

Unmuting and reinterpreting the *Mahabharata* through feminist translation in *The Palace of Illusions* (2008)

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Abstract

The *Mahabharata* is arguably the most well-known Hindu epic in modern day India. Despite the fact that it is not, strictly speaking, a religious text, the notion(s) it vehiculates concerning what constitutes the correct gendered code of conduct continue to shape the minds and practices of a majority of Hindus in India. The original *Mahabharata*, I contend, promotes a subservient position of women within their interpersonal relations and the larger domain of society, and legitimises patriarchal codes that restrict and controls women and their bodies in both the private and the public sphere in contemporary Hindu society. In this context, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) provides for what I perceive to be a feminist translation of the original; by making the central female character the narratorial voice, it problematises taken-for-granted notions of ideal Hindu womanhood. This translation un-silences and re-centres the marginalised people (women and lower castes) whose stories were otherwise left unsaid in the original *Mahabharata*. Divakaruni's feminist translation also delves into tabooed topics such as female sexuality and pleasure. I argue that Divakaruni's *Mahabharata* demystifies the unquestioned authority of *Mahabharata* as a text that defines appropriate Hindu womanhood, so that her translation is not just a literary work but also becomes a tool for societal change.

Keywords

Mahabharata, feminist translation, Hindu epic, *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), Hinduism

1. Introduction

The *Mahabharata* is, arguably, the most widely known, read, and taught Hindu epic in present day India. As I was growing up, I read the *Mahabharata* in school and watched televised versions of it, so much so that it came to define what Hinduism meant to me. Even though the *Mahabharata* is not strictly a religious text, its power over the Hindu public is arguably greater than the *Vedas* or *Puranas* precisely because of its immense popularity. In this article, I first explain why an epic has been elevated to the position of a sacred text. I will then briefly touch upon the question of male authorship and outline the way in which I (re)define the concept of translation. I discuss Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) and, by applying a feminist perspective to her version of the *Mahabharata*, I seek to highlight how the novel is essentially a translated work that unveils the intentional silences and absences in the original text. I elaborate on how Divakaruni speaks of otherwise tabooed subjects, thus effectively talking or, rather, writing back to the original author. Lastly, I conclude by explaining why de/reconstructing texts such as the *Mahabharata* through translation is crucial to the feminist discourse in India. Since the widely popular *Mahabharata* continues to capture and shape the Hindu way of life, re-translating the story in a new manner allows for "the enunciation of multiple feminisms and their various contradictions within the Indian context, and for the creation of common ground between feminists and Indian women at large" (Luthra, 2014, p. 137). I undertake a personal *unlearning journey* via Divakaruni's translation of the famous epic and rely mostly on my life experience as a Hindu and a feminist (the terms oftentimes clash with each other).

2. Legitimising Hindu epics as sacred texts

Hinduism, arguably one of the oldest religions in the world, is polytheistic. As someone who was raised a Hindu, over the years it became clear to me that the tenets of Hinduism are not entirely strictly fixed. Indeed, Hinduism allows for multiple interpretations of what the religion constitutes and how it should be practised, with only very few rules (such as not eating beef) that must be adhered to. Moreover, polytheism allows for blurring the distinction between what can be labelled a religious Hindu text and what is not religious. As commonly accepted, Hinduism derives its wisdom from the *Vedas*, the *Puranas* and the *Upanishads* (Vohra and Sharma, 2014, p. 100). However, what captures the popular imagination are the two Hindu epics: the *Mahabharata*, written around the 4th century BCE and the *Ramayana*, written around the 5th century BCE (Basu, 2016b, n.p.).

While the authority of the *Vedas*, *Puranas* and *Upanishads* as sacred texts of Hinduism is rarely questioned, the two epics have a somewhat contested or, rather, confusing position in terms how they perceived by the general public, scholars, and theologians. I see them essentially as religious literary works that not only have Hinduism embedded in their narratives, but also have the power to shape how Hinduism is practised. For instance, the story of the *Ramayana* is that of a Hindu deity, Lord Ram who defeats the evil Ravan. Lord Ram's victory is celebrated in India as *Dussehra*, followed by *Diwali*, which commemorates his return to his kingdom of Ayodha. With its "100,000 verses", the *Mahabharata* is "the longest epic poem ever written" (Basu, 2016a, n.p.). It is "eight times as long as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* put together" (Hopkins quoted in Erney, 2019, p. 486), and it includes the Hindu scripture of *Bhagavad Gita*, whose title means "The Song of the Divine Lord". The fact that arguably the most sacred Hindu scripture is a part of a mythological epic does not challenge the legitimacy of the *Gita*. This is precisely because, given the open, fluid nature of Hinduism, the border between what is considered a sacred text, and what is mythology, or epic, or folklore, is porous. Consequently, these genres do not function in contestation but, rather, converse, collide and shape each

