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Passages to India

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About

Gender forum is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

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Editorial

1 “Passages to India. Literary and Socio-Political Perspectives on Gender Concepts in India” is dedicated to the investigation of the country's prevailing gender concepts and gender politics. India is a country which appears to have a rather distinct history and agenda in this regard, particularly compared to Western feminist theories, concerns and histories. The articles assembled in this issue of Gender Forum offer insights into the status quo of feminist concerns in India and approach this topic from a variety of angles, including analyses of literary representations, religious discourses and socio-political developments, to medical-judicial concerns.

2 As Rita Banerji in her contribution “Why Kali won’t rage. A Critique of Indian Feminism” states: “Two unique factors distinguish Indian feminism from the feminism in the west. One, it rejects the notion of a deep-rooted, tradition-fed gender hierarchy in India, defined, dominated and exploited by men. Secondly – it does not ascribe the abysmal state of women in India to longstanding patriarchal oppression, and hence sees no reason to rage against it. While to western feminists, these factors might seem oddly perplexing, there is within Indian feminism a rationalization of these outlooks.” In the article Banerji therefore explores the necessity and the means to readdress the deep rooted gender bias within this culture.

3 The essay “Racialised Boundaries. Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* and Alice Walker's “In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens” by Parminder Bakshi-Hamm investigates gendered and racial implications of the metaphor of the garden as presented in the two well-known literary works. She argues that in Hodgson’s novel “the garden is not a neutral, ahistorical, timeless idyll but culturally defined, and insofar it is deliberately distanced from India and everything that India is intended to denote in the novel. The garden is created as an exclusive space, signifying whiteness.” In juxtaposition with Alice Walker’s narrative the article shows the different but at the same time complementary engagement of both authors with this trope and its racial and gender implications.

4 Julia Hoydis’ contribution “A Palace of Her Own: Feminine Identity in the Great Indian Story” provides a gender-theoretical analysis of *The Palace of Illusions*, a retelling of *Mahabharata*, an ancient epic that has maintained the status as culturally foundational text also in terms of shaping Indian gender and social norms ever since. *The Palace of Illusion*, Hoydis argues, “retells the epic from the point of view of one of its heroines, Draupadi, thus

reclaiming female agency in the famous tale of war between two families, hyper-masculine heroes and their devoted wives. The text [...]displays the struggle for identity in a mythological context, which is distinctly Indian, yet transcends cultural borders, all the while showing the illusionary nature of those imposed by history and gender.”

5 In “Sociology of Female Foeticide and Infanticide. Where does the Law Stand?” Bir Pal Singh offers another lens through which the gender bias and patriarchal structures in India become apparent. By taking into account religious beliefs, society’s systematic ordering of social relationships and India’s law system, the article argues that in India “the mentality and attitudinal problem at the level of society are directly responsible for [...]violence, rape, foeticide, infanticide, marginalization, powerlessness, exploitation, cultural imperialism and a traditional notion of polyandrous marriages to women of our contemporary society.” Although from a different angle, the concluding contribution of this issue also deals with current notions of parenthood and maternity, a review of Lisa Baraitser’s *Maternal Encounters. The Ethics of Interruption*.

Why Kali Won't Rage: A Critique of Indian Feminism.

By Rita Banerji, Calcutta, India

Abstract:

Two unique factors distinguish Indian feminism from the feminism in the west. One, it rejects the notion of a deep-rooted, tradition-fed, gender hierarchy in India, defined, dominated and exploited by men. Secondly – it does not ascribe the abysmal state of women in India to longstanding patriarchal oppression, and hence sees no reason to rage against it. While to western feminists, these factors might seem oddly perplexing, there is within Indian feminism a rationalization of these outlooks. Their argument is that what may seem to be a gender hierarchy to westerners, is simply regarded as cultural observances by Indians. They further argue that because of the tradition of goddess worship, Indian men are more attuned to the idea of women in power, and that unlike the west, in India, men too have historically participated in the women's rights movement. This paper argues that the ground reality of the state of women in India today, or indeed even historically, does not support this perspective. It also asks the question why this perspective might have evolved in the Indian women's movement, and takes a historical, sociological and psychological view of possible explanations. Finally, the paper asserts that the Indian feminist movement has a responsibility to gravely introspect on its position and approach so far, and urgently contemplate a new approach and plan of action on challenging India into becoming a more gender-just and humane nation. It also makes a few suggestions on some of the issues that specifically need to be focused on.

1 Two unique factors distinguish Indian feminism from the feminism in the west. One, it rejects the notion of a deep-rooted, tradition-fed gender hierarchy in India, defined, dominated and exploited by men. Secondly – it does not ascribe the abysmal state of women in India to longstanding patriarchal oppression, and hence sees no reason to rage against it. While to western feminists, these factors might seem oddly perplexing, there is within Indian feminism a rationalization of these outlooks.

2 Suma Chitnis in *Feminism In India*, a compilation of “some of the most influential writings on the concept of feminism in India” (Chaudhuri 1), describes how once, while attending an international seminar on gender roles in Canada, she was acutely conscious of the fact that while the western feminists there launched an “angry tirade” against the patriarchies in their countries, she felt no such anger towards the patriarchy in her own country. She goes on to elaborate on Indian women's general “disapproval of [the western] feminist anger” and their “confused reaction to the [western] feminist emphasis on patriarchy [...] particularly on men as the principal oppressors” (Chitnis 8-10).

3 Chitnis muses that this might be because history and culture render, “the women's issues different in India from the issues in the west.” She points out that historically India has “always been [a] highly hierarchical [society]” with the hierarchies maintained through

customs and social behavioral codes. She also notes that unlike the west where individuality and personal freedom are emphasized, Indians cherish values like submission to superiors, “self-denial” and “sublimating the [individual] ego.” In other words, Indian society is sociologically and psychologically acclimatized to the notion of a stratified social order, and what may appear as gender hierarchy to an outsider, is simply regarded as cultural observances by Indians. Also, what westerners may read as a forfeiting of the individual self is regarded by Indian women as a prioritizing of family and community over the individual. Hence they see it as making a choice in favor of the larger good.

4 Chitnis further justifies this perspective of Indian feminism by arguing that after Independence the Indian constitution “granted women political status fully equal to that of men. [And] thus Indian women did not have to bear the kind of injustices that women in the West had to suffer because of the [...] gap between political ideals and realities.” She contends that since Independence in 1947, the Indian government has through its series of Five Year Plans provided for the “welfare of women” such that if countries are compared in terms of legal provisions for women, India “is likely to emerge as one of the most progressive countries.” Chitnis feels this is one of the main reasons why Indian women are not as agitated as their western counterparts. She concludes that Indian women “see that the legal safeguards and equal opportunity facilities that are being fought for [by western feminists] [...] are already available to them in principle” (Chitnis 9, 11, 17).

5 Madhu Kishwar, in the same compilation of essays, *Feminism in India*, corroborates Chitnis’ viewpoint and further adds that “the idea of women’s rights and dignity [...] [has] a much longer history of individual women’s assertiveness in India [than in the west.]” This she believes is evidenced in India’s traditions of goddess worship, where “*Shakti*” or power is recognized as an embodiment of the feminine. Kishwar insists that this in fact “allows Indian society to be far more receptive to women’s assertions and strengths” than western societies are. This, she argues, is also the reason why, unlike the west, in India, men too have historically participated in the women’s rights movement. She points out that during the British Colonial period men even took a leadership role in the abolishment of practices like *sati*, and the institution of laws to allow widows to remarry. Kishwar’s contention is that because of the tradition of goddess worship, Indian men are socially adjusted to the idea of women in positions of power and that this is one of main reasons why the women’s movement in India “did not acquire the overtones of gender warfare as it did in the West where women faced fierce hostility from most politically active men in their endeavours to win equality” (35-36).

6 However, notwithstanding laws, the constitution, goddess worship and male feminists, the ground reality of women in India today is an outrage. While India has undergone astronomical growth in industry and wealth, and is now geared to become the third largest economy in the world (Sinha, P.), the state of Indian women, when taken as a national stratum that theoretically represents one half of the nation, has been horrendously regressive.

7 In 2010, the World Economic Forum released its Global Gender Gap report, in which India ranked at 112 out of a total of 134 countries (Murti). The report measured the difference in how men and women in each country had access to resources and opportunities. It took into consideration economics, education, political participation, health and survival. When countries are ranked according to economic participation and job opportunities for women, India ranks at 128, above just six other countries. Even in India's booming corporate sector, the country's highly educated and professional stratum, the average annual income of women is U.S. \$1,185, less than a third of the average annual income for men at U.S. \$3,698 (Nagrajan). Even among the BRICS nations – Brazil, China, Russia, South Africa and India – the five developing countries that have the fastest growing economies in the world, India lags far behind the others in view of how much of this growth is inclusive of women (Rajadhyaksha). Women occupy only 11% of political offices in India, compared to 21% in China. India also has one of the lowest female literacy rates in the world and in 2006 the World Bank estimated that more than 50% of India's females above the age of 15 are illiterate (Business Standard). However, even this figure is misleading, since “measuring effective literacy in India means including anyone who can read and write his or her own name, [so if] [...] Sita knows how to read and write the four letters of her name [she is counted] [...] in the category of effective literates” (Bhaskar). Almost 50% of girls in India are married off by their families before the age of 18, and India singularly also accounts for one-third of the world's child brides (Sinha K., UNGA).

8 What is now amply evident is that this existential disparity faced by India's women is fueled by an unrestrained misogyny. A misogyny that not only does not permit women an equal life-style but one that does not even permit them the most fundamental of all human rights -- the right to live. A 2011 global poll by Thomson Reuters Foundation identifies India as the fourth most dangerous country in the world for women (Chowdhury).

9 In three generations, India has systematically targeted and annihilated more than 50 million women from its population – a number which constitutes the sum total of the populations of Sweden, Austria, Switzerland, Belgium and Portugal put together (Banerji,

Female Genocide). In 20 years India will have methodically annihilated 20% of women from its population (Sinha K., In 20 Years). They have been eliminated through the rampant practices of female feticide, female infanticide, killing of girls under 5 years through intentional neglect, dowry murders, “honor” killings, and endangerment of women through multiple and forced female fetal abortions. Between 500,000 to 700,000 girls go “missing” in India every year, eliminated through female feticide and female infanticide. The average life expectancy of Indian women at 66 years is one of the lowest in the world. India has the highest maternal mortality rate in the world, and one out of every 140 women in India is at risk of dying due to pregnancy or childbirth (Sinha K., India Slips). The crime of dowry related murders of young married women in India has escalated to epidemic levels. Many of these murders are staged as kitchen accidents or suicides by self-immolation. A study published in the *Lancet* in 2009 (Sanghavi), that collated hospital records and testimonies, estimated that as many as 136000 women are being killed by fire in India each year, that is one woman is killed every five minutes (Stephey).

10 This signifies a misogyny that does not even spare infants and girls. A 2007 UNICEF report shows that the mortality rate of girls under 5 years was abnormally high, about 40% higher than boys the same age, and this was due to intentional neglect, a malicious denial of food and medication, that is tantamount to negligent homicide (UNICEF 12). A 2011 study by the Indian Council of Medical Research and the Harvard School of Public Health showed that girls under 5 years were 21% more likely than boys that age, and infant girls one-year or younger were 50% more likely to die than infant boys that age, because of violence inflicted on them at home. They estimated that in the last two decades more than 1800,000 girls under the age of 6 years have been killed by domestic violence. The head researcher Jay Silverman said, "Being born a girl into a family in India in which your mother is abused makes it significantly less likely that you will survive early childhood. Shockingly, this violence does not pose a threat to your life if you are lucky enough to be born a boy" (Sinha K., Violence at Home).

11 The fallout of this misogynistic annihilation results in a further commoditization of women. Domestic trafficking accounts for the largest percentage of sex trafficking of women in India today (Dixit). Women are kidnapped or sometimes sold by their own families through touts in regions where gender ratios are so low that families are willing to “buy” brides (Sharma). Most of these bought brides are virtual slaves, used not only to serve the domestic, sexual and reproductive requirements of the family, but are often sexually exploited by other men in the family too. Once they’ve had children and have been used,

many of these women are re-sold into the bride market as second hand ‘goods.’ Known as *Paros*, these women can be bought, sold and resold up to three or four times, their value estimated according to their age, reproductive capacity, and how many times before they’ve already been “married” (Agal).

12 While Indian women see no cause for outrage despite their brutal subjugation and dehumanization, the men in India have gone on the offensive against what they see as their outright persecution by Indian women. They have formed an influential and effective lobby to mitigate one of the most critical domestic violence laws in India – the 498A . Their claim is that women are rampantly filing false cases of domestic abuse and harassment, and that men are the “victims of gender-biased laws” . Even if there were such cases, the problem clearly is in the implementation of the law, and in the failure of the police and the courts to efficiently investigate and file the legitimate complaints brought forth. Yet, the anti-498A lobby was so focused and powerful in its networking and campaigning that it was able to effectively have its case presented for hearing before the Indian Parliament.

13 The resistance to the anti-498A lobby from women’s groups was erratic, weak and ineffective. In fact, even the President of India, a woman, and a lawyer at that, seemed to agree that men are justified in their complaints of being abused by women who were misusing the law to persecute them. In an interview she said, that domestic violence laws like the 498a were “subjected to distortion and misuse to wreak petty vengeance and to settle scores” (Ram). The Supreme Court of India on its part has urged the government of India to mitigate the 498A, arguing that the courts “come across a large number of such complaints which are not even bona fide and are filed with oblique motives [and that for the court] [...] to find out the truth is a Herculean task in a majority of these complaints [...] Criminal trials lead to immense suffering [...] [and] even ultimate acquittal in the trial may not be able to wipe out the deep scars of ignominy [from accused husbands and their families]” (The Times of India, Amend Dowry Law). In a country where life and survival has become a fundamental issue for women, where dowry related violence and murders have risen at such monstrous rates they’ve assumed the appearance of an epidemic, how does a law for the protection of women come under the scanner and not provoke a furious and outright revolt among women’s groups?

14 One of the most obvious reasons for the passivity of Indian women in the face of such extreme tyranny is that this is a socially and culturally conditioned response. Since gender is effectively a cultural construct, it is customary for girls and women to assume a code of behavior and response that is typified for people of their gender in their own communities

(Crawford 22-23). The ancient, religious text of India, *The Laws of Manu*, provides the prototype for the ideal Indian woman:

A girl, a young woman, or even an old woman should not do anything independently, even in her own house. In childhood a woman should be under her father's control, in youth under her husband's, and when her husband is dead, under her sons'. She should not have independence. A woman should not try to separate herself from her father, her husband, or her sons, for her separation from them would make both her own and her husband's families contemptible. She should always be cheerful, and clever at household affairs; she should keep her utensils well polished and not have too free a hand in spending. When her father, or her brother with her father's permission, gives her to someone [in marriage], she should obey that man while he is alive and not violate her vow to him [even] when he is dead. A virtuous wife should constantly serve her husband like a god, even if he behaves badly, freely indulges his lust, and is devoid of any good qualities [...] It is because a wife obeys her husband that she is exalted in heaven (Doniger 115).

15 Docility is still the most exalted personality trait in Indian women, and a much sought after attribute in prospective brides in the matrimonial columns of Indian newspapers. Even when the prospective bride is a career woman she is expected to "also" be "domestic" – a word that implies compliancy. One of the primary reasons why families resist educating girls and are keen to marry their daughters off at a younger age, is that the younger and less-educated she is, the more she is regarded as being tame and easy to control. Hence these are the brides preferred by the husbands and in-laws.

16 The above passage from *The Laws of Manu* also proves what theories of personality development indicate -- that built into expectant gender roles are the social valuations of the gender, that is, how inferior or superior a gender is ranked in a culture. In fact Indian religious texts expound on the inferiority of women extensively. According to Hindu creation theory, women were created from the lowest and most impure part of the body – the feet. Various texts describe women as "lustful, lazy, power hungry, deceitful, malicious and vengeful by nature [...] [and] men are advised to keep guard on women at all times or they would bring great distress to the family [...]" (Banerji, *Sex and Power*, 104-5). And as Indian women internalize their culturally defined gender roles, the tendency is to also internalize an inferior valuation of themselves. Traits such as passivity, susceptibility, avoidance of confrontation and absence of motivation for change, are often indications that women have internalized their social devaluation and subordination (Crawford 22-23). Indeed when the external oppression becomes highly internalized, victims "begin to actually believe [...] that [their oppression] doesn't even exist" (Yamato 58), a form of denial that's very apparent in Indian women. Other symptoms of "internalized subordination," include a lack of a sense of

personal rights and entitlements, low expectations and a willingness to compromise oneself (Aspy 23). These are evident in Indian women's rationalizations about the virtue of their culture-driven obligation to forgo the personal self for the sake of the family and community. Ela Bhatt, one of India's most lauded women's activists, on Women's Day recently questioned, "Why should women consider maternity, motherhood and household work as a burden? That is our privilege, a source of power [...]" (Bhatt, Interview). What Bhatt, as most Indian feminists, shies away from is the question of individual choice for women that the culture strangles. It is not the role itself, be it motherhood or domestic work, which is a burden per se. Rather the burden, indeed the oppression, is when the culturally ordained role becomes an imposition that violates women's individual rights of choice, physical safety, mental well-being and human dignity.

