MYTHOLOGY: NARRATIVE AND FEMINIST CONCERNS

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled **"MYTHOLOGY: NARRATIVE AND FEMINIST CONCERNS"** submitted by **SASWATI BHATTACHARYA** in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY** of this University, has not been previously submitted for the reward of any degree to this or any other University. This is a bonafide work.

We recommend this dissertation to be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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Saswati Bhattacharya

Saswati Bhattacharya

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The realm of narratives, myths, representation and hence images that are constructed through them, have always fascinated me. My concern is with the understanding of these images, reflecting upon how they are formed in the course of time. The interest however has primarily been with the category of women, in the context of feminist concern for their position and status in a society. Clearly, these images have been formed through the ages, by different discourses[1] on women at numerous points of time in history, be it in literary works, sacred texts, canonical works or through oral narratives of how women should be, what is right or wrong for them, what they can or cannot do; bounding their existence by hundreds of codes. My aim is to explore how the 'social construction' of womanhood takes place through an interaction between culture and society in the context of a few chosen narratives in the *Mahābhārata* – the Indian epic which is often treated simultaneously as either 'itihaasa' (history) or as 'purana' (story).

However, before such an attempt is made, it is necessary to dispel the misunderstandings about feminism, stemming from it being perceived as anti-male, anti-religious and destructive of the family and society, to the extent of it being considered immoral[2]. This dissertation focuses on the dominance of what have become male norms, masculine ways of relating with the environment and resources, viewing everything as an object. It attempts to challenge through feminist readings, dominant forms of knowledge and of understanding the world. Even then, it is important to note that it is not a monolithic

discourse, and therefore a historicity of the feminist thought and action must be revisited before trying to search for answers. One can start with three phases. In the first appears the legacy of enlightenment feminist theory which provides an image of woman as a rational, responsible agent, one who is able, if given a chance, to take care of herself to further her own possibilities (Mary Wollstonecraft 1792). Some of them goes beyond (Sarah Grimké 1838; Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 1848) to suggest that the oppression of women as a group has been a historically pervasive, systematic subjugation by men. Secondly, there is another vein of equal importance in the nineteenth century feminist theory, and still a part of twentieth century feminist thinking which focuses on the more broader cultural transportation envisaged as the 'cultural feminism' (Brooke 1975). Instead of emphasizing the similarity between men and women, theorists often stressed the differences, ultimately affirming that feminine qualities may be a source of personal strength and pride and a fount of public regeneration. Instead of focussing on the political change, feminists holding these ideas while continuing to emphasize the importance of critical thinking and self-development, stress the role of the "non-rational, the intuitive, and often the collective side of life" (Margaret Fuller 1845 in Donovan 1994:31). The underlying vision was matriarchal, the idea of strong women guided by essentially female values and concerns (Stanton 1895; Matilda Joslyn Gage 1893). However, whereas the nineteenth century cultural feminists more or less assumed that "women's pacifist and reformist nature was relatively innate and that women would bring this perspective with them into the public sphere to 'purify politics"(Donovan 1994:61); the twentieth century cultural feminists are for the most part leery about this biological determinism. The second phase saw the rise of other feminist traditions that constituted the theoretical base of feminist movement. These

were the debates about Marxism and Feminism (Heidi Hartmann 1981; Nancy Hartsock 1983), Feminism and Freudianism (Nancy Chodorow 1978; Gale Rubin 1975; Kate Millet 1970), Feminism and Existentialism (Simone de Beauvoir 1949; Adrienne Rich 1975), Radical Feminism (Angela Davis 1981; Mary Daly 1961). In the third phase there is a shift (in the 1980s) when spurred on by the stress on difference in postmodernist and multi-culturist theory, feminist theory tended to become more specific, paying more attention to the differences among women particularly those of race, class, ethnic background and sexuality (Elizabeth Gross 1986; Donna Haraway 1985; Susan Bordo 1987; Iris Marion Young 1990). But, even within the continually shifting focus of feminist theories, it was always concerned with two distinctly different, yet related aspects of the situation of women in society. The first is the status of women as defined by law, religion, custom and tradition; and the second aspect being the 'consciousness' of women as composed of their self-image (self-concept, self-worth), of the framework of attitudes, norms and values that they subscribe to and in terms of which they define their concept of self.

For me, such an understanding involves the twin concepts of 'culture' and 'social construction', where culture encompasses the complex totality of artifacts, knowledge, beliefs, values, skills, institutions, patterns of behaviour (Raymond Williams in Smith 2001) -critical elements of human existence, and also defines truth, beauty, normality, duty, obligation and justice in their lives; the analysis of which appears necessary to reflect upon the images of women, a 'social construction' through the representation of the woman as object, through the interaction and interconnection of these categories.

Hence, the paper will hereafter study the importance of mythical narratives as texts in this context, as a cultural representation of gender, with a concern not only with how

they are incorporated but also how they evolve and grow, how women are represented, how they represent themselves and consequently what do they do with the representation they encounter, influenced by the critical work of women studies concerned with the processes of production, dissemination and consumption of texts, asking questions about how audiences (and particularly female audiences) use texts.

Here, I have made a distinction between representation and reflection. The latter term is not used in this study because it implies that there is a direct correspondence between phenomena (events, peoples, things) in the 'real' world and their appearance in the text. Representation, however, indicates that some kind of modification or interpretative process is involved in 're-presentation,' some manipulation or transformation is unavoidable.

Thus, my work will begin by introducing some theoretical tools for interpreting stories and genre frames before going on to look at the ways in which narrative analysis has been applied to the understanding of the wider social life. The 'narrative' character of the *Mahābhārata* has been restricted here, following the double-layered model of structuralism, where it consists of two parts: 'story' and 'discourse'. 'Story' is the temporal sequence of events and 'discourse' the mode of representation of that story. Narrative is the inter-relation of the two as an articulation. Discourse is the set of narrated events and situations as they are presented to the reader or the listener; story is the sequence of events and situations as they appear in the chronological order; discourse is the plot as opposed to the basic story. Discourse consists of both the 'medium' (written, oral) and the 'form' (the order of representation, the point of view, the narrator etc) (Culler 1975 in Dev 1994).

But, given the above components of the study, any discussion of narrative in the Indian context will have to eschew the binary distinction between mimesis and diegesis, between history or 'itihaasa' and myth or 'purana', between tradition and modernity. Only then shall we be in a position to conceive a proper theory of Indian narratology. This truth is nowhere more eloquently expressed than in Mahābhārata itself when it says:

> Logical argument is inconclusive;
> The Vedas are dissimilar;
> There is no sage whose doctrines can be taken as authoritative;
> The verities of dharma lie hidden in the inaccessible recesses of soul;
> The traditions followed by the many show the true way.
> (Cited in Dev 1994).

And, this is how the *Mahābhārata* acquired the mythical character- to the extent of a traditional narrative of a religious and ritualistic kind, which justifies or represents an exemplary truth, presenting an 'ideology' as natural and commonsense.

It is in this backdrop that the paper starts by first examining feminist theorizing of post-structuralists like Foucault and Derrida, who attempted first to deconstruct the taken for granted universal and essentialist category of 'woman,' questioning how gender relations and arrangements had been constituted in culturally and historically specific conditions. This led to the emphasis on discourse as a process of creating subjects and the meaning of experiences-a call to interrogate the subjects' identity- the hitherto 'silence' of the subjects' rights, to abandon the homogenization of women and address their differences through the epistemological route of feminist postmodernism[3].

Although it is central to many forms of structuralism and post-structuralism, an attention to the story like qualities of social life, or to observe culture as a 'text' to be interpreted is perhaps strongest in those theoretical approaches that are concerned with

narrative and hermeneutics. The work being sociological will then move on, not to focus on narrative theories as such but will try to incorporate concepts of feminist theory into narrative analysis, reading of text, in this case, with reference to *Mahābhārata*-as a literature that embodied the sacred and secular, political, cultural and social tradition of an epoch.

The focus being, the questions of feminism attempting to analyse gender as a construction and a product of discourse that constitutes and maintains power relationships. Hence, the interpretation or recalling of the stories will explore the mimetic aspect of narratology, a representation of life, rather than the structuralists' semiotic understanding. The concern will be more with characters than with any other aspect of narrative and to speak of characters largely as if they were persons in relations to others in society, influenced by the premises of feminist criticism that narrative texts are profoundly referential and influential in their representations of gender relations.

In dealing specifically with the questions of gender, I have posed the questions of 'how'? How in various historical and mythical discourses gender has been continually reconstructed wherein gender becomes more than simply a category for men and women; it becomes a category through which to analyse society. Both 'gender' and 'power' are understood in this context not as absolute but as relational. That is they exist, only as relationships between 'man' and 'woman' or 'powerful' and 'powerless' and not as independent facts.

Thus, the aim will be to look at two specific problems. The first is the analyses of theoretical orientations in the recalling of the narratives of the Mahābhārata. The second is

concerned with the analysis of some of the characters in the epic, the characters of Śakuntalā, Satyavatī, Gāndhāri, Kuntī, Ambā and Mādhavī. I shall focus on examining power relations in a context that cannot be reduced simply to the opposition between ruler and subject or men and women. And the effort will be to understand how and when gender becomes a principle of social order. The effort of this dissertation will be towards understanding the lives of these women, their relationships with their men, to other women, and to the society at large. A critical appreciation of the differences between women and avoiding the creation of an essence in terms of 'universal motherhood', or 'ideal wife' where none such idea exists in reality. Thus, the focus will be on a complex web of social relations, the dynamics of gender relations as found in the society.

Given the schema of things as to how I have intended to proceed, it has now become necessary to explain the agenda and the choice behind exploring Bengali *Mahābhārata* as a 'text' in the context of narrative theories and feminist philosophy. Other than the obvious reason that I felt more comfortable in dealing with only the *Mahābhārata* in my mother tongue in a short span of time, I felt that this is an opportunity to bring forth the rich literary tradition of Bengal, and the salient features of Bengali culture as it is perhaps represented in its *Mahābhārata.*

The history of Bengali Literature is about a millennium old. The salient features of the Bengalis' philosophy, thinking and a trend of their serial changes can be traced out through this. Though the origin of Bengali language is Sanskrit, with the passage of time, at about 10th century A.D the Bengali language was born, peeling off the clusters of Prakrit Apabhrangsa (some words and phrases from the commoner's language Prakit). Since then, the language has been flowing incessantly through several permutations and

combinations till date. From the historical perspective of linguistic changes, the Bengali language can be classified into three categories. Firstly, the ancient Bengali language, ranging from 10th century to 12th century AD. Then came the mediaeval Bengali language, which ranged till the mid-18th century. The next and ultimate phase of Bengali language took off from the second half of the nineteenth century.

During the early middle Bengali period, i.e. 1300 - 1500 AD, the Muslim emperors who ruled Bengal realized the "wonderful influence" which "*Rāmāyaṇa*" and "*Mahābhārata*" exercized in "moulding" religious and family life of their Hindu subjects and therefore employed Sanskrit knowing Bengali scholars to translate them into Bengali (Sen, S 1976). An important aspect of mediaeval Bengali literature is this transliteration. The Bengali translation of ancient literature started taking place from 15th century onwards. Raghunath Pandit translated "Bhagavat-Gita", "Puranas" and other Vaiṣṇava works from Sanskrit to Bengali. In the mediaeval age, the Sanskrit mythologies were also translated along with *The Rāmāyaṇa* and *The Mahābhārata*. These translations were not mere productions of the source language text but were adaptations set in a new context and imbued with a new spirit. They have imbibed personal thinking and blended their own creativity with the original text. Krittibas Ojha of Phoolia has the credit of translating *The Rāmāyaṇa* and *The Mahābhārata* (Sen 1976) into Bengali for the first time. His *Rāmāyaṇa 'Pacali'* or doggerels had earned immense popularity at that time.

