



“I was not a nobody, but no one knew what I was”: A Mother’s Reclamation of her Story in Madhavi S. Mahadevan’s *Bride of the Forest*

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<https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/amal.92463>

Recibido: 09/10/2023 • Revisado: 15/05/2024 • Aceptado: 04/06/2024

EN Abstract. The ideological stronghold of mythology in the cultural consciousness necessitates the production of counter-ideologies that decenter the normative narrative with more subversive and progressive tales. The story of Madhavi from the Indian epic *Mahabharata* is upheld as a tale of a devoted daughter who is blessed with a privileged womb, which is prophesied to give birth to great kings, and a boon of *chirkaumya*, the ability to regain virginity. Devoid of any rights over her own body, Madhavi becomes instrumental for Gaalav, the disciple of Vishwamitra, in fulfilling his promise of eight hundred white horses with black-colored left ears as *gurudakshina* (tradition of repaying one’s teacher) to his teacher. Her womb is bartered, allowing men to exchange her indefinitely as a commodity with utilitarian value. Her voice, desires and feelings are undermined by the structural needs of the masculine tale. This paper seeks to read the novel *Bride of the Forest* by Madhavi S. Mahadevan in the context of motherhood studies and postfeminism through the examination of the character Madhavi. It inquires into the representation of the maternal figures who are mapped on a power spectrum to posit that both agency and victimhood co-exist in uncomfortable ways.

Keywords: Myth Revisionism; The *Mahabharata*; Matricentric Feminism; Popular Culture; Motherhood; Internalized Exile; Postfeminism.

ES “Yo no era una desconocida, pero nadie sabía lo que era”: La reconstrucción de la historia de una madre en *Bride of the Forest*, de Madhavi S. Mahadevan

ES Resumen. a influencia ideológica de la mitología en el imaginario cultural hace necesaria la producción de contraideologías que descentren la narrativa normativa con relatos más subversivos y progresistas. La historia de Madhavi, de la epopeya india *Mahabharata*, cuenta la historia de una devota hija que fue bendecida con un vientre privilegiado, del cual se profetizó que daría a luz a grandes reyes, y con la bendición de *chirkaumya*, capaz de recuperar la virginidad. Madhavi, desprovista de cualquier derecho sobre su propio cuerpo, se convierte en un instrumento para Gaalav, el discípulo de Vishwamitra, en el cumplimiento de su promesa de entregar a su maestro ochocientos caballos blancos con las orejas izquierdas de color negro como *gurudakshina* (tradición de retribuir al maestro). Su vientre es objeto de trueque, lo que permite a los hombres intercambiarla indefinidamente como una mercancía con valor utilitario. Su voz, sus deseos y sus sentimientos se ven socavados por las necesidades estructurales del relato masculino. Este artículo pretende analizar la novela *Bride of the Forest* de Madhavi S. Mahadevan en el contexto de los estudios sobre la maternidad y el postfeminismo a través del examen del personaje de Madhavi. Indaga en la representación de la figura materna, que se sitúa en un espectro de poder para plantear que tanto el poder como el victimismo coexisten de forma incómoda.

Palabrars calve: Revisionismo de mitos; *El Mahabharata*; Feminismo matricéntrico; Cultura popular; Maternidad; Exilio interiorizado; Postfeminismo.

Summary: Introduction. Revisionism and Feminism. Methodological Framework. Postfeminism. Motherhood in India. Madhavi from the *Mahabharata*. Madhavi in the Revisionist Narratives. Dhrishadvati as an Internalized Exile. The Absent-Present Mothers. Moving Beyond Victimhood. Conclusion. Works Cited.

Cómo citar: Mruthula J. "I was not a nobody, but no one knew what I was": A Mother's Reclamation of her Story in Madhavi S. Mahadevan's *Bride of the Forest*. *Amaltea. Revista de mitocrítica*, 16, 2024, e92463

Introduction

The primary subject of Mary Beard's manifesto, *Women and Power* (2017), is female silence. She elucidates how silence is enforced upon women in mythology as a mechanism of control by men. She begins her book by illuminating the example of Telemachus, son of Odysseus, from Greek mythology, who asks his mother to "shut up" in public as the realm of public speaking is reserved only for men (3). Beard equates speech with power and points out the unquestionable mess women in power make in myths to justify their exclusion from power in real life and for the rule of men (59). Beard emphasizes that mythology is not a thing of the past without continued significance in the current age. Our cultural template for a powerful person has always been a man, and its cause can be traced back to the voices denied to women in our stories (Beard 53). The marginal figure Madhavi from the *Mahabharata* is also a suppressed woman. Despite playing a crucial role in the story, Madhavi is thrust to the periphery with little or nothing to say. She becomes a symbol of obedience and, by extension, an "ideal" female figure for the Indian female milieu through her silent acceptance of her father's orders without an appeal.