17 Indeed, in cultures, like that of India, where there is excessive emphasis on observing religious and traditional norms, internalized oppression is even harder to shake off since there is an impulsive adherence to stipulated social behavior and gender roles that is resistant to rational examination and change (Aspy 76). Indeed Indian women's refusal to rage itself is an indicator of internalized subordination. Studies of human social behavior show that anger as an emotion is usually permitted to groups only in the upper rungs of society, since it indicates social power (Tidens), as indeed the anti-498A men's lobby demonstrates. On the other hand, the appropriate emotions allowed for the subordinate groups are sadness and remorse. These, not surprisingly, are the most often expressed emotions by Indian women in the context of their dismal state.

18 The Indian women's refusal to rage, besides being a culturally instilled response and a symptom of internalized subordination, might also be a historically adopted strategy of surviving an aggressive patriarchy. Submissiveness often is a strategy for survival in the face of the most extreme forms of violence, ones that directly threaten survival. Here passivity becomes a learned response. Victims learn to become passive when they are repeatedly made powerless through the infliction of violence, or their resistance is violently crushed if and when they try to raise objections or resist their oppressors (Jones 181). There are other indicators for this in the response of Indian women to traditional patriarchy. These responses are symptomatic of Battered Women's Syndrome, and the question that needs to be examined is, are these also evident at a collective level and in the women's movement in India? One of these symptoms is the inclination to romanticize existent gender dynamics, while the other is a tendency to self-blame (Follingstand).

19 Women's rights activists in India often deny the power play of a violent patriarchy in India, and go to great lengths to expound on, indeed romanticize, how Indian men have historically fought for women's rights in India. However many of the issues that individual male activists had campaigned against during the British colonial period, such as *sati*, the burning alive of a widow on her husband's pyre, were not so much a woman's right issue as a human rights one. The equivalent, for example, would be the fight against witch burning in the United States. Furthermore, the presence of a few social male activists is not representative of how Indian men in general felt about or responded to the repressive, often inhuman customs targeted at women. During the British colonial period, there was tremendous resentment among the Indian men to the attempts to encourage education of girls and women in their communities. Men felt their conventional positions of power threatened by educated women, and contended that education ruined Indian women by stripping them of traditional values and westernizing them, such that they neglected to satisfactorily fulfill their domestic duties. The political and economic autonomy of women was an idea that was unpalatable to even some of the most prominent social and political figures of this time like Gandhi, who also maintained that women's rightful place was the home, and that their strength was in working to serve the family and community (Banerji, *Sex and Power*, 250-52).

20 Indeed many Indian women writers from this period, like Mokshodayani Mukhopadhyay and Tarabai Shinde, challenged the real motive of many of their contemporary Indian men activists (Tharu 217-18). They felt that the attempts by these men for the "improvement" of women, were more like benevolent dole outs to passive recipients rather than a serious commitment to socially fostering the independence and empowerment of women. More so, there were in fact occasions when Indian men mass protested against administrative attempts to abolish violent practices against girls and women, as was the case with the issue of child marriage (Banerji, *Sex and Power*, 247-8). When in 1890, a girl less than 10-years-old was married to an older man and died of hemorrhaging after he raped her, the British tried to introduce 12 years as a minimum age of consent for girls. It caused a public uproar and men mobilized against the law in mass protests on the streets. They argued that this was their right by tradition, since Hindu scriptures entitled a 24-year-old man to have an 8-year-old bride, and that Muslim men were similarly entitled since Muhammed himself had a 9-year-old bride. This organized protest was also politically supported by the Indian National Congress party, the current ruling party, which at that time was at the helm of

India's Independence movement. The British administration then, under extreme public and political pressure, decided not to enforce the law.

21 Self-blame is another very frequent response to oppression among Indian women, indeed even women activists. Chitnis for e.g. makes a point that is frequently put forth in India, that it is not men, but women who most often inflict violence on other women. She argues that, "in many incidents of bride-burning, or suicide attempts by women unable to bear ill-treatment [...] [the perpetrator of abuse] is almost always one of her female relatives [such as a mother-in-law or sister-in-law.]" Indian men on the other hand, she points out, "have [been] 'benefactors' facilitating the advance of women" (22). Even for those women who have been successful in getting an education, in joining politics and establishing a career in a chosen profession, Chitnis asserts they too "have almost invariably been encouraged, supported and actively helped by a husband, a father or a brother" (23).

22 So what then explains the pathetic state of women in India? In Chitnis's opinion, it is their own "failure." She points out this "failure" of women at different levels – "failure to exercise their rights [...] and failure to use legal safeguards." She explains that "the problem really lies in the fact that women do not make proper use of the existing legal and political rights [available to them] [...] Even educated women are apathetic, [and so] political parties consider women candidates a poor risk and are unwilling to invest in them" (18-19). The line of reasoning here is that the state of women in India is pitiable, not because of oppression by men, but because women do it to themselves. They are incompetent and self-destructive. The questions that are never asked or examined are: What really happens when women approach the system for their legal rights? Why are women turning on women? And what is it that ultimately brings or keeps women in positions of political power in India?

23 There are, indeed, umpteen laws and authorized provisions for women in India, as is often pointed out. But the reason most women don't avail of them is because far from being a source of protection and empowerment, they find the legal and criminal system makes them even more vulnerable to abuse. The manner in which these laws are overtly disregarded or flouted by the very agencies meant to uphold them, like the police and judiciary, reinforces the message of the autocratic power and ruthlessness of a patriarchal system. A majority of rape cases in India are never even filed with the police. The general fear, particularly among the women of the lower economic strata, is not just that the police will disregard their complaints, but that they might see it as motive for rape. There have been numerous cases of women being raped by the police, when they went in to file a rape charge (The Times of India, Girl Who Accused). In 2005, in the vastly publicized rape case of Imrana, a woman

who was clearly desperate for help when she publicly accused her father-in-law of raping her, the Indian legal system didn't just fail her, but refused to intervene promptly, and watched on as Imrana herself was put on public trial by an Islamic village council. The council declared Imrana "polluted" and ordered her to divorce her husband and marry her father-in-law, while the village ostracized her. Incidentally, one of the first things Imrana had said when she made her complaint was how rampant this issue of sexual abuse of young women was by various men in their families. In the manner in which Imrana was re-victimized by the system, what are the chances other women would now come forth with their complaints?

24 It is also worth noting that the Indian state with the highest incidents of rapes of women (NDTV), which also factors some of the worst national figures in terms of female literacy, female feticide, female infanticide, and dowry violence, is headed by Mayawati, a female Chief Minister, who also happens to be a *dalit*, a community comprised of the lowest and most oppressed castes in India. In the course of her political stewardship so far, she has shown much effort in catering to the demands of *dalit* men, as well as upper caste men. She has however, shown no interest in even addressing the issues oppressing women, let alone a resolve to provide a safer and more gender-just governance for the women in her state. What female politicians in India understand well, is that they may be women, but their position and power is dependent only on their ability to acknowledge and serve the dominion of the patriarchy. Indeed, no female politician in India could ever hope to come to power by announcing gender-equality as her political agenda.

25 The frequency with which women turn on women in India, where mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law participate in the group abuse and dowry murders of married women, is probably one the most glaring signs of a despotic and dangerous patriarchy. Giuliana Tedeschi, a holocaust survivor, in an autobiographical account, described her experience in the women's camp at Birkenau. She talks about what happens when women find themselves prisoners of a desperate situation, where their very survival becomes a source of competition among them. "Exasperated, the mass of bodies became bestial or mad and in this hell conflicts of race, class, and character exploded violently. Even prison friends...had moments when they were overcome by bestiality [...]" (201).

26 An important question to ask is, are there indications in Indian history of situations where women have tried to resist or revolt against their general oppression and have been brutally subdued by men? Is the passive response of India's modern feminist movement to the systematic repression, indeed annihilation, of women in India, a historically learned response?

27 A close study of the *Shakta* cults that arose in the first millennium A.D. in India, reveals “the seeds of a feminist rebellion” (Banerji, *Sex and Power*, 157). The *Shakta* cults were goddess worshipping cults, that regarded the goddess as “*Shakti*” – power personified as female. Unlike the earlier cults that arose from the Vedic traditions and venerated male gods, with the goddesses serving simply as reproductive consorts to them, the *Shaktas* regarded the goddess as having absolute and sole command over the universe, with powers that surpassed that of the all male gods combined. It was believed that her supremacy was incontestable, and so powerful was she in her ability to create, sustain and destroy, that she could render the mighty male gods like Brahma and Shiva dispensable. The *Shakta* philosophies and myths in essence “revolutionized the concept of the feminine in India [as they] seemed to rebuff the bovine placidity of the [earlier] Vedic goddess.” The *Shakta* goddesses were immodest, and assertive in their needs and demands, in all arenas, including sex. As in the myths of Radha and Sati, the goddess broke social conventions of marriage, caste and clan in her choice of sexual partners. And when confronted with men who wanted to sexually exploit her, the goddess would, as Durga or Kali, respond to the affront with fearsome rage and spectacular battle skills – destroying the men in a bloody battle and then wearing their decapitated heads in a victory garland around her neck. Some of the literature and myths from this period indicate that there could possibly have been an open altercation between older male-worshipping cults and the goddess worshipping ones. For instance, temples dedicated to male gods would often create symbolic “barriers” to prevent *Shakta* goddesses like Kali from entering the premise as they were regarded as evil and destructive forces (Banerji, *Sex and Power*, 156-65).

28 Some scholars have suggested that the *Shakta* cults might actually have been associated with matriarchal communities, and that around the early 2nd millennium AD there might have ensued a violent confrontation between matriarchal and patriarchal communities, because of their conflicting ideologies, that resulted in a brutal overpowering of the matriarchal tribes which is reflected in an extraordinary increase in the practices of hypergamy, child marriages and *sati* as observed in this period (Bhattacharya 119).

29 We could probably add to this list female infanticide as well. Not only is there a religious sanction of this practice in the Vedas – the scriptures of the highly patriarchal Vedic communities that dates back to the first millennium B.C., but as some of the earliest official census records in the late nineteenth century, under the Colonial British government, show that the systematic practice of femicide in India had already resulted in a highly skewed gender ratio. The 1901 census shows that 3.1 million women had already been exterminated

from the population, a phenomenon that horrified the British administration as they had not known of any such practice by communities in other parts of the world (Banerji, *Sex and Power*, 287, 307).

30 However, the British colonial period particularly in the late nineteenth and early twenties century, shows another interesting pattern of gender dynamics in India. First of all, encouraged by the vigor of the women's suffrage movement in England, several women's organizations, such as the *Women's Indian Association*, *Sakhi Samiti*, and the *All India Muslim Ladies Conference* emerged all over India. This rising voice of women in India was not only challenging the oppressive traditions against women (such as *sati*), and demanding fundamental rights such as the right to education and property, but they were also pushing for their right to equal participation in the public sphere – such as in the right to vote, to join politics, and the right to work. But what was particularly unprecedented in this period was the number of autobiographical books published by Indian women. In these books women freely vented their opinions and feelings and described how as housewives they were literally treated like slaves and made to serve the demands of large extended families, how it affected their health and well-being, their brutal experiences as widows, their suffocation by traditions that prohibited them from going outside the house, or meeting people, or traveling, or even getting an education or a job. Women writers from this period were openly critical of traditions that crushed Indian women. Pandita Ramabai called the practice of segregating women in special quarters as “shameful” and a terrible “cruelty.” Krupabai Sathianadhan was critical of how Indians raised their daughters like “inferior” beings. Vibhavari Shirurkar talked about how it was Indian men's egos that sexually violated and repressed women. There is “an unmistakable fury in the writings of many women” in this period, a fury that is not contained, that does not cringe from openly confronting the Indian male patriarchy, and emerges in fearless and explicit expressions (Banerji, *Sex and Power*, 252-265).

31 Indeed, what is particularly curious is how this voice and fury of Indian women fell silent soon after India's independence. Indeed, despite the escalating violence against women in India today, with practices like dowry murders, honor killings, and bride trafficking, there are hardly any autobiographical accounts by Indian women about their lives and experiences. Dowry violence and forced female fetal abortions are highly prevalent among the middle and upper classes of women who are educated and often working, yet even among them there is no voice emerging. It should be noted that many of the women who spoke out during the British colonial times were not highly educated or economically independent. More so, the increasing tendency in the women's movement in post-independent India has been to be

accommodating of customs and traditions, and to refuse to name and directly confront the power structure of a traditional gender hierarchy. It puts the modern feminist movement in India in almost a regressive position when compared to the women's movement during the colonial period. Why is this so? One possible explanation could be that the presence of the British colonial government, and their direct apprehension of many of the customs that were oppressive of girls and women, through laws, provided a safe niche, probably a breathing space for women, which allowed them to confront the brutal power and dominance the traditional patriarchy had had over Indian women. And once the British left the country, the Indian patriarchy, having been restrained for so long, reasserted itself with increasing vengeance, forcing women to adopt the survivors response, one that is passive and non-confrontational.

32 The feminist movement in India, as elsewhere, is that which leads the national momentum for change for the women of the country. Given the outrageous state of women in India today, the feminist movement has a responsibility to carefully examine its position and approach so far, and urgently contemplate a new approach and plan of action on challenging India into becoming a more gender-just and humane nation. Below are some suggestions for what the Indian feminist and women's movement need to focus on:

1. Recognize and name the reality

When Indian feminists speak about the state of women's affairs in India, they rarely look the ground reality in the eye or identify it clearly. It is often swept under the carpet as something symptomatic and representative of the general state of affairs of women world-wide. However a majority of women in countries around the world, do not face the horrific prospect of mass femicide (Banerji, Female Genocide) or of having 20% of them being targeted and selectively annihilated. The first step to overcoming violence that many battered women learn, is to overcome denial; to clearly recognize and identify the violence being inflicted on them as criminal, and to hold the perpetrator accountable. This is also what the women's movement in India must do collectively.

2. Realize that the domestic must become public

Despite the undue emphasis on family and tradition in India by the feminist movement, these issues are not unique to India. These were the hurdles for the feminist movement in western countries as well. The male-dominated social and legal systems in the west, that persistently turned a blind eye to violence on women in their homes, had also regarded family traditions and cohesiveness as a national priority. In the U.S. the public attitudes to domestic violence began to change only in the 1970s' when the feminist movement made a collective and concerted effort to name "the hidden and private violence in women's lives—declare it public—and treat both violence and killing as a crime" (Jones 6-11). Recently, when American singer

Rihanna was assaulted by her boyfriend, it caused a public uproar in the U.S., something that would have been unheard of even 30 years ago.

3. Actively redefine gender roles and rights independently of culture

India's feminist movement needs to clearly recognize that the gender roles defined by Indian culture and traditions both perpetuate Indian women's internalization of their social oppression, as well as give leeway to men to exercise their tyranny on them. Interviews with battered women show that the one crucial characteristic that most of these women shared was their tendency to accept traditional gender roles (Avni). Studies show that gender scripts, roles, and attitude to violence on women, are learnt primarily through observations of other people's behaviors – at home, in school, in religious institutions. It is where young girls and boys also learn about social boundaries, of what kind of behaviors will be tolerated, and what they cannot get away with (Crowell 58). To escape these "gender prisons" it is imperative that women learn to decline traditional gender roles and reclaim their right to independently define themselves and their goals, without the obligation to justify them to a larger community or social order (Aspy 96).