During this time, The Mahābhārata was also translated simultaneously by others as well. Kāśirāma Dāśa was the chief translator of *The Mahābhārata* among them. A popular proverb often quoted about *Mahābhārata* and something which Dasa himself believed is "Ja nei Bhārate ta nei Bhārate"[4] (Dāsa 1987:17). However, several persons had translated

The Mahābhārata before Kāśirāma Dasa. But none of them attained as much of popularity as his. The other four translators who have also done commendable translation of this epic are Kavindra Parameshwar, Srikar Nandi, Kavi Sanjaya and Bijaya Pandit (Dasa 1987). The Mahābhārata of Kavindra Parameshwar was popularly known as '*Parageli Mahābhārata*' (around 1493-1519 approx)[5] while its original name was '*Pandava Bijaya*'. Srikar Nandi's translation was more concerned with the 'asvamedhaparva' of Mahābhārata and his work is popularly known as '*Chutikhani Mahābhārata*'[6]. Some scholars however, regarded the *Mahābhārata* of Kavi Sanjaya as much more interesting in several respects. Far less in awe of Vyāsa than Kāśirāma, he consequently includes much more matters from popular tradition. Unlike other vernacular renderings of the great epic, his version is almost unaffected by the devotional movement (Vaiṣṇava) of his time, since it contains several unusual Sakta influenced episodes. In this and other respects it is very much representative of the Bengali epic tradition. Another important work on Mahābhārata was done by Haridasa Siddhāntavāgīśa, which was published later. Though not quite popular it is considered as an important work in terms of precision and careful retaining of the meaning of the *Vyāsa Mahābhārata.*

However, till date the most important and popular translation of *Mahābhārata* in Bengali has been the *Mahābhārata* by Kāśirāma Dasa (first printed in four volumes 1801-03). But critics like Haraprasad Sastri, Ramendrasundar Trivedi (Hajra 1983) say that Dasa did not finish the epic translation. He died after completing the Virataparva and his nephew, Nandaram, did the rest. Be that as it may, Kāśirāma too avoided a literal translation in form and meaning of Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata.* He included some tales and fables from other Puranas that reflect both his knowledge of Vedas and Puranas and

literary prowess. The most notable thing in Das's *Mahābhārata* is the abundance of devotional Vaiṣṇava culture. Coming from a Vaisnava family, he believed and revered the pious character of the book as a 'adipurana' or 'the fifth Veda' (Bhattacharji 1988), and Krsna to be the hero of *Mahābhārata.*

This reverence with *The Mahābhārata* is very apparent among the Bengali's as a whole. Even in the early part of the last century, each Bengali household possessed a copy of *Kasidasi Mahābhārata* (popular name of Dasa's *Mahābhārata*) and it was with quite a ceremony that the elders gathered in the evenings for listening to the rendering of the Mahābhārata. This tradition of oral rendition was most popular in Varanasi, where widows from Bengali Brahmin households listened to the recitation of the *Mahābhārata* by Kathak Thakurs[7] in the banks of the river Ganges. They believed that listening of the 'great epic' is a pious act in itself, 'Mahābhārater katha amrita saman'. The following passage reflects the belief of Dasa himself in the sacredness of the *Mahābhārata.*

> Sampurno bharat jar grhe sarbakhon
> tar grhe ran sada laksmi-narayan.
> Agnibhaya ar jwar-cor mrtyu bhay
> pap-tap, shok-dukha sab hoi khay.
> Raj-danda, jam-danda, akal maran
> bhutpret mari yaksha gandharva caran.
> Sampurno bharat grantha thake jar ghare
> e sakal pira tare kabhu nahi dhare[8].
> (Das 1983:22)

The Mahābhārata and other Vedas and Puranas also interested the later scholars of eighteenth century Bengal, who were resurrecting the glorious past of our country and its culture. In the early nineteenth century Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1774-1834) translated "Vedanta" treaties, "Upanishads" and "Bhagavat Gita" to resist the Serampor Dutch missionaries who were critical of Hinduism (Sen 1976). Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar

translated and adopted literature from Hindi (Betal Panchbinsati), English (Comedy of Errors) and Sanskrit (Śakuntalā). He also undertook a translation work in prose of the Mahābhārata but it was later finished by Kaliprosanna Sinha.

Our interest lies in the *Kāśidāsī Mahābhārata*, not only because of my familiarity with it but also because it was imbibed in the Bengali culture. It contains some such additions and alterations, which makes it typical of Bengali culture of that time. The stories of *Mahābhārata* are something that very Bengali children, or probably every Indian children come to know at a very early age from their mothers and grandmothers as bedtime stories. Familiar in this way with the *Mahābhārata*, an interest cropped up while reading some articles by a Bengali scholar Dr. Nrisinhgaprasad Roy (1989, '90, '92, '94, 2002 etc) on various characters of the epic. The writings of some eminent Bengali writers like Sunil Gangapadhyaya, Buddhadev Basu, Nabaneeta Debsen also inspired me into looking at Mahābhārata more critically. However, recent readings of Irawati Karve(1991) and Sukumari Bhattacharji (1988) finally tempted me to do this preliminary work on women characters in the various narratives of the epic.

The characters were chosen from Kāśidāsī Mahābhārata for its being a some kind of representative of the Bengali culture, except perhaps that of Mādhavi, a character I became interested in while reading an article in a Bengali journal and later searched for it in other translations. The agenda as already said, was to relocate and identify women's agency in these narratives. Though quite a lot of work has been done on women's identity and Mahābhārata separately and on women's agency in the *Mahābhārata*, most of the work that I have come across are involved with either Draupadī (perhaps the strongest epic character) as a voice of protest, or Sita, as the image of the prototypical Indian woman,

meek and submissive and yet carrying the essence of womanhood. The choice of characters like Śakuntalā, Satyavatī, Gāndhārī, Kuntī, and Mādhavī were however influenced by numerous reasons. The first and foremost reason was the urge to 'give a voice' to the 'others' –the other women characters of the epic who played important part in the events, and consequently the shaping of the epic story. Moreover the attempt was also to chronologically observe the status of women by choosing one from each generation. While Śakuntalā belong to the ancestral time of the epic, Satyavatī belongs to a time when the epic actually started to take shape in terms of the later Kuruksetra war. Gāndhārī and Kuntī, two women of the same generation, who were greatly involved in the actual conflict of the Kauravas and Pandavas, being their mothers, respectively, were chosen to analyse the 'representation' of motherhood, while the character Mādhavī, taken from later episodes in the *Mahābhārata* was a representation of the ongoing debasement of women in a Brahmanical society. Other than these objective reasoning, the choices were arbitrary, primarily because most of these characters were either fascinating to me at some point of time or became so when I accidentally came to know something unfamiliar about them. For example, it was only when I came to know in a seminar, of Śakuntalā's story to be much different from what I knew from popular renditions that I went back to the original story[9]. However, even after stating the biases, this study has some drawbacks. Firstly, I had to rely on mainly one version of the Bengali translation, as others were either in manuscript form or could not be traced. Therefore, however representative *Kāśidāsī Mahābhārata* may be, there was no scope to counter-check or incorporate other versions of the same narratives, which would have provided a more critical view. Second, in the translations of stories, though I have tried for accurate words, it was quite impossible to

convey exact meaning of phrases in some instances. Moreover, the translation of *Mahābhārata*, similar to all rewritings reflect a certain ideology and poetics, and also manipulative in some senses, functioning in a given society in a given way, which can be both advantageous and disadvantageous. On the positive side, it is expected to give a view of a society in a certain space and time, while on the negative side one has to take into consideration the author's biases and prejudices. It can also repress the ideology of the time and reflect the translator's awe and belief in the greatness of the epic and its creator. To overcome the limitation of using only one version I also took the help of two other critical editions, one by Haridasa Siddhantavagisa, but it consisted of only the Adiparva translation of the epic. The other was the *Mahābhārata* of Kaliprassanna Sinha, a much more critical prose based on *Vyasa Mahābhārata.*

Once having made the choice the effort was to link the study of the Bengali Mahābhārata from a sociological perspective of narrative theory and feminism. The following paragraphs give a brief summary as to how I have tried to inter-link these. The first chapter delves into the interrelation of myth and narrative. It starts with the question of 'what is myth?' and arrives at the point where we ultimately define myth as a form of narrative. Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes search this answer through the theories on myth. However, where Lévi-Strauss was more interested in developing a two-dimensional, binary structure for understanding the myth and its components, Barthes provided an understanding of how language becomes important as a tool in providing a transhistorical and transcultural view. After giving a theoretical framework of both Lévi-Strauss' and Barthes' explanation of myths and narratives, we have tried to arrive at a juncture from where we can probe into the fact of how narratives or myths are involved in

symbolic representation of the reality. Encouraged by the fact that it is the reader of th myths who reveal their essential functions (Barthes 1956), myth or mythical narrative appears for us (similar to many others) as belonging to history. This semiological root o myth and narrative is capable of rendering significance on how minds, societies an civilizations work. The language of myth enabled a paradigmatic study of the mythica narratives that were to be taken up in a subsequent chapter. It reveals how the binaries o emotion and reason appear in the narratives to provide the structures of a myth. How all kinds of institutions find expression in these narratives- religious, legal, moral etc which is capable of constructing specific group identities-of men and women as distinct and different groups.

Theories of feminist stylistics and narratives were examined in the second chapter in order to establish a base for examining the narratives from a feminist ideological perspective. The concept of 'self', a basic premise of twentieth century feminist philosophy being the core point of the discussion, some theoretical insights were presented too. This chapter also includes the concepts of identity and self-formation in the context of Indian literary theories for a better understanding of narrative structure. Such a background helped us later while going through the study of selected narratives of the Mahābhārata in an endeavour to find out new meanings in the prevalent categorization of women as either 'wife' or 'mother', meanings other than those granted by the patriarchy – thus interrogating how women are incorporated into the dynamics of power[10], both temporal and spiritual.

The third chapter is an exposition on some particular stories, in the first part of the analysis. A total of five narratives, each involving separate characters but related through the web of the epic were examined in the hope of unraveling the concept of self and

differentiation into the monolithic representation of women. The choice on which characters to focus was made on the basis of each revealing some complexities of humanity and not solely of femaleness. An analysis followed every narrative, reflecting on questions of gender and agency from narrative standpoints. The second part of this chapter located the general conditions of women at the age of Mahābhārata and was involved in reconfiguring how women's status gradually degenerated through time. Moreover taken from Bengali translation of the Mahābhārata, an effort was also made to trace the aspects of change in ideology and culture often found in translation literature and capture the specificities of Bengali culture that may have been reflected in them together with a pan-Indian image.

In the concluding chapter, we were to arrive at the point where we understand how feminism and narrative theory helped in the understanding of the narratives. How mythical narratives as historical fact have shaped the social construction of 'femininity', and how they are different in reality? How a retelling of narrative over a period of time repress certain views over others, and how it distorts and contain ideology that seem to threaten the prevalent patriarchal thinking.

Thus, the work is situated at the intersection of cultural studies, critical theory and literary analysis. However, the debates between feminism and post modernism, and essentialist and non-essentialist camps within feminist theory proves irrelevant here, for our concern is not feminism neither narrative theory but on the question of 'text' from these two perspectives. It has struggled to move beyond polarized constructions, particularly in this case where the interest in narrative and feminist criticism amounts in flogging questions that have been either pre-empted or displaced by semiotic studies. This

has amounted to a re-reading of the sacred/secular texts through the passionate urging of feminist disposition which has asked 'different' questions for the last twenty or so years.

NOTES:

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[1] I understand the term 'discourse' to mean forms of communication both verbal and non-verbal, and myth has been included as a specific form of communication. Two key aspects inherent in the concept are quite useful, following Bruce Lincoln (1989) & Rosemary Hennesey, discourse is always inter-textual, any form of communication is seen to emerge not from a void but is necessarily conditioned by the social, both its past and present. Interested in the role of narratives in producing history we will look at either of the two basic elements of narrative from time to time, its story and its discourse. The role of discourse though less familiar is possibly even more important. It works to construct presuppositions. The story seems determined by the discourse. Hence, "the distortion which follows necessarily from this process [of mediation] is a function of that hiatus between event time and discourse time" (Dev 1994: 8), which makes verbal representation problematic and less accurate and therefore the emphasis on 'text'. Much about the role of discourse will be discussed in the following chapters.

