

## Negotiating Patriarchy, Empowerment, and Resistance: A Study of Satyavati in Saoli Mitra's *Katha Amritasaman* (Timeless Tales)

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### Abstract

The two Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, constructed the image of the ideal woman as a “*pativrata*”, a dutiful, chaste, and devoted wife, a submissive silent woman modeled on the principal women characters whose function is to highlight and glorify male protagonists and who are devoid of agency, subjectivity, and expressing emotion. The proposed study focuses on the performance of *Katha Amritasaman* (Timeless Tales) that deconstructs the patriarchal ideologies in the *Mahabharata* and performs indigenous feminisms on stage to protest against myriad forms of injustices that women suffer in the contemporary society. The study proposes to analyze the female characters of the *Mahabharata*, focusing on the dramatized renditions of Satyavati in Saoli Mitra's *Katha Amritasaman* (Timeless Tales). Mitra invites the audience to ponder on the issues of women's freedom in a male dominated world and provides fresh perspectives. She offers a critical perspective of analyzing the patriarchal epic and confronts power and gender dynamics of the then society through her characterization of Satyavati.

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### Introduction

The engagement of women with theatre in India started in the late 1970s as an alternate form in response to the male dominated theatrical tradition that neglected the women participants to the point of relegating them as non-existent in the performative genre. The advent of both Western feminist ideological thoughts and the indigenous feminist praxis, which was developed as “an essential and integral part of national resistance movements” (Jayawardena 8), enabled and accelerated women's activist movements which, in turn, facilitated women's participation in what was considered to be a male bastion. Indian women theatre practitioners recognized the manifold possibilities of the genre by asserting their self and reclaiming female subjectivity challenging the politics of (mis)representation. Theatre, as a medium of conscientization, becomes “a place at which resistance is possible” (Dolan 5) where women playwrights/ directors critique the historical marginalization of women in the ‘his stor[y]ies. Feeling “oppressed by some of the images and notions that conventional culture was imposing on them” (Sharma 140), women theatre artists focus on positive characterization of women, often taking recourse of feminist

revisionism to unearth the voice of marginal women characters in the great ancient epics, politicize women's oppressions and subvert phallocentric ideology that informs the male created myths.

Myth, as a form of logocentric discourse, has always propagated patriarchal bias against women by portraying them as negative of man “to found (fund) phallocentrism” (Cixous 266). The two Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, constructed the image of the ideal woman as a “*pativrata*”, a dutiful, chaste, and devoted wife, a submissive silent woman modeled on the principal women characters whose function is to highlight and glorify male protagonists and who are devoid of agency, subjectivity, and expressing emotion. Feminist theatre facilitates (re)construction of (women's) self by taking up feminist revisionism revealing oppressive phallocentric ideologies that dominated the dissemination of negative characterization of women and fostering re-interpretation of the ancient texts through a “pair of women's eyes” (Mitra ix) to bring neglected women into the centre stage by defining and redefining womanhood through social interactions in the theatrical arena. The proposed study focuses on the performance of *Katha*

*Amritasaman* (Timeless Tales) that deconstructs the patriarchal ideologies in the *Mahabharata* and performs indigenous feminisms on stage to protest against myriad forms of injustices that women suffer in the contemporary society. The study proposes to analyze the female characters of the *Mahabharata*, focusing on the dramatized renditions of Satyavati, Gandhari, Kunti, and Draupadi in Saoli Mitra's *Katha Amritasaman* (Timeless Tales).

### Reinterpretation of Satyavati from Feminist Perspectives

The play begins with the chorus singing the praise of the epic: "The *Mahabharata* tale is like amrita, divine, We seek in its truth a blessing, a sign" (Mitra 77). The play professes to interpret these 'sign[s]' as the 'kathak' (narrator) narrates and reinterprets events from the epic focusing on the neglected women characters, starting with Satyavati, "most fortunate woman, that's what all claim" (Mitra 79). However, a closer analysis reveals "great is her tale, of sorrow and pain, Sad were her years, sad her domain" (Mitra 79). Abandoned by the king in favour of her twin brother, she is portrayed as a beautiful sexualized woman who lures the sage Parashar as well as King Shantanu. Mitra's Satyavati challenges traditional patriarchal portrayal of women in terms of passive object of sexual desire and depicts the inner turmoil of a woman desired by a man for the first time in her life as well as her effort to resist, ultimately realizing "what it was to be praised and loved by a man" (Mitra 85) when the first man left her forever and the son born of their union, Vyasa disappeared. The narrator mocks her destiny by saying- "The valiant Devvrat did not get a whiff of that fragrance-who should get it but that old sod! [Smiles at the irony.] O Satyavati was a 'most fortunate woman'! (Mitra 85)." Her husband died after the birth of her two sons, Chitrangad and Vichitravirya, and Chitrangad died shortly after.

Satyavati, the queen of the Kuru dynasty, tried to secure the dynasty with an heir and instructs Bhisma to procure brides for her remaining son, but that too did not succeed. Vichitravirya died without producing an heir which prompted Satyavati to implore to Bhishma who took a terrible vow of abstinence in order to make his father King Shantanu to marry Satyavati following the terms of her foster father. She even tried to call her son Vyasa to have union with her two daughters-in-law with the hope of producing an heir, but that hope also shattered as "Dhritarashtra was born blind while Pandu, the pale one, looked positively sickly. And for these flaws, neither was deemed fit to be king" (Mitra 93). Satyavati tried hard to convince one of her daughters-in-law to copulate with Vyasa once more: "Satyavati tried everything with Ambika-once she commanded, then she coaxed, then she tried to make her understand that the situation was desperate. After all, Satyavati had just once night in her hands" (Mitra 94). No matter how she tried all her efforts went in vain as Ambika sent her maid, a lower caste woman, to Vyasa and although the son born of the union had all the qualities of a king, but could not become one because of his low caste. The Kathak describes Satyavati thus,

Satyavati's struggles were reduced to nothing, and she was now a defeated woman. And it is because she lost her own battle that the terrible Kurukshetra War took place.....