other. In other words, it can be said that the *Mahabharata* derives its validity from the fact that it houses the *Gita*, just as the *Gita* is validated by being a part of the *Mahabharata*. This fluidity is further mobilised when people draw on the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* to define appropriate Hindu culture (the term 'Hindu' is often used erroneously to denote what is in fact a multi-religious India). While the lessons to be drawn from these immensely popular texts are numerous, they also foreground some severe shortcomings, one of which being the deliberate silencing of the female characters in these narratives.

3. Male authorship and authority

Unsurprisingly, the authors of both the *Ramayana* and of the *Mahabharata* are male, and assumed to be the human avatars of Brahma, the Hindu God of Creation. The author of the *Ramayana*, Valmiki, is believed to be an actual person, while the author of the *Mahabharata* also compiled the *Vedas*, and was called Ved Vyasa. Although many see Ved Vyasa as the name of the person who wrote the *Mahabharata*, others argue that it was simply a title bestowed on the person who organised the *Vedas* (since that is what 'Ved Vyasa' actually means). Nonetheless, even though the identity of the author is contested, there seems to be little doubt that it *must* be a man. One cannot help but wonder why it has never been pointed out that the author may as well have been a woman? Perhaps it is unimaginable, in a society that continues to be seeped in patriarchy, to think that a woman can have the calibre to write an epic this great. Perhaps the thought of a woman as the author of the *Gita* makes the general public and the (male) theologians extremely uncomfortable, as it would entail that Hindus have been following religious dictates defined by a person belonging to the weaker, to-be-dominated sex. Perhaps feminists would not in fact like to think it may have been a woman because, should that be the case, how could they then explain the glaring yet casual dismissiveness shown to the female characters in the epic? However, just because a woman has written a text does not entail it would implicitly or explicitly wave the flag for feminism. For centuries, women writers have produced texts that continue to uphold patriarchal norms, silencing women, casting them in narrow categories of either the Madonna or the whore.

4. Translating to unveil silences

When it comes to the translation of sacred Hindu texts, it needs to be pointed out that women translators do exist. Of course, over the centuries translations of the *Mahabharata* have been largely done by men; the most popular English translation in recent years is *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* by Devdutt Pattanaik, which came out in 2010. Female translators have been a rare few. Kamala Subramaniam's translation, first published in 1965 and now at its 18th edition, has been persistently popular because it is considered a faithful translation. Precisely for this reason, Subramaniam's remarkable translation or, for that matter, any other 'faithful' translations of the *Mahabharata* by women will not be the main subject of this study. Instead, I focus on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The palace of illusions* (2008) that tells the story of the *Mahabharata* through the first person narrative voice of the main female character, Draupadi. While, traditionally, such retellings are not categorised as translations, I argue that every translator brings into the text, deliberately or not, his or her positionality. A translator is not and cannot be invisible. He or she might be the bridge between two languages but the nature, make and shape of this bridge is unique.

Although, as Shahane points out, translation is conventionally perceived as an "uni-directional process" wherein an "operation [is] performed on two languages: the source language (SL) and the target language (TL)", which leads to a "change from SL to TL", he argues that "translation is as much an act of creativity as the original writing in literature is acknowledged to be"

(Shahane, 1983 p. 5). It can further be argued that translation is a complex phenomenon that entails “rewriting, new writing, transcreation, recreation” operating all at once (Giovanni, 2013, p. 101). Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) moves away from contemporary translation practices, where proximity to the source text is traditionally a priority and turns towards the ancient translation practices in India that allowed for “creative reproduction of religious texts written in Sanskrit”, such as the *Mahabharata* itself (Giovanni, 2013, pp. 102-103). This aspect reflects an approach to translation as ‘transcreation’, where “[f]idelity to the source was far less prominent than creativity” (Giovanni, 2013, pp. 102-103). Indeed, Divakaruni’s feminist retelling of the *Mahabharata* encapsulates the notion of “translation as new writing” (Mukherjee quoted in Giovanni, 2013, p. 103) and “reinforces the view of written translational activity in India as highly dynamic and prolific” (Giovanni, 2013, p. 103). While writing in postcolonial India, Divakaruni turns to pre-colonial times when the “highly creative potential” of translation was not just accepted but appreciated (Giovanni, 2013, p. 103).