[2] Immoral, because it subverts the prevailing belief of women as inferior, some thing which is encoded even in the religious texts.

[3] As proposed by Sandra Harding (1986) it accepts women's hyphenated categories: Black, Lesbian, Asian, Native American, Working class. Rather than dismiss standpoint theory she embraces ambivalence, a stance she considers preferable to theorizing an incoherent world to make it seem coherent.

[4] A popular proverb in Bengal, it can be translated literary as 'anything which is absent in the Bharata (Mahabharata) is also absent in Bharata (the country Bharat)' thus treating the epic as an all encompassing treaties.

[5] After Paragal Khan, the ruler of Chattagram (now in Bangladesh) who ordered to translate the Mahābhārata to his court bard, Kavindra.

[6] After the name of the ruler Chuti Khan, the son of Paragal Khan, who was fond of the 'asvamedhaparva' of Mahabharata and specially ordered and supervised this work.

[7] A class of people who earned their livelihood by reciting Mahabharata for the elderlies-a tradition peculiar of Varanasi, though also practised in several other regions of the country also.

[8] A rhyme found in the opening verses of the Kasidasi Mahabharata, it explains the importance of the epic. For it is believed not just to be another literary work, as the translator says that a copy of Mahabharata must be present in every household since it keeps away all kinds of evil (material and supernatural), brings in peace and prosperity in the home and tranquility in the mind.

[9] The version that is more popular is from the play by the poet Kalidasa's Abhigyanam Sakuntalam, where the story runs that after Śakuntalā and Duṣmanta were married, the king went off to the kingdom giving her a inscribed 'ring' (abhigyan) which will remind him about her when they meet later. The heroine unfortunately loses it and hence was met with great sorrow when the king could not remember her and she had to leave him.

[10] The Foucauldian analysis of regimes of power which alert us to symptoms of coercion. For sociologists however, the questions like 'what'? and 'where'? appear as significant starting points while locating power relations within a society than the question of 'how'?

CHAPTER II

'MYTH' AS NARRATIVE

Amidst the apocalypse of world war, the mid-twentieth century saw a late modern upsurge of popular and academic interest in mythology. To a large extent the study of the history and applicability of mythographies[1] is a study in the history of ideas. The interest however, was not merely aesthetic, for not only students of art and culture dealt in mythography, but it also held scholastic interest for interpreters like the analytic psychologist Carl G Jung, to structuralists Levi-Strauss, Eliade and Barthes, all of who has said much in the rediscovery of meaning in myth. In Barthes words,

> "the notion of myth seemed to me to explain ...of the falsely obvious. At that time, I still used the word 'myth' in its traditional sense. But I was already certain of a fact from which I later tried to draw all the consequences: myth is a language"
>
> (Barthes 1972: 11).

And it is in these lines that my attention is focussed primarily upon understanding why we approach myths and rituals the way we do at the present time. Myths here do not refer to the sense which a scholar of history of religion, or students of aesthetics imply to them. The endeavour will be to inquire how epic narratives acquire mythic proportions and create a specific system of beliefs. However, too much of the history of mythography has been marked by the assumption that a single approach must be chosen. Myths are often considered to have only one function, to be of only one type, but for me it is multi-layered, multifunctional. And here it is mostly the power of narrative used to narrate the history of the society by establishing a community or a group identity, which catches my attention[2].

The role of a mythic narrative according to historians such as Hayden White (1987) is a form of social argumentation. Narrative, they argue, is a form of speaking about events, the 'objectivity' of the narrative being defined by the absence of all reference to the narrator. "The events are chronologically recorded as they appear on the horizon of the story. No one speaks. The events seem to tell themselves" (Benveniste cited in White 1987:3). According to White, the assumed pattern of narrative can contribute by presenting a principle- a desire to moralize the events of which it treats. This idea of 'moralizing narrative', therefore, can be productively broadened to include the strategies of mythological narrative. Both kinds of narrative impose a certain ordered, higher significance onto a sequence of events, revealing to us a world that is "putatively 'finished', done with, over, and yet not dissolved, not falling" (Callinicos 1995:50).

Thus, the component of each theme, each myth- the intricate details, startling twists of action, and layer upon layer of meaning seem to defy enumeration and explanation. But the attempt is to analyse how and why myth came to take its shape and its subtle changes over time. According to Roy Willis, the 'great themes of myth' include "the origins and structure of universe; the causes of life and death; supernatural being such as gods and demons; cosmic disasters; heroes and tricksters as agents of change; the body and the soul; marriage and the social area and so on" (cited in Leslie 1996:5).

But before we embark upon the issue of what is myth? Or, what for that matter is there in myth for our interests? the primary task will be to establish how 'myth is narrative' and why is it important to embrace this idea for the subsequent study.

Narrative discourse for its universality as a cultural fact also serves the interest for the dominant group in controlling the authoritative myths of a given cultural formation[3]. And also in assuring the belief that social reality itself can be both lived and realistically comprehended as a story. Myths and the ideologies based on them presuppose the adequacy of stories to the representation of reality whose meaning they purport to reveal.

This is why there has been a pervasive interest in the nature of narrative, its epistemic authority, its cultural, and its general social significance. Philosophers have sought to justify narrative as a mode of explanation. Theologians and moralists have recognised a relation between a specifically narrativistic view, of reality and the social vitality of any ethical system. Anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and psychoanalysts have begun to re-examine the function of narrative representation. Indeed, a whole cultural movement in the arts, is informed by a programmatic commitment to the return to narrative as one of its enabling presuppositions (White 1987).

And hence the recognition that narrative, far from being merely a form of discourse that can be filled with different contents, real or imaginary as the case may be, is what prompted the study of the *Mahābhārata*, as a mythical discourse[4] of narrative form and content.

Thus, while the term 'narrative' is not certainly a 'story' only, most people know that it refers, in some way, to stories. So, the question arises as to what exactly is this narrative? A powerful analytical tool today, narrative has existed as long as human beings and anthropologists have yet to find a society in which story telling is not important. The

word derives from the Latin 'narre', which means to make known, so narratives frequently convey information (Lacey 2000).

However, this is not, on its own, a sufficient definition. What distinguishes narrative from other form is that it presents information as a connected sequence of events. Moreover, narrative is not merely a neutral discursive form that may or may not be used to represent real events in their aspect as developmental processes. It rather entails ontological and epistemological choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications. Hence, narrative discourse far from being a neutral medium can be said to be the very stuff of a 'mythical' view of reality. A conceptual or pseudoconceptual 'content' which when used to represent real events, endows them with meanings more characteristic of oneric than waking thought.

To move from such an understanding to the recent theories of discourse which dissolve the distinction between realistic and fictional discourses will then not pose much of a problem. These theories in favour of stressing their common aspect as semiological apparatuses reveal narrative to be a particularly effective system of discursive meaning production. It is by which individuals can be taught to live a distinctively "imaginary relation to their conditions of existence" (White 1987:x). That is to say, an unreal but meaningful relation to the social formations in which they are indentured to live out their lives and realise their destinies as social object.

Thus what appears at this stage is a promise of how semiological studies and the use of its analytical models can provide some crucial insights. Throwing light as to how 'mythical' narratives are constructed or whether the semantic point of a narrative is to

provide an example of behaviour, to stimulate discussion, or to provoke rejection of its own claims.

With this in mind and Barthes' remark that "narrative...is simply there like life itself...international, transhistorical, transcultural" (Barthes 1977:79), what follows is to look more comprehensively at the different aspects of a narrative and how it can be used as a model of analysis for mythological narratives. And at the starting point it will not be inconsequential to note that,

> "[t]he narratives of the world are numberless, able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving... It is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime..." (Barthes 1977:79).

Narrative analyses however are sometimes condemned to a deductive procedure, obliged first to devise a hypothetical model of description and then gradually to work down from this model towards the different narrative species, to their historical, geographical and cultural diversity (Leslie 1996). However, the most basic narrative are linear sequences, though not in random. It is structured logically. Most narratives structure their sequences causally: each event logically follows from the previous one, and causes the next one. What makes narrative a key concept then is its usefulness in looking at texts as a whole.

Thus, as such a discussion necessitates, we will move on to the theoretical approaches- specifically the structuralists approaches starting from Lévi-Strauss, with a brief review of the work of Propp and Todorov and elaborating on Barthes. And, as it is evident, our examination will try to link up the threads; picking a few and shedding the rest to conjure a model that may help the purpose of the study. My approach with respect to the

work of Claude Levi-Strauss will be selective, summarizing and drawing together diverse ideas in terms of their eventual significance for the study of myths.

Lévi-Strauss in claiming that he can show "not how men think in myths, but how myths operate in men's minds without their being aware of the fact" (Lévi-Strauss 1969:12) alerts us to a different approach to analysing the content of narratives. He does not stress content or meaning, but rather "the system of axioms and postulates defining the best possible code, capable of conferring a common significance on unconscious formulations which are the work of minds, societies, and civilizations" (Lévi-Strauss 1969:12).

In order to understand what a myth really is, Lévi-Strauss starts by drawing awareness to the basic antimony connected with the myth. Mythology projects a contradiction similar to those found by the first philosophers who were concerned with linguistic problems. They noticed that though certain sequences of sounds were associated with definite meanings in a given language, these same sounds convey entirely different meanings in other languages. This has happened with mythology too, where at one hand it may seem that anything can happen in myth for there is no continuity or logic in it; when this apparent arbitrariness is disclaimed by the astounding similarity between myths collected in different regions on the other. Lévi-Strauss routed this contradiction by considering myths, not in isolation but in combination, to provide significant data. For him myth cannot simply be treated as language if its specific problems are to be solved because, "myth is language", "[t]o be known, myth has to be told" (Lévi-Strauss 1969:209). Thus, in order to preserve its specificity he proceeded to show how it is both the same thing as language and also different from it.

Taking his cue from the Saussurean distinction between 'langue' and 'parole'[5] Lévi-Strauss aspired to conceive a third level. For him, "myth uses a third referent which combines the properties of the first two" (Lévi-Strauss 1969:209). On the one hand a myth always refers to events alleged to have taken place long ago and yet the pattern is timeless. This is because myth combines a double structure, which is both historical and ahistorical at the same time. Thus what follows the above assumptions are: - (i) meaning in mythology do not reside in the isolated elements that enter into the composition of a myth, but only in a combination. (ii) Although myth is of the same category as language it exhibits some specific properties. (iii) These properties are found above the ordinary linguistic level. And such assumptions entail the consequences that-

> "(i) Myth, like the rest of language is made up of constituent units. (ii) These constituent units presuppose the constituent elements present in language when analysed on other levels – namely phonemes, morphemes, and sememes but they nevertheless differ from the latter in the same way as the latter differ among themselves, they belong to a higher and more complex order"
> (Lévi-Strauss 1969:210).

And he calls these "*gross constituent units*"(1996:211). For him these gross constituent units or 'mythemes' exist at the level of sentences and consists of a relation. However, to explain the specific character of mythological time, which is both synchronic and diachronic, Lévi-Strauss drew a difference between the gross units of mythology with that of ordinary relations prevalent in all levels of structural linguistics. Therefore 'gross units' are not isolated relations but 'bundles of relation' in a myth, which combine to produce a meaning.

Only when these bundles of relations are grouped together a two-dimensional referent of a new nature is found, simultaneously diachronic and synchronic and integrating the characteristics of both langue and parole. The mythmaker like a bricoleur

assembles these units into meaningful wholes according to structures that are deep embedded within the cultural framework of meaning available at a particular period. Tl structures are assembled, sometimes after much decomposition to represent the ultima cultural value or problem. These, ultimate values are, for Lévi-Strauss, primarily thos that have the character of binary oppositions[6]. That is, those are expressible only in term of contrasts that are completely polar, representing the primary conflicts of huma existence.