In the Preface to her text, *Antigone Rising* (2020), Helen Morales observes, "What makes a myth a myth, rather than just a story, is that it has been told and retold over the centuries and has become meaningful to a culture or community" (xii). She opines that we do not live in a state of temporal vacuum, and for positive ways of thinking about the present and future, we turn to the past. "We look to antiquity to provide examples of human behavior, ways of living that confirm, challenge, and expand the possibilities of how we live today" (Morales 122). Hence, there is a pressing need to reclaim the silenced voices in mythology in contemporary times through revisionist mythmaking. Alicia Ostriker posits that in the process of revisionist mythmaking, a previously accepted figure or story that is defined by culture is appropriated for altered ends: "The old vessel will be filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible" (72). Adrienne Rich defines revisionism as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction. It is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival" (18). Nevertheless, how exactly is revisionism helping the feminist cause? One could argue that women are becoming the female Prometheus, to borrow Claudine Herrman's phrase, "thieves of language" (qtd. in Ostriker 69), who uses the oppressor's very own language, in this case, hegemonic masculine narratives featuring silent women without access to authoritative expression, with the intent to "seize the speech" and make it say what women mean (Ostriker 69). Mythological retellings have always been an integral part of Indian storytelling. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the retelling of mythology helped revive and consolidate an

Indian national identity under British rule. Later, the redeployment of mythology helped in advancing the notion of the Hindu past and values "as a remedy to present social and political ills" (Kanjilal 64), as seen in the case of the televised epics of Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayana* (1987) and B.R Chopra's *Mahabharat* (1988). Although the employment of mythology in literary works sometimes resulted in complicity with hegemonic discourses, other times, it was employed critically to question social hegemony and hierarchy. Indian writers continue to draw heavily from the epic repertoire despite numerous adaptations and retellings already present, culminating in the emergence of the genre of Indian mythological fiction. Devdutt Pattanaik, Kavita Kane, Anand Neelakantan, Amish Tripathi, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Ashwin Sanghi are some of the famous contemporary Indian writers who continue to contribute to this growing genre of mythological fiction.

Revisionism and Feminism

In "Feminist, Female, Feminine", Toril Moi opines that any feminist approach that can be successfully appropriated to their political ends must be welcome. She emphasizes that the word *appropriation* must be used in the sense of creative *transformation* (Moi 118). Since patriarchal power is dominant and all-pervasive in nature, "feminists have to be pluralists: there is no pure feminist or female space from which we can speak. All ideas, including feminist ones, are in this sense 'contaminated' by patriarchal ideology" (Moi 118), hence what matters the most is how one puts an idea into use and the effect it produces. This can be said to be true of the nature of feminist revisionism. The source materials borrowed by the writers for revisionism are not a pure provenance untouched or uncontaminated by patriarchal ideology. Despite that, it is appropriated for a creative transformation, whereby the writers aim for a socio-cultural change by encouraging the readers to unlearn the internalized notions of gender.

Moi opines that not all books written by women on women writers exemplify anti-patriarchal commitment. "A female tradition in literature or criticism is not necessarily a feminist one" (Moi 120). Rosalind Coward, in her essay, "Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels?", opines that it is not possible to say that all women-centered writings have any necessary relationship to feminism. She argues that even though "The Mills and Boon romantic novels are written by, read by, marketed for, and are all about women" (qtd. in Moi 120), these fantasies based on sexual, racial, and class submission are so further from the aims of feminism (qtd. in Moi 120). On the one hand, describing and rendering women's experiences visible can be considered a feminist act, an anti-patriarchal strategy "since patriarchy has always tried to silence and repress women and women's experience" (Moi 121). On the other hand, however, "women's experience can be made visible in alienating, deluded or degrading ways" (Moi 121). Women-centered revi-

sionist mythological narratives belong to the category of popular fiction in India; they are written for the market, and the texts are at a crossroads with few texts trying to package themselves as feminist texts merely by the merit of rendering women visible while the other texts are consciously feminist and choose the medium of popular fiction because of its wide reach.

Urmī Chanda-Vaz, in her article “Indian Mythology is a new medium of choice for feminist narratives (and it’s working)”, emphasizes that it is constructive in reimagining women from the myths as empowered figures with agency despite the fact that hundreds of retellings and reinterpretations have cast our female protagonists from mythology in new molds. The earlier representations have “remained confined to their niche, and their reach has been limited in terms of popularity as a frame of reference” (Chanda-Vaz). It is in such contexts that this research gains significance because the popularity of the revisionist texts enables writers to revamp gender notions and cater to the needs of the time. “Traditionally, Indian mythology has tended to serve the purpose of patriarchy, keeping the woman where she belonged—at the bottom of the social ladder... But the tables are finally turning. The subaltern is now wielding the tools used to justify their oppression for ages, this time as a means of empowerment” (Chanda-Vaz).

Myths are read selectively, re-created, adapted, cut, and pasted, and they always have been since antiquity. The different versions of myths operated collectively as a kind of conversation, with later versions responding to earlier, like contributions to a long-running debate (Morales 128). As Jasbir Jain rightly points out, our interpretations “are guided by ideological beliefs, locations and compulsions contemporaneous to that interpretation” (2), and what is recorded or is interpreted stems from temporal contexts. Unlike translations, abridgements, and some retelling forms, revision does not depend upon the likeness or repetition of the story. A story becomes a revision only when it reworks the originary tale and stands out because of its difference as much as the connection to the tale (Schanoes 72). K. Satchidanandan opines that “subversive interpretations often persuade us to interrogate our status-quoist notions of dharma from the point of view of the victims of social order: women, dalits, tribals, ethnic, religious and sexual minorities, etc., thus employing myth in the service of democracy, human rights and social justice” (xiv). Mahasweta Devi is a fine example of a writer who has used mythology as a springboard to question the injustices of the social order. Her short story collection *After Kurukshetra* (2005) foregrounds the experientiality of the marginalized, dalits, and cast-out women from the *Mahabharata*. Devi’s short story “Draupadi” (1981) subverts the character of the epic heroine Draupadi by casting her as a tribal rebel whose violated body becomes her site of rebellion and power.