My own standpoint is that, in contemporary India, the act of translating must not simply involve an attempt to be ‘faithful’ to the original, but should be a way of reinterpreting texts. True, reinterpretation through translation can easily be dismissed if one considers that this is not the purpose of translation to do that, and that translators are not at liberty to (re)interpret. It is nevertheless my claim that, by building their bridge between languages, translators are forever interpreting. And yet translation is both necessary and impossible (Maini, 2018). Translations are necessary as they enable texts to reach a wider audience, overcoming language barriers. Translations are also impossible because a translation is not a straightforward transfer from one language to another but, rather, it involves complex processes aiming to make intelligible a particular historical, cultural, socio-political context embedded within the original work, which it also shapes. The fact that the bridge can be built in several different ways is certainly not a downside. On the contrary, the impossibility of a single ‘perfect’ translation allows for a plurality of meanings to emerge that challenges a hegemonic, monolithic notion of what is considered a good translation. Furthermore, translators are “active, creative agents” who engage in “a process which can upturn asymmetries” (Giovanni, 2013, p. 112). In Divakaruni’s case, as I hope to reveal shortly, it is the asymmetries of gender in the *Mahabharata* which are getting upturned and dismantled. Clearly, the translator has the power to un-silence the voices on the periphery, to move them towards the centre. Indeed, according to Shahane, the most difficult problem of translation “is not to seek ‘a true correspondence of words’ but to find whether ‘there can be a true redaction of silence’ (1983, p. 17). A translator does not abuse his or her power when they reveal what is left unsaid between lines. Divakaruni’s novel *The palace of illusions* is still the story of the *Mahabharata* as we know it, but it does not ‘stay true’ to Ved Vyasa’s version. Instead, it illuminates those aspects and people who the original author had occluded. Effectively, I find that translating a text has the potential to let us “know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us” (Rich, 1972, p. 19).

Melissa Wallace talks of “translators as manipulators”, as “active (not passive, not invisible) shapers of texts with the potential to catalyse literary and even social change” (2002, p. 66). Indeed, they have “the power to manipulate texts at more than one textual level, between linguistic, cultural and even political boundaries” (Wallace, 2002, p. 66). Feminist translators in particular “deliberately seek solutions to texts which speak against their code of values, against their political agendas, against the cultural constructs of their gender” (Wallace, 2002, p. 69). This “rejects submission to the original”, thereby creating a “translator effect” that subverts “the stronghold of authorship” (Wallace, 2002, p. 69). Such an attempt is evident Divakaruni’s rendition of the *Mahabharata*, where a female character becomes the primary voice of the

story. Divakaruni's attempt to see the *Mahabharata* from a feminist lens also opens spaces for challenging notions of Hindu womanhood that the epic legitimises and promotes in modern Hindu society.

5. The *re-visioning* power of narration

The action in the *Mahabharata* is arguably triggered by Draupadi, the common wife of the five legendary Pandava brothers. In the story, the scene where the eldest Pandava, Yudhishthir, gambles away Draupadi to his cousin Duryodhan (the oldest of the hundred Kaurava brothers), the latter commands Draupadi to be disrobed. Though she is saved by the divine intervention of Lord Krishna, this unsurmountable insult to her honour makes an enraged Draupadi instigate her husbands to wage war against the Kauravas. This war is the crux of the *Mahabharata*. Thus, Draupadi is a key element in the story because she functions as the trigger that sets the plot in motion, but in the original *Mahabharata* she is *not* a subject endowed with agency despite being the one who urges her husbands to war. Divakaruni's narration challenges this. She does so primarily by bestowing on Draupadi the immensely powerful position of the narrator. By changing *who is doing the telling*, Divakaruni shapes *what is told, how it is told, and why it is told*. With Draupadi as the first person narrator, the epic shifts from being a patriarchal grand narrative about powerful men and wars they bravely fight to save *their* women, to the autobiographic story of a thus far silenced and stupefied woman who has now, metaphorically, been handed over the microphone to expose the underpinnings of the original story and, more importantly, to narrate her story on her own terms. In Wallace's words, Divakaruni "re-work[s] language to restore women's dignity, creativity and equality" (2002, p. 70). She makes "the feminine visible in language", which implies "making women seen and heard in the real world" (von Flotow quoted in Wallace, 2002, p. 70).

