

ISSN : 2395-4132

THE EXPRESSION

An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

Bimonthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal



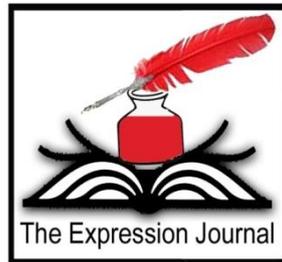
Impact Factor 6.4

Vol. 11 Issue 6 December 2025

Editor-in-Chief : Dr. Bijender Singh

Email : editor@expressionjournal.com

www.expressionjournal.com



Gender in Contemporary Renditions of the *Mahabharata*: A Reading of Selected Texts

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Abstract

The Western feminist discourse often ends up with an argument for gender equality whereas the postmodern-post-feminist discourse of gender goes a step ahead and interrogates gender as a cultural construct. The Western and left-of-the-centre historians have often tended to paint the Indian social system as full of binaries and discrimination through selective and biased presentation of facts, which needs to be revisited to decolonize the dominant discourse. The Indian thought system puts women as the epitome of *Shakti*, the eternal source of energy that runs the society since time immemorial. The *Mahabharata* is a knowledge text providing remarkable insight into the ideals of ethical obligation (*dharma*), social norms and cultural heritage of Bharat. It also reflects the power and agency wielded by the woman characters in the text to define and determine the future of Hastinapur and other kingdoms. Therefore, it is pertinent to analyse the modern renditions of *Mahabharata* by contemporary writers of fiction to assess the impact of the colonial discourse on building narratives of the portrayal of woman characters like Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, etc. A postmodern study of gender and culture in contemporary renditions of the *Mahabharata* has the potential to open multiple layers of interpretation and different perceptions of gender from the ancient times to this day.

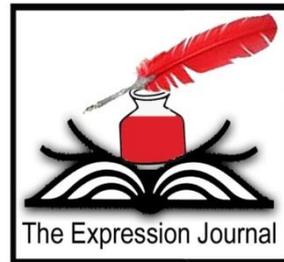
Keywords

Gender, *Mahabharata*, Mythology, Culture, Heritage, *Itihasa*, Postmodernism.

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Introduction:

The epic *Mahabharata* has been translated and rendered in various languages. These renditions of the *Mahabharata* have their own originality. This paper aims to look behind the politics and perspectives behind these renditions and comes up with close reading of the texts. The renditions of the *Mahabharata* are mostly based on the contemporary scenarios that include issues related to the existing cultural, social and gender roles. The interpretations of the *Mahabharata*, therefore, provide new opportunities for the contemporary people to understand the complex history, traditions, and culture more appropriately by relating themselves to the characters and the stories.

This study concentrates on selected renditions of the *Mahabharata* that are helpful in providing a broader perspective to gender studies. In several interpretations of the *Mahabharata*, women take the central position. Women are making way into the central discourse throughout the world and the interpretations of the *Mahabharata* are testimony to this.

Literature Review:

Rustom Bharucha, a director, writer and cultural critic, has explained in his book, *Theatre and the World: Essays on Performance and Politics of Culture* (1992) that the *Mahabharata* is not merely a great narrative poem. It is our "*itihasa*, the fundamental source of knowledge of our literature, dance, painting, sculpture, theology, statecraft, sociology, economy—in short our history in all its detail and density" (97). P. P. Raveendran, a critic, editor and translator, especially known for interpretations of texts and trends in Indian literature, has explained in his article titled "Fiction and

Vol. 11 Issue 6 (December 2025)

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Reception: Reconstructions of the *Mahabharata* in the Malayalam” (2009), that there are several interpretations of the *Mahabharata* in different versions and traditions in the whole world and these interpretations have now become an integral part of the *Mahabharata* and “no one today can read the epic in isolation of the several alternative traditions of the *Mahabharata* myths and tales that have developed in various parts of the world in diverse forms and in diverse versions” (288).

In his article “The Mahabharata as an Inspiration for Living Literary Tradition” (1990), R. C. Shah writes, “A living literary tradition presupposes the twin process of re-creation and re-interpretation in any coherent society” (246). Irawati Karve writes that the scope of the *Mahabharata* is wide-ranging in time, in space and in its casting of characters, “Heroes and cowards, villains and good men, impulsive fools and wise men, ugly men and fair ones are all depicted in the course of its narrative. Almost no person is portrayed as all good or all bad” (80). The *Mahabharata* is therefore unique in several aspects. It provides a wide scope to interpret the stories and characters in whatever way one wants to. It is because of this broadness of the epic that the various interpretations have been done and there are possibilities for thousands of more interpretations of the same.