Moreover the binary method eleminates "one of the main obstacles to the progres of mythological studies, namely the quest for the *true* version, or the *earlier* one"(Lévi Strauss 1969:216). On the contrary, Lévi-Strauss defines myth as consisting of all it versions because "a myth remains the same as long as it is felt as such" (Lévi-Straus 1969:217). The consequences that follows this is that "structural analysis should take all o them into account" (Lévi-Strauss 1969:217). Such a model therefore, served him to have

> "several two-dimensional charts, each dealing with a variant, to be recognised in a three-dimensional order...so that a logical treatment of the whole will allow simplifications, the final outcome being the structural law of the myth"
>
> (Lévi-Strauss 1969:217)

Thus, Lévi-Strauss tried to evolve a systematical structural analysis of myth which not only, according to him brings some kind of order but also enables to perceive some basic logical processes which are at the root of mythical thought. So, in his structural study of myth he is seen to note three things. First, the fact that a myth is addicted to several repetitions is because it serves the function of rendering the structure of the myth apparent. Thus, a myth exhibits a 'slated' structure that comes to surface through the process of repetition. Since the purpose of the myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming contradiction, the slates are not identical. It grows spiral-wise, a continuous

process whereas its structure remains discontinuous, "myth is an intermediary entity between a statistical aggregate of molecules and the molecular structure itself" (Lévi-Strauss 1969:229) closely corresponding to the realm of physical matter. Such an interpretation also shows that the kind of logic in mythical thought is as rigorous as that of modern science and the difference lies not in the quality of intellectual process but in the nature of things to which it is applied.

However, through all these, it seems certain that Lévi-Strauss is not concerned to develop a method for the careful analysis of particular mythological narratives but a structural pattern or model by which all myths could be analysed. He worked out an understanding of 'The Mythical' in general, what he calls "the quintessential mythic formula"(quoted in Doty 1986:201). He is not interested in individual stories but in all of mythology, all principals of structuration. Thus, he stressed that there are inherent structures greeting at the various levels of within particular myths or systems of social organisation. And any level may be operationally or functionally more important within one particular society than in another, or at different times within a particular society. What becomes evident then is that, Lévi-Strauss is concerned primarily with the mythical structures of a society, rather, than with clarification or appreciation of the actual narratives themselves in terms of their aesthetic/poetic dimensions which is only a secondary concern. However, this does not mean that structural analysis of Lévi-Strauss do not have any cultural connotation. Or, is irrelevant in terms of their immediate semantic significance within the societies producing the myths or rituals. The units of a myth are assembled into meaningful wholes according to structures that are deeply embedded within the cultural framework of meaning available at that particular period, in order to recognize the cultural value or problem that is being represented.

This is not to say that other scholars, before Lévi-Strauss and after, have not pursued these dimensions. Structuralist analysis of the 1970s often refers primarily to narratological analysis and poetics, or to semiology and semantics, which is of much relevance within ethnology and symbology. And among other structuralist option developed to replace or to augment those of Lévi-Strauss, we will look briefly at types aimed at the narrative, aesthetic, and semiological structures of a 'text' (see Visvanathan 1980). However, in the presence of masses of analytical material we direct our attention to some agreed upon features. The major features accordingly may be categorised as an emphasis upon narrative ('narrativity' or 'narratological' features), to the study of the symbolic and semiotic constraints that a narrative exhibits.

The narratological emphases taken up by the later structuralists like Propp and Barthes provides for a better understanding of myth as narrative. Vladimir Propp's 'Morphology of the Russian Folktale' was first published in 1928. But it was not until 1968 that an English translation became available. In the intellectual climate of the following decade which was conducive to his ideas, that the book's importance was recognised. Propp endeavoured to show how folktales are linked by a common structure. And how this structure can be applied to any old or theoretically new folktale. Propp argued that the

> "surface language (characterizations, descriptions of locales, and so forth) in folktales might change extensively within a folktale corpus but that 'underneath' (here is the frequently recurring spatial metaphor again) the surface details, certain basic 'moves' occur that are not dependent upon particular characterizations in the story".
>
> (cited in Doty 1986:207)

Propp is not interested in the psychological motivation of individual characters but what their function is in the narrative. He conceptualised these functions in two ways: the actions of the characters in the story and the consequences of these actions for the story. Though derived from structuralism his ideas about narrative emphasises the resolution of

conflict. Thus by using simple system of substitutions for syntagmatic[7] elements, Propp developed a means of describing folktale plots, but not the paradigmatic element that Lévi-Strauss and subsequent structuralists had emphasised. At this juncture, however, of building a narrative analytical model of myth, some clarification about narrative, discourse, plot and story is not uncalled for. Therefore, to understand the development of narrative it is important to distinguish between 'story' and the 'plot'.

The 'plot' is everything that the 'text' explicitly presents. The 'story' is the chronological order of all events explicitly presented and inferred by the text. Tzvetan Todorov offered a way of distinguishing between these devices as,

> "the story is what has happened in life, the plot is the way the author presents it to us. The [story] corresponds to the reality evoked...the [plot] to the book itself...the narrative, to the literary devices the author employs".
>
> (1988:160 quoted in Lacey 2000:18)

In a conventional narrative therefore stories must always be chronologically constructed, otherwise they might be judged to violate the rules of our universe. They would destroy the rules of logical causality which define narrative. However, as we will see in Barthes' analysis, story and plot can also be conceived as semiotically. We can say,

> "[p]lot is the narrative as it is read, seen or heard from the first to the last word or image. That is, like a signifier, it is what the reader perceives. Story is the narrative in chronological order, the abstract order of events as they follow each other. That is, like a signified, story is what the reader conceives or understands".
>
> (Thwaites et al 1994:121 quoted in Lacey 2000:19)

If we carry the above analogy further then it is reasonable to call the resulting sign (which is created by the signifier and signified) to be the narrative itself[8].

Roland Barthes, modeled an alternative framework for coding stories, targeted primarily toward the surface expression of mythological content rather than Levi-strauss'

direction towards the structure of the mythological content. At the outset of his theory Barthes provided an etymological answer that "myth is a type of speech". It is a "system of communication, ... a message.... a mode of signification. For him, "everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse" (1956, reprinted in Sontag 1982: 93). Since myth, as such a definition denotes, do not possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things, objects cannot be the inevitable source of suggestiveness. Mythology can only have a historical foundation and, Barthes continues, which is why it is "by no means confined to oral speech" (1956, reprinted in Sonteg 1982: 94). Thus a wide range of writing or representation from written discourse to painting, cinema or sport etc can serve as a support to mythical speech.

However, it does not follow that mythical speech will be treated as language, for Barthes, as we will see, it belongs to the realm of semiology. The most influential structuralist to postulate semiology as a science of signs was Ferdinand de Saussure. He demonstrated that signs whether they are words or images, do not have any intrinsic meanings because they are arbitrary in nature. This means that a sign's meaning is derived from its context (syntagmatic dimension) and the group (paradigm) to which it belongs. Therefore, we can say that,

> "a sign .....works through a system of differences
> (from what it isn't), rather than of identity, (with itself).
> It means something not because it has some fixed identity,
> but because it is different from other signs. We could put
> that in a succinct but paradoxical form by saying that what
> a sign is due to what it isn't".
>
> (Thwaites et al 1994:32 in Lacey 2000:64)

Semiology thus, is a science of forms since it studies significations apart from their content. It postulates a relation between two terms, a 'signifier' and a 'signified' which

gives rise to the third associated term, the 'sign'. This relation which concerns objects belonging to different categories is of equivalence. Moreover, though in common parlance it is simply said that the 'signifier' expresses the 'signified', on the plane of analysis we have three terms; the former and the latter existed before forming the third object which is the 'sign'. With the example of a bunch of roses, Barthes explained that on the plane of analysis one should not confuse the 'roses' as a 'signifier' and 'roses' as a 'sign' where 'passion' is the 'signified'. This is because the signifier is empty, the sign is full- it is a meaning.

What follows is that there are functional implications between the signifier, the signified and the sign. Such a distinction is extremely important for Barthes, in his study of myth as a semiological schema. Such an explanation of myth however has its origin in his work on structural analysis of narratives, which, has been assimilated, for long now, to render a better understanding of a theory of myth. Rejecting the purely inductive method that one should start by studying all the narratives within a genre, a period, a society as utopian, he aspires to build up a single descriptive tool to study the plurality of narratives, to their historical, geographical and cultural diversity.

For him, the language of narrative is deciphered beyond the sentence. The discourse operating at a higher level than the language of the linguistics[9]. Discourse has its own units, its rules, and its 'grammar'. It is beyond the sentence, forming the object of a second linguistics, a system of meaning. But still there is no denying the homology between sentence and discourse that Barthes projected. The analysis of narrative as a concept however takes place at the level of description. As Barthes says, "narrative is a hierarchy of instances. To understand is not merely to follow the unfolding of the story, it

is also to recognise its construction in 'storeys'" and, works in two major levels, "*story* (the argument), comprising a logic of actions and a 'syntax' of characters, and *discourse* comprising the tenses, aspects and modes of the narrative" (1977:87). Thus, to read (to listen to) a narrative is not merely to move from one word to the next, it is also to move from one level to the next, as 'meaning' is not 'at the end' of the narrative, but runs across it.

He proposed to distinguish three levels of description in the narrative work. The "level of 'functions' (in the sense this word has in Propp); the level of 'actions' and the level of 'narration', bound according to a mode of progressive integration" (1977:88). This is entrusted to a discourse which posses its own code. Narrative is never made of anything other than 'functional', for, "everything has a meaning, or nothing has" (1977:89). The constitutive signified might have a number of different signifiers often very intricate. These functional units are of two major classes, determined without recourse to the substance of content. These are, distributional and integrational. The former corresponds to what both Propp and Barthes takes as functions. The latter, that is the 'integrational' units comprise of all the 'indices', a more or less diffuse concept which is nevertheless necessary to the meaning of the story. Indices because of a vertical nature of their relations, according to Barthes, are truly semantic units, a paradigmatic ratification. They refer to a 'signified' not to an 'operation', unlike 'functions' which is a syntagmatic ratification. Moreover, "functions involve metonymic relata, indices metaphoric relata; the former correspond to a functionality of doing, the latter to a functionality of being" (1977:93).

These two units then lead to a classification of narratives. Some are heavily functional (such as folktales/myths) while others heavily indical. Between these lies a

whole series of intermediary forms, dependent on history, society, and genre. However, the classification does not end at this point. It is further divided into '*cardinal functions*' and '*catalysers*'[10]. While the former inaugurate or conclude a certainity, the latter enter into a correlation with it. Their functionality being attentuated, unilateral, parasitic. This indeed suggests that the mainspring of narrative is the confusion of consecution and consequence where the catalysers are only consecutive units and cardinal functions are both.

The four sub-divisions then: cardinal functions (nuclei) and catalyser, indices and informants combine to produce a certain level of description in a narrative. Where the cardinal functions accomplishes the logic and temporality, the catalysers have a constant function in maintaining the contact between narrator and addressee. And, indices serve as part of a parametrical relation[11] while informants serves to identify, to locate in time and space. Indices always have implicit signifieds, according to Barthes, but informants are pure data with immediate signification. Indices involve activity of deciphering, informants bring ready-made knowledge not on the level of story but discourse[12] (Visvanathan, 1980).

Having decided upon the schema of narrative character and units, the next concern for Barthes was, how, according to what 'grammar' are the different units stung together along the narrative syntagm? In answering such a question, he reflected that informants and indices can combine freely together, while catalysers and nuclei are linked by a simple relation of implication. Moreover, a cardinal function is bound together by a relation of solidarity, and defines the very framework of the narrative. It is also important for working towards a structure of narratives.