In the "Author's Note" to *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni explains:

[L]istening to the stories of Mahabharat as a young girl [...] I was left unsatisfied with the portrayals of the women [...] [who] remained shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions portrayed only when 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 remember thinking [...] 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. Better still, I would have one of them tell it herself, with all her joys and doubts, her struggles and her triumphs, her heartbreaks, her achievements, the unique female way in which she sees her world and her place in it. (2008, p. xiv-xv)

Hence, by turning the epic into an autobiography by a woman, this form of translation can be seen as a response to the patriarchal dominance that subsumes the original work. In the *Mahabharata* narrated by Draupadi, the otherwise oppressed and marginalised woman offers resistance and fights her way into the centre of the text, demanding inclusivity. In doing so, Divakaruni's translation of the epic not only undertakes a revision of the text, but re-visions the story itself. As Adrienne Rich explains,

[r]e-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for [woman] more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival [...] And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. (1972, p. 18)

Therefore, by re-visioning the story, Divakaruni's Draupadi transforms from being the object which moves the plot into the subject who reframes the grand narrative of the *Mahabharata*, snatching the power away from the male narrator Ved Vyasa. Draupadi, in a sense, becomes the feminist translator of *Mahabharata*. She claims: "A story is a slippery thing [...] perhaps that was why it changed with each telling" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 15). The translator-narrator not so much changes the story but gives us new lenses to read it with, lenses that scrutinise the traditional gaps, the absences of female voices. Right at the beginning, Draupadi declares that she intends to narrate "*what really happened* when I stepped from the fire"¹ (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 6, my emphasis). A few pages later, she obstinately claims: "I'm taking back the story" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 16). Clearly, Draupadi is talking back to the male author of the original text.

I would like to mention at this point a specific chapter in the original *Mahabharata* titled "Stree Parva", which means "The Woman's Chapter". Interestingly, the focus is almost entirely on Arjun's dismay (Arjun is the third Pandava brother) when he sees the carnage of the war. This chapter makes the object of a potent critique by Jyotirmoyee Devi in the beginning of her novel *The River Churning* (1967). She writes: "In actual fact, even Ved [V]yasa could not bear to write the real [S]tree [P]arva [...] The [S]tree [P]arva has not yet ended; the last word is not yet spoken" (Devi, 1967, p. xxviii). I would argue that "The Woman's Chapter" was not accurately recorded, or else any attempts to do so were thwarted by overarching powerful male voices like that of Ved Vyasa. After over forty years of Devi claiming that "the last word is not yet spoken" (1967, p. xxviii), Divakaruni's Draupadi undertakes the task of revealing 'her-story'. What is more, this Draupadi does not simply narrate "The Woman's Chapter" of the *Mahabharata* but tells the entire tale with the centrality of a female voice. The story of Draupadi in particular and of women in general is no longer (mis)construed in one mere chapter, but now becomes the focus point of the epic. This involves bringing to the fore certain gender constructs and taboos that it departs from, thus mobilising a space for feminine perspective and sexuality. I elaborate on this in what follows.

6. Translating to break taboos

Draupadi's autobiographical tale deconstructs Ved Vyasa's narrative in several ways. First of all, the female character rejects her name, which is simply the feminised form of her father's name, Draupad (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 5). In this manner, she resists the anchoring of her identity to that of a man. Instead, she prefers her other name, Panchaali, which is derived from the name of the kingdom Panchal where she was born. More interestingly, the translator-cum-narrator Draupadi also brings into light certain topics that are considered taboo even today in India. For instance, she speaks of female sexuality and desire, which goes against the typical representation of a good Hindu woman as modest, chaste, and devoid of sexual needs. This demand for desexualisation of women by modern Hindu society has, arguably, more to do with gendered moral norms and the male desire to control a woman's body than with religious prescriptions. As a matter of fact, Hinduism is replete with polygamous and polyamorous gods and goddesses who oftentimes are gender fluid (e.g., Lord Vishnu) or bisexual (e.g., Lord Agni), and tales where women enjoy sexual intercourse as much as men. By speaking of her desires, Draupadi takes a step in the direction of normalising women's sexual activity which, although ever-present in Hinduism, was deliberately veiled in the original *Mahabharata*.