The focus of this paper is on the representations of the marginal character Madhavi in the revisionist works based on her. It aims to address how the maternal subject is re-imagined in the revisionist narrative. Therefore, this article revolves around the questions: What is the nature of the visibility and embodiment given to the erased identity of Madhavi as

a mother figure in revisionist fiction? Can Madhavi be read as a case of an “internalized exile”? How does postfemininity as a productive theoretical tool illuminate women’s negotiations with patriarchal power within this type of popular culture?

Methodological Framework

Postfeminism

Postfeminism is often misunderstood as an anti-feminist project, but it merely implies a stage in the ongoing transformation of the feminist movement, which tries to renegotiate feminist politics in a contemporary framework (Rajasekaran 16). It does not disclaim what feminism has achieved. It has only re-appropriated its energy. “The ‘post’ prefix is a site of contemplation and re-alignment. It is not to be read as a site of disengagement” (Amin 41). Sociologist Shelley Budgeon says, “Postfeminism is about understanding multiple ways of being a feminist” (qtd. in Rajasekaran 32). Postfeminism does not align with the collective politics of feminism, and it emphasizes individualist politics by drawing upon the vocabulary of “empowerment” and “choice”.

“The term postfeminism came to prominence in the 1990s in the English-speaking world as a way of making sense of paradoxes and contradictions in the representation of women” (Banet-Weiser 4). Although postfeminism is distinctly seen as a Western concept, Jess Butler’s (2013) and Simidele Dossekun’s (2015) works question this assumption by looking at postfeminism as a transnational culture. Chakraborty argues that the onset of globalization and India’s economic liberalization in the 1990s saw a change in the image of the Indian woman from being largely described as a victim to “a liberated subject who voluntarily participates in the consumption of pleasures offered by a global market” (539). Despite women’s empowerment entering the mainstream cultural discourse in the 1990s in India, “the visibility of feminism that is committed to social justice and collective struggles, was increasingly relegated to the periphery” (Chakraborty 539). As Sindhu Rajasekaran posits: “Postfeminist women cherry-pick what battles they want to be a part of” (195). She argues that feminism helped women locate their oppressed position in the patriarchal superstructure. It gave women the tools to assess their position as victims and made them aware of their lack of choice, eventually motivating them to fight against misogynistic violence, gendered discrimination and bias. Today’s women do not declare that patriarchy has ended but rather proclaim that “they aren’t its victims anymore as they consciously make self-empowering choices in their lives” (218).

Stephanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon argue that a reductionistic reading of postfeminism as an “unfaithful reproduction of feminism” is problematic for several reasons: firstly, it presupposes the binary distinction between authentic and unadulterated feminism and commercialized postfeminism; secondly, because it adopts a one-dimensional reading of the term ‘post’ which confers the meaning of anti-feminism to postfeminism; and finally because of the glossing over of the interpretative possibilities of postfeminism (Genz and Brabon 6). Postfeminism

allows us to address the paradoxes of a late-twentieth and twenty-first-century context in which feminist concerns have entered the mainstream and are articulated in potentially contradictory ways (Genz 91). For instance, the women in the novel *Bride of the Forest*- Devayani, Sarmistha, and Dhrishadvati- are portrayed as assertive, active, confident female subjects, but these women also willingly become objects of the male gaze for their benefit and upliftment. Their feminist politics do not always involve an outright questioning or rejection of patriarchy; it is more individualistic, and many of the women in the novel do what suits their interests the best.

Motherhood in India

The key aim of motherhood studies, in the words of Jenni Ramone, is “to create an empowering practice and theory of mothering for women, countering the patriarchal master narrative of motherhood that maintains notions of the ideal mother and the dangerous binary of good/bad mothering” (qtd. in Karmakar 297). In *Interrogating Motherhood* (2017), Jasodhara Bagchi opines that women were made to believe that their true empowerment relied on the fruition of their lives as mothers of heroic sons, and their sacrifices were justified and internalized through the reiteration of the sacrifices made by the ideal heroines of the epics (64). Bagchi says that the idea of womanhood in the West was that of a wife but that of a mother in India (62). Through motherhood, men could keep women captives of patriarchy as they were always seen as the mother of sons, the keeper of the *vamsa* or the male lineage, and never the mother of daughters (35). “Worshipping women as mothers, while devaluing them in every other sense, thus became a way of displacing as well as managing fears about female power and sexuality” (Geetha 15).

Aneja and Vaidya’s *Embodying Motherhood: Perspectives from Contemporary India* (2016) is an important book on the motherhood discourse in urban India as it analyses how the maternal body is represented in the ancient religious iconography, in contemporary consumerist culture and in the representational discourse, mainly mainstream Bollywood cinema. The text is a reflection on the motherhood ideology of India and takes a feminist standpoint to critique and re-vision “the embodiment of the maternal as symbolic and experiential” (xv). They argue that “Motherhood has often been reduced to a contractual arrangement that women consent to under circumstances of economic or social compulsions; yet there has also been an ongoing recognition of deep, visceral satisfactions to be derived from mothering” (xvi). Maithreyi Krishnaraj opines that modern woman finds no viable alternative to the outlook on motherhood as she is “caught between rejecting the life-giving power that motherhood gives her, and seeking an identity beyond the halo of motherhood” (5). She identifies that it is not mothering or motherhood that makes women vulnerable but their social construction, the meaning attached to the notion of motherhood, and the implications of it for women (7).