Scope of Study:

The present study includes some of the interpretations that give voice to major women characters of the *Mahabharata*, for example, Mahaswata Devi’s short story, “Draupadi” (1997), Pratibha Ray’s novel, *Yajñaseni* (1984), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s novel, *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), Mitra Saoli’s plays, *Five Lords, Yet none a Protector* (2005) and *Timeless Tales* (2005) and Sashi Deshpande’s novella, *The Stone Women* (2000), etc. All these books are interpretations of women characters of the *Mahabharata* by women authors. These books have mostly been interpreted or analysed as feminist texts. However, it would be wrong to read these texts under the confinement of a feminist perspective. Just because they centre on women, they cannot be labelled as feminist texts.

Methodology:

The different interpretations of the *Mahabharata* mentioned above are marked by a constant shift towards a wider arena of cultural and gender studies. ‘Identity’ is the keyword in gender studies under postmodern perspective and the different interpretations of the *Mahabharata* taken for study attempt to provide new identities to the marginalised gender. This study is based upon close textual reading and analysis of selected works.

Textual Analysis: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions*

The novel *The Palace of Illusions* stands apart with its formal and structural construction. While analysing the complexity of femininity in the *Mahabharata*, Divakaruni has tried to study and highlight different layers of gender binaries in her novel. She retells the epic from the point of view of Draupadi. Divakaruni has written the novel with the contested premise that the *Mahabharata* has a male narrator that provides a man’s perspective whereas she has given a woman’s perspective in her novel to reveal the inner psyche of Draupadi as a woman.

Ashok Yakkaldevi in her article, "Role of Female Identity in the Ancient Indian Stories" (2014) describes how Divakaruni's narrative appears in many ways "merely faithfully modelled on the original, but reverses the perspective by granting the reader insight into the mind of the listening Draupadi" (6). Divakaruni, in her note to the novel, explains the reason behind her decision to write this novel. She writes that her reading of the *Mahabharata* had compelled her to think and rethink about the limited agencies of the women characters. She argues that the women characters in the epic do not question or express their own views and that their silence indicates their confined roles of a mother and a wife. Divakaruni says that these characters "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" (xiv). The author has not changed the actual course of the plot of the *Mahabharata*; she has rather written her novel from a woman's point of view.

This depiction of Draupadi is bold and powerful. But the claim of Divakaruni that the epic itself is a weak portrayal of Draupadi's character, is highly contested. The original text shows Draupadi as a powerful character who can speak for herself and force the men to kill the culprits even if they are their blood relations. It is a matter of debate in literary discourse whether only women can portray the psyche of women or people coming from Dalit background can write about the lived experiences of marginalization faced by their community. There are numerous instances of male writers depicting women more beautifully than most women writers and the same holds true for the *Mahabharata* as well. This is one of the reasons why the court scene of Draupadi's attempted disrobing by Dushasana remains unchanged in the novel.

The destruction and chaos spread due to the Mahabharata War transformed Hastinapur into a city of women. The destruction in the war triggered a remarkable change in the character of Draupadi. After her revenge against the Kaurava-s was fulfilled, her attention shifted from her own self to other women who had lost their husbands and sons in the War. "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" (323). The author brings a major change in her novel by turning Parikshit, the son of Abhimanyu into a daughter, who becomes the only heir to continue Pandava-s line. Thus, the authoritative power or the central position has been given to a woman that symbolises the reversal of role and governance of women on men in future.

Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* (1984)

Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi is a novel written by Pratibha Ray in Oriya and translated into English by Pradip Bhattacharaya. Like *The Palace of Illusion* of Divakaruni, Draupadi occupies the central position in *Yajñaseni*. Here again, Draupadi is the narrator and the novel is written in first person narration. The very title *Yajnaseni* means a woman born out of fire. In the *Ramayana*, Sita, born out of the earth, is an epitome of calmness, sacrifice, and patience. Whereas Draupadi in the *Mahabharata*, born out of fire, is an exemplification of fire, anger and impatience. But Pratibha Ray in her novel has released Draupadi from the image of a revengeful

