



A Re-understanding of Female Identity through Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan's *Mahabharata* Novels *The One Who Swam with the Fishes* and *The One Who Had Two Lives*

Preeti Patanjali, Research Scholar, Department of Modern Indian Languages and Literary Studies,
University of Delhi, New Delhi.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4288-4601>

Dr D. Uma Devi, Professor of Tamil, Department of Modern Indian Languages and Literary Studies,
University of Delhi, New Delhi.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7422-2843>

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.6945410

Abstract

“Mahabharata”, the longest epic and also called ‘the fifth Veda’, has had a compelling role in establishing and validating the female identity from the insight of a male. Even after a span of hundreds of years, it still holds a revered significance concerning certain roles dictated different for men and women which, in a way, hold men at supremacy. The rich glut of the “Mahabharata” retellings indicates that contemporary women writers consider the epic to be a significant reason for the perpetuation of a misinterpreted female identity. Contrary to the epic, the women novelists attempt to bring to light an alternate portrayal of the epic women characters through their “Mahabharata” novels. They aim at shedding light on a female insight and deliberation through it. Thus, the research paper attempts to probe two “Mahabharata” novels, “The One Who Swam with the Fishes” (2017) and “The One Who Had Two Lives” (2018), of the series Girls of the “Mahabharata” penned down by Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan. Correspondingly, it would take into consideration Elaine Showalter’s theory of ‘gynocriticism’ to look into the female aspects which include female experience, language, body and, thus, the female identity.

Keywords: Female Identity, Gynocriticism, Epic, Female Experience.

Introduction

Mahabharata, the longest epic and also called ‘the fifth Veda’, has had a compelling role in establishing and validating the female identity from the insight of a male. Even after a span of hundreds of years, it still holds a revered significance for certain roles dictated different for men and women which, in a way, hold men at supremacy. To break this autonomy there has been a rich glut of *Mahabharata* retellings in the past few years which indicates that contemporary women writers consider the epic to be a significant reason for the perpetuation of a misinterpreted female identity. However, there are a considerable number of male novelists as well who have represented the female characters of the epic in a contemporary perspective and share the same opinion as the woman novelists that the female characters in the epic are shadowed. Contrary to the epic, the women novelists attempt to bring to light an alternate portrayal of the epic women characters through their *Mahabharata* novels to shed light on female insight and deliberation and, thus, the female identity. The



research paper attempts to probe two *Mahabharata* novels, *The One Who Swam with the Fishes* (2017) and *The One Who Had Two Lives* (2018), of the series *Girls of the Mahabharata*, penned down by Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan and focuses on Satyavati and Amba as the protagonists of the respective novels. Correspondingly, it would take into consideration Elaine Showalter's theory of 'gynocriticism' to look into the novels for the perception of an alternate female identity that is visualized by a female.

A Look at Elaine Showalter's Theory of Gynocriticism

Elaine Showalter in her famous essay "Towards a Feminist Poetics" (1979) rejects the idea of evaluating a woman's work on the grounds of male literary theories. Since both, male and female, are two different individuals with a different set of social and cultural codes then it would be unfair to evaluate the works of both on the same plane. She further iterates that it is only a woman who could better understand and analyze a woman's work since both share similar experiences for the body and mind. In her essay, Showalter coined the term 'gynocriticism' for such a critical framework.

...the programme of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories. Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture. (Showalter 28)

It is further pointed out by Showalter that this female culture is looked into the shared experiences of women which is a point of commonality in them, i.e. in their roles as mothers, daughters, sisters and friends and also in some activities and experiences that are exclusive to women, such as their ideas about their body, sexuality, reproduction, taboos, myths, rituals (Showalter 28). Also, she asserts that female experience is not an emotion but a source of independent art and hence is not counted as irrational and absurd (Showalter 38). And, this art is extracted from the everyday experiences of females that bring to the surface the perception of actual female identity.

A Peek at the Story of Satyavati and Amba in *Mahabharata*

Satyavati and Amba are both significant threads of the epic *Mahabharata*. These two women have eminently contributed to the progression of the plot of the epic. Satyavati is hailed as the first feminist who marked her name by being the matriarch of the Kuru dynasty. She was mysteriously born and was brought up by a fisherman. Shantanu was so bewitched by her fragrance and magnetism that he could not resist falling in for her and eventually proposed to her for marriage. Noticeably, it is Satyavati's bloodline instead of Shantanu's that ran since her both sons from Shantanu died while young and Bhishma took an oath of celibacy. To keep the dynasty intact she sent for her elder son Vyasa, born from sage Parashar, to consummate with Amba and Ambalika, wives of her late son Vichitravirya. So, it was Satyavati who saved the Kuru dynasty in such a crucial hour of getting fallen.

Amba, too, is considered an epitome of a feminist since she defied and denied following the fate opened for her when Bhishma abducted her from her swayamvara. She outright refused to marry Vichitravirya and boldly expressed her desire to marry Shalva.