4. Confront the legal and social tyranny

When girls and women violate gender status norms, they are stigmatized and face social rejection (Kite). Often, in India the community and society at large treats them as "deviant" and punishes them, frequently resorting to violence as a method of control (Aspy 21, 79). This is a form of social tyranny that the Indian feminist movement must confront and contain, by communicating directly and forcefully with the public about legal rights and transgressions. Studies show that the difference in the degree of gender based discrimination, repression and violence that exists in different societies is determined by what is socially permissible in each society (Crowell 58, 62). The excessive violence and acute oppression of women in India exists because there is a cultural and social sanction for it. Indian feminists must use aggressive public and media propaganda to create a social and psychological environment of acceptability, support and esteem for those who do violate gender norms. The few attempts to engage with the public on gender issues have been indirect and suggestive, like "Save the girl child." Studies show that messages that are upfront and explicit, that do not shy away from stating to the public what is unacceptable about gender based beliefs or practices, are far more effective and impactful (Norris). So a more appropriate public message would be: "Killing your girl child is a crime." "If you kill your girl child you will go to jail." Equally important is the necessity for the feminist movement to demand full accountability from the criminal and legal systems on their utter failure to implement laws or to safeguard women in India, and compel them to fulfill their roles.

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Racialised Boundaries. Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* and Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens"

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Abstract:

The garden in Frances Hodgson Burnett's novel is not a neutral, ahistorical, timeless idyll but culturally defined, and insofar it is deliberately distanced from India and everything that India is intended to denote in the novel, the garden is created as an exclusive space, signifying whiteness. Burnett's narrative unfolds to support the ideology and values of imperialism. The racial aspect of Burnett's garden becomes explicit when juxtaposed against Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens", an essay written several decades later and also resonant with the images of women and gardens. Whereas the garden in Burnett has many conventionally British associations of health and healing, nature and bounty, creativity and self-expression, Alice Walker pays tribute to a tradition of black women whose relation to a garden was not given, but rather highly contested and violated. The black creative women missing and muted in Burnett's garden find place in Walker's essay and thus Walker works to broaden the literary tradition Burnett relates to.

1 Frances Hodgson Burnett's novel *The Secret Garden* is an allegorical, pastoral narrative in that it celebrates the life and culture of an English countryside in the early twentieth century. However, a seminal technique that Hodgson uses to evoke a rural, idyllic world that is essentially British is by systematically removing it from India - the descriptions of Yorkshire unfold against the backdrop of all that India is not. Burnett knew neither India nor Yorkshire at first hand (although she did know England), so both locations are, besides being geographical entities, also artistic constructs. However, the specific relationship in which these two spaces and countries are brought together, the naturalness and ease with which the contrasts between the two are developed by the author, and accepted and understood by her readers, puts Burnett's novel in the tradition of orientalism as elucidated by Edward Said.

2 Recognising this strain of orientalism in Hodgson's novels has implications for the geographical symbolism of the novel; the garden is not a neutral, ahistorical, timeless idyll but culturally defined, and insofar it is deliberately distanced from India and everything that India is intended to denote in the novel, the garden is created as an exclusive space, signifying whiteness.

3 The racial aspect of Burnett's garden becomes explicit when juxtaposed against Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens", an essay written several decades later and also resonant with the images of women and gardens. Whereas the garden in Burnett has

many conventionally British associations of health and healing, nature and bounty, creativity and self-expression, Alice Walker pays tribute to a tradition of black women whose relation to a garden was not given, but rather highly contested and fraught with violence; Walker refers to a tradition of women who somehow managed to keep their creativity and spirituality alive in the face of brutal oppression, deprivation and slavery. Alice Walker's narrative is a reflection on Burnett's garden and indicates that the black women (the Indian Ayah) do not walk through Burnett's secret garden and are muted here. Seen from the perspective of Alice Walker's essay, the garden represents a racialised space, enclosed within boundaries in terms of both what is let in and what is kept out.

4 That the garden is secret forms a central preoccupation in Burnett's narrative so that it becomes almost imperative to examine why it is significant that the garden should be secret and how it is rendered to be so. The most obvious mechanism for making secret is by sealing off from the usual and everyday affairs of the world. Hodgson therefore sets her garden in a remote country home standing at the edge of the Yorkshire moors, far in the north of England, a part which we are to assume is isolated from the rest of the world. The sense of secrecy is further heightened by the circumstances of the accident that happened in the garden which led to it being shut up and barred to all access for ten years.

5 The process by which Burnett defines her secret garden is revealing. From the outset of the novel, Mary Lennox's arrival at Misselthwaite Manor is set against the circumstances of her leaving India:

When Mary Lennox was sent to Misselthwaite Manor to live with her uncle everybody said she was the most disagreeable-looking child ever seen. . . . Her hair was yellow because she had been born in India and had always been ill in one way or another. Her father had held a position under the English Government and had always been busy and ill himself, and her mother had been a great beauty who cared only to go to parties and amuse herself with gay people. She had not wanted a little girl at all, and when Mary was born she handed her over to the care of an Ayah*, who was made to understand that if she wished to please the Mem Sahib* she must keep the child out of sight as much as possible. . . . She never remembered seeing familiarly anything but the dark faces of her Ayah and the other native servants, and they always obeyed her and gave her her own way in everything . . . (1)

While the opening establishes the colonial context of the novel, it also moves forward by leaving India behind and thereby displacing it. Mary's progress to finding her own garden and all that it symbolises is deeply connected with her rejection of India and everything it embodies. In this opening passage, as throughout the novel, India acquires specific connotations, and Burnett's allegory of the garden evolves in antithesis to this India.

6 The choice of India as a physical and imaginary contrast to England is neither random nor neutral but perpetuates the imperialist ideology of its times. Danijela Petković provides a comprehensive analysis of the oriental-imperialist discourse embedded in the novel and it is worth recounting the main points of Petković's argument. She points out that Burnett's engagement with India has little to do with the socio-historical reality of the country. In fact India is dehumanised and denied of complexity and variety:

It is worth noticing that this word [India] is repeated over and over again – the readers are never given the name of the particular Indian town in which the Lennox family tragedy takes place, or the place to which Mary is taken after it – in an obvious effort to consolidate the whole country into one flat, highly unfavourable image the narrator creates. Nor are the native servants given face or any humanly recognizable characteristic. Even the sentences are uniform: 'In India ...this...In India ...that'. (Conversely when the story shifts to England, the details abound ...). (88)

The point is that in her representations Burnett's resorts to a “carefully constructed, perfectly naturalized discourse concerning India (88) and the author's assertions about the country that she did not know at all are both effortless and confident; they appeal to the shared consciousness of her readers, and the writer takes this for granted, “Burnett does not invent these links, she merely echoes popular views, the views that had been in circulation for almost 200 years (91). Petković draws out the relationship between the central motif of the novel and the imperialistic values sustaining this motif:

Nineteenth century British imperialism – and by imperialism it is understood both imperialist ideology and practice – is undeniably present in *The Secret Garden* as the source of images, metaphors, and values, as well as the novel's underlying doctrine. The images of and references to the British Empire and its subjects permeate the novel, . . . furthermore they provide the context in which the story of Mary's refinding her true Self – her national, cultural, and gender – is played out. Not only that, the True English Self is in the course of the novel carefully constructed – made possible, even – through numerous contrasts with/negations of its dark Other, India. Thus, not only are the authority and the validity of the colonizing English Self established, but the essential and permanent 'otherness' of India also. (87-88)

7 In the opening scene India is connected with danger, disease, darkness, death, lovelessness, promiscuity and unnatural or perverted relationships. This first impression of India is reinforced by Mary's encounter with a snake which adds a sense of exoticism as well as eeriness. What is also noticeable is that for a country so populated with people, India is made to look desolate in Mary's loneliness and lack of relationships. This sense of desolation is heightened by the mention of cholera which causes the natives either to flee or die. Although born in India and having lived there for almost ten years, Mary “never remembered seeing familiarly anything but the dark faces of her Ayah and the other native servants” (1),

whereas the term “home” (9) is introduced immediately with reference to England. Thus India is efficiently dealt with in the first few pages of the book and by the middle of the second chapter, Mary is on her way to England and it becomes clear that India has been set up to show what Mary is actually getting away from. And from the moment Mary arrives in England, Mary's entire development is delineated in terms of how it was in India, with India always carrying the negative connotations.

8 Mary's physical weakness, her plain and ugly appearance, her hardness and spoilt behaviour are all attributed to her situation in India. Mary's physical, mental and emotional development are stunted in India and she progressively changes for the better in all these aspects as soon as a landscape shifts to Yorkshire in England. In Martha's family, Mary is known as “the little girl who had come from India and who had been waited on all her life by what Martha called “blacks until she didn't know how to put on her own stockings ” (70). The Sowerby children sitting by the hearth in an English cottage, eating hot cakes, on the other hand are a picture of health, happiness and independence (70). In contrast to the English clergyman's untidy bungalow in India, with five disgruntled, squabbling children, Mrs Sowerby living in Yorkshire, although she has more than double the amount of children than the clergyman in India, and is a single parent, conveys an image of rural contentment and bliss. Even to Mary, Martha's mother, who she admires very much, “doesn't seem to be like the mothers in India” (88).

9 Being in Yorkshire incurs all kinds of refinements in Mary, brings out the best in her and integrates her into a social network, and this metamorphosis is attributed simply to the change of scene, and the observations that Yorkshire is so unlike India: “In India skies were hot and blazing; this was of a deep cool blue . . . [with] small clouds of snow-white fleece” (61). But these external, physical differences have abstract and far reaching implications: “In India she had always felt hot and too languid to care much about anything. The fact was that the fresh wind from the moor had begun to blow the cobwebs out of her young brain and to waken her up a little” (p. 48). These passages demonstrate how the comparisons move simultaneously at various levels – physical, mental, emotional and moral, always putting India at a disadvantage. This narrative mode informs the entire text, and accordingly when Colin is in his tyrannical moods he is perjoratively described as a “young Rajah“ (170-71).

10 Among the several pleasant things that happen to Mary in Yorkshire, the climax is her discovery of the garden. In India, she had not known the natural life that the garden symbolises. She says to Colin about spring, “I never saw it in India because there wasn't any” (212). The necessity of making the garden secret or hidden from the rest of the world

eventually becomes clear - Burnett's garden can only be established after it is as far removed from India as possibly could be, and is cleansed of Indians and everything India stands for. Unlike India, the garden is a civilised, white space with restorative powers where Mary can find her true identity. As Martha comments of India “there's such a lot o' blacks there instead o' respectable white people. When I heard you was comin' from India I though you was a black too”, to which Mary retorts, “You don't know anything about natives! They are not people – they're servants who must salaam to you” (27-28). The dual relation in which India and Yorkshire are caught up becomes evident in this dialogue – it is that of ruler and their subjects, and the naturalness with which white and respectable are linked together cannot go unnoticed. It is ironic that Martha, who herself occupies a position of servility in the British society, feels superior to Mary because of the fact that Mary lived amongst blacks before coming to England. It is only after Mary is categorically cleansed of every trace of India that she is ready for her initiation into the English way of life.

11 That the garden is simply located in England is not enough; it emerges in opposition to India and signifies the author's impulse to empty the garden of Indian natives that had become so inextricably a part of British history. This is probably also the reason why Burnett seeks the farthest corner of England, Yorkshire, and a country home situated there alludes to an aristocratic, white England. At Misselthwaite Manor, while the contact with India cannot be completely negated, the Indian things are all locked up in one of the rooms. Even the Yorkshire dialect in the novel serves to stress this romanticised idea of Englishness. Hence, it becomes apparent that Burnett develops her allegory of the garden vis-a-vis India in order to invoke a particular form of Englishness which is aristocratic, and hence also solely white.

12 Another explanation for the need to make the garden secret is that the author sets out to create not just a white space but to connect whiteness with the ideal, with perfection. However, though the whiteness or the Englishness of the space is maintained by constantly being posited against India, it becomes problematic to disclose this space as perfect. While Burnett employs a number of techniques to construct her secret garden as a viable alternative to India, she does not succeed in this project; the narrative falls hostage to the imperialist ideology underlying the novel and the empire abroad is endorsed by gender and class hierarchies at home. As Petković comments,

there are in fact two empires overlapping in the semantic field of the novel; the first one (the Empire) is literally as well as imaginatively-metaphorically erected upon the savage Other(s) in distant lands; the second, in which the first one is mirrored, is the domestic empire, smaller in scale but noteworthy: the Yorkshire household composed of master and servants, of the rich and poor, of husbands-masters and wives (daughters)-angels in the house. Furthermore,

the two empires are not only presented and employed as the physical/imaginative setting of the novel – this alone could never support the claim that the novel is essentially imperialist but the values and principles underlying them are endorsed and promoted. (88)

England and Yorkshire are unquestionably desirable when set against India. However, as soon as the focus from India is removed, the social factors prevalent in English life, especially those of gender and class differences, the upstairs-downstairs hierarchies of country homes – invariably begin to impinge on the text. The realities of British society rankle in the text and prevent England from being posed as viable ideal to India. Burnett strives to resolve these contradictions mostly by facile comments. But one technique the author does employ to get rid of the social aspects of England is by resorting to the world of children and putting them in a secret garden, thus creating a world that it is secluded and cut off from the facts of the world outside.

13 In order to establish some kind of companionship between Mary and Martha, despite the class distinctions between them, Burnett suggests that Misselthwaite runs differently from the usual country houses. Martha explains: “If there was a grand missus at Misselthwaite I should never have been even one of th’ under housemaids. I mǐght have been let to be scullery-maid, but I’d never have been let up-stairs, I’m too common an’ talk too much Yorkshire. But this is a funny house for all it’s so grand. Seems like there’s neither master nor mistress except Mr. Pitcher and Mrs. Medlock” (26). Here too the eternal comparison with India is made to indicate that Martha’s servitude is, in some fine way, different from that of the servants in India: “The native servants she had been used to in India were not in the least like this. They were obsequious and servile and did not presume to talk to their masters as if they were their equals” (25). Martha is young, untrained and outspoken which makes her servility to Mary different (and by implication more dignified) than that of the Indian servants, and thereby prepares the ground for a constrained interaction between her and Mary.

14 Similarly, there is a tendency to extricate Dickon from the social structures surrounding him. He is some kind of nature’s child, who enjoys being outdoors, knows a great deal about plants and vegetables, is utterly at ease with various animals and can communicate with them – complete with pipe playing. Yet, for all his symbolic qualities, Dickon is enlisted in the service of Mary and Colin; he functions to help Mary with her gardening enterprise and pushes Colin’s wheelchair in the garden and teaches him some physical exercises, besides supplying the two regularly with refreshments and diversion. Social reality intrudes even within the secluded boundaries of the secret garden. After

spending their first exciting morning together in the garden, Mary is called to lunch. As she hurries off to a rich, wholesome meal in the house Dickon, “picked up his coat from the grass and brought out of a pocket a lumpy little bundle tied up in a quite clean, coarse, blue and white handkerchief. It held two thick pieces of bread with a slice of something laid between them. ‘It’s oftenest naught but bread,’ he said, ‘but I’ve got a fine slice o’ fat bacon with it today’ (112). This produces a discordant tone in the idealised world of innocent children in the garden, and Burnett understandably brushes the incident aside with the comment, “Mary thought it looked a queer dinner, but he seemed ready to enjoy it” (112).

15 The author tries again to minimize the existence of hierarchical relationship, this time in Ben Weatherstaff’s servility to Colin. The usually unsociable and crabby old man, Weatherstaff is quickly put in his place by Colin who tells him, “I’m your master . . . when my father is away. And you are to obey me” (228). Burnett shows Weatherstaff overcome with emotion as he sees Colin standing straight, but one outcome of this encounter is that Ben Weatherstaff acknowledges Colin as his master, “‘Eh! Lad,’ he almost whispered. ‘Eh! My lad!’ And then remembering himself he suddenly touched his hat gardner fashion and said, ‘Yes, sir! Yes, sir!’ And obediently disappeared as he descended the ladder” (229). There are several such ruptures in the narrative when glimpses into social life reveal the precariousness of the contrived harmony of the English countryside. Even Mary Lennox, who is simply Mary in the Indian environment, becomes Mistress Mary as she arrives in England. But all social factors are swept aside in favour of producing an idyllic image of life in England.

16 Another strategy that Burnett employs in order to avoid confronting the aspect of social conflict in the English society is to induce the notion of ‘Magic’; all the positive transformations in the novel – Colin’s rapid gains in strength, the changes in his and Mary’s character, the conversion of a piece of land that has remained neglected for ten years into a pleasant, blooming garden - are eventually presented in terms of magic as other explanations are not available. In fact the entire chapter 23 of the novel is devoted to the exposition of the concept of magic in the book. The end effect of introducing magic into the book is that it deflects attention from awkward realities such as the fact that to turn a wild overgrown area into any version of a garden involves dirty and back-breaking work as may be seen in the figure of Ben Weatherstaff and is not child’s play as it is made out to be for Mary, Dickon and Colin. Another such conundrum is the issue of food (fresh milk and buns and eggs) supplied by Mrs Sowerby to the children during their time in the secret garden. While fresh food, prepared by a mother, is integral to Burnett’s vision of rural bliss, the details of how Mrs Sowerby so generously manages to fit in the task of baking and providing for three

additional children beyond her own twelve, and how Dickon (who is only twelve) carries a pail of milk and a pail of buns across the countryside, are overlooked. This reluctance to deal with the social aspects of English life is evident everywhere in the text. It is notable that Mary's much cherished wish to visit Martha's family in their cottage never does take place; the sentimental form of the narrative does not have the prerequisites for rendering such a meeting – it remains just a fancy.