woman. In a review titled “The Novels of Pratibha Ray” (2013), Prafool Kumar Mohanty has talked of ‘humanist feminism’ as the basic approach of the novel *Yajnaseni*. Draupadi represents a modern woman who has her own identity. Ray has said in her interviews that Draupadi is a representative of a kind of ‘humanist feminist’ who does not have the rigidity or resentment of the French poststructuralist feminism of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray. The Draupadi of Ray is in the, “tradition of the classical feminine as envisaged by Vyasa and other Vedic philosophers: yet she is sophisticated, knowledgeable, well-versed in fine arts, warfare, and even the dice game. She is magnanimous and self-eschewing, almost transcending the milieu which she inherits” (38). Draupadi has been presented in the novel with all the virtues expected in an ideal woman. She is cultured, knowledgeable, benevolent and sacrificing.

However, Pratibha Ray also falls in the same misplaced notion that Divakruni fell in her novel. On the one hand, Draupadi is shown playing her feminine role in the confinement of her gender and on the other hand, she is raising questions against the rigidity of gender binaries. She understands that she will have to fight for her self-respect, her identity, and position but she finds herself helpless. In the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi is known for her mysticism, fire and revengefulness. But Ray has portrayed Draupadi as an innocent and pious woman who has to suffer due to her confined gendered role. She is not able to decide anything for her own life and she is helplessly following the accepted gender and moral diktats and walking on the path chosen by men.

Mahasweta Devi’s “Draupadi”

Mahasweta Devi’s short story “Draupadi” (1987) is set in a system of hierarchy in which there is a group of tribal people fighting against the government for their rights and survival. These tribes are marginalised and the women in their group are doubly marginalised. The story captures the struggle of a tribal woman addressed by two names, Dopdi and Draupadi Majhen. She is involved in the Naxalite movement and lives in the Sharkhani forest with other Naxalite rebels. The background that the author provides is in itself quite conflicting. The politics of power pervades the text as men and women fight for their existence, for their freedom and right. In this situation, the very condition of Naxalite women is being exposed. They are suppressed because of class, caste, and gender. The women who are a part of the Naxal groups have to suffer physically and emotionally.

The story is, therefore, quite sensitive. The translator of the story, Spivak suggests that the story should not be read as a distortion of the ancient epic. The central character of the story Dopdi represents the Draupadi of the *Mahabharata* in the modern circumstances and conditions. Spivak writes, “it would be a mistake, I think, to read the modern story as a refutation of the ancient. Dopdi is as heroic as Draupadi” (9). In an article titled “Archetypal Deconstruction in Mahasweta Devi’s Draupadi” (2014), Rajni Dwivedi has explained that the force of the story lies in its “grounding in the Hindu mythology of gender subaltern’s body, the female body which is never questioned and only exploited” (241).

Mahasweta Devi has presented Dopdi as a fighter who has to suffer due to her sexuality and gender. In the story, when the tribal woman Dopdi is undressed and

gang raped by the police officials, she loses her weaknesses with her bare body. This act of gang rape and the nakedness of her body made her more powerful than she was. She exhibited her wounds and blood to the General (Senanayak) when she was brought to tent in the morning. After being raped for several nights Dopdi does not die or become silent. She rather speaks, roars, and questions the masculinity of the men who have raped her. She has no feminine self or female body now and she questions the Senanayak if he has the masculinity to break her any more. Comparing the tribal Dopdi to the Draupadi in the *Mahabharata*, one thing becomes clear that both of them had to face insult and humiliation due to their feminine body. In the story, the major point that Mahasweta Devi has exposed is the politics of sexuality or the politics over women's body.

Bala has explained that Mahasweta Devi has presented an example for women to be fearless and fight for their rights instead of accepting their rape as an end of their life and bearing the insult with silence. Women who are raped or insulted by men should not keep silent and hide themselves from the society or to commit suicide, they should rather raise their voice so that the victimizer would be afraid and feel guilt for the crime.

Draupadi in the *Mahabharata* questions the masculinity of both, those who have tried to undress her and those who have become silent spectators. Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi," therefore, gives a strong message to the women that they should fight for themselves alone and break all the sexual and gender restrictions so that their body would no longer be considered as an object to be used by men.

***The Stone Women and Other Stories* by Shashi Deshpande**

The Stone Women (2000), a collection of short stories by Shashi Deshpande, aims to create awareness in both men and women towards their gender roles that they are religiously following.