It is important to note here that Barthes has already pointed out that structurally narrative institutes a confusion. This confusion is between consecution and consequence, temporarily and logic. Barthes tackled this as a central problem of narrative syntax, in trying to find out whether there is an atemporal logic behind the temporality of narrative.

Discarding Levi-Strauss and Todorov's idea of logic in regulating narrative functions, Barthes is about to provide for a description sufficiently close as to account for all the narrative units. For him, the functional covering of the narrative necessitates a basic unit (a small group of functions), which he called sequence.

"A sequence is a logical succession of nuclei bound together by a relation of solidarity; the sequence opens when one of its terms has no solidarity antecedent and closes when another of its term has no consequent"(1977:101). This is a purely metalinguistic naming of the code of narrative. At the same time it can be a part of an intra-metalanguage in the reader (or listener) —not only to perceive a language but also to construct it. A sequence is thus, Barthes says, "a threatened logical unit" (1977: 102). It can be constituent unit by itself, ready to function as a simple term in another, more extensive sequence. " It moves in counterpoint; functionally the structure of narrative fugued: thus it is this that narrative at once 'holds' and 'pulls on'"(1977: 103-104).

Being done with the functions of a narrative, he moves towards the 'actions'. Here the search is for a structural status of characters and consequently dealing with the problem of the subject. By reviewing the Aristotelian notion of character which is subsidiary to action, and the subsequent structural analysts problem with the essence of character, or, of whether action is prior to character, Barthes strived to show that structural analysis has

tried to define a character not as a 'being' but as a 'participant' or, as an agent of action The character is projected to be bound by a paradigmatic structure and defined according to participation in a sphere of actions. These spheres are few in number, typical and classifiable which is why Barthes calls this not as a level of character but level of 'actions' According to him, "the word actions is to be understood as the major articulations of praxis" (1977:107).

However, such a formulation does not resolve the problem of classification of characters. For Barthes the real difficulty posed is the place (and hence the existence) of the subject in any actantial matrix[13]. There may be one character in particular, the *hero*, or two adversaries in conflict over a stake, but characters as units of the actional level find their meaning, their intelligibility only if integrated in the third level of description-the level of narration. The level of narration is categorised to have two parts- the point of narrative communication, and, the narrative situation. Narrative as object, Barthes continues, is the point of a communication. There is a donor of narrative and a receiver of it, or there can be no narrative. But for him the problem is not to introspect the motives of the narrator (the much publicized 'author') or the effects the narration produces on the reader. It is more to describe the code by which narrator and reader are signified throughout the narrative itself. In doing this he therefore rejects the earlier assumption about the donor of the narrative being either the 'author' (a definite purpose), the omniscient narrator (residing simultaneously inside his characters and outside them) or the idea that a narrator limits his narrative to what the characters can observe or know.

Structural analysis for him is unwilling to accept such an assumption. Narration, or the code of narrator, is like language, knows only two systems of signs: personal and

apersonal. The personal can be either first person or third person so long it does not affect the discourse. The apersonal is the traditional mode of narrative, designed to wipe out the presence of the speaker. It is perfect to recall here the meaning of "in narrative, no one speaks" (1977:112). Though this elements forms part of the narrational level, the writing as a whole–the narrative situation must also be considered. Its role is not to 'transmit' the narrative but to display it.

Just as linguistics stops at the sentence and is followed by a shift to 'situations', narrative analysis stops at discourse, but similarly is dependent on a 'narrative situation'. The latter is a set of protocols according to which the narrative is consumed. This is because narration can only receive its meaning from the world which makes use of it[14]. While the narrative situation is heavily coded in archaic societies, Barthes stressed that nowadays the greatest pain is taken to do away with the coding of it. Seen critically therefore, the narrational level has an ambiguous role:

> "contiguous to the narrative situation it gives on to the world in which the narrative is undone, while at the same time, it closes the narrative, constitutes it definitively as utterence of a language [langue] which provides for and bears along its own metalanguage" (1977:117).

Analyses proper, of the narrative for Barthes would remain incomplete without analysing the next level–the system of Narrative. It consists of two fundamental processes in the language of narrative–a form or articulation, and a meaning or intergration. The form of narrative is again characterised by two powers: distending of signs over the length of the story, and, inserting unforeseeable expansions into these distortions, both being included within the language of narrative itself. A purely logical phenomenon generalised distortion substitutes meaning for the straightforward recounting of events. Moreover two units may be separated by long series of insertions belonging to different functional

spheres. Through this, a kind of logical time is established, being firmly held in place by the logic that binds together the nuclei of the sequence. These places of expansions are filled by a large number of catalysers. "The narrative is translatable without fundamental damage"(Barthes 1977:121), the only untranslatable elements being the signifiers of narrativity and the language of writing.

The second important process in the system of narrative is the 'mimesis' and meaning, or integration. It guides the understanding of discontinuous elements, simultaneously contiguous and heterogenous. "Narrative integration however, does not present in a serenely regular manner" (Barthes 1977:122). It appears as a succession of tightly interlocking mediate and immediate elements. Therefore there can be both 'horizontal' and 'vertical' reading of narrative.

All this is not to say that there is no narrative freedom, but it is limited between two codes, the linguistic and the trans-linguistic. Hence claims concerning the 'realism' of narrative are to be discounted. This is because the function of the narrative is not to represent. Here the 'reality' of a sequence lies not in a 'mimetic' order, a 'natural' succession, but in the 'logic' there. In this sense it is exposed, risked and satisfied.

Thus, in the final analysis we can see that narrative does not show or imitate. It is a level of meaning of a higher order of relation. It transcends repetition. Though men have ceaselessly tried to re-inject into narrative what they have known and experienced, narrative does so in a form which is not repetition but a process of becoming[15]. Such a structural analysis of narrative is later carried on in dealing with the question of what is myth in our study. As already stated by Barthes that even myth is also a form of narrative,

it is now important to find out precisely what elements of narrative analysis are present in myth. Also where is it that myth achieves a distinct form of 'narration', definitely a narrative yet something beyond it.

As an exposition to understand myth, our study at this point will take up Barthes' 'Myth Today'[16]. And in combining it with that of Lévi-Strauss we may arrive at a composite theory of 'myth as narrative'. We will begin here by remembering that the characteristic of myth is to transform a meaning to form. Also it has the potential to transform itself into a factual system though in actuality it is a semiological system. Tracing his origin from Saussure's work on 'langue'[17], Barthes denotes that literature as discourse forms the signifier; and the relation between crisis and discourse defines the work, which is a signification. In myth too there is this tri-dimensional pattern, but as a second order semiological system. That which is a sign in the first system becomes a mere signifier in the second. Every mythical speech is reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth.

In myth then, there are "two semiological systems, one of which is staggered in relation to the other: a linguistic system, the language or the language object...and myth itself...metalanguage"(Barthes 1956, reprinted in Sontag 1982: 100). When reflecting on a metalanguage, semiology no longer takes into account the linguistic schema but only need to know its total term, or sign and only in as much as this term lends itself to myth. Therefore a prior terminology must be specified in the analysis of each term in the mythical system. According to Barthes, the signifier in a myth can be looked at from two points of view. As the final term of the linguistic system he calls the signifier– *meaning*, and on the plane of myth– *form*. In case of signified he retains the name *concept*. The third term of the myth he calls the *signification*. The word signification has a "double function" here: "it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on

us" (Barthes 1956 reprinted in Sontag 1982: 102). However the "signifier of myth presents itself in an ambiguous way: it is at the same time meaning and form; full on one side and empty on the other" (1956: 102). Thus as a total of linguistic signs, the meaning of the myth has its own value, it belongs to a history. In the meaning a signification is already complete and it postulates a kind of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, and decisions.

> "Mythical speech is made up of a material which has already been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication: it is because all the materials of myth... presuppose a signifying consciousness, that one can reason about them while discounting their substance"
> (Barthes 1956 reprinted in Sontag 1982: 95).

Mythology is then a part both of semiology as a formal science, and, of ideology as a historical science. It studies ideas in form.

What is striking is that Barthes proceeds to show that the "form does not suppress the meaning, it only impoverishes it, it puts it at one's disposal" (1956 reprinted in Sontag 1982: 103). The meaning for the form is like an instantaneous reserve of history. The form must constantly be able to be rooted again in the meaning, and must be able to hide in the meaning, and both form and meaning together defines the myth. The form of myth is definitely not a symbol. While in explaining the signified he said, "this history which drains out of the form will be wholly absorbed by the concept" (1956 reprinted in Sontag 1982: 104). The concept is determined, historical and intentional at the same time, a motivation of uttering the myth. In reconstituting a chain of causes and effects, motives and intentions, the concept implants a whole new history in the myth; it is filled with a situation. However, what is invested in the concept is less reality than a certain knowledge of reality. This is because, in passing from meaning to the form, some knowledge of reality is lost. Thus concept has open character- it is a formless, unstable, nebulous condensation whose unity and coherence are based on its function. Just as in linguistics and psychoanalysis a signified can have several signifiers, a mythical concept can also have an

unlimited mass of signifiers. Thus, in this sense we can say that, the fundamental character of the mythical concept is, to be appropriated.

However, for Barthes this means that quantitatively the concept does nothing but re-presents itself and is much poorer than the signified. The form and the concept are in reverse proportion and to the quantitative abundance of form there corresponds a small number of concepts. As a constituent element of myth this repetition of concepts allows the mythologist to decipher the myth. Also, there is no fixity in them. They can come into being, alter, disintegrate, or disappear completely; and being 'historical', history can very easily suppress them. The signification in Barthesian analysis is the 'word'. The character of this signification is based on the correlation of the mythical concept and the mythical form where both are completely manifest.

"Myth hides nothing" (1956 reprinted in Sontag 1982:107) is what Barthes clarifies in explaining that the function of the myth is to distort, and not to make disappear. This is done by the concept, which distorts the 'meaning' aspect of the signifier. The signification of the myth is constituted by the duplicity of the signifier,

> "a sort of constantly moving turnstile which presents alternately the meaning of the signifier and its form, a language object and a metalanguage, a purely signifying and a purely imagining consciousness"(1956 reprinted in Sontag 1982: 109).

One last element of the signification that Barthes examined is its motivation. For him the mythical signification unlike the sign in language is never unmotivated or arbitrary. It is always motivated in part, and unaviodably contains some analogy.

Myth thus, plays on the analogy between meaning and form. There is no myth without a motivated form, and it is full of significant forms. Even when there is no meaning inherent in a concept, the form can give signification (meaning) to the absurd and make it into a myth. For that matter, form mystifies absence, gives signification to poor,

incomplete images or concepts, and gives meaning to it, which ultimately transforms into a myth. At this point Barthes idea that there can be three different types of reading by focussing on the duplicity of the signifier will not be discordant to look at. It will prove important on reading and deciphering myth in our analysis. The first two types of focussing according to him are static and analytical, they destroy the myth either by making its intentions obvious or by unmasking it. In the first instance the focus is on an empty signifier. This means that the concept fills the form without ambiguity and the signification becomes literal. For Barthes, such a focus is apt for the producer of myths, who starts with a concept and seeks a form for it.

The second, the path we will subsequently tread along, is where the focus is on a full signifier. Though Barthes' disinclination is clear, in such a situation he distinguished between the meaning and the form and the distortion that the one imposes on the other. It is then that the signification of myth is undone. Such a thing is suitable for the mythologist who deciphers the myth and understands a distortion[18]. The third way is that of the reader deciphering a myth. Here the focus is on the mythical signifier "as an inextricable whole made of [both] meaning and form" (1956 reprinted in Sontag 1982: 114). This receives an ambiguous signification. The reader responds to the constituting mechanism of myth. He or she absorbs its own dynamics and lives the myth as a story at once true and real. For Barthes continues, "if one wishes to connect a mythical schema to a general history, to explain how it corresponds to the interests of a definite society, in short... pass from semiology to ideology, it is obviously at the level of the third type that one must place oneself" (1956 reprinted in Sontag 1982: 115). Thus it is the reader of the myths who reveal their essential function.