The proliferation of revisionist narratives based on Indian mythology in the popular discourse has become an important research subject. Most of the

research that has been previously done in this area focuses on how women reclaim their lost voice through myth revisionism (Luthra 2014; Parvathy 2021), the disruption of gender stereotypes (Meenakshi and Kumar 2021; Shetty 2020), thematic study of the novels (K.L. 2021), and the significance of mythology and its cultural ramifications (Sharma 2016; Kalugampitiya 2016). Very little research is being conducted on analyzing women-centered Indian mythological fiction through the lens of motherhood and matricentric feminism (mother-centered perspective) and a postfeminist reading of revisionist texts as a productive entry into understanding contemporary negotiations of femininities with patriarchy. This paper aims to address this clear gap in the critical literature available and forge an analytical connection between revisionist narratives and motherhood studies. I propose to read the novel *Bride of the Forest* as a matrifocal narrative, as suggested by Andrea O’Reilly, in which a mother plays a significant cultural and social role and in which motherhood is structurally central to the plot and is thematically elaborated and valued (O’Reilly 17).

Madhavi from the Mahabharata

What is foregrounded in the *Mahabharata* is the story of dedication and accomplishment of an impossible task by Gaalav to claim recognition as an ideal disciple, and the magnanimity of King Yayati, father of Madhavi, who upheld his morale above everything, earning him the reputation as the great giver. Yayati donates Madhavi to Gaalav by calling her a *vastu* (special thing) in his possession when Gaalav approaches him seeking help to fulfill his *gurudakshina* (tradition of repaying one’s teacher after the completion of education). Because of Madhavi’s ability to regain virginity and the prophecy of her privileged womb that would bear Chakravarti kings, she is circulated among three kings, Haryashva, Divodas, Ushinar and Gaalav’s guru Vishwamitra- who were ready to exchange two hundred *shyamkarni* horses (white horse with black colored left ear) for a child through Madhavi. She willingly enters into this transaction as an obedient daughter and even reminds Gaalav about her boon of *chirkaumya* (the ability to regain virginity at will) when he hesitates to submit her successively to kings. Madhavi is essential as an important plot catalyst at every stage in the story, but for the most part, she is mute or silenced, performing her duty as per the need. What is missing in the urtext is Madhavi’s response to it. Indeed, she was given a place in the story as she was put on a pedestal as the ultimate dutiful woman whose sacrifice for the sake of the men around her was acknowledged and appreciated. But how she felt is invariably erased in the text, “she, her feelings and perceptions, all tend to be mediated and presented through a controlling male narrative” (Singh and Jaidev 4). After fulfilling her function as a woman with a gifted womb, Madhavi is returned to Yayati, a *swayamvar* (‘self’ choice of the groom) is organized for her, but she disregards it and weds the forest to lead a life as a *brahmacharini* (female ascetic) doe for the rest of her life.

Madhavi figures in the *Mahabharata* as an exceptional woman who is completely aware of the function she is to perform. “It is tacitly assumed that she also finds fulfillment in serving these men” (Singh

and Jaidev 7). Her whole worth is tied to her body, which will produce Chakravarti kings. Pankaj K Singh and Jaidev point out that despite Madhavi's history with the kings, her *swayamvar* is attended by noble kings. "It is possible that an otherwise rigid sexual morality was willing to accommodate her sexual past because her labor could yield most useful things to men. She is therefore patronized, co-opted, canonized, even though in material terms she is simply abused" (Singh and Jaidev 6-7). At the end of the story, it is Madhavi who is left with nothing to gain. Her father, Gaalav, Vishwamitra and the three kings received what they desired through Madhavi. The epic maintains a poignant silence on the repercussions it has on the psyche and body of Madhavi. It expects the woman to find solace and happiness in being of use value to the men she cares about. Drawing from the Marxist analysis, Luce Irigaray compares women to commodities. She theorizes "patriarchy as economic exchange premised on woman's position as commodity" (Zimmerman 429). The commodity/woman in a capitalist exchange has no intrinsic value and cannot exist in isolation. Their value arises only through their exchange by men who are active participants in the market. A woman and a commodity have "two bodies"- the natural body and the socially valued, exchangeable body. Just as a commodity is disinvested of its natural body and reclothed in a form suitable for the exchange of it among men, women masquerade the masculine value to participate in the social operation and achieve "value on the market by virtue of one single quality: that of being a product of man's labor" (Irigaray 175).

Irigaray argues that as commodities, women are at once utilitarian objects and bearers of value (175). The social roles imposed on women are that of a mother, a virgin, and a prostitute in the patriarchal order. A virginal woman has pure exchange value, and once she is deflowered, she is removed from the exchange value of men and becomes private property. Mothers, on the other hand, have both natural value and use value as reproductive agents. They are not circulated in the form of commodities as they threaten the social order. A prostitute, although condemned by the social order explicitly, is tolerated implicitly. Her value lies in the appropriation of her body already by men, and its worth only increases with more of its usage (Irigaray 180-86). Madhavi here can be seen reduced to a commodity whose worth completely rests on her exchange value. The social value assigned to Madhavi is double the normal as she has the pure exchange value of the virginal woman and of use value as a reproductive agent. Because of her ability to regain virginity, she ceases to be private property. Even though she is circulated between men after becoming a mother, the exchange does not threaten the social order as her marriages to kings¹ have validity only until the birth of her child. Madhavi's worth has only increased with the appropriation of her body by more men, which is illustrated by the keen interest shown by kings in marrying her after her ordeal. The prophecy that she will give birth to Chakravarti kings must be underscored as, in a patrilineal and patriarchal society, that is a coveted prize to possess.