Shashi Deshpande's *The Stone Women*, as the very title suggests, offers central position to women in all the stories. The women characters in the stories are mythological, taken mostly from the *Mahabharata*. The title of the collection has been taken from the first story. The female characters in these stories are placed in difficult situations. They are torn between the self and society. Shashi Deshpande's book is a sincere attempt at "revisiting her mythological sisters and tap their feminine consciousness from an awkward women's point of view" (Prakash 40).

Mitra Saoli's *Five Lords, Yet None a Protector* and *Timeless Tales*

Five Lords Yet None a Protector (2005) and *Timeless Tales* (2006) are two plays based on the *Mahabharata* by Saoli Mitra, a Bengali actress born and brought up under the influence of the technicality of a theatre artist. These plays were originally written in Bengali titled *Nathaboti Anathaboth* and *Katha Amritasaman* and translated into English as *Five Lords, Yet None a Protector* and *Timeless Tales* by Ipsita Chanda, Rita Datta and Moushumi Bhowmik.

In the "Forward" to the plays, Nabaneeta Dev Sen, an Indian poet and novelist, has explained that the play *Five Lords Yet None a Protector* is the first modern Bengali play to give a feminist interpretation to the characters of the *Mahabharata*. Mitra has accomplished an incredible task of writing a play, directing it and acting in it. In both

the plays, Mitra has worked as “an author, a director, an actor, a singer and a dancer, and excelling in each role. She has combined several genres and a variety of literary styles to express herself fully in these plays, using prose, poetry and music, folk style and classical style, with urban and rural dialect” (Datta XI).

Saoli has chosen some of the important episodes of the *Mahabharata* related to some major characters. With her multiple talents she makes the characters alive before the audience and the readers. Both plays are performed by a single young woman (Saoli Mitra) who narrates the story and plays different roles by adding her own comments. In the play *Timeless Tales*, Mitra has taken the tragic stories of some of the chief characters from the *Mahabharata*. It presents a mature interpretation of the stories from the *Mahabharata*. The play also displays the darker sides of the Kurukshetra War and the helplessness of human beings before their destiny.

Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*

The Great Indian Novel (1989) is a satirical novel based on the epic *Mahabharata* written by Shashi Tharoor. The background of the novel is the Indian Freedom movement. The novel is written in first person narration and Veda Vyasa, the counterpart of Shashi Tharoor, is the narrator. Unlike the other two novels discussed above, *The Palace of Illusions* and *Yajnaseni*, *The Great Indian Novel* is narrated and written by a man from a man's point of view. The historical figures like Gandhi, Nehru, Bose, etc., are transformed into characters taken from the epic.

Tharoor has given a special role to one of the less mentioned women in the *Mahabharata*, Dushala, the only daughter of Dhritrashtra (Nehru) called in the novel as Priya Duryodhani, representing Indira Gandhi. She has been portrayed in the novel as a woman who was not confident of her feminine beauty. She struggles to be equal to her hundred brothers and transforms herself into an ambitious, violent, and cruel woman. In the novel, the character of Draupadi personifies democracy. The birth of democracy after Independence is like the birth of Draupadi. Gandhi represents Bhishma of the *Mahabharata*.

B. R. Chopra's *Mahabharata* (1988)

Among the TV adaptations of the *Mahabharata*, only B. R. Chopra's 1988 TV serial telecast on Doordarshan is faithful to the original text of Veda Vyasa. The powerful dialogues and script composed by Dr. Rahi Masoom Reza and Pandit Narendra Sharma and superb acting, costumes, and direction have made this TV adaptation immortal. Mythological stories are always a part of the collective consciousness of the masses, but the popularity of the *Mahabharata* in the contemporary generation in India owes largely to this TV serial.

Dr. Rahi Masoom Reza has stuck to the original storyline of the text without manipulating the ethos of the epic for making it consumer-friendly, as is the case with all the later visual adaptations of the *Mahabharata*. The construction of gender in the serial is poignant, especially the episode of Draupadi's attempted disrobing, which brought tears into the eyes of the viewers with its visual effects.

Conclusion:

To conclude, all the modern renditions of the *Mahabharata* contribute towards a better understanding of the myriads of issues raised in this epic. The adaptations are crucial for offering diverse viewpoints towards an understanding of this cultural text. However, the authorial intent becomes a site of contest when it is presumed by the likes of Pratibha Ray and Divakaruni that *Mahabharata* is not kind to its women characters. Therefore, all these texts require a close critical reading to understand their meanings in the context of the original text.

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