A combination of Barthesian structural analysis of narrative and his later study on mythologies therefore can provide crucial insights. In the manner as to how 'mythical' narratives are constructed? Or, whether the semantic point of a narrative is just there to provide an example of behaviour, to stimulate discussion or to provoke rejection of its own claims. A proverb, for example, may function differently in different cultures. So, the question of the relationship of the literary material to the society in which it is produced becomes important. The most important contribution of semiological studies is that it insists upon the context in which literary works appear. Its emphasis in this regard has been both, constructive and deconstructive. The former in showing where the actual terms or signifier of a metaphor in literary work derives from. The latter in showing how a particular work is innovative in reworking the traditional meanings into a new meaning that may stand in a dialectical relationship with the past expressions.

A whole scope of literary history, therefore, can be unfolded in a new context. As a tracing of the meaningful segments received from the tradition it is now revoiced and reheard in terms of a dialectical tension with predominant 'meanings'. The present study nonetheless follows this pattern. That is, it strives to be seen differently in the light of new 'meaning'. In our analysis of the traditional text of the *Mahābhārata*, we will follow this perspective in the light of the deconstructionists movement of the 80s which has for long, opened the path of questioning and deconstructing 'given' concepts and then reconstructing them. In line with much of the structuralist (narratological and semiological) analysis[19], the idea is of a reappropriation of the materials from antiquity; both in terms of how translation recreates narrative, and how it is received by the reader at different points of time.

In conclusion then we will agree to erect a premise based on the different theories on myth and narrative. The first thing at the outset is a voluntary acceptance that myth can in fact define the whole of our traditional literature. And it can be so because there is a 'meaning'–that of the discourse; there is a signifier–the same discourse as a form or writing; a signified–the concept of literature; and a signification–the literary discourse. Lévi-Strauss' idea of myth as a mental construction and its inherent logic of binary opposition is important. But so is Barthes' narative codes–not all but the 'semic code', 'symbolic code', and the 'cultural code' (Lacey 2000). The semic code is determined by the needs of the culture in which the narrative is produced, and the symbolic is nothing but Lévi-Strauss' codes that signify (binary opposition). The third, that is the cultural or referential codes refer not to the text's narrative but to 'outside the text'. The outside however is not 'reality' but a common stock of a culture as it is expressed in the 'already written' knowledges of morality, politics, art, history, psychology and so on. Thus, for our purpose, myth is a "naturalised", "innocent speech", an "inflection" or "speech justified in excess"(1956 reprinted in Sontag 1982: 116-8). It is defined more by its intentions than by its literal sense. But though these intentions are never hidden, they are "frozen, purified, externalized" (1956 reprinted in Sontag 1982:110), and is thus read as a factual system. This exposition of trying to theorize myth as narrative will form the background in our re-reading of the Mahabharata 'stories'. But before actually plunging into the depths of it, the interaction of feminism and narrativity needs to be explored. The idea is to fully respect the original dimensions of materials from traditional 'text' and yet to make it comprehensible in our own terms, to look out for new dimensions, if any in the mythological narratives. In this respect feminism is destined to establish a new set of values in the fictive set-up. It

will not only boil down to a statement of protest, thus making for a new literary kind- the novel of dissent, but also analyse how and why singular patterns of images of women evolve. Hence, the following chapter will prepare us to deal with the problems of narrative through feminist understanding, revealing a spectrum representation of the ways of dealing with the binary oppositions of male vs female, of woman as subject vs woman as object, and of power and powerlessness.

NOTES :

[1] The term mythography means the application of critical perspectives to mythological materials, a traditional term for compilation of mythological accounts (Doty 1986:xiii) and the rest of the work will refer to this meaning.

[2] Here I acknowledge the fact that every community/tribe has a mythic narrative explaining the origin of life and its own origin as a community

[3] We will later see that how a certain narrative is preferred over the others in an attempt to control, for example only narratives showing the humble, docile images of women are more circulated than other different ones.

[4] The term discourse here consists of both the story and the plot which combines together to form a narrative, and how a paradigmatic analysis of narratives such formed reveals the power of narrative in directing and controlling the world-view of individuals.

[5] 'Langue' belongs to a reversible notion of time, the structural side of language, while 'parole' is non-reversible, the statistical aspect of language.

[6] As evident from the analysis of Oedipus myth in 'Structural Study of Myths' and his subsequent theorizing.

[7] 'Syntagmatic' as opposed to 'paradigmatic' means synchronic-a given time; the latter term refers to the study of diachronic-a cross time,or even cross-culturally.

[8] It is through the treatment of Levi-Strauss that signifier and signified combines to form a sign-a linguistic legacy.

[9] He developed this in 'Myth Today' (1956)-a relational similarity in myth and narrative whereby myth can be read as narrative.

[10] While the former constitute the real hinge points of narrative, the latter has a complimentary nature (Barthes 1977:73).

[11] Barthes by this term referred to N. Ruwet who called 'parametrical' an element, which remains constant for the whole duration of a piece of music- maintaining the tempo or character.

[12] Difference between story and discourse earlier in this chapter.

[13] The actantial model is proposed by Greimas and later adapted and developed by Todorov. Its value lies in its canonical form, a matrix of six actants, than in the regulated transformations (like replacements, confusion, duplication, substitution), thus holding out hope of an actantial typology of narratives.

[14] In the essay *Myth Today* (1956) he treats the concept of myth in the same way.

[15] As our discussion proceeds I will try to show that how once it is 'becoming', every narrative has a reality of its own and that is how a myth is formed and grows.

[16] In *Myth Today* (1956) Barthes wrote about myth as a semiological schema.

[17] Here "the signified is the concept, the signifier is the acoustic image (which is mental), and the relation between concept and image is the sign (the word for instance), which is a concrete entity" (Barthes 1956 reprinted in Sontag 1982:98).

[18] This idea was developed in Barthes' concern of making myth comprehensible.

[19] Here I refer to the structuralist work on biblical texts and mythological material. For example, *Structuralists Study of Biblical Myth* (1983) by Edmund Leach and D. Alan Aycock; Susan Visvanathan (1980, 1993).

CHAPTER III

NARRATIVE AND FEMINISM

> She [woman] is defined and differentiated with
> reference to man and not he with reference to her;
> she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to
> the essential! He is the Subject, he is the
> Absolute- she is the Other. (Simone de Beauvoir *The Second Sex:* xvi)

It is this 'other(s)' to which the paper will address itself. It will do so in the context of the feminist concern for their position and status in society. Feminist thought and action have always been concerned with two distinctly different, yet related aspects of the situation of women. The first aspect is the status of women as defined by law, religion custom and tradition. The second is the 'consciousness' of women as composed of their self-image (self-worth, self-concept): the framework of attitudes, norms and values that they subscribe to and in terms of which they define their concept of self. These in essence are the two critical parameters in terms of which feminism try to make sense of the actual course of women's lives.

Our concern with the images of women will be confined to the cultural analysis of gender myths. This is because, role models and reference persons in the persona of powerful characters who seem to define the do's and don'ts of socially accepted behaviour exists in different cultures, moulding the images of women. It is the mythical narratives that often create them. For us the questions will be what is the place accorded to women in religious myths? What do religious symbols and rituals indicate regarding the concept of woman, about her 'cleanliness' or 'uncleanliness', her value as a 'progenitor'? (Leslie 1996). How are the women seen in folklore? What are the roles they are primarily cast in?

What are the qualities that they are shown to demonstrate in their roles? How are their joys, their sorrows, their triumphs, their yearnings and their frustrations depicted? Such concerns cannot but only be understood in the light of feminism; and how and why it becomes important for the analysis of these narratives.

Feminism, however, is not what most people think about it. It is not there to disintegrate or rupture the stable structures of society in a query to understand the ignored categories of 'women', 'gender', 'other'. This quest moreover, has not been monolithic - from its point of emergence somewhere in the 1960s through the tumultuous decades of 80s till the present form when the very categories are at the verge of loosing their authenticity. Feminism isn't what it used to be. Looking back at the history of feminism, one can see that it (in the 70s) had a clear object (women), a clear goal (to change the fact of women's subordination), and even a clear definition (political struggle against patriarchal oppression). But the feminist work of the late 70s and early 80s, in refining from ever proliferating positions of the objects, goals, and definitions of feminism "has had the effect of splintering what had been a recognisable feminist project into unrecognisibility...into a paradoxical state of visible invisibility" (Broufen and Kavka 2001:ix). What appears is that though 'feminism' has become a more publicly visible term, the less sense there has been of what it is about. However, though clarity about the object, goal, and or definition is no longer possible or even desirable with the innumerable debates within and outside[1]; a brief visit to how it all began and what it is, will not be uncalled for.

In the sixties, feminism started by questioning various images, representations, ideas and presumptions traditional theories developed about women and the feminine. To begin with, feminists started their theoretical attention towards patriarchal discourses. It

either included those, which were openly hostile to and aggressive about women and the feminine, or those that had nothing at all to say about women. Feminists seemed largely preoccupied with the inclusion of women in those spheres from which they had been excluded. The theories during 1970s were liberal, Marxist/socialist, and radical. In thinking about some of the central characteristics of liberal feminism Marysia Zalewiski in *Feminism After Postmodernism* (2001) identified six concepts. Very rightly, these are *freedom, choice, rights, equality, rationality* and *control*. The legacy of Enlightenment and Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) brought about these upheavals. Liberal feminist theory thus provided an image of woman as rational responsible agent. As one who is able, if given a chance, to take care of herself, and to further her own possibilities. Hence, instead of being ignored by, and excluded from theory, women were to be included in it. And of course for such inclusion, the patriarchal discourses on position of women were to be rejected outright. This aim for equality was necessary both historically and politically. This later served as a pre-requisite to the more far-reaching struggles directed towards female *autonomy*. Under the label of feminist essentialism, it went beyond the fundamentally rationalist and legalistic thrust of liberal theory, moving towards a broader cultural transformation. Instead of emphasising the similarities between men and women that lead to validating social paradigm of dominance and subordination, it stresses the differences. Then, as cultural feminists declare, females perceive reality in terms of 'unities'. Her rational mind is embodied, has feelings and is engaged with, not in opposition to, other persons and things (Donovan 1994). The feminists falling under this category celebrate aspects of the human being, which have been depreciated and ascribed to women. Intellectually akin to phenomenology instead of

Enlightenment philosophy of the liberal feminism, they assume, like Husserl (1983) that the self interacts with internal and external contigencies. But unlike him, they do not reduce it to atoms for a revivalist science[2]. This theme of essentialism emerged in various forms in the writings of Nancy Chodorow (1989), Luce Irigaray (1980,1985) and others (Zalewiski 2001).

During the same time, there was also the rise of socialist feminists who viewed the essentialists definition of patriarchy as generative of human oppression, as anti- theoretical. The central features of socialist feminism can be categorised into *class/capitalism, revolution, patriarchy, psychoanalysis, subjectivity* and *difference*[3]. Both socialist and Marxist feminists agree that humans are defined by their production of the means of existence. They see humans as biological being in a continual process of praxis. Work is considered the essence of humanness and it is important to develop appropriate social relations. Sociality therefore, is seen as a human condition and emancipation can be achieved only by overthrowing the present state of capitalism to be followed by the liberation of women. Feminists like Hartmann (1981) question the sources of women's oppression and directions for change, and takes patriarchy as parallel structure to capitalism. Others differ, in terms of racism, public/ private, gay and lesbian struggles and view consciousness raising as '*the*' feminist method. Here women draw on their material being and thought, which are inextricably intertwined, to examine their own social context. Such an analysis is also strong among radical feminists leading to the point where "the personal [becomes] the political"(Mackinnon 1989 cited in Kachuk 1995:85). For the radicals the central emphases can be encapsulated as *woman centred, patriarchy, oppression, experience* and *control* (Zalewiski 2001).