17 Burnett's vision reaches a climax in the end of the novel, in the second last chapter when the three thriving English children stand in the middle of a blooming garden and sing the Doxology aloud, joined by the awe-struck and respectful Ben Weatherstaff, with tears gushing down his cheeks. It is also the moment when Mrs Sowerby enters the garden. The scene is extremely conventional in its symbolism and leads to a doubtless assertion of the British feudalistic values, including Protestantism. Towards the end of the novel it emerges that the narrative has primarily been directed towards the restoration of Colin. The justification for making the illness and healing of Colin as a central concern of the novel might lie in Burnett's personal circumstances; perhaps it is her way of resurrecting her younger son who had been sickly and had died. But apart from her personal tragedy, what is quite apparent is that the values with which she invests Colin are feudal and imperialistic. Whereas Mary and Dickon work in the garden, Colin approaches it with unquestioned authority and launches into great speeches and lectures. Although sickly, Colin as a young Englishman of social stature, declares his natural destiny to be a scientist and explorer, and this is said without a hint of irony: "I shall live for ever and ever and ever!" he cried grandly. "I shall find out thousands and thousands of things. I shall find out about people and creatures and everything that grows . . ." (278-279). Colin's resemblance to the little lord Fauntleroy is unmistakable.

18 It is therefore unsurprising that the characters who come out of the garden in the final scene of the book are the triumphant Colin and his father. Mary falls into the background and, "Across the lawn came the Master of Misselthwaite, and he looked as many of them had never seen him. And by his side, with his head up in the air and his eyes full of laughter, walked as strongly and steadily as any boy in Yorkshire – Master Colin" (306). So in this novel, in the allegory of the secret garden, Burnett nostalgically recreates the bygone world of English aristocracy; the narrative articulates an imperialist ideology that is exclusively white and Protestant and predominantly male.

19 The elisions that Burnett so painstakingly manages in her novel eventually find an expression in Alice Walker's essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Garden". Walker uses the

allegory of the garden to refer to the lost traditions of African American women writers and artists, whose creative spirit was violently destroyed by slavery and imperialism – the very same values which are upheld in *The Secret Garden*. In recounting the names of black women writers, Walker seeks to restore them to the literary tradition from which they have been erased and exiled. Hence it is perfectly logical that Walker's concept of the garden should be totally unlike that presented by Burnett, albeit a direct analogy was never intended. Walker has no use for the image of a civilised and privately owned English garden of Burnett's novel, and she moves away from the white, imperialist locations to include open fields and yards; Walker's garden is boundless, both spatially and metaphorically. Alice Walker's essay provides a comment on why Burnett's garden cannot be a symbol of harmony that she sets out to achieve, and she breaks the racialised boundaries of *The Secret Garden* in more than one way.

20 “In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens” pays tribute to the creative spirit of ordinary, anonymous and lesser-known black women, a creative spirit that was most often warped and found no outlet at all due to the harsh circumstances of slavery and patriarchal oppression. Walker relates to a tradition of creativity in women that remained only a potential, that was eliminated or never even allowed to exist, and in taking account of the unfulfilled and damaged efforts of African American women, Walker proposes a far reaching and inclusive tradition of creative, artistic work.

21 At one level, Walker redresses the narrow, restrictive, privileged, and subsequently also white American tradition of art and literature by incorporating oral narratives, slave songs, and interrupted stories that black mothers told their children. And creativity cannot be confined to particular forms, and is to be seen as much in Walker's mother's talent to grow the most magnificent flowers wherever she lived, as in a quilt that hangs in the Smithsonian Institution:

In fanciful, inspired, and yet simple identifiable figures, it portrays the story of the Crucifixion. It is considered rare, beyond price. Though it follows no known pattern of quilt-making, and though it is made of bits and pieces of worthless rags, it is obviously the work of a person of powerful imagination and deep spiritual feeling. Below this quilt I saw a note that says it was made by ‘an anonymous Black woman in Alabama, a hundred years ago.’ (239)

22 Walker cites Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* and while she finds allegiance with Woolf, she quotes Woolf's to insert the experience of black people in the text:

Yet genius of some sort must have existed among women as it must have existed among the working class. [Change this to ‘slaves’ and ‘the wives and daughters of sharecroppers.’] Now

and again an Emily Brontë or a Robert Burns [Change to a ‘Zora Hurston or a Richard Wright’] blazes out and proves its presence. But certainly it never got itself on to paper. When, however, one reads of a witch being ducked, of a woman possessed by devils [or ‘Sainthood’], of a wise woman selling herbs [our root workers], or even a very remarkable man who had a mother, then I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet, of some mute and inglorious Jane Austen. (239-240)

23 Another technique that Walker applies to widen the sense of literary tradition is to give a black woman's voice-over to an extract from Okot p'Bitek's poem *Song of Lawino*. Whereas p'Bitek presents the motif of an African rural woman lamenting her betrayal by her husband who takes another woman who is westernized, from a typically male perspective, Walker does not see this as a single occasion but rather indicative of the a history of betrayal shared by all black women and forming a common bond between them. P'Bitek lines are as follows:

O, my clansmen,
Let us all cry together!
Come,
Let us mourn the death of my husband,
The death of a Prince
The Ash that was produced
By a great Fire!
O, this homestead is utterly dead,
Close the gates
With lacari thorns,
For the Prince
The Heir to the Stool is lost!
And all the young men
Have perished in the wilderness!

Alice Walker rewrites it thus:

O, my clanswomen,
Let us all cry together!
Come,
Let us mourn the death of our mother,
The death of a Queen
The Ash that was produced
By a great fire!
O, this homestead is utterly dead,
Close the gates
With lacari thorns,
For our mother
The creator of the Stool is lost!
And all the young women
Have perished in the wilderness! (Fike 148)

24 Walker demonstrates how the substitution of just a few words makes a world of a difference in recovering the missing and the silent. It is important to state here that Walker's attempts are not to antithetically oppose or displace one tradition with the other, but rather to argue for a holistic approach. As Matthew A. Fike comments, Walker's project is not that of competing rejection of the literary ancestors, including white authors, but that of making connections and showing infinite intertextuality. It would therefore not be appropriate to read Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" as antithetical to Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, but rather as completing it in that it hints at the several gardens that lie beyond and outside Burnett's vision.

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A Palace of Her Own: Feminine Identity in the Great Indian Story

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Abstract:

Along with the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, literally, is one of India's "great stories", and the ancient epic maintains its status as a culturally foundational text which, apart from philosophical- spiritual values, educational and religious instruction, contains and perpetuates ideas and ideals of ethical obligation (*dharma*), social norms and gender roles. Having inspired writers for centuries, references to the epic, its central legends or characters, are ubiquitous in literature. Two contemporary examples of explicit attempts to retell the epic in novel form are Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008). These shall be analyzed in the following, as the texts not only invite criticism for the ambitious attempt this poses on a formal and structural level, but furthermore allow a comparison of the way they present the interaction between gender and politics. Whereas Tharoor uses the epic to provide an allegorical frame and backdrop for a satirical narration of India's political struggle for independence in the 20th century, Divakaruni chooses to retell the epic from the perspective of one of its heroines, Draupadi, thus reclaiming female agency in the famous tale of war between two families, hyper-masculine heroes and their devoted wives.

1 Along with the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* is one of India's "great stories", and the ancient epic maintains its status as a culturally foundational text which, apart from philosophical/spiritual values, educational and religious instruction, contains and perpetuates ideas and ideals of ethical obligation (*dharma*), social norms and gender roles. Having inspired writers for centuries, references to the epic, its central legends or characters, are ubiquitous in literature. An explicit attempt to retell the epic in novel form is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* which will be analysed in the following. The novel not only invites criticism for the ambitious attempt this poses on a formal and structural level, but allows insight into the interaction of gender and identity, particularly into the complex construction of femininity already inherent in the original text, while also challenging it from a contemporary perspective. Divakaruni retells the epic from the point of view of one of its heroines, Draupadi, thus reclaiming female agency in the famous tale of war between two families, hyper-masculine heroes and their devoted wives. The text highlights a crucial relation established between womanhood and vengeance. Moreover, it displays the struggle for identity in a mythological context, which is distinctly Indian, yet transcends cultural borders, all the while showing the illusionary nature of those imposed by history and gender.

2 Dating back to 1600 B.C. and considered to be the world's longest poem, the original epic consists of 100.000 stanzas in verse, structured into 18 books, thus exceeding by far the length of the great Western epics such as *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey* (cf. Narayan, R. vii). Although there are many different versions and uncertainties about its exact date of origin and authorship, it is commonly attributed to Ved Vyasa, who also appears as the narrator in the epic, telling the stories to his scribe, the elephant-headed God Ganesh. The structure is inherently dialogic, if controlled by an omniscient male narrator. Whereas "Maha-bharata" means "great India", the title first chosen by Vyasa was "jaya", meaning triumph or victory (Narayan, R. viii), an implication which is certainly challenged in Divakaruni's rewriting. The main plot, which like the *Arabian Nights* digresses from one story into another (cf. Singh 10), tells the tale of the fight for supremacy in the kingdom of Hastinapur.¹ The conflict erupts between two families, the Pandavas and the Kauravas, who are the progeny of two brothers, Pandu, and the blind king Dhritarashtra. The rightful heir to the throne, Yudhishtir, and his four brothers, are exiled by their jealous cousin Duryodhan. All five Pandavas are married to the beautiful and headstrong princess Draupadi after Arjun, the handsome and virile warrior, wins her hand in an archery contest. A climactic scene is the game of dice in which Yudhishtir gambles away all his possessions, his kingdom as well as Draupadi, who vows revenge for their shame. In the final battle of Kurukshetra, everybody dies except Draupadi and her husbands. After their only remaining heir, Parikshit becomes ruler over Hastinapur and peace is restored, the brothers and Draupadi embark on a final journey into the Himalayas where they find eternal redemption.

3 Just from this brief summary one can deduce why Alf Hiltebeitel, who has dedicated his scholarly life to the study of the *Mahabharata*², states that its academic reception is commonly centred on its "monstrosity" due to the text's sheer size, indeed presenting what Henry James would have called a "baggy monster" (2001, 1). The scholarship on the epic is, of course, extensive. Yet, as Hiltebeitel (2001; 1980) has argued, it has rarely been treated as a coherence fictional work, although this is changing, as recent and highly informative

¹ Apart from countless legends, the epic contains one of the most sacred texts of Hinduism, the Bhagavad Gita, which consists of the famous dialogue between Arjun and Lord Krishna on the battlefield about the difficult choice between good and evil, culminating in Krishna's exegesis of "karmayoga", i.e. the obligations of dharma and man's necessity to fight the 'just' war (cf. Brodbeck/Black 6).

² Alf Hiltebeitel has written extensively about the *Mahabharata*. In his detailed analyses of individual legends, scenes and characters, particularly interesting is the focus he places on Draupadi and the disguises of the Pandavas (cf. 1999; 2001; 1980). Although arguing more from a mythological-historical than from a gender-theoretical perspective, he generally emphasizes the centrality of the role of Draupadi.

studies such as Brodbeck and Black's focus on gender and narrative in the epic show.³ Principal themes are the results of vengeance and the human potential for destruction, love, sacrifice and loyalty, while problems and possibilities of rule are staged on various levels, e.g. individual, societal, and cosmic. Of central importance is the human struggle with destiny and the ethical concept of *dharma*.⁴ Moreover, as Brodbeck and Black emphasize, "gender is one of the most central and most contested issues in the text, and [...] discussions regarding gender operate on a number of different levels and are manifested in multiple ways without the text providing one consistent and definitive view" (10). In the present context, which refers to the epic⁵ mainly indirectly, the complex world of the *Mahabharata* is treated as a fictional-literary one and reduced to the characters and scenes of particular relevance for a gender-theoretical analysis. The focal point is Draupadi (Panchaali), who is given a different presence by Divakaruni, yet also has a crucial, distinctly gendered function in the original. Taking the narrative situation and the dialogic textual orientation into account sustains the argument for a surprisingly (post)modern ambivalence and complexity of the gender roles conveyed in the contemporary text, which is already palpable in the ancient epic. Therefore, some issues in terms of gender and the relation of the sexes in the *Mahabharata* deserve consideration before turning to the novel.

4 The fact that the study of the epic's many characters and sexualities in the text has found critical interest is hardly surprising.⁶ As stated above, the "*Mahabharata* is one of the defining cultural narratives in the construction of masculine and feminine gender roles in ancient India, and its numerous tellings and retellings have helped shape Indian gender and social norms ever since" (Brodbeck/Black 11; Sanzgiri). The desire for revenge is a central trait linking the sexes who are otherwise assigned clear differences in appearance, behaviour, as well as character and obligation of *dharma*. Fighting being one of the main gender-distinguishing activities, the masculine ideal is commonly represented by the virile husband

³ Brodbeck and Black (2007) offer a good introduction to the study of gender and more literary-oriented approaches to the epic. Their essay collection also includes an extensive bibliography of research on the *Mahabharata*.

⁴ "Dharma" is a complex term with context-dependent diverging connotations; it is central in Hinduism and Indian philosophy. Generally it refers to any conduct with aids the upholding of the order of society, thus including notions of general ethical laws, rules, customs, as well as individual obligation or vocation.

⁵ The epic is originally written in Sanskrit verses. An accessible translation in English prose is R. K. Narayan's (2000).

⁶ See for instance: Bhattacharya, Pradip. "Epic Women: East and West – Some Observations." *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 37.3. (1995): 67-83; Doniger, Wendy. *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999; Falk, Nancy. "Draupadi and the Dharma" *Beyond Androcentrism: New Essays on Women and Religion*. Ed. Rita M. Gross. Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977. 89-114; Goldmann, Robert. "Transsexualism, Gender, and Anxiety in Traditional India." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113.3 (1993): 374-401.

and fearless warrior. This is complemented by the portrayal of the epic's principal model of femininity, the ideal of the loyal, devoted wife (cf. Brodbeck/Black 16-17). A striking example for this is Gandhari, who decides to follow her husband, king Dhritarashtra, into blindness and sacrifices her sight by wearing a silk scarf over her eyes till her death. Yet things are more complex than a binary of the silent, passive, merely listening or following female and the actively battling male. The epic puts forth a second paradigm of femininity (Śri), which has mythical connotations and implies female independence, mobility, and agency, showing the women as important contributors to their husbands' successes. Nonetheless, as Brodbeck and Black rightly stress, both of these roles "are restrictive, only representing women in relation to their menfolk; but in terms of the behaviour of female characters, there is a sense in which neither paradigm is complete in itself" (18). While in particular Draupadi, as well as her mother-in law Kunti, is representative of this dual role and the inherent tensions, this shows how the epic transgresses essentializing gender models in favour of more fluid or contradictory ones. Andrea Custodi describes Draupadi as on the hand being "extolled as the perfect wife – chaste, demure, and devoted to her husbands", yet on the other is often shown "to be intellectual, assertive, and sometimes downright dangerous" (213). Seeking to assign mythological references to this trait of her character, Alf Hiltebeitel sees Draupadi as an invocation of Kali/Śri-Lakshmi, the goddess of destruction (1980, 153).⁷

5 Read against the background of contemporary notions of gender, the epic's central characters, prominently Arjun and Draupadi, "manifest different modes of gendered behavior at different moments in the narrative" (Brodbeck/Black 21), illustrating the idea that gendered identities interact with particular situations as well as with markers of social class (caste), ethnicity, or education. Many characters unite opposing qualities with regard to their identities. Yudhishtir is the aggressive ruler and gambler, yet famous for his stoic endurance, kindness and wisdom; Arjun is virile lover and hero of the battlefield but also spends a year as an "effeminate" dance instructor. Like Gandhari, Draupadi is a fiercely loyal wife and a hot-tongued critic of her husbands, hence at once "active and passive, articulate speaker and symbolic listener" (Brodbeck/Black 21). This later aspect is important with regard to her portrayal in the novel. Furthermore, clear power hierarchies are established via the dialogical structure of the text, through the gap between the authority of narrators and listening characters, which often ardently await instruction of how to become better men or women (cf.

⁷ Hiltebeitel (1980) gives an in-depth analysis of the mythological references of the disguises of Arjun and Draupadi as well as of the gender ambiguity of Arjun.