Divakaruni's Draupadi claims that she is a good wife. However, in the novel, she unapologetically and persistently articulates her attraction for the illegitimately born Karna. This attraction is very obscurely hinted at in the original *Mahabharata*. However, in *The Palace of Illusions*,

¹ Draupadi and her twin brother Dhri were born out of a ceremonial fire.

Draupadi's desire for Karna despite being a married woman breaks away from the notion that women are bereft of or, rather, must not express their sexuality. In the final part of the story, Draupadi, along with the Pandavas, undertakes the journey to the Himalayas to be allowed into the abode of the Gods. It is an arduous journey and, towards the very end, Draupadi says:

I am buoyant and expansive and uncontainable [...] I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet, for the first time, I'm truly Panchaali. I reach with my other hand for Karna – how surprisingly solid clasp! Above us our palace waits, the only one I've ever needed. Its walls are space, its floor is sky, its centre everywhere. We rise; the shapes cluster around us in welcome, dissolving and forming and dissolving again like fireflies in a summer evening. (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 360)

These lines are extremely impactful because they subvert the previously predominant, horrific Hindu custom of *Sati*, where a woman would be immolated on a pyre after the death of her husband. The idea behind *Sati* was that a woman's role is solely that of a faithful, serving wife. Hence, if her husband dies, she must continue her journey as a dutiful wife with her master-husband after his death as well. Draupadi subverts the *Sati* tradition in the sense that, in the afterlife, she does not seek her conjugal companions (in the plural, as she is married to all five Pandava brothers), but her unrequited love. Throughout the story, Draupadi never acts on her desire for Karna. However, it is him she ultimately wants. In Hinduism, human life is seen as temporary; it is only one's life in *Sarg* [heaven] that is of permanence. Draupadi finding the companionship of Karna for eternity is an act of self-assertion that can be seen as a response to her subjugation as the wife of the five Pandavas during a life in which she had no say.

Furthermore, Draupadi's desire for Karna challenges strict caste hierarchies. Karna was born to Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas, when she was unmarried. Thus, Karna was unceremoniously dismissed as a bastard, while the Pandavas became the princes of Hastinapur (modern day Indian state of Haryana). Caste is patrilineal in India and, since Karna was born to an unwed mother, he was deemed casteless or, even worse, an outcaste, in other words beneath the lowest official caste. In falling for an outcaste, Draupadi, a Kshatriya princess belonging to the second highest caste in the Hindu caste hierarchy, rejects stringent caste norms. Indeed, in India, even today, inter-caste love is uncomfortably accepted at best when not rejected outright by families, with severe punishment meted out to defaulters. Draupadi, during her lifetime, remains trapped between the boundaries of caste where, as a Kshatriya, she marries within the Kshatriya community; in her afterlife, however, she untangles the shackles of caste, revealing that they are simply human tools of control that allow one section of society to marginalise the other.

In what follows, I discuss the episode of Karna's death in the battle of the *Mahabharata*. Although the battle forms a significant part of the original text, Draupadi deliberately refuses to go into details about the war, thereby signifying that wars are essentially fought to satiate men's bloodlust and ego, and are the consequence of male desire for power over territories, titles, and other people. Instead, Draupadi focusses on how Karna was killed in the war. Though she replicates Ved Vyasa's description of the death scene, she further adds: "But here's something Vyasa didn't put down in his *Mahabharat[a]*" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 298). In the original *Mahabharata*, Karna's demise is given relatively little attention, despite his portrayal as a great warrior throughout the epic. Draupadi undoes this caste-based discrimination in Ved Vyasa's story to dignify Karna's death, in her own narrative. This is a perfect example of how her re-vision of the *Mahabharata* unveils aspects previously dismissed due to the biases of the first author.

