ramayana signifies her symbolic presence in sacred rites, dismantling socially constructed power disparities between partners. Feminist critics contend that women serve as instruments of karma and endure the repercussions of their actions within the epic's moral framework. Nevertheless, the epic literature affirms the role of women as moral agents actively participating within the ethical framework<sup>6</sup>. The trial by fire that Rama requests of Sita to demonstrate her purity symbolize the inequality inherent in men's varying standards of sexual fidelity. The conflict between interpretations highlights the overarching issue of whether women's actions should be viewed or evaluated within the framework of patriarchy, characterized by contradictions and identity choices. This segment of the epic remains a subject of discourse regarding the physical boundaries of cultural identity and raises the question of whether to retain, reinterpret, or eliminate elements of myths and narratives that modern Hindus will confront while navigating the relationship between ancient mythology and contemporary values<sup>7</sup>.

## V. Draupadi: Embodiment of Feminist Resistance in the Mahabharata

Draupadi equals probably the most explicitly feminist character of ancient Hindu mythology, and her story is a great example of female resistance against patriarchal oppression. The courageous act of Draupadi grilling the Kuru elders for a decision he made, which led to her being lost in a game of dice against her husband Yudhishtira speaks to one of the subsequent earliest literary pictures of a woman questioning a man. Draupadi is for sure a feminist icon for her outstanding brave and defiant deeds against the male hegemony. Her critique of the traditional order, her call to the court of law and her effort in creating a space where the marginalized can inquire the authorities, set her apart from just being a strong female character to one of the feminist philosophers<sup>8</sup>. Draupadi does not act like a bird in a cage that has lost its ability to chirp, when her partners fail her by not shielding her from the public disgrace; she instead makes a dire accusation of the social and legal regimes that have disappointed her. This, public questioning in her presence, is a sharp challenge of the male to be the only authority, and which will make Draupadi as a character who will not accept injustice because of tradition.

## VI. Subversion as Resistance

Draupadi's response to the violence against her in the Kuru court not only shows her as a victim but also as a heroine who fought for her right and voiced out her view on moral authority. Undaunted by the prospect of her own disrobing, Draupadi employs the feminist subversion theory whereby she refuses to conform to the norms of male domination by first of all refraining to perceive her assault as it was meant and also by not giving her assailants the satisfaction of having been able to expose her<sup>9</sup>. The verb to subvert carries the meaning of grasping the repressive faculties that turn them into something opposed to the oppressor, and Draupadi's struggle is her reinterpretation of the entire system that identifies the feminine as an impregnable body representing the honor of a woman. After the exposure that became a moment of the divine transgression and the wrathfully angry self, she transformed the whole power relationship, thus causing the involuntary disgracing of the violators. It is this moment that serves as the juncture of Draupadi's transformation from the position of an unwilling participant in her plight to that of the one, whose suffering is the reason for the geopolitical conflict—Kuruksheetra War<sup>10</sup>.

## VII. Contradictory Scriptural Perspectives

The Hindu scriptural canon, which has always been the basis of women's status, and often contains contradictory and confused points of view, reflects the intricate and different lines of thought on the gender issue in the ancient Indian society. At the same time, some scriptural passages explicitly curtail women's independence, such as the injunction from Manusmriti that "Men must make their women dependent day and night, and keep under their control those who are attached to sensory objects. Her father guards her in childhood, her husband guards her in youth, and her sons guard her in old age<sup>11</sup>. A woman is not fit for independence". On the other hand, other scriptures advocate greater equality, such as Krishna's statement in the Bhagavad Gita: "For, taking refuge in Me, they also who, O Arjuna, may be of sinful birth—women, vaisyas as well as sudras—attain the Supreme Goal". Moreover, the former example of Krishna restricts women to a category along with the lower castes that require special mention, but at the same time, it also assures them of the equal possibility of liberation. These antinomies are a reflection of the multifaceted nature of Hindu gender thought, and hence, both freedom and restriction are the two components of the tradition.