The Mahabharata is essentially a male project, and its worldview is also phallogocentric. As Katrak points out, the feminist demystifications of mythological figures through a male gaze are part of the recuperation and reinterpretation of indigenous models of female strength (58), which includes raising the women of mythology to a pedestal of goddesses, mothers, and *pativrata* (a devoted wife) from whom men derive strength to achieve their feats in contrast to scheming and ugly demoneses whom men punish for transgression. Keeping this in mind, the rise of women-centered mythological fiction can be seen as an attempt to reread the texts through a female gaze; notably, most texts are confessional, seeking to be the voice of the undermined women, their dreams, feelings, and ambitions.

Madhavi in the Revisionist Narratives

The representation of Madhavi in narratives such as *Madhavi: the Eternal Virgin* (1955) by M V Venkatram and Bhisham Sahni's play *Madhavi* (1984), the eponymous character Madhavi believes that it is her duty to oblige to her father's wishes, despite having reservations about Yayati's decision to send her off with Gaalav. The resistance lodged by the character is faint. Venkatram's Madhavi is a damsel in distress caught up between her love for Gaalav and her obedience to her father, Yayati. The novel takes an apologetic tone towards Yayati and Gaalav. Madhavi, in Venkatram's novel, is a woman with no agency. Despite her knowing that what is happening to her is against her personal morality, she sacrifices her life for the sake of her father's dharma. On top of it, she is blinded by love and feels that since she has taken Gaalav as her husband in her mind, she should obey him by marrying other kings for his sake. Venkatram chose to interpret Madhavi's boon to regain virginity literally in his text. Madhavi is married to King Haryashva in return for a son, but it is only her body she surrenders and not her heart. When her child Vasuman is born to her, she forgets her bitterness momentarily and embraces motherhood happily. Soon after the child is born, virginity is restored to Madhavi, leaving her unable to breastfeed her child. This was the start of her descent into madness, "She felt that she was going mad. She wanted to tear away the breasts which could not give milk to the child" (Venkatram 53). In the end, after fulfilling the promise to Gaalav by giving birth to four heroic sons, Madhavi runs to the forest, taking "refuge in her insanity, a world where she can escape moral persecution" (Kiran 134).

At the beginning of Bhisham Sahni's play, Madhavi willingly agrees to the male project. "This is because before she becomes their victim, she becomes a victim of their ideology. She has imbibed it so that she too begins to see herself as a function. But she lives the ideology- suffers, counts her curses, changes... she alone is allowed the capacity to learn and grow. The men remain unchanged throughout" (Jaidev xi). Sahni allows Madhavi to have inner progress. From being a naive girl who blindly follows her father's orders to someone who confidently tests her lover, however, she ends up failing him in the test, "prov-

¹ Although Madhavi's marriage to the three kings and later to Vishwamitra is heavily implied in the *Mahabharata*. In the novel *Bride of the Forest*, Mahadevan leaves Madhavi's marital status ambiguous.

ing that she is no longer willing to be taken in by the grand but bogus language of the men” (Singh and Jaidev 8). Madhavi carries out the test by appearing visibly old with the body of a woman tired of childbirth with saggy breasts in front of Gaalav, despite having the boon to regain youth and virginity so that she can see through him. Madhavi is shattered by the injustices meted out to her, but in the end, she gathers her courage and finds freedom by rejecting the sinister trap of man’s love. Her decision to go back to the forest in the play is presented as a dissenting move. Madhavi is not doomed to insanity in Sahni’s play in contrast to Venkatram’s novel, as death or madness are often seen as the best resort for virtuous women devoid of a male companion. Sahni’s Madhavi was indeed an obedient daughter, but her allegiance to her father and Gaalav expired at her realization that they only cared for themselves and that she was a means to an end.

Jaidev points out that despite Madhavi being denied a mother in the epic, Sahni’s play acknowledges the absent mother figure. Madhavi thinks about her late mother while her father orders her to accompany Gaalav. Madhavi believes that her mother would never have disposed of her so casually like her father. “The play also allows her expression of her denied maternal feelings, her disenchantment with the palaces where the queens are callously forgotten if they cannot yield a male child and her disillusionment with the men in her life. In the play, she narrates herself” (Jaidev xi).

Dhrishadvati as an Internalized Exile

The novel *Bride of the Forest* (2020), written by Madhavi S Mahadevan, makes conspicuous the story of Dhrishadvati (also known as Madhavi), an invisibilised woman who was denied any inner space, dreams, self or conflict in life. The novel opens with the abandonment of Dhrishadvati by her mother, a forester at her father Yayati’s court in Pratisthan. We are not told why she is being left behind, but before leaving the palace, she reminds Madhavi that “The forest is yours. It will be here for you” (6). Madhavi’s mother is indeed portrayed as an absent maternal figure. Still, Madhavi yearns for her mother’s company, who is remembered without any resentment. She chooses to be called Dhrishadvati over Madhavi, the name her mother gave her. As the novel proceeds, the narrative technique shifts from omniscient narrator to first-person narration to vocalize the reality through Dhrishadvati’s eyes. She feels entrapped within the palace walls and in the company of those who only see her as a feral creature rather than a human. When Yayati’s wife Devayani refuses to bring her up as her child, Dhrishadvati is sent to *asuri* (demoness) Sarmistha, Yayati’s concubine. She grows up into a woman in Sarmistha’s house, a place for exiles. There, she is taught that a woman’s highest destiny is to have sons, “Our value lies in what we can do for them: warm their beds, bear their sons, care for their families, extend their influence in the world through the connections we bring.... To breathe, to breed. This is all that gives meaning to a woman’s life” (118).