Brodbeck/Black 23). With regard to female education and knowledge, a significant ambiguity can be found in the epic. As Brian Black points out, the women undergo a second-hand instruction as they are usually a constant presence in all scenes, watching when men receive important teachings and hearing their stories, yet this eavesdropping “is far from passive” (53). Therefore, Black argues, the central female characters, though mostly confined to the background, emerge to shape the story in significant ways and the stance taken towards their agency appears thoroughly ambivalent, as:

for both Gandhari and Draupadi there is more to being a listener than merely their symbolic presence. The way in which both of them are constituted as subjects shows that they are not merely defined and portrayed in relation to male characters, that what they hear and say is linked up with their specific duties and circumstances as queens: [...] Draupadi’s role as listener [...] educates her for her role as *dharma* queen. (73)

Divakaruni’s version portrays the education of Draupadi and her transformation from ambitious princess to revenge-seeking queen in subjective detail. Following first her brother’s and then her husbands’s lessons, she also receives many instructions on her own (e.g. by a sorceress, a sage, or Krishna). Regarding the multi-dimensional presentation of femininity, Divakaruni’s narrative appears in many ways merely faithfully modeled on the original, but reverses the perspective by granting the reader insight into the mind of the listening Draupadi.

6 Although one has to guard against taking the enthusiasm for this too far, the challenge of normative gender roles is moreover aided by the various “gender-bending” characters (Brodbeck/Black 19).⁸ All the while the idea of the third sex stems from ancient India, the epic does by no means break with a binary framework. In this context Andrea Custodi emphasizes that: “As fluid as sexual characteristics and gender may be among deities and in mythological escapades, however, *dharma* as it structures and orders this-worldly affairs revolves around a firm conception of the two genders, and is very much based upon their clear distinction and eternal stability” (210). The characters’ fate and gender identity remains usually stable, determined by birth, status, and the customary expectations connected to them. Still, there are several instances of transsexualism, of sex changes from man into woman or vice versa. A prominent example is Sikhandi who switches sex in order to fulfil a mission of revenge; according to the ancient rules she has to give up womanhood in order to kill her nemesis Bhisma. Most sex-changing episodes, while drawing attention to the fluidity of

⁸ See especially Custodi’s essay “‘Show You Are a Man!’ Transsexuality and Gender Bending in the Characters of Arjuna/Brahannada and Amba/Sikhandin(i)” (in Brodbeck and Black 2007). She employs psychoanalytical theories for her reading and presents an interesting analysis of the great variety of forms and diversity of characters (e.g. androgynous gods, male-female/female-male sex-changes, transvestites, eunuchs).

gender, show elements of transgression of the traditional categories, but are playful enough to not subvert the existing order for good. An example for this occurs during the Pandavas' year of disguise; Draupadi and her husbands are forced to spend their final year of exile in hiding before embarking on the mission of reclaiming their kingdom. As cover, each of them has to choose an identity as opposite to their previous one as possible. The disguise forces Draupadi into the role of a chambermaid. She thus becomes socially inferior, almost an outcast (cf. Hildebeitel 1980, 153), while the alpha-male Arjun is transformed into a eunuch dance instructor, his virile masculinity symbolically turned into sexual abstinence (150).⁹ While many critics make well-founded arguments for Arjun's disguise as an invocation of the androgynous god Siva (cf. Hildebeitel 1980, Custodi), the year in disguise brings an accentuated reversal of the gender roles between Arjun and Draupadi, highlighting ambiguities that occur, in fact, throughout the narrative. Draupadi is depicted as increasingly dynamic, impatient, and even aggressive, which is contrasted with her husbands', especially Yudhishtir's and Bhim's, more passively enduring, and gentle nature, or Arjun's newly effeminate, playful character. As Custodi comments, "not only are physical sexual characteristics put into question, but on a psychological and behavioural level as well, Draupadi wears the proverbial pants while Arjuna wears the skirt" (213). In this context Hildebeitel draws attention to fact that "Draupadi's disguise and actions [...] hold strong associations with defilement" (1980, 169). In more than one way is her role bound to tasks and behaviour 'improper' for a royal heroine, which in the Indian context has strong implications of caste, impurity and transgression. A strength of Divakaruni's novel is the empathic rendering of these scenes. Furthermore, the analysis will show how the sex change of avenger Sikhandi contrasts with Draupadi's challenging of gender roles and how the narrative develops the relation between femininity and vengeance. Agreeing with Hildebeitel that the disguises reveal more than "univocal mythic associations" (1980, 173), the ancient epic already seems to allow for multiple identities and shifts between different sides of personality. Therefore it provides a fruitful ground of investigation for modern notions of gender as fragile, conditional, and part of constantly queried identities. But such an argument certainly requires the "recognition that the epic also evokes, through its symbolism, certain

⁹ According to Hildebeitel "the epic descriptions leave it amusingly imprecise, and ambiguous whether Arjuna is physiologically a eunuch, a hermaphrodite, or simply a transvestite" (1980, 154). Arjun is dressed as a woman, yet as it says in the original text, "he has something of a man, something of a woman" (156). This is also reflected in his new name, Brhannada, "a name in the feminine gender meaning the 'great man'" (157), which sustains the implied references to Siva, a God uniting all three sexes.

cultural themes, myths, ritual practices, and social norms that are not fully attested historically until ‘post-epic’ times” (Hiltebeitel 1980, 151).

7 The influence of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* on Indian authors is pervasive, regardless in what language they write (cf. S. Narayan, 46);¹⁰ Meenakshi Mukherjee even refers to episodes from these epics as the ground on which “the imagination of most Indian writers was sustained” (9).¹¹ Still, the idea of using myth to synthesize cultural heritage with the realities of contemporary society and the fascination with myths as ‘eternal’ stories about human nature, are not an exclusively Indian phenomenon.¹² One example with parallels to Divakaruni’s literary project is Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*, a revision of the *Odyssey*, focusing on Penelope and her twelve hanged maids.¹³ Choosing as her guiding question, “what was Penelope really up to?” (Atwood xxi), during Odysseus’ long absence, Atwood aims to throw light onto the gender-bias and the inconsistencies in the Homeric epic. In similar fashion, Divakaruni explains her motivation to write the *Mahabharata* from Draupadi’s perspective and to put “her life, her questions, and her vision” (PI, xv) center stage, because

her destiny that was foretold when she was born, her insistence on doing what none of the other women around her were doing and her unique situation—being married to five brothers—all made her the perfect choice. I was also interested in the fact that in some ways she was the catalyst for the great war — and perhaps the one who suffered the most as a result of it.¹⁴

¹⁰ Numerous examples can be found especially in recent popular mainstream fiction. For instance: Amish Tripathi’s *Shiva trilogy* (2010), Amreeta Syam’s *Kurukshetra* (1991), Ramesh Menon’s *Blue God: a Life of Krishna* (2000) and *The Hunt for K.* (1992). Like R. K. Narayan, Menon has also translated the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* for modern re-tellings in prose form.

¹¹ Another explicit retelling of the *Mahabharata* is Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* (1989). Tharoor uses the epic to provide an allegorical frame and backdrop for a highly satirical narration of India’s political struggle for independence in the 20th century. He focusses in particular on the ethical implications of dharma to make a claim for India’s history of (ethnic/religious) diversity and peaceful coexistence.

¹² Transcending the Indian context, it is also interesting to consider collections such as Jack Zipes’s *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1986) which includes re-tellings of classics like “Sleeping Beauty” or “Red Riding Hood” and other tales, revealing them as stories of transgressions and power, culturally established to aid the socialization and acceptance of gender roles. See also Marina Warner’s *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994.). In her book “Texts of Terror” (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) Phyllis Trible offers a feminist reading of biblical narratives, seeking to highlight the presentation of victimized women and to give a voice to abducted slaves and raped princesses. Reading Divakaruni’s novel also places ancient tales in a contemporary critical context and refocuses the view on gender issues and power hierarchies in a culturally foundational narrative.

¹³ In 2005, publisher Canongate launched its Myths Series, inviting authors from around the world to re-tell ancient stories. Apart from Atwood’s, feminist revisions feature prominent in this series, e.g. Jeanette Winterson’s *Weight*, a modern take on the myth of Atlas and Heracles, or Ali Smith’s *Girl Meets Boy*, a queer narrative which employs the Iphis myth from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

¹⁴ Divakaruni in an interview on the publisher’s website.

Another aspect has intrigued the author since her childhood, as she recalls that, “listening to the stories of the *Mahabharata* as a young girl [...], I was left unsatisfied by the portrayals of the women” (PI, xiv).¹⁵ Although the female characters possess plot agency, complexity, and destructive power or dazzling beauty, Divakaruni states that,

they remained shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions portrayed only when they affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers or sons. If I ever wrote a book ... I would place the women in the forefront of the action. I would uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of the men’s exploits. (PI, xiv-xv)

8 Traditionally, Indian society is firmly patriarchal-oriented with an established segregation of the sexes and the family is of crucial importance. Consequently, these issues and the suppression of women are current topics in Indian writing and especially in Divakaruni’s fiction. Stressing the concern with sisterhood and female bonding in her works, Urbashi Barat explains how Indian feminism developed differently than in the West and how contemporary fiction reflects that women’s relationships remain to a larger extent “governed by the power politics of patriarchy” (Barat 47). Considering this aspect it is interesting that Jasbir Jain, in his survey of Indian women’s writing in the 21st century, argues that while gender and location continue to be major preoccupations, critics should seek “to liberate contemporary women’s writing from overworked gender concerns” (Jain 7). He claims that a shift took place in the vision of many writers who

have moved from the subjective towards a larger social canvas, crossed over to positions which emphasize the vulnerability of all human beings irrespective of sex, are less inhibited about emotional and sexual lives, and have acquired a new sense of subject-hood. Social and religious institutions as imagined and crafted by patriarchy are no longer taken as the given. Women’s writing has moved beyond concerns with the self and the other. (Jain 12-13)

One can agree with Jain if one places this argument in a broader critical context. Because similar to the way and sense in which postcolonial writing has moved beyond a “writing back in anger”, or postmodernism beyond a mere celebration of openness and uncertainty, feminist writing has transcended the rebellion of “us vs. them”. The pressing question nevertheless remains then which theories should be used to “open” texts if one wants to avoid overused labels or categories, “gender” and “postcolonial” surely being among the ones surfacing

¹⁵ In her essay “What Women Share”, the author explains how she perceived the “aloneness” of the heroines of South Asian mythology as bewildering and how this informs her own writing today: “[...] the main relationships the heroines had were with the opposite sex: husbands, sons, lovers, or opponents. They never had any important friends. Perhaps in rebellion against such thinking, I find myself focusing in my writing on friendships with women and trying to balance them with the conflicting passions and demands that come to us as daughters and wives, mothers and lovers” (Divakaruni 1999).

almost reflexively in an Indian literary context. Nonetheless, even if having moved beyond a victim position, which is clearly the case with the text under scrutiny here, important theoretical constellations and coinciding agendas persist between feminist and postcolonial criticism. Because here we still find the “political, social and religious conspiracies against the subaltern”, which are caused by “major influences on the formation of gender relations, that is, the development of the patriarchal form of family organization, the formation of the caste hierarchy and politics, and the impact of the male domination in religion [...]” (Navarro-Tejero cited in Lucas, 108).¹⁶ Although this issue cannot be dealt with in detail here, the fact that most theory comes from within the Anglo-American academy and hence from a predominantly Western perspective calls for caution, or at least acknowledgment, before applying it to a reading of texts from a different cultural sphere.¹⁷

9 Regarding the scene of contemporary Indian women’s writing, international bestsellers like Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* or Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* and the quality and variety of fiction by authors like Githa Hariharan, Shashi Deshpande, Jhumpa Lahiri, or Bharati Mukherjee spark academic interest in India and abroad. In comparison to these writers, Mary Louise Buley-Meissner observes,¹⁸ “formal literary criticism addressing her [Divakaruni’s] work is rare, a situation likely to change as her books are given more attention in educational circles” (43). Divakaruni is a representative of India’s educated, politically active elite of expatriate writers.¹⁹ Frequently compared to Bharati Mukherjee (cf. Shankar 65), she is seen as giving a voice to female Asian immigrants and to portray the struggle with hybrid identities in her fictions (Mandal 115). Apart from

¹⁶ In her analysis, Antonia Navarro-Tejero focusses on the relation between gender and caste in the fictions of Arundhati Roy and Githa Hariharan. This aspect, which also plays an implicit role in Divakaruni’s novel, generally deserves close attention in the study of Indian fiction and also in the Mahabharata, but is beyond the scope of this essay.

¹⁷ I have laid out this debate and its critical implication in the context of Anglophone Indian fiction elsewhere in more detail (cf. Hoydis 2011, 34ff; 73). In general one needs to exercise caution against categorizing values, power hierarchies and aesthetic phenomena without reflection on their historical, social, and cultural specificity. As Kumkum Sangari memorably put it, “the crisis of meaning is not everyone’s crisis” (184). Postmodernism’s perceived void of value and its aesthetic representations appears itself marginalized as a phenomenon in a context where issues like decolonization, the struggle for national or personal freedom and justice, and inequalities of race, class and gender are pressing concerns. See also: Kapur, Geeta. “When Was Modernism in India/ Third World Art?” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 92.3 (1993): 473–514; Mukherjee, Arun P. “Whose Post-Colonialism and Whose Postmodernism?” *World Literatures Written in English* 30.1 (1990): 1–9; Roy, Anjali. “Postmodernism Goes Native: Decentering Narrative in Recent Indian Fiction.” *The Post-modern Indian English Novel: Interrogating the 1980s and 1990s*. Ed. Viney Kirpal. Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1996. 383–399.

¹⁸ Cf. Buley-Meissner (2010) for a good current overview of Divakaruni’s fiction and criticism of her works.

¹⁹ Born in Calcutta in 1956, Divakaruni was educated and now lives mostly in the US. Holding a Phd from the University of California, Berkeley, she has been teaching literature for years and is also politically active, e.g. she has helped to build shelters for Afghani women and has been involved with an organization working with abused women in the San Francisco bay area. She has published novels, poetry and short story collections, children’s books and a play.

cross-cultural perspectives, feminist issues (i.e. women's oppression, arranged marriages, sisterhood etc.) continue to shape her works.²⁰ Making her agenda explicit Divakaruni wrote: "I really wanted to focus on women battling and coming out triumphant" (cited in Mandal 116). The author's interest in a fusion of art forms characterizes her writing as well as an "ideologically" interesting mix of Hindu traditionalism, spiritualism, and emancipated feminism. While her first novel *Mistress of Spices* (1997) already experimented with magical realism and Hindu myths, she takes up these elements again in *The Palace of Illusions* (2008).

10 Criticism of the novel often sees the mix of Hindu scripture and fiction as making Indian reader feel uneasy (Dasa), or claims that the "mysterious potency of myth translates badly into commercial fiction" (Lindner). Scholarly reception often assesses the text, despite acknowledging Divakaruni's poetic imagery and lucid style, as a failed attempt of making the epic's grand sweep of time, place and characters fit into a single novel (cf. Dunn, Lindner). All critics agree on the ambitious scope of the project, typically referring to the fact that Peter Brook's famous theatre version of the *Mahabharata* lasted nine hours, while Divakaruni compresses it into just 350 pages. But perhaps, like Atwood's novella *Penelopiad*, one needs to read the text as an addition, rather than as an alternative version of the original, as a re-writing which complements a picture without claiming comprehensiveness. Divakaruni's text works both for readers who grew up with knowledge of the epic and those exposed to it only in this revised, condensed format.²¹ The novel fills many gaps, not just because historical fiction dealing with Hinduism, written for Western audiences, is generally sparse, but because above all, it presents both a spiritual and irreverent feminist retelling from the viewpoint of Draupadi (Panchaali). This dramatic change de-thrones many of the male heroes, which appear to be "no longer the perfect supermen" (Dasa). Divakaruni also shifts the focus onto marked silences, e.g. on the grief of the widows after the battle of Kurukshetra. Another twist is the focus on Panchaali's intimate friendship with Krishna, but more importantly her secret love for Karna which "reminiscent, in its obsessive weakness, of

²⁰ On the subject see especially Divakaruni's essay "What Women share" (1999) and Urbashi Barat's essay "Sisters of the Heart: Female Bonding in the Fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni." (2000). Sisterhood is a major theme which the author most obviously explores in her first volume of short stories "Arranged Marriage" (1995) and her second novel *Sister of My Heart* (1999), which expands on one of the stories, "Ultrasound", from this collection (cf. Barat 54). Although the topic is not at a preoccupation in *Palace of Illusions*, the chosen epigraph, a poem from the 3rd millennium BC, reveals the authors emphasis of shared history between women: "Who is your sister? I am she. Who is your mother. I am she. Day dawns the same for you and me."