Another tabooed topic that Draupadi's autobiographical retelling of the *Mahabharata* brings forward is her candid opinion on female virginity. A woman's virginity is never spoken about but expected to be guarded until she is wedded. In fact, during a Hindu marriage, there is the tradition of *Kanyadaan*, which means "gift of the virgin", that the father of the bride makes to the groom. A woman is thus considered the property of the father, whose ownership is passed on to the husband as a gift which must, moreover, be that of a virgin. Clearly, the worth of an unmarried woman lies in her virginity. Draupadi exposes this legitimised obsession with female virginity. In order to discuss this further, I would like to briefly refer to an episode in the original *Mahabharata* where Draupadi's father arranges a *Swayamvar*² for her to pick an appropriate husband. While the purpose of the event is for the princess to pick a husband, it is revealed that Draupadi's father had in fact asked her to choose a man with whose kingdom he can strengthen political ties, thereby making his own position as a king more powerful. Draupadi picks Arjun, partly because of her attraction to him and partly because of her father's instructions. When Arjun weds Draupadi and brings her home, he requests his mother, Kunti, to come and see what he has brought. Without looking at Draupadi, Kunti simply commands Arjun to share with all of his brothers whatever he has brought. Being the forever obedient sons, Arjun and the rest of the Pandavas do exactly that: they all marry Draupadi and, during the entire process, her opinion is not sought even once³.

Occasionally, in popular imagination, Draupadi's polygamy is mistakenly seen as a sign of female empowerment (Kane, 2020; Das, 2014). Such interpretations miss the point that she did not actually choose to be polygamous. In *The Palace of Illusions*, she rightfully states: "My situation was very different from that of a man with several wives. Unlike him, I had no choice as to whom I slept with, and when. Like a communal drinking cup, I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 120). It was decided that she would spend a year with each brother and then, from the sixth year, the rotation would begin again. What Draupadi finds even more infuriating is the supposed boon given to her by the (male) Lord Shiva, i.e., that her virginity would be restored when she is passed on from one brother to another. Divakaruni's Draupadi bitterly says further: "Nor was I particularly delighted by the virginity boon, which seemed designed more for my husbands' benefit than mine" (2008, p. 120). Draupadi's words capture the rather simple truth that it is mainly men who seem to be obsessed with a woman's virginity⁴. Note how it was not a goddess who gave her this 'boon' but, rather, a male god. Draupadi indirectly lays bare that intercourse with a virgin might be pleasurable for a man, but not so much for the woman, and this ties back to the previous topic of female sexual desire. If Draupadi is to become a virgin by divine intervention every time she changes hands between one brother and another, men appear to be always and unconditionally entitled to a virgin to copulate with. Another implication is that it is only the

² A ritual where several suitors of a highborn girl compete in certain tasks to show their physical or mental strength. The one who best completes the tasks wins the hand of the girl. If there are no clear rules to determine who the winner is, the girl decides, thereby choosing her husband.

³ It is unclear whether Kunti was aware that Arjun had brought a wife home. If she was and intentionally instructed her son to share his wife, Kunti becomes one among many women who are responsible for other women's subjugation. Furthermore, even once she clearly has had the opportunity to discover that what Arjun has brought home is a human being, a wife, she does not revoke her orders, which begs the question, why should that be so? Here is a case of a woman unapologetically putting another in a precarious position. These questions remain unanswered in Divakaruni's text. Indeed, relationships between women are not explored, and this missed opportunity is perhaps one of the limitations of the text.

⁴ Certainly, it can be argued that women also give importance to their virginity. I would, however, suggest that this is a consequence of male-defined expectations that women safeguard their virginity if they are to be valued and respected.

man's pleasure that matters (virginal vaginas are supposedly tighter and thus more enjoyable for men to penetrate⁵), while the woman's role is simply to satiate his desires and not her own. To sum up, the male obsession to control the female body, the naturalised patriarchal demand for a female virgin for intercourse, is shockingly legitimised by male gods who otherwise do not follow the same rules in their own sexual conduct⁶.