When Gaalav comes to Yayati’s court requesting eight hundred *shyamkarni* horses, Yayati offers him Madhavi, calling her something incomparable in val-

ue. Unlike in other revisionist narratives, there are no efforts made to hide the truth nor portray Yayati as a generous soul. Yayati sees Madhavi only as a good to be discarded, and when Gaalav comes to his court with this unusual request, he spares no time to execute it. Dhrishadvati is unaware of her father’s malevolent scheme. She gets kidnapped by her father’s men and is forcibly given away to Gaalav. Dhrishadvati says, “When this story gets told, they will surely edit this bit- about how I left Pratisthan. Choosing bland words, they will make it look as if it was an orderly and formal leave-taking with my father handing me over to the brahmin, all new, nice and tidy. It was anything but that” (166). When Gaalav realizes that he has been fobbed by Yayati he asks Dhrishadvati to go back home, but she sees Gaalav as an escape from the morbid palace walls to freedom, and she offers to help him. From there she is taken to three kings for whom she bears male heirs. Madhavi agrees to meet the kings, hoping for freedom, but she gets entrapped in the vicious cycle of childbearing and abandoning her babies at the palaces. When Madhavi voices out her distress in this arrangement, Gaalav gaslights her, saying, “I did tell you to go back right in the beginning, to save yourself and leave me to my fate. But you did not listen. Please don’t blame me now for this situation” (203). The burden is on Madhavi for her unfortunate circumstances; men, according to themselves, are blameless.

It is assumed in the urtext that Madhavi does not have any grief about leaving her children behind as she is only performing her duty. “Kartavya (duty), seva (service), and submission are her virtues. She has no soul, no need for salvation, no heart or emotions” (Singh and Jaidev 7). Krishnaraj points out that Madhavi’s story “depicts the denial of maternal instinct to a mother, and deprivation of any inner space to her, of any desire or selfhood” (19-20). It highlights the stark insensitivity of patriarchy to women’s feelings and how women had little power over their reproductive capacity. In this novel, on the contrary, Madhavi is given space as a maternal figure; it captures the experience of birthing, its immeasurable pain and joy, and the narrative also allows Madhavi to mourn for the loss of ties with her children. She is more of a mother here than a reductive womb-in-rent. She laments: “The prophecy of sons has incarcerated me. It has spun threads around me, and now I am trapped in this web of desire, a living prey to be consumed in slow morsels. But doesn’t my own longing trap me too? I cannot bear the idea of being separated from my baby. Yes, my baby. I am torn” (225-26). Madhavi is finally taken to Vishwamitra’s ashram (hermitage) as they were short of two hundred horses to fulfill the promise made by Gaalav. Since there are no more *shyamkarni* horses in the world for Gaalav to procure, he asks his guru Vishwamitra to take Madhavi in exchange. After bearing a son for Vishwamitra, Madhavi is finally sent back to the kingdom as her father should decide her future, despite her asking for *moksha* (freedom) from the sage Vishwamitra. When her father arranges a *swayamvar* for her, she is very clear that all she wants in life is to be free and she cannot spend a lifetime in a palace married to someone. She remembers her mother’s words, “The forest is yours” (319), and returns to the forest.

Ketu. H Katrak defines internalized exile as a state where “the body feels disconnected from itself, as though it does not belong to it and has no agency” (2). She posits that the experience of internalized exile unfolds as a process whereby the female protagonist showcases complicated levels of consent and collusion to domination, followed by a state of being exiled. The unfolding brings them to a liminal state of consciousness. Katrak interprets liminality as a space for the female protagonists to cope with and, at times transcend exile through which they can resist domination and reconnect with their bodies and communities. In the novel, the meeting of Divodas and Gaalav marks a shift in how Dhrishadvati perceives her relationship with Gaalav. Unlike the representation of Madhavi in the earlier adaptations of the story from the *Mahabharata*, Madhavi here is not a victim of ideology but her emotions, as she is not bound by her sense of duty ingrained in her by patriarchy towards her father but exhibits moments of weakness in the company of Gaalav whom she considers as “someone more unfortunate than I” (251). Madhavi had battled with desertion, betrayal and indifference from her parents and people all her life. She has had a loveless existence since childhood, and when she met Gaalav for the first time, she dreamt of love, and she trusted him easily. She surrendered her agency to Gaalav by promising to help him achieve his goal; by doing so, she became an internalized exile. Despite her forthrightness, she consented to the domination of men over her body. She remained in a state where she felt her body did not belong to her because of her vow to Gaalav. “All those hours in Haryashva’s bedchamber. Night after night he took what he’d agreed to pay for. My body became an empty shell. I felt nothing. In the only way possible for me, I kept a part of me safe from the assault. I had promised to help Gaalav. That was how I saw our relationship, as a vow” (251). But soon, she enters the liminal space of consciousness when she understands that Gaalav is only interested in using her for his quest for the horses. He does not acknowledge Dhrishadvati’s efforts in helping him achieve it.