However, Shalva's rejection brought her no choice but to end her life since she was not going to be accepted either by her father and Vichitravirya and Bhishma too denied marrying her. But she chose to avenge the insult done by Bhishma. She observed penance for years and when Shiva granted her the desired boon she immolated herself to get re-incarnated as Shikhandi, the doom of Bhishma.

The Re-presentation of Female Identity through Satyavati and Amba in the Novels

Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan through the re-presentation of Satyavati and Amba has shed light on an alternate portrayal of female identity which stands in contrast to the one projected by Vyasain the epic. In the novels, Satyavati and Amba, are not attributed with subservience, patience, devotion and selflessness. In a contrast, they are greedy, selfish, and opportunistic. Madhavan has glorified these attributes of her heroines which is quite explicit from the way these traits are unfolded in the course of the novels. She has not demotivated these re-presented shades of the epic women characters and regards them as rational and actual by asserting her own experience of being a female.

In the novels, Madhavan has laid some hints for countenance, feelings, emotions, relationships and values to shed light on her idea of a female. In consideration of countenance, Madhavan has re-defined beauty not from the perspective of physical features and fair complexion but with wit and wisdom. In the portrayal of Satyavati, she has glorified her dark complexion as "the colour of mud" (Madhavan 5). Similarly, in the delineation of Amba, she has kept her high physical stature a prominent characteristic of her character which made her feel like a camel sometimes. Also, Madhavan has pointed a finger at other stereotypical attributes as well like, traditionally, it is expected from a girl to be demure and quiet and is not supposed to raise a question about whatever she is asked to do. In response, Madhavan's protagonists are defiant, bold and brave to question anything which they find odd and do not follow them.

When it comes to emotions, Madhavan has provided a benevolent glance at the emotions of both Satyavati and Amba, however, through the monologues. Satyavati when for the first time met Bhishma was enticed by his personality. She admits to herself that it would be quite hard for her to have motherly feelings for Bhishma since both, Satyavati and Bhishma, were of the same age. Moreover, Satyavati could not deny to herself that Bhishma was handsome enough to stir sensual feelings in her that are certainly not meant for a son (Madhavan 139). Amba, too, fell for Bhishma when he single-handedly combated with all the princes who came there to participate in her swayamvara. The journey from Kashi to Hastinapur is appended to bring a contrast in the mind of Amba regarding Salva and Bhishma. She inadvertently fell for his kind gesture toward her and her sisters. Also, the two-day journey made her live a life of freedom, away from the inhibitions of vigilance, manners and decorum. So, when Salva came to rescue her he was quite shocked to see her jovial and not like a damsel's distress.

In both of her novels, Madhavan has made sure to instil a female's vision of marriage and marital relationships. She asserts that a woman's worth is more than just getting married and bearing children (Madhavan 27). She opines that just like a man a woman wishes to be in power and authority. And, in a male-dominated society, a woman can have access to power and prestige either when she is born into it or gets married to one (Madhavan 22). That's



what Satyavati did. She was born to a king but was denied the status that she deserved at birth. In the case of Amba as well, Madhavan asserts that “marriage is a game, and only the strongest player wins.” (Madhavan 62) It illuminates the point that a wife should be prudent and not selfless. It is worth noting that Madhavan has defied the male discourse here by comparing marriage to a game and has also challenged the sanctity of marriage propagated by men for ages. Madhavan has also deliberated about the equation between husband and wife that marital relationships should not be based on the domination of one while the supremacy of the other. According to Madhavan, a marital relationship is a bond of equality where both partners care and worry for each other since it is a connotation of ‘great love’ (Madhavan 44).

Madhavan disregards the male established opinion which visualizes a woman as a dependent entity either on her father or her husband. Satyavati though had been brought up in meagre conditions yet like to be independent. She preferred to have her hut where she could live a happy life with her brother Chiro. Also, her sense of individuality is seen in her preference to remain unmarried if she would not get a suitable partner, “for my own marriage, I hadn’t considered it, but if there was a man worthy of my great wealth, I’d think about it. Maybe I’d have enough money to not marry at all, and just be able to row my own boat every morning, and live my own life.” (Madhavan 67) Generally, it is a woman who needs to prove her worthiness to get married to a man but here Madhavan has reversed this tradition. This sense of individuality is also seen in Satyavati’s self-esteem that she again wanted to meet the king not as one who is in a need but as a woman of strength, determination and an equal to him (Madhavan 41). This aspect of Satyavati is accentuated earlier as well when she pleaded with Parashara to let her stay on the mysterious island. She hated it that she had to beg him, “I hated myself just then, this piteous mewling creature who had no self-respect. I hated myself more than I hated him.” (Madhavan 128) She did not let her pathetic condition wash away her hope and ambition to live and become a queen. Even when her foster mother ousted her out of the house she immediately discarded the idea to drown herself in the river which her foster mother suggested to her and motivated herself to live an independent life (Madhavan 58).