There came however, a thorough change in feminist theorising with the advent of postmodernism, rather, poststructuralism. In it's rejection of the Enlightenment's fundamental proposition, postmodern feminism has a reputation for being inaccessible and very difficult to understand. Still, the prominent features that can be located within it are, the *subject, language, power/truth/knowledge, anti-metanarrative, anti-foundational* and *deconstruction* (Zalewiski 2001). A summary of postmodern feminism's main features by the feminist proponent Jane Flax (1990) enables a comparison with other feminist views. Most generally stated, it abjures the Enlightenment's ground for explaining human experience and promising human progress. Rejecting the belief in a rational self, functioning according to universal laws, postmodernism in some senses denies the scientific foundation of knowledge. Disclaiming the erstwhile meta-narratives as the foundation of *Truth*, it says that power is the manipulative force behind all. The emphasis is on discourse or discourses as a process of creating subjects and the meaning of experience (Scott 1992). As a call to interrogate the subject's identity (Butler 1992), it would abandon the danger of homogenization of women and address their differences in race, class, religion, sexual orientation and ethnic identities (Hooks 1984). This claim is but considered by others as a threat to the category of 'women' and concepts of feminism as a whole. However, as Sandra Harding (1986) proposes, an epistemological route of feminist postmodernism can overcome this problem of postmodern rejection. Harding, does this, by embracing ambivalence and accepting women's 'hyphenated' categories (Kachuk 1995).

To cut a long story short, feminism today has reached that point where there is no single theory as such. The multiplicity has opened up a whole new vista of doing

feminism. Whether activist, practical, theoretical or just 'quiet' in the issues and complexities; today, feminism involves the studying of 'women' as a group, along with their differences (Felski 2000). In this maze of things, better judgement urges us to dispense with feminist theory as such and, try to understand how feminism is more a methodology. As stated earlier, this chapter is not an exposition of feminist theory, but how it will provide a backbone, a logic in the understanding of myth as narrative for me.

The ideology of feminism that will be referred to, emerged in interaction with existentialism of Neitzche, within the philosophy of Kant and Descartes, and, borrowed heavily from French structuralism and post-structuralism. It incorporates especially, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Barthesian semiotics, Derridean deconstruction, and Foucault's work on power and sexuality. In this, feminists have shifted from 'true' consciousness, to the understanding of 'gender' and 'sex' as a social construction, the product of differing discourses (Gamble 2001). The Western philosophy of existentialism and phenomenology may seem to converge productively at the outset.

> "They form a tradition that opposes abstract, rationalist thought and is committed to elucidating concrete 'lived experience', including experiences of embodiment and emotion"
> (Kruks 2000:66).

Though having waned to some degree in the 1980s with the 'postmodern' turn, it regained vitality as theorists have sought insights from the tradition. The two strands can be said to be meshed together in the French 'existential phenomenology'. It is here that phenomenology was harnessed in the endeavour of elucidating 'existential' questions concerning human being and experience. And with these later developments, work of feminism within existential philosophy shifted towards the exploration of social and ethical issues, including questions of freedom and historicity, responsibility, self-other relations,

and embodiment. Feminist epistemologies thus insisted on the situated nature of knowledge.

Such a philosophy is carried on in feminism's interaction with postmodernism, in the debates of history and culture. The influence of Foucault and Derrida led to a deconstruction of categories and search for discourses in power. It is in this way that feminism provides a methodology in our work, an influence in our analyses. For us, subjectivity encompasses unconscious as well as conscious dimensions of self. It is embodied in bodies that are culturally gendered, (Irigaray 1985, Butler 1990, cited in Weedon 2000:76), and implies contradictions, process and change.

A combination of these philosophies will lead our understanding of work in the realm of gender and religion, and, feminism and narrativity. For us (following Foucault), power is not reducible to any one source. It is a relationship that inheres in material discursive practices. Discourses create embodied forms of subjectivity, which are implicated in power relations. Yet power also creates resistance, and we will search for this resistance in the myths about female characters. A search like this however raises the question of female agency. How female agency serves as a point of difference in the experience of subjectivity for different women, which in turn is a social construction becomes our focus. In the endeavour to understand this, an analysis of women character through their agencies in the narratives of the *Mahābhārata* is considered. This work will therefore focus on "women's difference [as] not represented by the patriarchal symbolic order, nor ...women's interests served by the laws and language of this order" (Irigaray 1985 cited in Weedon 2000:76), but rather on the idea that there are many discourses on the feminine, a legacy of Derridean deconstruction. To locate these issues our work will be

considering the areas of gender and religion, and gender and narrativity in particular. This is in order to situate how myth as narrative can be looked at through myths concerning female figures in the *Mahābhārata*; and how different or similar can the understanding of 'narratives' of female iconography be from a feminist standpoint.

A brief sojourn of gender and religion at this point will serve to know how it has inspired the particular study, and how theories in feminist narrativity and stylistics can provide a useful method for our purposes.

Feminist scholars of religion focus on a wide variety of topics-"gender, sexuality, women, men, social structure, cultural regimes of knowledge, modes of knowing, and the contours of disciplines-within multiple religions, as they relate to nations and regions, racial and ethnic communities" (Peskowitz 2001:29). Feminists in the field of religion offer a critique of existing religious belief and practices. Exposing the effects of privileging a particular perspective, their schemata have been entangled in "historical struggles of possession and dispossession, inclusion and exclusion, dominance and resistance" (David Chidester 1996:259 cited in Castelli 2001:4). But feminist methodology is also not simply a matter of critique. It has a pragmatic and constructive aspect too, in providing an alternative imaginary. This is because for them,

> "women is historically, discursively constructed, and always relative to other categories which themselves change; ... a volatile collectivity in which female persons can be very differently positioned....and the struggle [has been] against over-zealous identifications; and feminism must negotiate the quicksands of 'women' which will not allow it to settle on the either identities or counter-identities"
>
> (Riley 1985:1-2; cited in Castelli 2001:3).

Thus, for us who think differently about religious discourses and practices, as soon as the divine is analogised to the human realm, gender emerges as a problem of both difference and power.

In line with feminist trajectories in religion as having multiform strategies[4], this work too will take up historical recovery and reconstruction, imaginative reconstitution of traditions and practices, and ideological critique. Such an emphases has been drawn from the feminist scholars who imply that religion has played a complicated role in identity formations, social relations and power structures. As a category it often cuts across the other categories by which identities are formed (gender, race, class etc) and often complicates these other categories rather than simply re-inscribing them. The quest has been about what is represented and devalued in gendered terms or lost to sight because of privileged male perspective. And in this quest feminism tend to stress towards ethical dimensions of human existence – a continuation of the embodied nature of the subjectivity of postmodernism.

Our interest in this regard will sketch that of Donna Haraway[5] (2001): an analysis that quickly moves beyond the constraints of the lexical and the philosophical into the realms of the historical, the cultural, and the political. Moreover, it will be interdisciplinary, drawing upon literary studies, history and cultural studies. However, a number of strategies has been developed to address the issues both critically and constructively. Ranging from a critique of religious scriptures on hermenuetics to a critique of religious myth, metaphors, theologies and dogmas. From finding out about traditions not conforming absolutely to the male-centred model to constructing new religious perspectives, the methodological principles have been varied. Of the important critics like

Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza (biblical scholar), Phyllis Trible (*The Christian Century* 1982), Janet Morley, Sallie McFague(1987), Rita Gross (*Buddhism and Patriarchy* 1991), Lina Gupta(1991), Irigaray (1993 in the essay 'Divine Women') and others, feminists scholars of religion focus on a wide variety of topics – gender, sexuality, women, men, social structures, cultural regimes of knowledge, modes of knowing. They have also examined the contours of disciplines – within multiple religious traditions, as they relate to nations and regions, racial and ethnic communities. Of these a few who are concerned in critiquing religious myths influence this work.

This inspiration to recover mythic constructions of the feminine that are not simply a product of privileged male imagination and desire, requires a number of ideas to be put together for configuring a relationship between the male and the female. It also aims to look at how social relations are challenged when a female figure adopts certain patterns of behaviour that do not fit with the proper role given to her within tradition.

Luce Irigaray (1993) has been a prominent figure in discussing the issue of religion in contrast to her feminist contemporaries who have regarded religion as irredeemably entangled within patriarchal structures and masculinist ways of thinking. Irigaray's work incorporates both, elements of critique and reconstruction. She argues that the existing symbolic framework makes the ideal of masculinity the measure of all human aspirations. Going against this in an essay 'Divine Women' (1993), she discusses the idea that "in order for women actually to be able to develop an understanding of their own subjectivity and identity as women" (Jasper 2001:165) a reformulation of the feminine myth is necessary. Rather than simply as factors or features, which relate to a masculine subjectivity, "they need a divine representation of the ideal to which, as women, they

aspire" (Jasper 2001:165). Putting it rather simply, Irigaray's idea of the Divine is a form of projection without which women cannot achieve a genuine sense of their legitimacy as women, apart from their relationship with men.

At the same time Irigaray believes that "the passage from one era to the next cannot be made simply by negating what exists" (Jasper 2001:165). Therefore it is important to reconstruct the existing traditions rather than to abandon them. One way in which she approaches this reconstructive aspect is through a process of mimesis or miming female roles within patriarchal myths related to the divine[6]. It is in following Irigaray that our work tries to reconstruct the myths of female identity as depicted in our religious texts and experiences of the female in the traditional texts, of which the *Mahabharata* is an example.

However, such a reconstruction requires a re-reading of the mythical narratives, and for this we turn to researches on gender and discourse analysis started in the early 1970s. This is where we find the connection with narrative theories too. The term discourse however integrates a range of occasionally contradictory or exclusionary meanings in its daily and philosophical uses. As already said, the concept appears in several ways, 'spoken or written language', 'situational context of language use', 'interaction between reader/writer and text', 'samples of spoken dialogue', and 'notion of genre' (Fairclough 1992:3 cited in Wodak 1997:45). Therefore, at this juncture it is important to differentiate between 'text' and 'discourse' in feminist studies. Discourse may be defined as a 'text in context' on the hand and as a 'set of texts' on the other. As Ruth Wodak in *Gender and Discourse* (1997) pointed out, as a specific form of social interaction "critical discourse analysis sees discourse-the use of language in speech and writing as a form of 'social practice". Describing discourse as social practice implies, a

dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation, institution and social structure shaped by them. But simultaneously it also shapes them. That is, discourse is socially constituted, as well as socially conditioned. It constitutes situations, objects and knowledge and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people. It is constitutive of both, in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and contributes in transforming it (Wodak 1996:17; reprinted in 1997:6).

This, moreover, provides a direct link to our discussion of organisations and institutions in which the reality of constituting element of discourse is emphasised. In addition, it becomes evident that questions of power and ideology[7] are connected with discourse. Every interaction is thus influenced by power relationships resulting in the speech situation and the overall context.

Feminists conceive language as "a symbolical reflection of androcentric structures" (Grinther and Kothoff 1991:7 cited in Wodak 1997:10). It acts as one of the means of patriarchal society to discriminate, disregard and incapacitate women. In their view, the language system already reflects patriarchal structures. The language system was therefore, analysed in regarding the treatment of women. Language was exposed as a means of legitimising male structures with the intention of extracting women from being subsumed under general and male categories. Together with the language system, the linguistic behaviour was made into the object for analysis of the new research discipline and the issue of gender-specific differences was investigated.