When Gaalav demands six hundred horses in exchange for Dhrishadvati from Divodas, stating that the latter can beget three sons from Dhrishadvati, Divodas flatly responds that he only has two hundred horses to give and needs one heir. Gaalav is dissatisfied with the arrangement, and when he decides to leave the palace, he makes a cursory glance at Dhrishadvati, suggesting that she should leave, too. However, in that instance, she felt as if “I am his pet dog who is chained to him, and a mere tug will make me trail obediently after him” (250). It is at this moment that she becomes conscious of her exiled state and begins to register her defiance by not being obliging and staying back at the palace of Divodas. She realizes that although the woman’s greatest destiny is to be the mother of heroes, she will be dragged from kingdom to kingdom, and her womb will be pressed into service to produce male heirs. “In this land of heroes, I will remain nameless, invisible” (252). Madhavi’s decision to leave the palace by turning down her *swayamvar* and going to the forest towards the end of the novel is the moment when she transcends her exile state by resisting domination and reconnecting with her community,

the forest, the place where she truly belongs. Madhavi also registers her resistance by not subjecting her body to be reduced again to a mere reproductive womb for her suitors to beget kings as per the prophecy. She chooses herself above all the identities that were thrust upon her.

The Absent-Present Mothers

Embodying both virginity and motherhood, Madhavi becomes an “ideal” woman whose sacrifice is foregrounded in mythology at the expense of her body, which was pressed into compulsory motherhood. However, she is devoid of an active sexual desire at the same time. As Sumathi Ramaswamy points out, “virginity becomes the site where this complex contradiction between absence of sexuality and fruitful motherhood is negotiated” (qtd. in Aneja and Vaidya 22). Like the virgin mothers from other religions and cultures, Madhavi occupies a unique position in the cultural imagination as she has the virginal purity and the regenerative capacity of a mother. Since her virginity is restored after the birth of every child, the notion of bodily violation becomes inconsequential or disregarded in the story as she is considered pure and chaste after childbirth, hence unviolated.

Sukumari Bhattacharji, in her essay “Motherhood in Ancient India”, posits that the apotheosis of motherhood in India is a compensatory act for society’s indifference to the mother, despite giving birth to a child the mother’s role in bringing up the child is disregarded. Mahadevan provides Madhavi with a mother, something that has been denied to her all along. This move to give Madhavi a mother figure is an act of subversion, as the mother’s role is often sidelined in the myth. The recurrent dream of Dhrishadvati about a deer in the story also alludes to the absent presence of Madhavi’s mother. For Madhavi, the deer represents the freedom that is denied to her, as Pattanaik explains, “In the forest, chasing the deer (*mriga*) creates a path (*marga*). Hence in Vedic texts, deer embodies a goal: the object of desire” (Pattanaik), and for Dhrishadvati her object of desire is freedom. The symbol of deer also stands for her mother, an untamed free person of the forest. Despite the abandonment, she craves for her mother and her affection. When a tattooist tribal woman encourages Dhrishadvati to get a tattoo of a pair of swans that symbolize eternal love on her arm, she chooses to get a tattoo of a deer on her back with a hint of the forest in the backdrop; it is the tattoo that her mother had. When the tattoo artist warns her that she will not be able to see the tattoo as it is on her back, she replies, “I don’t have to see it. I just want to know that it’s there” (259), despite having an unavailable mother the thought of her mother comforts her. This interaction can be interpreted as Madhavi’s longing to keep the memories of her mother closer to her through the tattoo.

As Tharu and Niranjana point out, “a woman’s right over her body and control over her sexuality is conflated with her virtue” (282). Madhavi’s status as a virgin and royalty makes her a virtuous woman despite her bodily morality being compromised by the very gatekeepers of patriarchy. Madhavi’s story can be seen as a metaphor for women’s lack of bodily autonomy at any given time. Madhavi’s identity as a

mother has been erased in the *Mahabharata* story, but this disembodied maternal figure is given visibility and embodiment in this revisionist narrative, *Bride of the Forest*. Madhavi's act of breastfeeding itself can be taken as an act of defiance in the story, as she is seen only as a "supplier" of the womb and not a nurturer because nurturance is reserved only for women who can lay claim to their children. When Madhavi says, "His mouth finds my breast and latches on. It flows through me in delicious warm ripples, this new feeling, this wash of joy. Anguish and rapture conjoined" (229), it captures the little joys of motherhood and the agony of a discardable being forced to live at the periphery of the society- a perishable marginalia. The story draws attention to the transaction economy where women are treated as mere goods for men to thrive. The inability to produce children is looked down upon, and the onus is always on women's bodies. If the womb produces a male child, then this priced possession is celebrated. If not, their existence is rendered meaningless. In traditional societies, a woman who has not given birth to a child is treated as an unfulfilled woman, possessed by "*nirrti*- a negative concept of a spirit that is exceedingly ugly and wholly evil but whose special function is to destroy everything good" (Bhattacharji 47). Bhattacharji points out that this idea of a barren woman being possessed by *nirrti* is "a direct corollary of society's subconscious assumption that the woman's primary obligation to society was to reproduce" (66). Haryashva's wives' predatory curiosity about Madhavi's pregnant body is also because of the apotheosis of the maternal figure and their presumed inability to have a male child. Madhavi describes their interaction as "a strange feeling of disembodiment, as if my womb stored an elixir that these women, like three empty pitchers, craved to be filled" (221).

Moving Beyond Victimhood

Madhavi has always been portrayed as the victim of patriarchy. This all-suffering woman pushed to the margins of the male discourse was retrieved from the periphery and given a subject position by feminist scholarship. In this novel, Madhavi goes beyond the narrative of victimhood. She realizes that she is caught up in a trap where she will neither be given the status of a wife nor a mother. Madhavi complies with being a surrogate mother, seeing that as her only hope for freedom. She willingly enters this transaction with her body and insinuates to Gaalav, "If I go away, there is no possibility of you getting those horses. I am your only hope" (177). In return, she hoped to become the wife of a rich king who could afford to give Gaalav eight hundred horses. In postfeminist rhetoric, Madhavi here is transformed from a sexual object to a sexual subject as Rosalind Gill observes that "sexual objectification can be (re)presented not as something done to women by some men, but as the freely chosen wish of active, confident, assertive female subjects (Gill 153).