Among all these traits, there are some scattered bits here and there in the novel that also focuses on Madhavan’s portrayal of female identity. Satyavati had been used to boys since she quite often accompany her father to the bank of the river and even helped him to row the boat. It is again a contrast to the male discourse which dictates that a girl should have the company of female folks and should maintain distance from men. Also, Satyavati finds it more interesting to listen to and know more about the lives of women in the troupe of Kaarika-bi because she felt it is more entertaining than her monotonous life (Madhavan 78). It is again a contrast to the male discourse which declares such women like Kaarika-bi and her troupe girls as immoral. A similar aspect is pointed out in the case of Amba also; Amba and her sisters liked to hear horror stories more than the mythological tales of virtuous women. Moreover, Satyavati does not like to fast and expressed her strong dislike of this biased tradition where only a woman is forced to do it that too for the men of the family while men are free from such obligations, “I hated fasting, hated how often we had to do it; it seemed like we were always going hungry – for a good catch, for a good husband, for the



long life of my brother and father, to appease the river goddess and I also hated how it seemed like the men never had to do it.” (Madhavan35)

The style employed by Madhavan also draws attention to her idea of imparting a distinguishing factor to the novels. Like, there is extensive use of para-linguistic expressions in the novels, such as ‘Ah’, ‘Shh’, ‘hush’, ‘humph’, etc. Besides in both the novels, there is a use of the first-person pronoun, i.e. ‘I’, in the narration to impart the subjectivity of being a female. Also, there are many instances in both the novels where Madhavan has quite frequently used expressions like ‘my,’ ‘me,’ ‘mine,’ ‘like’ and ‘dislike’. Such expressions also emphasize the subjectivity of the writer. She has used such expressions to relate personal experiences related to the body which instills a female touch to the novels, like when Satyavati was fourteen years old she felt young, she was just eight years old when for the first time she experienced a man’s gaze on her, etc. Furthermore, Madhavan has shed light on the lives of other women as well. She has given voice to their plight as well as their point of view in the novel.

Madhavan has given equal attention to female rituals and folk games related to girls, like folk songs of women, kith-kith games, marriage rituals, river festivals, etc. In consideration of rituals, two rituals are emphasized significantly in both novels. In *The One Who Swam with the Fishes*, the menstruation ritual is focused upon. When Satyavati went through her menstrual cycle for the first time, the island compelled her to leave Parashar’s hut and she had to stay in a secluded hut for five days. Only on the sixth day, did the island allow her to go to Parashar’s hut again. Satyavati was displeased over such inhibition of being cornered and aloof. The other ritual is the purifying ritual which is pointed out in the novel *The One Who Had Two lives*. Amba and her sisters had to go through a purifying ritual meant for the brides. They took bath in a copper tub and had to take a dip in that water. After that, they were thoroughly examined by the maids and they were properly cleansed. There as well Madhavan has shown her displeasure that only women are meant to go through all this. There is also a consistent use of italics at many points to emphasize particular words and opinions. Also, there are some specific words deliberately chosen to play a significant factor in narration. Madhavan has chosen these specific words, i.e., ‘precious jewel’, ‘avengeful goddess’, ‘treasure’, etc., to qualify her protagonists Satyavati and Amba. It is deliberately done by Madhavan to elevate them as well as their emotions.

Conclusion

Madhavan has reconstructed the female identity by re-presenting the epic women characters Satyavati and Amba. In the course of it, she has shed light on relevant aspects like countenance, relationships, marriage, marital love, emotions, individuality, etc. Along the way, she has brought to the surface the details that are exclusive to females thereby bringing to the forefront the female culture. Furthermore, she has imparted a distinguishing factor to the novels by incorporating her literary style and format. Both the words and the expressions are deliberately chosen by Madhavan to suit her purpose of creating her literary style away from the male discourse. Lastly, the attempt of Madhavan of reconstructing the epic women characters brings the idea to re-look at the epic and its characters in an alternate dimension since the epics are a significant part of India and its culture. So, it would not be wrong to say



that it is also an attempt to re-look at the Indian culture from the eyes or perspective of a female.

References

- [1] Abrams, M. H. and Geoffrey Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 8th ed., Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2005.
- [2] Bhawalkar, Vanamala. *Woman in the Mahabharata*. Sharada Publishing House, 1999.
- [3] Eagleton, Mary, editor. *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*. Basil Blackwell, 1986.
- [4] Jacobus, Mary., Editor. *Women Writing and Writing about Women*. Croom Helm, 1979.
- [5] Madhavan, Meenakshi Reddy. *The One Who Swam with the Fishes*. Harper Collins, 2017.
- [6] ---. *The One Who Had Two Lives*. Harper Collins, 2018.

Author (s) Contribution Statement: Nil

Author (s) Acknowledgement: Nil

Author (s) Declaration: I declare that there is no competing interest in the content and authorship of this scholarly work.



The content of the article is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution4.0 International License.