²¹ In her attempt to modernize a classic of Indian culture and to present it to an international readership, Divakaruni not only has to face the fact that her readers possess widely diverging knowledge of the original text, but the general struggle of the Indian writer of having to make their world comprehensible to foreign audiences by walking "the fine line between touristy exoticism and untranslatable authenticity" (Tharoor 1997).

Guinevere's attraction to Lancelot [...] will ultimately trigger the war and seal Panchaali's promised role in history" (Lindner). The decisive change in comparison to the original in which female voices are usually "filtered through a battery of nominally male subject-positions" (Brodbeck/Black 23), is the subjective account of a heroine who, driven by her desire to change the course of history, "owns up to a mass of flaws: pride, jealousy, arrogance, stubbornness, vanity, self-absorption, and (most threatening) unfulfilled romantic yearnings" (Lindner).

11 The opening chapters present Draupadi's obsession with her origins and introduce her rebellious character as well as her struggle for a feminine identity of her own making. Indeed, listening to the story of her birth and her prophecies about her destiny seem to signify as "the only meaningful activity for her" (Nair 151). She dreams of leaving her father's palace, a suffocating place for her, which "seemed to tighten its grip around me until I couldn't breathe" (PI, 1). Her nurse calls her teasingly "the Girl Who Wasn't Invited" (PI, 1), as she was born as daughter to one of the richest kings in India, yet — in best mythological fashion — emerged from the fire unexpectedly, clinging onto her twin-brother, the long awaited heir. While her brother is named "Dhristadyumna, Destroyer of Enemies", she is called "Draupadi, Daughter of Drupad" (PI, 5), a name she considers to affirm patriarchal dependency and to be unsuitably at odds with the divine prophecy made at her birth: "she will change the course of history" (PI, 5). From the start the narrative highlights an important relation between names, gender, and identity. Draupadi envies in particular the power and agency inherent in her brother's name, the implied mission of his life to kill the archenemy Drona, while hers merely symbolizes patriarchy. Full of self-doubts about her outward appearance, which deviates radically from the ideal of the 'fair' woman, she asks Krishna "if he thought that a princess afflicted with a skin so dark that people termed it blue was capable of changing history" (PI, 8). This question testifies to an awareness of a double marginality, a felt inequality of the heroine in both ethnicity and gender (if not, obviously, in terms of class/caste). From the start she fights "to position herself as a subject who desires and not as an object of desire" (Nair 152). But the results of her refusal to be a victim of circumstances and her aspiration of attaining "a more heroic name" (PI, 5) are shown to be deeply ambiguous as the story unfolds, fusing justified claims of equality and liberation with guilt, vanity and cruelty. Finally, it will prove almost "ironic that a name that she fancied for herself, 'Off-spring of Vengeance', turns out to be true" (Nair 152). She consults a sage about her destiny and learns that: she will marry the five greatest heroes of her time, be envied like a goddess, become mistress of the most magical palace, then loose it, start the greatest war,

bring about the deaths of millions, be loved, yet die alone (cf. PI, 39). Moreover, in her lifetime she will encounter three moments that can potentially mitigate the catastrophe to come; significantly the sage's advice is related to not speaking and controlling her emotions in those moments ("hold back your question", "hold back your laughter", "hold back your curse"). The name given to her by the sage, "Panchaali, spirit of this land" (PI, 41), excites her due to its power, it is "a name that knew how to endure" (PI, 42).

12 From the beginning, Panchaali starts to narrate her life story and dreams of possessing her own palace one day. Thus she claims both a place for herself and narrative agency, seeking to establish her identity by rootedness in a location and control over her life and its presentation to others. Tellingly, she imagines her future palace full of "colour and sound", mirroring her "deepest being" (PI 7), a statement which hints at the desire for dramatic significance and "brilliant theatricality of her life" (Nair 153). According to Nair, who emphasizes the centrality of the theatrical metaphor, Panchaali appears as a character who wants to take center stage in her own play; she is aspiring lead actress and not satisfied with a supporting role in someone else's script (154). The metaphor is appropriate because Panchaali's life and the self-perception of her character are constructed around a dual struggle. This concerns, on the one hand, the attempt to harmonize different, conflicting roles into one stable identity, on the other hand the constant fight for the attention of others. With regard to her desired audience, she attaches a special importance to the men in her life, i.e. especially the unattainable lover of her dreams, Karna, her friend Krishna, and her husbands. The seeking of male attention, as well as the struggle (and often refusal) to balance her different roles according to the requirements of specific situations, are themes running through her life, causing much suffering.

13 She rebels against an education of typically female skills (painting, sewing, poetry), which she perceives as useless in comparison to the knowledge taught to her brother (lessons about royal rule, justice, power). Again she uses a metaphor of suffocation to describe the life awaiting her: "With each lesson I felt the world of women tightening its noose around me" (PI, 29). Yet after her father reluctantly agrees to let her partake in Dhri's classes, she starts to notice how these transform her further and deepen the difference to what she has been trained to perceive as feminine. She observes how it was "making me too hardheaded and argumentative, too manlike in my speech" (PI, 23), and finds it increasingly harder to resign herself to the restrictions of royal womanhood. In response to the tutor's idea that "a woman's highest purpose in life is to support the warriors in her life" (PI, 26), Panchaali realizes that her ambitions makes her an outsider of her own sex: "Each day I thought less

and less like the women around me” (PI, 26). Repeatedly, the narrative refers to her perception of differences and the awareness that: “For better or worse, I was a woman” (PI, 139). As she learns to employ her femininity strategically, e.g. to dazzle and manipulate through her looks, she forces acceptance on both men and women around her: “I who had been shunned for my strangeness became a celebrated beauty!” (PI, 10). Soon afterwards, a sorceress makes Panchaali recognize her central flaw, her vanity, and the power of women, as despite all their dependency on men, “you’re wrong in thinking of woman as an innocent species” (PI, 66). But the main lesson she tries to teach Panchaali is the control of her passion and her own destructive power, reminding her that she does not “have the luxury of behaving like an ordinary starstruck girl. The consequences of your action may destroy us all” (PI, 88). Throughout the narrative Divakaruni has her heroine ponder on the inevitability of fate, the discrepancy between the perception of others and her self-image. The central tension exists between her desire for independence and the attempts to please and conform, which is increased by recurring confrontations with gender differences. Watching her husbands for the first time after her marriage, she observes: “I was a woman. I had to use my power differently” (PI, 99). This is followed by recognition of her inequality with regard to freedom, as well as reputation. Despite being granted independence from her father and the status as queen, her unconventional polyandrous marriage bears the risk of being seen as an insatiable whore (PI, 118). Moreover, according to the special marital arrangements, Panchaali is split between her husbands, spending a year with each, her virginity restored each time when entering a new husband’s bed. She becomes aware that in contrast to her husbands, she “had no choice as to whom I slept with, and when” (PI, 120).

14 The plot action as well as the heroine’s identity are developed through narration, which appears to some extent as a process of self-interpretation (cf. Nair 156). It also reflects her crucial reliance on outward influences for her happiness and identity; continually she struggles to construct a self to be set against the patriarchal construction of her self. Actively seeking out affirmation, or dreaming of Karna’s forbidden love, she is usually shattered when she discovers any discrepancy between her fragile self-image and her perception by others. Although the novel is for the most part a first person narrative, there are frequent switches of perspective, mainly through the incorporation of dreams or stories told by other characters. Additionally, Vyasa, Panchaali’s grandfather, appears several times, reminding heroine and

reader that the story is already written and the outcome fixed.²² On the one hand, through these devices Divakaruni “contrive[s] at least some of the omniscience of the epic narrator” (Ansell 2008). On the other, the narrative, itself motivated by a change of perspective of its ancient model, highlights the importance and the illusionary nature of perception and narrative transmission. There is always the possibility of deception, just as there is always another angle to the story. The novel opens with three narrators (Panchaali, her brother, and her nurse), presenting different versions of the tale of Panchaali’s birth and destiny. While trying to gain power over the narration, Panchaali’s reflections, her dialogic engagement with her implied listeners, also include meta-narrative comments on the nature of truth and narration: “At the best of times, a story is a slippery thing” (PI, 15). Throughout the narrative one finds a dual view on stories as powerful and “true”, as well as subjective and refusing to be fixed in time or space, likely to change with each telling. Creating a parallel between storytelling and identity, the narrative situation reflects on the process on a inter- and metatextual level. Furthermore, regarding the prominence given to dialogic negotiation, it is noteworthy that Divakaruni captures this element of the original epic in her first-person narration. Analyzing the inherently dialogic structure of the *Mahabharata* Laurel Patton²³ argues for a correlation between the multiple perspectives and an emphasis on a plurality of identity. Basing the argument on gender theory, she refers to “the dialogical, gendered self” as “a multiple self, with a variety of momentary roles to choose from” (Patton 198). Such a discursive, performative notion of gender, which might appear as a theoretical given nowadays, and which lies at the heart of Divakaruni’s novel, can be seen to operate already in the ancient epic through its construction of characters and narrative structure.

15 In many ways, the novel is a Bildungsroman that chronicles Panchaali’s process of gaining knowledge about herself and the world. The rebellious, yet also somewhat naïve girl eventually becomes a governess and wife, whose advice is frequently sought by her husbands. Apart from the plot-changing moments when her passions take control of her words, she mostly manages to temper her outspokenness, and “having learned more of the workings of women’s power”, is “careful to offer my opinion only in private” (PI, 148). After a decade of married life and being mistress at the eponymous palace of illusions, Panchaali appears noticeably emancipated. This is not just due to the power to rule over a place and

²² In the epic, “Vyasa is the great-uncle of the Pandavas and their fathers biological father; he appears at many points in their story to give them advice and assistance of various kinds” (Brodbeck/Black 3).

²³ Cf. Patton’s essay “How Do You Conduct Yourself? Gender and the Construction of a Dialogical Self in the *Mahabharata*” (in Brodbeck and Black 2007). In order to demonstrate the negotiation of gender ideology in the epic, she focusses her reading on the dialogues between Draupadi and other women.

family of her own but because, as Vyasa tells her: “You no longer care what people think of you, and that has given you a great freedom” (PI, 180). It is an, at least partial, liberation from outside judgment. Her identity is no longer primarily constituted in relation to the expectation of others. This gives her some of the independence she perceives as being granted naturally to men, and so she feels that, “in some matters, I was equal” (PI, 180). From a gender-theoretical point of view, it is interesting that her change and her transgression into male realms (independence, power to rule, revenge), are reflected in a transformation of her demeanor and outward appearance; she turns from beautiful, desired woman into one which is feared or rather sought to be avoided due to “my tangled hair, my accusing sighs, my pepper-hot tongue” (PI, 216). She is herself aware that she loses some of the attributes of traditional femininity (e.g. softness, beauty, silent companionship) and continues to compare herself to other women, who appear “better”, i.e. softer, more patient or content. Again the narrative presents a dialogic negotiation of judgment, mediated through the voice of the heroine, revealing the contradictions between inward and outward perception. Torn between her own desires and the expectations of the feminine roles lived by the women around her Panchaali comments: “(But is *better* the word I was looking for? At what point does forbearance cease to be a virtue and become a weakness?)” (PI, 210). Often, she is shown to oscillate between passivity and activity, as the following statement about her husbands illustrates: “I followed them into the forest and forced them to become heroes. But my heart [...], I never gave it fully to them” (PI, 213). Relevant with regard to this aspect is her obsessive romantic yearning for Karna, which is a revolving point for the plot action. Although it appears, as most critics have noted, in many ways no quite plausible, it seems to fulfill an important function by offering her an escape fantasy which protects her from emotional abuse und complete surrender to her husbands and her situation. This becomes clear in the climatic scene of her public shaming in court.

16 After Yudhisthir’s fatal loss in the game of dice, Duryodhan takes possession of the kingdom, Panchaali’s palace, and the Pandavas themselves. Panchaali is informed that she has been gambled away like property, “no less so than a cow or a slave” (PI, 190). When she is dragged into the hall, the whole court stares at her, but worst of all is that her husbands send “tortured glances but sat paralyzed” (PI, 191). She is stripped of all ornaments, yet the ultimate shame is the command to take off her sari, the only item of clothing protecting her from “a hundred male eyes burning through me” (PI, 191). The scene of Draupadi’s

disrobing²⁴ is also a crucial one in the *Mahabharata* and it is obvious how her humiliation is rendered as a distinctly gendered shame. She appears “furious at her mistreatment, [...] hair disheveled, menstrual blood spotting her single garment” (Hiltebeitel 2001, 246), forced to expose her vulnerable body to male eyes, reduced to the status of an object lost by her husband. In the novel, Panchaali describes the situation thus: “The worst shame a woman could imagine was about to befall me – I who had thought myself above all harm, the proud and cherished wife of the greatest kings of our time” (PI, 193). What furthers her rage is the silence of all men present; nobody answers her question if Yudhistir actually still had the right to lose her after he had already lost himself. Consumed by her anger and the desire to restore her dignity, Panchaali commits the prophesied third mistake and utters the dreadful curse of the battle, which will destroy everybody and vows not to comb her hair again till “the day I bathe it in Kaurava blood” (PI, 194). Significantly, she chooses to give up part of her traditional femininity for revenge, as particularly in India shiny fragrant hair symbolizes female beauty. After this, there exist diverging versions of the epic. In the critical edition, Draupadi’s nakedness is exposed; whereas in the more popular version (cf. Hiltebeitel 2007, 128ff), Krishna appears as an answer to Draupadi’s prayer, saving her from shame by miraculously extending her sari, the endless folds preventing the final satisfaction of the voyeuristic stares. The question of divine intervention usually takes priority in readings of the scene, which is rarely interpreted from a feminist perspective. In the novel, Panchaali deals with the shame of exposure by remembering Krishna’s advice; she finds the mental strength to cut herself off from the reality of the situation, instead focusing on people dear to her.

17 Despite the image of victimization, the scene presents a clear assertion of female strength and agency. After sealing everyone’s fate, it makes Panchaali aware of her illusion about romantic love. She comes to recognize the limits of her husbands’ feelings for her; “there were other things they loved more. Their notions of honor, of loyalty toward each other, of reputation were more important to them than my suffering” (PI, 195). She also notices how she had been consumed by passionate anger, in contrast to her husbands who stoically suffered the humiliation and controlled their desires for revenge by submitting to the expected protocol, patiently waiting for the circumstances to turn in their favour. The situation triggers a painful act of emancipation for Panchaali who is forced to protect herself as men fail her, while also learning how “emotions are always intertwined with power and pride” (PI, 195). Furthermore, the fact that Duryodhan takes over her beloved palace

²⁴ Hiltebeitel (2007, 110) gives a good summary of the scene and of its conflicting interpretations. He also emphasises the relevance of Draupadi’s special friendship with Krishna which is highlighted by Divakaruni.

increases her hatred and unhappiness to such an extent that she describes her emotional state thus: “She’s dead. Half of her died the day when everyone she had loved and counted on to save her sat without protest and watched her being shamed. The other half perished with her beloved home. But never fear” (PI, 206). It is significant that for the first time she describes herself as seen from the outside. The quote underlines the importance of the experience of shame and loss of her palace, which had formed such an integral part of herself, as catalysts for the tragedies to come. Although the focus on compensation and revenge henceforth give her a clear sense of purpose, she is still missing a feeling of stable selfhood:

it seemed that everything I’d lived until now had been a role. The princess who longed for acceptance, the guilty girl whose heart wouldn’t listen, the wife who balanced her fivefold role precariously, the rebellious daughter-in-law, the queen who ruled the most magical of palaces, the distracted mother, the beloved companion of Krishna, who refused to learn the lessons he offered, the woman obsessed with vengeance – none of them were the true Panchaali. (PI, 229)

18 Throughout the narrative, the desire for and the execution of vengeance is presented as the central trait transcending the boundaries of gender, yet affirming them at the same time. While Panchaali spends her life struggling to control her passionate temper and her thirst for revenge culminates in causing the killing of thousands, her husbands are constructed as her counter images in terms of patience and stoic obedience of rule and custom, all the while, of course, enjoying the freedom of action attached to their status as men. Although Panchaali’s desire and speech trigger the war, she does not actively fight in it but remains confined to a position of eyewitness. At various points in the story it is implied that a woman’s body is incapable of fulfilling a mission of revenge. One night during battle, Panchaali dreams of killing her brother who is disguised as a Kaurava prince. The dream expresses her feeling of despair from watching everybody close to her die, from facing her own impotence and guilt. Transformed into a man in the dream, she experiences a feeling of sameness, a kind of gender-empathy, because she feels the familiar hatred and desire for revenge, yet now she is actively able to kill. In contrast to this brief imaginary switching of gender, Panchaali’s half-sister, Sikhandi, undergoes a permanent change, being transformed into a “great and dangerous warrior” (PI, 44) in order to partake in the battle. Although her appearance and behavior are markedly different, she describes her new identity thus: “When I awoke, I was a man. And yet not completely so, for though my form was changed, inside me I remembered how women thought and what they longed for” (PI, 46). She retains this ambiguity about her gender. Watching her in battle, Panchaali notices how she still looks

“male from a certain angle, female from another” (PI, 256). Like Panchaali, Sikhandi is driven by vengeance and rebellion against men’s greater freedom of action. Early in the narrative she describes an insight in the inevitability of emancipation, similar to the one Panchaali has during her shameful disrobing in court. She argues that women need to fight for themselves to restore their dignity because, “wait for a man to avenge your honour, and you’ll wait forever” (PI, 49). Inspired by Sikandhi’s sex change as the ultimate liberation from the restrictions of womanhood, Panchaali is aware from the start that: “I, too, would cross the bounds of what was allowed to women” (PI, 51). As shown above, her behavior frequently transgresses the boundaries of traditional femininity, e.g. her outspokenness, her education and her polyandrous marriage. Furthermore, she fails to display a strong attachment to her children, valuing her independence higher than motherhood. To be at the side of her husbands, she leaves her sons behind, barely recognizing them years later. Emphasizing the centrality of vengeance for the construction of female identity, Andrea Custodi²⁵ states that “there is a dark, destructive, lethal undercurrent to Sikhandin’s female-to-male transsexuality” (220) that differs noticeably, e.g., from the Arjun’s playful male-to-female transsexual episode during the year of disguise. Agreeing with Custodi’s argument about the epic, it is obvious how Divakaruni’s novel focusses on the “destructive undertones in the character of Draupadi, who never switches genders but [...] challenge[s] the epic’s explicit dharmic formulations of what a woman and wife should be” (220). Moreover, the narrative underlines how the trajectories of the characters of Sikhandi and Draupadi “away from ‘traditional’ femininity are towards vengeance” (220), feminine vengeance thus forming a major plot-driving force, but, perhaps more importantly, constituting a dominant strand of femininity in both original *Mahabharata* and its feminist retelling.