### VIII. Polyandry and Consent in Draupadi's Marriage

The Draupadi's situation of being shared among the five Pandava brothers she married is something that has to be taken into account when the feminist interpretation is addressed. Modern feminist rewrites have emphasized the instability of the situation from Draupadi's perspective. In Divakaruni's version, Draupadi complains about being the common wife: "Like a communal drinking cup, I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not". Supposedly the boon was granted to her by Lord Shiva when she lost her virginity and then made whole again by one of her husband's passing her to the other one. Nonetheless, she felt that: "Nor was I particularly delighted by the virginity boon, which seemed designed more for my husbands' benefit than mine". These alternative adaptations illuminate the questions of consent and female autonomy that are only hinted at in the original text<sup>12</sup>. Through the articulation of Draupadi's inner thoughts toward her peculiar marriage, current feminist retellings provide a room for dissecting the crises between cultural routines and individual autonomy that are within the tradition.

### IX. Recovering Women's Voices through Translation

Feminist translation practices have become a very promising tool in reclamation and amplification of women's voices within the classical texts such as the Mahabharata and Ramayana. Translators can have the readers see the world from an entirely new perspective by an active decision of theirs to make the female group the focal point of the argument. One example of this is the Divakaruni's approach to the translation in "The Palace of Illusions"; he brings Draupadi to the fore by telling the story from her point of view. Such kind of feminist translation enables the epic to challenge the traditional ideals of Hindu womanhood, the ones the epic might be supposed to legitimize and promote in modern Hindu society<sup>13</sup>. The transference of the narrative to focus on Draupadi's life by such translations allows the readers to know elements that were omitted or marginalized in the regular narration through traditional practices. These translations are not meant to be seen as ascribe contemporary values of today's society to the texts, but they are means of salvaging the forgotten and neglected female experience that was present in the ancient narratives but was barely emphasized by the patriarchal interpretations.

### X. Subversion as a Traditional and Modern Strategy

Ancient female characters use strategies that go against the society's norms, which are consistent with contemporary feminist theory; therefore, there is an indication that there is a continuity between ancient and modern forms of resistance. Draupadi's reaction to the humiliation at the hands of Kauravas shows that she is involved in one form of subversion that is very similar to feminist strategies of resistance<sup>14</sup>. Mahasweta Devi highlights the modern interpretation of Draupadi next to the original character and notes: "Both ladies stand for political and social oppression of women who have a voice because they seem to question the fragile male identity". This time linearity between old and new forms of resistance argues that feministic quests are not just new interpretations of old stories that are placed within a new historical context, but rather have antecedents within the tradition itself. The application of these continuities enables, therefore the new-age reader, to develop interpretations of these epics which are neither unquestioning emancipations nor fix these narratives within tradition, but critically deal with the intricate tapestry of female representation in Hindu mythology<sup>15</sup>.

## XI. Conclusion: Mythology as Living Cultural Heritage

The Ramayana and Mahabharata, the two ancient Indian epics, are a living cultural heritage that remains organic thanks to constant re-interpretation. These stories are full of various patriarchal impositions and female empowerment, as well as the traditional, expected, and the subverted gender roles. The ambiguous illustrations of the characters such as Draupadi, Sita, and Kaikeyi make it impossible to classify them, thus, indicating the cryptic features of the ancient Indian society vis-à-vis Bakhtin's gender and power. Female interpreters, in breaking down and improving the role of woman, revivify the tradition; that is the opposite of what they are charged with; they do not corrupt the tradition, they expand it and they do not falsify it<sup>16</sup>. Such works, i.e., namely a reinterpretation, not a sort of immortalized code in a singular style, form part of the conceivable cultural relics lived every time among people. The hunting down by the mythological sources of cultural identity calls for a twofold realization of its continuity and novelty, taking note of the fact that it is the ancient myths that pollinate the values for a new generation yet face new challenges. However, these readings that unfold a complexity and inner tensions of the narratives can help contemporary readers to articulate their cultural identity that, on the one hand, is supportive of the tradition and, on the other, is still subject to the development of the comprehension<sup>17</sup>.

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