Think! If Satyavati had not been defeated at that time then all the war and waste which followed would not have taken place at all.

[She sits down upon the semicircular dais on the left looking frustrated, as if like Satyavati, she is just fed up of trying and trying and yet not getting anywhere.] (Mitra 95)

Satyavati in spite of being the grand matriarch of the Kuru dynasty was given so minimal a role that did not justify her position in the epic. Mitra portrays Satyavati as a strong woman caught in an intricate web of misfortune yet resolved to protect her dynasty. She links the misfortune of Satyavati with that of the whole age in which they lived and which ultimately got destroyed.

Mitra portrays the finer aspects of the character, her suffereing, her musings, and her longings which was absent in the patriarchal discourse. Her Satyavati "remember[s] her carefree life, running along the banks of the river Yamuna, rowing her boat alone across the river..." (Mitra 95). She voices her hopes and aspirations when she comes to the royal palace for the first time:

As Shantanu's queen she must have been quite arrogant, full of pride! Wasn't it her beauty that made Shantanu desperate, wasn't it for her that Devvrat became Bhishma? From the inner quarters, she got word of the fisher king's demands, ... she must have been thrilled. She must have remembered how her own father had never cared for her... But now she would be queen of a king far greater than her father, she would be queen mother. (Mitra 92)

However, Satyavati's fate had something else in store for her. Mitra highlights the tragedy that informs the life of one of the most important women characters of the epic.

Mitra re-narrates the epic from the perspectives of the women characters who were often relegated to the secondary positions. Ghosh and Singh in their article on "Demythologizing Draupadī: A Comparative Study of Saoli Mitra's *Nāthavatī anāthavat* ('Five Lords, Yet None a Protector') and Teejan Bai's *Draupadī cīrharan*" (2014) opines that the "Kathakthākurun [in Mitra's play] rewrites the whole of the *Mahābhārata* in her own words and improvises whenever she gets the chance" (Ghosh and Singh 523). This rewriting makes her to explore many facets of a character on which the epic was silent. Mitra's Satyavati "lay unattended in a corner of the palace" (Mitra 96) when her grandchildren were born. On advice of Bhishma that there was no point of living in the palace when "sins [are]... multiply[ing]", Satyavati set out for the forest. At this moment the narrative becomes a poignant tale of pain and suffering:

Satyavati left the palace where she had once arrived with her head held high in arrogant pride. Now she left as an old, haggard widow, utterly defeated, taking along her two widowed daughters-in-law, who had also aged. Slowly they faded out in their exile in the forest.

What became of Satyavati or of her daughters-in-law, ... how or when they died, no one bothered to know. Even her son Vyasdев has not left any record. We only know the little that he has told us. (Mitra 96-97)

The patriarchal text does not give any importance to the women; their sufferings were not worthy enough to find mention in the canonical literature.

Mitra not only portrays Satyavati as a muted sufferer, but infuses her with an agency, unlike the epic where she is merely a character dictated by her male counterparts. Her characterization is not merely limited to her physical charm,

but she comes alive as a woman of intellect, a person who plays an active role in the course of events. Her resilience in the face of tragedy is praiseworthy. She emerges as an empowered woman who is able to transform her state from being disowned by the king and raised by a fisherman to become queen herself. Her journey to the palace marks her conscious effort to rise from her societal position. Partha Chatterjee talks about the binary of home/world where women are positioned in the confinement of home (Chatterjee 321) to the benefit of the men; Mitra's Satyavati disregards the domestic confinement of women and comes to the public sphere, plays active role in shaping the future of her clan. Her effort of asking her daughters-in-law to produce heir out of wedlock can be interpreted as her decision to subvert the name of the father as she professes to crown the child born out of the union as the heir to the throne. She is an active participant in her own destiny who tries hard to protect her bloodline. Her impact on the narrative is evident in the way she makes active choices unlike her counterpart in the *Mahabharata* where she is a muted character, devoid of agency and dictated by the men. There is little depth in the character of Satyavati in the *Mahabharata*, she is reduced to a one dimensional character, but Mitra's feminist reinterpretation transforms her from a passive victim to an active participant in the narrative whose hopes, aspirations, dilemmas move the narrative forward and challenge traditional gender roles. Mitra's feminist reinterpretation echoes with the feminist debate of agency, subjectivity, gender, and empowerment. By narrating the life of Satyavati with the ironical statement of "most fortunate woman" (Mitra 85), Mitra invites the audience to ponder on the issues of women's freedom in a male dominated world and provides fresh perspectives. Mitra offers a critical perspective of analyzing the patriarchal epic and confronts power and gender dynamics of the then society.

### Conclusion

Mitra's play *Katha Amritasaman* (Timeless Tales), based on Irawati Karve's *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*, is a seminal work that provides contemporary reinterpretation of the great Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*. The play offers a different perspective by reevaluating and reinterpreting the portrayal of women characters. It gives the prominent women characters of the epic agency and voice which was denied to them by the patriarchal discourse of the epic. The female characters, like Satyavati, Kunti, Gandhari, and Draupadi, were always subordinate to the male characters and devoid of agency; however, Mitra's women characters transcend the limitations of the patriarchal society. She provides Satyavati with multifaceted identities to go beyond her traditional portrayal.

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