The two other female characters from the novel, Devayani, the wife, and Sarmistha, the lover of Yayati, do not hesitate to employ trickery or use their body to their advantage. Their consciousness of their sexuality announces a rejection of the docile model. They are active sexual subjects who are aware of the pa-

triarchal world that they are living in. They do not wait to be rescued. Instead, they pursue their desires and ambitions by performing their femininity, one of the limited subject positions available to them. The novel abandons a critique of patriarchy as the source of oppression of women, making it a postfeminist text. There is an absence of conversation on the obliteration of patriarchy through collective resistance. Rather, women are pitched against each other, highlighting the perseverance and commitment of the individual women in surviving patriarchy and the success they attain therewith. Both Devayani and Sarmistha can achieve only symbolic equality through "the new sexual contract" (McRobbie 54), where they take a compromising position by embracing both feminist and anti-feminist claims. Devayani coerces Yayati into marrying her, thereby becoming a queen and gaining power, and Sarmistha manipulates Yayati through words to get her pregnant and solidify her position in society as a mother.

Sarmistha was taken as Devayani's slave despite being born a princess following a dispute between the two. Sarmistha realizes that the only way she can reclaim her status and respectability is through motherhood. When she meets Yayati for the first time, she seduces him and asks him to make her a mother. She succeeds in her endeavor as it is her son Puru who inherits the throne of Pratisthan and not the sons of Devayani. Ashis Nandy, in his essay "Woman Versus Womanliness", points out that for an Indian mother, the major medium of self-expression is her son. She exercises authority through her son, and "It is her motherhood that the traditional family values and respects; her role as wife and to a lesser extent as daughter are devalued and debased" (36). Since women's self-respect is tied to the notion of motherhood and the aura attached to it, Nandy calls it a "compensatory mechanism" through which "society can manipulate and control a woman by forcing her to take on her maternal identity, and a man by forcing him to take on the son's role, whenever there is a crisis" (37). Devayani and Sarmistha derived power as the mothers of future kings, and indeed, they exercised their authority through their sons. A postfeminist theoretical lens helps us understand how feminist concerns are articulated in potentially contradictory ways in contemporary fiction. Despite the text dismissing the victim position of the women characters in the novel, the availability of other subject positions is limited to them. From a feminist standpoint, one can only argue that the notion of choice is itself denied to them, and they are mere survivors in the grand patriarchal narrative. The women in this novel are largely strategically manipulative, but it is their inevitable tool for survival in a patriarchal society.

Conclusion

In the novel *Bride of the Forest*, when Sarmistha tells Dhrishadvati, "It is enough for now to sing our secret songs. Everything may be taken from us but not our melodies, made up from odds and ends as only we know how to use them- scraps of our mutilated selves, the wounds and the tears ... We pass it on... we return from the dead when we sing our lives" (119), it feels like a clarion call for the autonomy and

reclamation of voice that had been denied to women for generations, an appeal to break out from the prison house as women had been held hostages of the male discourse. Feminist revisionist narratives are enriched by the female experience, a counter-narrative to “the collective male fantasy”, and “they are representations of what women find divine and demonic in themselves; they are retrieved images of what women have collectively and historically suffered; in some cases, they are instructions for survival” (Ostriker 73).

“On the Trail of the *Mahabharata*: A Response”, Janaky argues that the presence of the mother cult in India implicates the cultural acknowledgment of feminine energy. But the problem lies with the politics of the location of this power in the reproductive mystique of motherhood. It results in the fixation of the feminine role within familial and maternal obligations. “Indian mythology and religious texts are suffused with the imperative of motherhood. As popular and much-regarded sources of Indian tradition and thought, they help establish the historical and socio-cultural legitimacy of motherhood and its conflation with womanhood” (Nandy, Amrita 66–67). Therefore, the imaginative construction of reconceptualized mother figures from mythology through revisionism is a significant step in challenging patriarchally constructed hegemonic motherhood.

Madhavi’s characterization has transformed over the years for a “dialectic between the myth and the ‘modern gaze’” (Jaidev vii); while the earlier adapta-

tions of the story of Madhavi have showcased Madhavi as a helpless woman, in *Bride of the Forest*, she emerges as radical in her ultimate rejection of patriarchy. Madhavi’s decision to go back to the forest is seen as an act of self-preservation in *Mahabharata*. In contrast, it is presented as a defiant gesture in the novel, choosing herself above all. There is a marked shift in telling the story from the other to the self and a shift from the narrative of victimhood towards women with agency. This novel also highlights an otherwise neglected maternal subject and makes their bodies visible. By deviating from the notion of the “ideal” submissive women of the epic, the author has given voice to the marginalized characters, reworked the pregnant silences, and envisioned a world populated by women characters, otherwise dominated by men and hyper-masculine tendencies. This novel can also be read as negotiations with patriarchy rather than as manifestations of abject affirmation of patriarchal codes and conventions. Despite several retellings, the reinterpretation of the myths through a gender lens holds ground today mainly because of the changing lived realities of women and the continued significance of mythology in their lives. This repositioning of retellings is something that must be pronounced, discussed, and examined.

Note: My thesis supervisor has helped me edit and revise the paper at various stages during its development.

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