19 The last part of the narrative adds another dimension. During the battle Panchaali is most shocked to find that her self-perception (as the brave woman wronged, admired for enduring hardships) is completely at odds with the opinion of the women around her, who, consumed by their own suffering gaze only in fear at “the witch who might, with a wave of her hand, transform them into widows” (PI, 258). The portrayal of the battle of Kurukshetra and its aftermath present perhaps Divakaruni’s most radical modification of the plot of the original epic. The focus on the subjective female consciousness is here broadened to draw attention to what is omitted in the older text: “But here’s something Vyasa didn’t put down in

²⁵ Custodi’s essay is generally based on the idea that in the epic notions of masculinity are more pronounced than those of femininity. It surely points towards interesting further research on the subject, but is not congruent with the angle of Divakaruni’s novel and the present analytical context.

his Mahabharata: Leaving the field, the glow traveled to a nearby hill, where it paused for a moment over a weeping woman” (PI, 298). Highlighting the grief of the women, the narrative presents a different angle of the morale of the battle between families and thoroughly blurs the distinction between kin and enemies, between winners and losers. After the battle, the grieving widows try to jump onto the funeral pyres. Faced with a mass sati, which would add unimaginably to the tragedy of the war, king Yudhisthir is rendered helpless: “If it had been a battle, he would have known what kind of command to give his men. But here he was at a loss, paralyzed by guilt and compassion and the ancient and terrible tradition the women had invoked” (PI, 312). This crisis forces Panchaali to finally prioritize sisterhood over her own interests and emotions. She steps forward to address the crowd, speaking as a woman and mother sharing their grief and manages to avert more deaths (cf. PI, 314). The devastation of the war, which had made Hastinapur “largely a city of women” (PI, 322), triggers a further change of Panchaali. She takes action, but this appears now to be driven less by personal than political interest and feelings of community: “It was time I shook off my self-pity and did something. I resolved to form a separate court, a place where women could speak their sorrows to other women” (PI, 323). Divakaruni’s feminist agenda underlines this almost utopian vision of a new city rising from the ruins, now a haven of safety and respect, a place of equality for women: “And even in the later years [...], Hastinapur remained one of the few cities where women could go about their daily lives without harassment” (PI, 325). This is sustained through another plot change. Whereas in the original the only remaining heir to continue the Pandava line, is a son, Divakaruni turns Parikhshit into a daughter, who takes on Panchaali’s legacy and realizes a peaceful female supremacy.

20 The analysis has shown that Draupadi is far from a univocal representation of the ideal Indian female, always torn between devoted wife and independent, outspokenly critical woman. Nancy Falk writes: “She is a throwback; her stories come from a time when women were more highly respected than in the days of the meek and submissive wifely models” (cited in Brodbeck/Black 16). Divakaruni’s narrative can be seen to highlight this perception of femininity. Moreover, the plurality of roles (wife, mother, queen etc.) within the story can itself explain the shifts and inconsistencies in Draupadi’s character. Divakaruni makes this tension one of her focus points and presents Panchaali’s distress and suffering caused by the fragmentation of her different selves. This is illustrated once more by Panchaali’s decision to follow her husbands on their final journey. Again she is both loyal wife and rebellious woman, as no other before her had ever attempted to climb the Himalayan Mountains. When her strength starts to desert her, she reflects:

Perhaps that has always been my problem, to rebel against the boundaries society has prescribed for women. But what was the alternative? To sit among bent grandmothers, gossiping and complaining, chewing on mashed betel leaves with toothless gums as I waited for death? Intolerable! I would rather perish on the mountain. [...], my last victory over the other wives [...]. How could I resist it? (PI, 343-44)

The quote shows the complex mix of emotions and demonstrates the ambiguous, finely tuned assessment of Panchaali's character in the novel. It portrays her as a model of female empowerment and courage but casts a clear critical-humorous glance on her vanity and desire for admiration. Even her death is staged ambivalently in this regard. When she jumps from the pathway it appears to signify a brave acknowledgment of having reached the end of her powers and as a final cry for attention because her last tormenting thoughts are about which men in her life would have turned around to come to her rescue. But the arrival in heaven brings a surprising relief for Panchaali, who notes: "The air is full of men – but not men exactly, nor women, for their bodies are sleek and sexless and glowing. Their faces are unlined and calm, devoid of the various passions that distinguished them in life" (PI, 358). The gods are presented as people without a sex, beyond passions, and thus in a state of androgynous, peaceful balance. Finally, emotions are singled out as the element marking character and gender differences, beyond all other deceptive guises. Panchaali's death appears as liberation and resolve of the contradictions of her identity: "I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet, for the first time, I'm truly Panchaali" (PI, 360). It remains for the reader to decide whether this ending appears spiritually consoling or pessimistic, as the reconciliation of her troubled female identity and recognition of her self is denied her on earth. Divakaruni's novel manages to convey the "great psychological depth" (Dasa) of the *Mahabharata* and reflects on the various illusions the characters have about themselves, about romantic love, about heroism, war, and vengeance. If "in most constructions of Draupadi, in both literary and non-literary texts, she is seen as a victim of patriarchy" (Nair 153), Divakaruni modifies this view and makes the question of female agency a more complex one. Resisting simplifications of matters which have fascinated audiences for over 2000 years, the great Indian story reminds us of many aspects of human nature and also of the fact that "[t]o the question posed by these myths – How deep is gender? Is it skin deep, superficial, or truly deep, essential? – Hinduism answers Yes" (Doniger 1999: 301).

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Sociology of Female Foeticide and Infanticide. Where does the Law Stand?

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Abstract:

The continuity of human generations depends both on men and women. Children are considered the gift of God on earth. But the patriarchal social structure of Indian society continuously denies the rights of girl children both before and after birth. The preference of sons over daughters in a family has been the cause of decreasing sex ratios year by year in India with few exceptions in certain States. The traditions and customs supported by the religious superstitions, play a vital role in this regard. The advances in medical sciences have made it easy to identify the sex of a child even before the birth by misusing the technologies like amniocentesis, scanning and ultra-sonography. Initially these technologies were designed to detect abnormalities of the foetus, but now they are being misused for learning the sex of the foetus with the intention of aborting it if it happens to be that of a female. It is estimated that 5 million girls were eliminated between 1986 and 2001 because of foetal sex determination done by unethical medical professionals. The enactments of laws to curb this attitudinal and social problem have proved unsatisfactory. The present paper seeks to critically examine the growing problem of female foeticide and infanticide in India from the point of socio-legal dimensions.

1 Society is the systematic ordering of social relationships based on definite patterns. Both men and women together contribute to the continuity of human generations on earth. Nature designed both sexes for the perpetuation of the human races. Traditional India has always accorded full respect to women in every walk of life. The notion of *ardhangini* (better half in Hindus) suggests that there was equality between men and women; neither of the two being superior to the other [Prabhu 1958:22]. Majumdar [1961:206] has aptly remarked that the status of women in India can be more understood in the Indian ethnology than in that of religion or Brahmanism. During the Vedic era women enjoyed almost equal status with that of men. They were allowed to participate in the social affairs of the society except on few occasions. The daughters were awarded the same status in ancient texts. Though sons were given preferential treatment from the beginning, there have been instances where we find that the *Rigveda* praises the father of many daughters. *Matrika-Puja* should take place first; the *Kumari-Puja* was performed at the end of the all Vedic rituals [Upadhyay 1974:43]. Initiations of girls were common, and they were provided all sorts of facilities to develop their personality fully. Like their brothers the girls wore the sacred thread (*Upavita-Dharana*) and used to pass through the period of *Brahmacharya*. According to *Sarvanukra-manika* there were as many as twenty women who are credited with having composed the hymns of

the *Rigveda*. Apart from a literary career, women entered fields of teaching, medicine, business, defense and administration [ibid :44-46].

2 The traditional value system of Indian society, sex segregation, poverty and the growing problem of dowries - all these have created an atmosphere where females are often considered a nuisance. The result is a declining child sex ratio in succeeding census reports. The mentality and attitudinal problem at the level of society are directly responsible for occurrence of such gaps in the society leading to various kinds of other problems in the forms of violence, rape, foeticide, infanticide, marginalization, powerless, exploitation, cultural imperialism and traditional notion of polyandrous marriages to women of our contemporary society. Justice Iyer [1979:31] has aptly remarked:

The fight is not for women's status but for human worth. The claim is not to end inequality of women but to restore universal justice. The bid is not for loaves and fishes for the forsaken gender but for cosmic harmony, which never comes till woman comes.

3 The survey published by the Geneva-based World Economic Forum-better known for its annual business bash in Davos-shows that full economic and political empowerment remains a distant dream for million of women in much of the western world, let alone developing countries. Of the 58 countries covered by the survey, no country has yet managed to eliminate the gender gap but the Nordic states - Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Denmark and Finland - have "succeeded best" in narrowing it. They seem to provide a "workable model" for the rest of the world to follow. Other "female friendly" countries include Britain, Germany, New Zealand, Australia and, significantly, several East European countries where women still benefit from the support system built during the Communist era [Sinha, et al.2008:303].

4 To minimize the gap between man and woman, girl and boy, efforts have been made at an international level. Gender equality and the empowerment of women were considered one of the eight Millennium Development Goals by the United Nations Population Fund in 2001. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation celebrated the Decade of the Girl Child in order to confront discrimination against girls between 1991 and 2000. The UN Declaration of Rights of Children from 1959, which indicated that "the child, by reason of his physical and natural immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate protection, before as well as after birth" was concretized into the UN Convention on Rights of the Child in 1989. India became signatory to the Convention in 1992.

5 Parity between men and women is much desired in order to minimize the gender gap at the level of society for the overall development of various aspects of society. The various census surveys carried out in India have the tradition of bringing out information by gender composition on various aspects of the population. Changes in gender composition have far-reaching and multi-dimensional effects in various directions. Sex ratio is defined as the number of females per 1000 males in the population and is an important social indicator to measure the extent of prevailing equity between males and females in a society at a given point of time. According to experts, sex differential in mortality, sex selective out migration and a skewed sex-ratio at birth are the major contributing factors that influence changes in sex-ratio. In a patriarchal society, the sex-ratio is skewed in favour of males and has continued to rise and expand. This is an alarming development, and it forces policy makers and planners of the country to reconsider their approaches.

6 The census data of 2011 revealed that the sex ratio has improved from 933 females per 1000 males in 2001 to 940 in 2011, the highest recorded sex ratio since the 1971. This can be explained by the greater natural longevity of women and improvement in health care over the years. As per the 2011 Census, the top five states/Union territories which have the highest sex ratio are Kerela (1,084) followed by Puducherry (1,038), Tamil Nadu (995), Andhra Pradesh (992) and Chhattisgarh (991). The five states which have the lowest sex ratio are Daman & Diu (618), Dadra & Nagar Haveli (775), Chandigarh (818), NCT of Delhi (866) and Andaman & Nicobar Islands (878). The table 1 and table 2 present the sex ratio of few selected countries at the world level to understand the trend and Empowered Action Group States in India respectively (data taken from Provisional Population Totals, Census 2001).

Table 1. Sex Ratios of Selected Countries

Country	Sex Ratio
Russian Federation	1,165
France	1,056
Japn	1,054
Germany	1,038
United Kingdom	1,037
South Africa	1,028
USA	1,026
Australia	1,011
Indonesia	1,003
Nigeria	995
Malaysia	970
Iran	968
China	927
India*	940

Table 2. Sex Ratios of India and Empowered Action Group States

Country/States	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
India	972	964	955	950	945	946	941	930	934	927	933	940
Chhattisgarh	1046	1039	1041	1043	1032	1024	1008	998	996	985	989	991
Orissa	1037	1056	1086	1067	1053	1022	1001	988	981	971	972	978
Uttarakhand	918	907	916	913	907	940	947	940	936	936	962	963
Jharkhand	1032	1021	1002	989	978	961	960	945	940	922	941	947
Madhya Pradesh	972	967	949	947	946	945	932	920	921	912	919	916
Rajasthan	905	908	896	907	906	921	908	911	919	910	921	926
Bihar	1061	1051	1020	995	1002	1000	1005	957	948	907	191	916
Uttar Pradesh	938	916	908	903	907	908	907	876	872	876	898	908

7 Children are considered to be the future of any society, as their development decides the progressive direction of any country and society. But prejudices in the form of so-called customs, traditions and attitudes towards female children can lead to an imbalance in the social structure of that society. And these shape the various social pathologies in the society. Gabriel Mistral , the Noble Laureate, said:

We are guilty of many errors and faults, but our worst crime is abandoning the children, neglecting the foundation of life. Many of the things we need can wait. The child cannot, right now is the time his bones are being formed, his blood is being made and the senses are being developed. To him we cannot answer 'tomorrow'. His name is 'today'[Quoted by Bhat 2009:606]

Child sex ratio in the country as well as in Madhya Pradesh has shown a declining trend since the 1991 Census. Child sex ratio (0-6 years) at country level was 945 in 1991, 927 in 2001 and has now declined to 914 in the 2011 Census. In case of Madhya Pradesh, it was 941 in 1991, 932 in 2001 and now stands at 912 in 2011. Child sex ratio (0-6 years) at country level has declined by 13 points and in the state by 20 points during the period 2001-2011. This is the worst child sex ratio in the history of the country since the gaining of independence. This steep decrease in the child sex ratio has rung alarm bells across the country. This trend and scale of a decline in India is shocking. Higher levels of literacy and economic development, in addition to adoption of family planning measures, are important factors that have led to smaller family sizes causing a decline in the child population.

8 Among the States/Union Territories, the highest child sex ratio (0-6) is reported by Mizoram (971), followed by Meghalaya (970), Andaman & Nicobar Islands (966), Puducherry (965) and Chhattisgarh (964). On the contrary, States and Union Territories which have reported lowest child sex ratio (0-6 years) are Haryana (830) followed by Punjab (848), Jammu & Kashmir (859), NCT of Delhi (866) and Chandigarh. It is reflected that Chhattisgarh (964) has the highest child sex ratio (0-6 years) whereas Rajasthan (883) has the lowest child sex ratio in the 2011 Census among Empowered Action Group (EAG) States. Child sex ratio (0-6 years) of 8 EAG states for 2001 and 2011 presents the change during the decade. The child sex ratio (0-6 years) of Chhattisgarh is highest in both the censuses. Rajasthan has slipped to lowest among all EAG (Empowered Action Group) States in 2011, while Uttarakhand was the lowest in 2001. The table 3 details all this.