7. Translating to challenge gender constructs and societal norms

In the original *Mahabharata*, when Draupadi was born out of the ceremonial fire⁷ it was prophesied that she would change the course of history. The prophecy did come true as Draupadi was the key reason for the battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. I argue, however, that Draupadi not only changed the history of the world in the *Mahabharata*, but has also been used as a trope by *Hindutva-wadis* (Hindu patriarchal zealots) to define what an ideal Hindu woman should be like, thereby imposing societal restriction on Hindu women and, generally, on all Indian women. Thus, when a woman deviates from these norms and expectations, she can be punished. For example, when an unmarried woman socialising with men in a pub is sexually harassed, the harassment is seen as punishment for her supposed transgression of mixing with men who are not related to her paternally or maritally. According to Uma Chakravarti, "[t]hat the punishment is regarded as justified is an index of how successfully the ideological premises of patriarchal violence have been incorporated into everyday life by the stereotypes of good and bad" (2006, p. 235). Though Chakravarti writes about the *Ramayana*, the same can be said for the *Mahabharata*.

According to Edward Said, "[f]acts do not at all speak for themselves, but require a socially acceptable narrative to absorb, sustain and circulate them" (1984, p. 34). Ved Vyasa's *Mahabharata* can be seen as an immensely influential narrative that legitimises certain claims of how a Hindu woman should be and how she should behave as essential *facts*. Moreover, repetition over the centuries of the so-called teachings of the original *Mahabharata*, has led to a normalisation of these dictates which have become omnipresent. And, to quote Said further, repetition and accumulation "amount to a virtual orthodoxy, setting limits, defining areas, asserting pressures" (1984, p. 35). Supposed Hindu ideals have become rules over centuries that Hindu women must follow, and these rules perform the task of controlling and limiting their bodies, minds and actions, thus ensuring the perpetuation of a male-dominated society. Texts like the *Mahabharata* hold power not "in its physical, tangible form" but "in the collective Indian consciousness" (Sharma, 2016, p. 292). Indeed,

The 'originality' of these texts is authenticated not by the evidence of an old undiluted written script: they are rather patented in Indian psyche by their indispensability as a cultural experience. The storyline of the "original" – a fixed schema of characters, relations, values, and events – is so intricately embedded in the minds of Indian people, especially Hindus, that it becomes impossible to replace it, or to reweave a new one around their lives. (Sharma, 2016, p. 292)

Hans-Georg Erney aptly illustrates how Hindu epics are currently used to justify or explain instances in everyday life. He reveals that, after the Nirbhaya Delhi Rape Case in 2012, where a young female medical student was brutally gangraped in a moving bus, creating international

⁵ The act of penetration can also be conceptualised as a symbolic conquering (or even colonising) of the unspoiled virginal body.

⁶ Hindu gods and other divine beings are largely polygamous and polyamorous.

⁷ Draupadi's father performed a *Yagna* (a ceremonial fire ceremony) to pray for children. In response to his prayers, from the fire (a deity in itself in Hinduism) emerged baby Draupadi along with a baby boy.

outrage, politician Kailash Vijayvargiya claimed that the rape was justified because the woman had dared to cross the *Lakshman Rekha* (Erney, 2019, p. 486). This refers to the line of protection that Ram's brother draws for his sister-in-law Sita around their hut, as they go to hunt for a deer in the *Ramayana*. Sita was warned not to cross the line, and yet she does so and is abducted by Ravan. This then leads to Ram's journey to Ravan's kingdom to rescue her. Vijayvargiya's statement, therefore, suggests that a woman's place is within the house, presumably under the protection of a father, brother, husband or son. Any attempt to cross this threshold can lead to severe consequences for which the woman herself is to blame. Thus, effectively, a sacred text is used for victim blaming. Interestingly, though, the unjust treatment of Karna in Ved Vyasa's text, due to caste-based discrimination, is never used as evidence of how our sacred texts perpetuate the infernal hierarchies of caste. Similarly, despite staking his wife Draupadi in a game of dice and gambling her away as though she were just another piece of property, Yudhishthir still continues to be revered as the epitome of a just, virtuous Hindu man. Finally, the disrobing attempt made on Draupadi by the Kaurava brothers is never used to signify that male violence against women exists even in our glorified sacred texts. Indeed, these aspects are not spoken of, because how would the patriarchal Hindus justify the humiliation and harassment of Draupadi when she did not even cross any male-defined boundaries of conduct imposed on her? Draupadi was a virtuous, faithful wife, under the protection not of one but of five husbands. Perhaps the silence surrounding this episode is due to the fact that it shows the failure of men to protect their women. The Pandavas' manhood, bravery and machismo is completely undermined in this scene, and as this does not fit neatly into the vision of a male-dominated society Hindu zealots uphold.