Table 3. Child sex ratio (0-6 years) for Empowered Action Group States: 2001-2011

SI. No.	EAG States	Child Sex Ratio (0-6 Years)	
		2001	2011
1	India	933	914
2	Chhatisgarh	975	964
3	Jharkhand	965	943
4	Orissa	953	934
5	Bihar	942	933
6	Madhya Pradesh	932	912
7	Uttar Pradesh	916	899
8	Uttarakhand	908	886
9	Rajasthan	909	883

The problem of child sex ratios is not uncommon in First world countries. It is also a growing problem in those countries where the technologies for sex selection originated. A declining sex ratio reflects gross discrimination against one sex within society. Daughters are always seen as burden because of dowry to be paid them and because any investment in them - for their nutrition, education, health, general well-being - will not help the natal family's future security.

9 The girl is always considered a part of another family, as only the son remains at the home. The son is considered the carrier of future generations in the name of the father. A daughter, once married, loses the familial bond to her parents, and thus does not carry future generations in the name of her family. The sociology of Indian society plays a major role in this regard, where it has been observed that parents who have girl children are not given many privileges in a typically traditional society. A woman without sons is considered barren and she risks being turned out of her marital home - a situation that has to be avoided no matter what the cost. A preference for sons is also necessary as he ensures the well-being of the parents in old age. Thus the son preference finds more and more expression in female foeticide and infanticide. The technological advancement in medical sciences paved the way for the determination of sex of the foetus. The noted economist Amartya Sen commented that a large number of women population is missing due to this development.

10 Female infanticide has been in practice since ancient times in the country. There are some prone areas in the country where this practice is considered a part of their custom and tradition. Kollor [1990] defines infanticide as "killing of an entirely dependent child under one year of age who is killed by mother, parents or others in whose care the child is entrusted". In recent years the misuse of ultrasound has reached remote tribal areas of

Rajasthan, Bundelkhand and emerged even in other parts of India where women were better treated such as Assam, Kerala and the Kashmir valley. The practice of female infanticide is documented to have existed in Europe in the early twentieth century and was found across Pakistan, West Asia, China and North Africa. The causes ascribed to that old practice include, besides the control of the population and socio-religious practices such as superstition and the disposal of handicapped/illegitimate babies, the gender-based selective killing of female children. One of the earliest records of female infanticide in India points to a clan of Rajputs in Uttar Pradesh, the discovery of which is credited to Jonathan Duncan, a British official posted in Northern India. Subsequent to this, the British Raj passed the Infanticide Regulation Act of 1870 to curb, among other variations, the widespread incidence of neonaticide (the killing of a baby within the first 24 hours of birth). (Lalitha Sridhar¹).

11 Foeticide can be seen everywhere in India, and it has become more common with the advent and easy availability of technology, such as amniocentesis and sonography, that enables the determination of the gender of the foetus. Despite government measures and laws against it, foeticide has not seen a decrease in its rate; on the contrary, it is increasing rapidly. The details of the cases of female infanticide are quite shocking. In Rajput families, “doodh pilana” is a common ritual reserved for newborn girls. Parents immerse the helpless child in a tub of milk until she chokes to death. In south Indian states like Tamilnadu, children are either fed the milk of poisonous plants or covered with a wet towel so that they die later of complications from cold. In Bihar, holding the baby from the waist and shaking it back and forth snaps the spinal chord. Sometimes a child is stuffed in a clay pot. Babies are also fed with salt to increase their blood pressure; death follows in a few minutes. Grains of paddy husk are also fed to slit the tender gullet. Furthermore, a change in the method of killing infants has been observed following the exhumation of bodies to get forensic evidence when it was suspected that an infant had been a victim of infanticide. People began to adopt methods such as starving the baby to death, which, unlike poisoning, leaves no forensic evidence as to the cause of death.²

12 Female foeticide and infanticide have been a growing social problem since ancient times. The solution for this must be a change in the social structure, rather than the implementation of laws. The socio-cultural environment, which denies reproductive rights to women, is a major factor. The efforts to control such biased and criminal acts as female infanticide gained momentum during the Colonial Era. The Regulation 21 of 1795 made

¹ Lalitha Sridhar, *Death Before Birth*, <http://www.islamonline.net/> (visited 26.09.2011)

² http://www.islamawareness.net/FamilyPlanning/Infanticide/fit_news001.html (visited 26.09.2011)

infanticide punishable in North-West provinces. The law on infanticide entered into the National legal framework, called Indian Penal Code. Infanticide is one form of homicide, attracting the application of Section 299 or 300 IPC. Section 317 of the Code also controls this crime. According to this provision, “whoever being father or mother of child under the age of 12 years, or having the care of such child, shall expose or leave such child in any place with the intention of wholly abandoning such child, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend seven years or with fine or both” [Bhat 2009:546]. Section 318 further states that, by secretly burying or otherwise disposing of the dead body of a child whether such child die before, after or during its birth, the person who intentionally conceals or endeavours to conceal the birth of such child is punishable with imprisonment for two years or with a fine or with both.

13 The statistics give a shocking picture of the situation. The Supreme Court observed in Centre for Enquiry into Health & Allied Themes (CEHAT)³:

It is unfortunate that for one reason or the other, the practice of female infanticide still prevails despite the fact that gentle touch of a daughter and her voice has soothing effect on the parents. One of the reasons may be the marriage problems faced by the parents coupled with the dowry demand by the so-called educated and/or rich persons who are well placed in the society. The traditional system of female infanticide whereby female baby was done away with after birth by poisoning or letting her choke on husk continues in a different form by taking advantage of advance medical techniques. Unfortunately, developed medical science is misused to get rid of a girl child before birth.

The law exists for the wellbeing of the people in the society but the same law can sometimes be misused at the same time in the name of this wellbeing, by the people. The enactment of the law in the form of the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act from 1974 declared abortion legal under certain conditions during the first trimester of pregnancy. To ensure proper implementation of this law in an era of technological advancement, much consideration has been given this law by the Apex Court of the country. The State of Maharashtra enacted the Maharashtra Regulation of PNDT Act in 1988, prohibiting the determination of sex of the foetus, and issuing the direction to the medical staff and concerned agencies for its proper regulations. Similar efforts at the national level resulted in the enactment of the Central Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act 1994. This Act was amended in 2003, and thus now it called as Pre-Conception

³ 3. Centre for Enquiry into Health & Allied Themes(CEHAT) v. Union of India, (2003) 8 SCC 398: AIR 2003 SC 3309

and Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act, 2003. Some of the salient features are:

1. Prohibition of Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of sex selection) of foetus, leading to female foeticide. (Section 6 a, b, c)
2. Prohibition of advertisement of PNDT Techniques for detection or determination of sex. (Section 22)
3. Permission and regulation of use of PNDT Techniques for purpose of detection of specific genetic abnormalities or disorders. (Section 4)

14 The PC & PNDT Act is one of the most comprehensive and well thought out laws in the country. To say a little about the amendments that have given this Act the present shape, it is after the intervention of the Hon'ble Supreme Court in CEHAT, MAUSAM & Dr. Sabu George v. Union of India and Ors (AIR 2003 SC 3309) that the law had been considerably overhauled to bring within purview the changing technologies. The truth today is that this brilliant piece of legislation is far from being implemented in its true spirit and purpose. In fact the first ever conviction leading to imprisonment of an offender (Dr Anil Sabsani, a radiologist, was jailed for two years⁴) under the present Act in the entire country took place in March 2006, 12 years after the Act came out in 1994. It is no exaggeration to state that legal implementation of this Act has practically failed so far. However, the judicial pronouncements like CEHAT⁵, Dr. Aniruddha Malpani⁶, Dr. Varsha Gautam⁷, Dr. K.L. Sehgal⁸, and Dr. Anil Sabhani⁹ have far reaching effects in curbing the menace of female foeticide and infanticide.

15 Society is full of likenesses and differences. Mere legal enactments and provisions under the Constitution of India with the purpose of safeguarding the rights of women and children will not serve their purpose until the mindset and attitudes of people change. The growing problem of missing girls and declining child sex ratio will impede human development towards full gender parity. Thus, everyone has a stake in helping to overcome these destructive and regressive customs. Social scientists, medical practitioners, common men, judicial officials, legal professionals and NGOs all need to focus on a humanist and scientific approach. There is a need for a strong ethical code for medical practitioners. The monitoring, regular appraisal and assessment of the indicators such as sex ratio, female

⁴ Justin Huggler, <http://news.independent.co.uk/world/asia/article354483.ece> (visited 26.09.2011)

⁵ *Supra no. 3*

⁶ Dr. Aniruddha Malpani v. Dr. Jaywant Anant Khandare, Bombay HC, Application No. 4644 of 2004

⁷ Dr. Varsha Gautam v. State of U.P. Manu/UP/0857/2006

⁸ Dr. K.L. Sehgal v. Office of District Appropriate Authority, Delhi HC, W.P.(C) 6654/2007

⁹ State Through District Appropriate Authority v. Dr. Anil Sabhani, SDJM, Palwal, Case No. RBT-298/2 of 2001

mortality, and literacy are required in a time frame management. The people involved, knowingly and unknowingly, must be punished if any violation of the laws related to the protection of women and female children are brought to the attention of the appropriate authority.

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Exploring the Unexplored and the Unexplorable in Lisa Baraitser's *Maternal Encounters. The Ethics of Interruption* (London: Routledge, 2009)

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In this book I seek to articulate the potential within maternity for new experiences, sensations, moods, sensibilities, intensities, kinetics, tinglings, janglings, emotions, thoughts, perceptions; new coagulations of embodied and relational modes. I try to pay attention to the ways that motherhood may allow the generation of new 'raw materials' for experiencing ourselves, others and our worlds. [...]. I take as my starting point some rather mundane and usually overlooked moments of maternal experience that appear to trip us up, or throw us 'off the subject'. It is to moments of undoing, I argue, that we need to apply ourselves theoretically, if we are to try to glimpse something we may term maternal subjectivity (p. 3).

1 There are currently two main trends in circulation in the field of motherhood studies. Badinter (*La femme, le conflit et la mère*, 2010) and Douglas and Michaels (*The Mommy Myth*, 2004) characterise the first approach which considers the idealisation of mothering and its impossible standards of perfection, as, perhaps more than ever before, deeply injurious to the subjectivity of the mother. Both speak of a reversal or an involution in contemporary culture with regard to mothering, that is, a return to the traditional stereotype of the all-sacrificing *mater dolorosa* who lives through the child and for the child but never for herself. In contrast to this rather bleak picture of what mothering today entails stands Baraitser's account of mothering published in 2009 under the title *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption*. Baraitser's text, while it no way overlooks the difficulties and frustrations suffered by mothers, offers a more positive examination of mothering and endeavours to articulate the potential within maternity for new and generative experiences as opposed to positing the experience of becoming a mother as the inevitable annihilation of the self. Of her own motivation for writing the book, Baraitser explains that she wished to create a space where maternal subjectivity could emerge in its own right through the exploration of a range of mothering experiences

[...] characterised by [...] physical viscosity, heightened sentience, a renewed awareness of objects, of one's own emotional range and emotional points of weakness, an engagement with the built environment and street furniture, a renewed temporal awareness where the present is elongated and the past and the future no longer felt to be so tangible, and a renewed sense of oneself as a speaking subject (p. 4).

2 Perhaps the most innovative aspect of Baraitser's text is its distinct structure, an unusual intertwining of personal anecdote and theoretical analyses that present the reader with a very real account of mothering but one which is still framed by an identifiable structure. Baraitser states

Anecdotal theory seemed like the right kind of vehicle with which to elevate the mundane details of a mother's daily life to the status of 'material' that could then be available for reflection, analysis, even 'research'. [...]. My hope was that an anecdotal approach to maternity would make visible a range of sensations, intensities, experiences, sensibilities, thoughts, emotions, moods, encounters, culminating in a new collection of 'raw materials' with which to think about maternal subjectivity [...]. (p. 152).

In adopting such an approach, Baraitser thus valorises the everyday experiences of mothers by inscribing them within academic discourse but allowing neither to enjoy privilege over the other. Although Baraitser may feel that this, at times, creates a sense of tension in her writing, in that she seems to be moving in two opposite directions (Ibid), such a contradictory pull is, in itself, characteristic of the experience of mothering. Indeed, the mother figure at the heart of *Maternal Encounters* is at once she who interrupts and she who is interrupted, she who is divided between being for oneself and being for another. To "create a semblance of coherence out of the self that is fragmented [...] due to the inherent ambivalence of the maternal" (p. 15) is not the goal of Baraitser's text.

3 The seeming disjointedness of the text's two-fold narrative, however, should not distract the reader from the fact that Baraitser has a series of clear aims that she establishes from the outset. First and foremost, Baraitser is keen to debunk the various myths associated with the mother: for example, the mother as abject; the mother and narcissism; the conflation of the maternal and the feminine; and, the unity/fluidity dialectic relating respectively to the self before motherhood and the self as mother. Nor does she shy away from questioning the work of established feminist theorists such as Irigaray and Kristeva. Baraitser declares that the tendency for abjection to cling to the maternal subsequently leads to the characterisation of the mother as dangerously "unthematizable, unrepresentable and unrecoverable" (pp. 6-7). In order to counteract a discourse so mired in "loss, murder and melancholia", Baraitser writes, we must approach maternal subjectivity from a position that engages with the unexpected and the excessive and acknowledges their generative rather than their destructive power (Ibid). With regard to the myth of motherhood and narcissism, Baraitser is quick to draw a distinction between maternal desire (as something that relates to a third term, such as desire for the phallus

or for one's own mother) and maternal love (in terms of emotions that emerge in direct response to the child). Configuring the mother as solely desirous hinders our ability to articulate maternal love as something stemming from the encounter between the mother and the child (p. 96). Similarly, conflating the maternal with the feminine (as is the stance of differentialist feminism) prevents the formulation of a specifically maternal subjectivity and leaves the mother's particular concerns and paradoxes hopelessly unarticulated. Maternity and femininity must be uncoupled to allow us to move

[...] beyond a conception of maternity as the embodied potentiality to become two, towards an account that can include the staggering complexity of what happens for a mother after 'birth': what arises for mothers during the day-to-day, ongoing and relentless experience of mothering, whether that is with their birth, adopted, fostered, community, surrogate or 'other' children (p. 10).

Finally, Baraitser takes on the myth of the unity/fluidity dialectic which, in the same way that phallogocentric binarism elevates the masculine as the unified subject and relegates the feminine to the inferior position of 'other', sets up the self before motherhood as a fictional unitary and coherent self whose loss is to be mourned while the maternal becomes the messy excess (p. 50). For Baraitser, it is important to free the maternal from its entrenchment in the unity/fluidity dialectic that serves only to devalue it, and consider it otherwise, from the point of view of the materiality of motherhood (p. 65).

4 In her bid to examine what it is like to "stay alongside a child" (p. 11), "to live in proximity with this irregular and mysterious other" (Ibid), to exist in the world with 'this extra, unpredictable limb' (p. 153), Baraitser inevitably moves into an exploration of the realms of maternal space and time. Building on Kristeva's (1981) concept of women's time as cyclical in opposition to the teleological structure of male time, maternal time, according to Baraitser is embedded in the present and predominantly characterised by recurring interruptions and moments of undoing (p. 75). These constant disturbances, however, while they may indeed be "depleting, exhausting, disabling" (Ibid), also have the "potential to be an enlivening and productive encounter, one that forces a mother to access a kind of thinking and feeling outside of her usual repertoire" (Ibid). With regard to space, becoming a mother entails a whole new relationship with one's environment, "a new set of actions, movements and manipulations" (p. 127) on the part of the mother as she tries to navigate the landscape afresh, accompanied by the

child and burdened with the various accoutrements of mothering, ‘maternal stuff’. Women find themselves mothering across “a vast array of different physical and geographical locations” and the challenges that this brings, or, more specifically, “the ergonomics of motherhood”, have not as yet, according to Baraitser, been given sufficient attention (Ibid).

5 To conclude, *Maternal Encounters* delivers what the title promises, in that it brings us into contact not only with the world of mothering theory but, also, the everyday lived experience of being with a child. Certainly, the text does not answer all our questions, for example, it steers away from darker forms of mothering such as depression, violence and infanticide, and does not differentiate between the experience of being a mother to a son and a mother to a daughter, but Baraitser is aware of this herself, hence the title of her own conclusion, ‘Intentions, Inconsistencies and Inconclusions’. What she does manage to convey however, is something of the specificity of the maternal position from a new and refreshing perspective.

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