To sum up, Divakaruni's novel exposes the selective amnesia at work when it comes to drawing lessons from the original *Mahabharata*. I have called *The Palace of Illusions* a translation because, in my opinion, Divakaruni does not modify the original tale but presents it in a manner that reveals its gender (and caste) biases, its deliberate silencing and controlling of certain voices and bodies. In Draupadi's words, stories are important and have to be "understood and preserved for the future, so that we didn't make the same mistakes over and over" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 270). The sanctity of texts that hold unquestionable authority over people must be challenged and scrutinised, so that we question the lessons and moral codes derived for them and pay attention at all times to questions such as *who* is deriving *what*, and *why*. This would thus lead to the realisation that, more often than not, sacred texts are instrumentalised as tools of control over women and lower castes by upper caste men (like the minister mentioned above). Hence, when we translate to re-vision, *we revolt from within the text* in order to demystify its prejudices, to make apparent the crevices that run through the seemingly perfect text.

8. Conclusion

As noted previously, the original *Mahabharata* includes the Hindu scripture of *Bhagavad Gita*. Divakaruni's retelling does not include the *Gita*, and this is because, in Ved Vyasa's *Mahabharata*, the *Gita* is in the form of a narration by Lord Krishna to Arjun. Since the scripture, considered a revelation of untold truths about the universe and the nature of human beings, was not narrated to Draupadi, she is unable to replicate it in her autobiography. She is filled with envy when the god narrates the *Gita* to her husband Arjun: "What crucial ingredient did I [Draupadi] lack that the mystery of the universe should forever elude me?" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 265). This foregrounds how, despite Draupadi claiming power over the story through her first person narrative, some limitations remain. Draupadi might have fought her way into the centre of the story, but certain truths continue to elude her. The fact that she was deemed unable to

hear the wisdom of the *Gita* mirrors the broader picture of how most women continue to be categorically denied access to Hindu scriptures, though at the same time they are expected to strictly adhere to moral Hindu codes. Only men can be Hindu priests, considered the true knowledge bearers and disseminators of Hinduism and of its practises. Hence, while *talking back* by means of translation is a crucial act, I see it as only one step taken forward among many more which are needed to lay bare, and thus challenge, how Hinduism – in its narratives, the way it is understood, practised, propagated – is largely (if not entirely) monopolised by men.

Sujit Mukherjee asks: “when is a translation over and done with?” and responds by claiming that “[t]he truly crafty translator will know why he translates, for whom he translates, what he should translate, how much to translate and, semi-finally, when to stop” (quoted in Giovanni, 2013, p. 113). Divakaruni certainly knows for whom, what she is translating, and how. More importantly, she knows when to stop; despite her central position in the novel, Draupadi still lacks certain knowledge, meaning that more barriers need to be broken. Perhaps the next translated Draupadi will speak more, know more, and enjoy even more agency. Thus, with every translation, one opens up spaces for the otherwise unheard. According to Spivak, “[o]ur obligation to translate should be recognized as, at the deepest level, determined by ‘the idea of the untranslatable as not something that one cannot translate but something one never stops (not) translating’” (2010, p. 38). Translations are made and are embedded within socio-historical-political contexts that are also constantly in flux. As our society changes, and in order to promote societal change, the act of translating texts that otherwise legitimise (multiple forms of) inequalities becomes “an emancipatory practice” (Godard quoted in Wallace, 2002, p. 70).

No two translations of the same text can ever be the same, and it matters fundamentally who translates, and how. Divakaruni translated the *Mahabharata* to challenge its centuries-old, unyielding authority that continues to dominate Hinduism. The problem is not with its being popular but, rather, that it is used as a vehicle for legitimising systemic gender and caste-based oppression and violence. By translating Vyasa’s story to reveal her own positionality, thoughts and opinions, Draupadi has begun to speak, and I would like to think many more translations will follow in a move towards not just comprehending and practising Hinduism without caste and gender discrimination, but also towards creating an egalitarian society as a whole.

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