The assumption that language system has lexical elements and morphological and grammatical rules that are already sexist, is based on the premise that, "due to their long history as public decision-makers, men not only determine the economic, political and social orientation of social life, but also influence the functioning and the semantic contexts of each individual language" (Postl 1991:89 cited in Wodak 1997:10). Once the language system has become the object of investigation for feminist linguistics, it is interesting to note how the linguistic structure of an individual language is connected to the structure of society and vice-versa. Our concern in this context will be first and foremost with an analysis, which identifies itself as feminist and which uses linguistic or language analysis, to examine texts. It aims to draw attention to the way gender is represented and also analyse the way agency, metaphor etc are unexpectedly related with the matter of gender. However, at the same time it may be helpful to remember that ideologies of gender are not the only one to be solely oppressive. They are not simply imposed on women by men. Women and men construct their own sense of self within the limits of the discursive framework, often in conscious resistance to, as well as in compliance with these constraints. How this occurs will be dealt with greater details at a later point in our study. Moreover, the attempt in capturing the meanings of gender representation will also give a space to contest and re-interpret them. But since women are no longer believed to form a homogenous group, the emphasis will be to try to incorporate the differences of class, race, age, wealth etc. The idea is to deal with the tricky question of

> "what new shape of politics emerges when identity as a common ground no longer constrains the discourse on feminist politics? And to what extent does the effort to locate a common identity as the foundation for a feminist politics preclude a radical inquiry into the political construction and regulation of identity itself?"
>
> (Butler 1990:xi cited in Mills 1995:3).

This view of feminist inquiry, which is concerned with how women and men are constructed at a representational level and at an empirical level, and how certain views of women are favoured at the expense of others, informs this work.

Feminist analysis[8] of narratives however place less emphasis on the artistic function of language than on the other aspects of language. It is concerned with the general emphasis of how certain effects are achieved through language. Hence, such work provides spaces for the subjective, individualistic process of interpreting literary texts, especially cannonical texts. Such a method offer numerous interesting and valuable ways of approaching texts, and linguistics can be used as an aid to interpretation. It can make readers aware of aspects of texts, in terms of lexical choices or grammatical choices, which skew the interpretation which a simple close reading cannot do. Also, over the years the focus of analysis has changed. From an analysis of text in itself it has shifted to an analysis of the factors determining the meaning of a 'text in its [social] context'. It occupies "the territory beyond the level of the sentence", and "the broader contextual properties of texts which affect their description and interpretation" (Carter and Simpson 1994:14 cited in Mills 1995:8).

Thus, feminist criticism as a whole is not pervaded by the concern with the linguistic level of texts. Much of it has been concerned with representations of women and relating those representations of female characters to a generalised female self-identity and experience. Hence, the focus can be said to be more on subjective content analysis. Nevertheless having its due criticism as a shortcoming in objectivity, it leaves the possibility for multiple interpretations.

However, the desire is not to explore the compatibility of feminism with linguistics but to reach the second level of analysis- the narrative analysis. It is not the level of sentence but the level of discourse or narrative[9] that is our concern. The immediate task therefore, as Susan S. Lanser (1986) pointed out, will be to ask whether feminist criticism and particularly the study of narratives by women might benefit from the methods and insights of narrative/narratology. There are but compelling reasons why feminism, (as an explicitly political criticism) and narratology might seem incompatible. The technical, often neologistic, vocabulary of narratology may seem particularly counter-productive to critics with political concerns. Moreover, feminists also tend to be distrustful of categories and oppositions, of "a conceptual universe organized into the neat paradigms of binary logic" (Lanser 1986:198). There are at least three crucial issues about which feminism and narratology can differ: the role of gender in the construction of narrative theory; the status of narrative as mimesis or semiosis; and, the importance of context for determining meaning in narrative. It is readily apparent that quite a number of works in the field of narratology has taken gender into account, especially by Michael Bakhtin (19), either in designating a canon or in formulating questions and hypotheses.

For the feminist critics, in the structural quest for 'invariant elements among superficial differences', for universals rather than particulars, narratology has avoided questions of gender almost entirely. A problematic for feminist critics, this has led to the re-reading of individual texts and rewriting of narratology. This rewriting takes into account the contributions of women as both producers and interpreters of texts. On the other hand, this is not meant to devalue the body of narrative theory, but to develop it further. For example, as Lanser says "[it is] likely that the most abstract and grammatical

concepts [like temporality] will prove to be adequate, but theories of plot and story may need to change substantially" (1986:199). Hence our concern will lie not in questioning any of the narrative theories but only how they can be used to reflect in the narratives to be followed, in the light of the concern of feminism. That is to bring about the questions of gender, pertaining to the experiences of women. How they stand in their relationship - to each other, to their males, and to the society as a whole? And, how, do they constantly negotiate their ways in a patriarchal society? It is in this sense that the major impact of feminism on narratology will be to raise new questions, to add to the narratological distinctions that already exists.

Such a project however leads to a point where feminist criticism will have to reconcile the primarily semiotic approach of narratology with the primarily mimetic orientation of most feminist thinking about narrative. Where mimetic document is considered a representation of life and an account of reality, semiotic refers to a non-referential linguistic system, an enunciation supposing a narration and a listener, that is, primarily a linguistic concept.

Structuralist narratology has suppressed the representational aspects of fiction and emphasised the semiotic, while feminist critics have done the opposite. The latter tend to be more concerned with the character than with any other aspect of narrative. They speak largely of characters as if they were persons. Most narratologists, in contrast, treat characters, if at all, as "patterns of recurrence, motifs which are continually recontextualised in other motifs" (Lanser 2000:199). In the process, they "lose their privilege, their central status, their definition" (Lanser 2000:199). This treatment but spells danger for the premises of feminist criticism, the most profound of which is that narrative

texts, particularly texts in the novelistic tradition (we will read traditional texts) are referential and influential in their representations of gender relations.

Thus the challenge is of blending both, feminism and narratology so that "the dual nature of narrative is [recognized], to find categories and terms that are abstract and semiotic enough to be useful, but concrete and mimetic enough to seem relevant to refer upon the real conditions of our lives" (Lanser 2000:200), in our case, the lives of the women in traditional texts. It is felt that the general tendency in narratology has been to isolate texts from the contexts of their production, as critics say, 'the real world'. Their capacity to account for social, historical or contextual differences have always remained limited by the codes and conventions, and hence, inadequate in some senses. Though such questions concerning why, so what, to what effect...etc, are admittedly speculative, they are necessary, if only to look at the question of gender. Thus, if we are to follow Lanser,

> "a narratology for feminist criticism would be willing to look afresh at the questions of gender and to re-form its theories... In both its concepts and terminology, it would reflect the mimetic as well as the semiotic experience that is the reading of literature, and it would study narrative in relation to a referential context that is simultaneously linguistic, literary, historical, biographical, social and political"
>
> (Lanser2000:200).

Moreover, as Mieke Bal argues, "the use of formally adequate and precise tools is not interesting in itself but it can clarify other, very relevant issues and provide insights which otherwise remain vague" (cited in Lanser 2000:201), and, it is here that narratology and feminist criticism can come together. This is how both can contribute for a fuller understanding of 'texts'. And, it is this schema of coming together of mimetic and semiotic, that the character in narrative will play an important role for us.

The relative importance of character, however, brings us back to the issue of identity/self in the realm of narrative. It is then that the active dimensions of agency in constituting a self are unfolded. This however may seem to be contradictory, as the post-structural thought that influences the paper is relatively under-theorised on the issue of self-identity. The general orientation of poststructural thought is towards demonstrating the constitution of a fragile subjectivity within contradiction, conflict and exclusion (McNay 2000). However, in the sense that individuals are routinely and actively involved in the meaningful interpretation of the self in social interaction, the attempt is to throw light upon the dispersed nature of subjectivity and see how individual can yet act autonomously. In this regard, the hermeneutic idea of the pre-interpreted nature of experience provides a way of considering how the ambiguities of the process through which the individual approach to gender norms are worked at the level of self-identity. The individual here is the individual woman in the narrative and how she forms/becomes a 'self'. However, the theory of agency in the formation of self, in my thinking, demands temporalising. This is because only "a temporal understanding of the construction of self-identity offers a way of explaining such phenomena as the historical embeddedness of certain gender norms and also the way in which contradictions within configurations of the self are mediated" (Louis McNay 2000:78). This is when narrative theory becomes important, as the post structural account of identity is temporally underdeveloped. It cannot explain why certain forms of gendered behaviour endure long after the historical circumstances in which they emerge have faded.

To avoid such a problem, recent feminist work on gender has begun to unpack aspects of the relation between subjectification and time. Rather than thinking of gender as

a quasi-permanent structure, it is thought of as a temporally regulated constellation of socio-symbolic norms and practices. The concept of narrative plays a key role in mediating these conceptions of agency. To bridge the gap between the determinist and the hermeneutic concept of agency, the understanding generated by narrative is foundational. This is because the "construction of a sense of self within time suggests a way beyond the antimonies of dispersion versus unity, contingency versus fixity, and determinism versus voluntarism around which thought on subjectification and agency often revolves" (McNay 2000:80). It is here that the idea of narrative shares the post structural concept of the constructed nature of identity, and pervades the rest of our study. Again, following McNay we can say that though

> "there is nothing inevitable or fixed about the types [of self]... that may emerge from the flux of events...yet the centrality of narrative to a sense of self suggests that there are powerful constraints or limits to the ways in which identity may be changed" (2000:80).

The focus on the narrative dimensions of subjective identity is not new. From a structural perspective, there has been much feminist analysis of narrative in terms of the way women are brought to identify with the objectified feminine position of patriarchal symbolism. In Teresa de Lauretis's words: "narrativity overdetermines identification" (1984:9 cited in McNay 2000:82). Moreover, the act of narration is central to identity formation; "experience is organized along the temporal dimension, in the form of a plot that gathers events together into a coherent and meaningful structure" (McNay 2000:81). This is significant for the overall configuration of self. Identity understood only in terms of objective social categories cannot adequately account for the dynamic aspects of self-identity. The feminist critique of narrative argues that "narrative presents a trans-individual, but implicitly masculine space.... Women are excluded from these narratives

and this gives rise to an 'exclusive' feminine subjectivity that is 'deeply rooted in the particularity of its own story" (McNay 2000:82). In such feminist critique then narrative becomes a central deconstructive tool because a cluster of issues associated with gender and sexuality are regarded as particularly amenable to narration (Plummer 1995 in McNay 2000). Narrative acts as a central instrument through which values and goals are inscribed into situational structures of meaning and through which conflicting claims of imaginary and real are mediated, arbitrated and resolved. With regard to gender identity women are identified with feminine position through the narrative generation. This positioning of female "involves a potentially conflictual double identification with the masculine gaze of the spectator on the one hand and the female object of the gaze on the other", and, this "conflict can be overcome through identification with the figure of narrative movement and narrative closure" (McNay 2000:83).

According to McNay, structural and interpretative feminist perspectives share a representational (mimetic) concept of narrative as an exogenous schema or simply one mode amongst many of imposing order upon the chaos of experience. But she goes on to suggest that this is in opposition with the "ontological concept of narrative as foundational in the construction of self-identity through time" (2000:85). In her analysis McNay obliged with Ricoeur's work on narrative identity. Narrative as a universal feature of social life is the fundamental mode through which the grounding of human experience in time is understood. Moreover, human action can be narrated as it is inherently symbolic in nature and hence interpretation becomes possible. At this point, without going in detail of Ricoeur's exploration of 'stasis and change', 'idem and ipse identity', it will suffice to say for McNay and also for us, the important implication of Ricoeur's ideas. This is precisely

inherent temporality, which reformulates the dichotomy between fixity and contingency so that the formation of identity has the dynamic unity of narrative configuration. The ontological conception of narrative on the other hand gives rise to the concept of agency, which neither rests upon an idea of unmediated practice, nor does it dismiss action as an illusion of free will. Thus, "narrative order is neither false in the sense that it constitutes an illusory coherence imposed upon the heterogenity of experience; nor does it signify authenticity as narrative always effects a metaphorization of the real" (McNay 2000:95). However, this understanding of narrative problematizes some of the assumptions of standpoint theory and other types of interpretative feminism, which attribute an 'authentic' status to women's social experience. Again, on the other hand Ricoeur's notion that the construction of any narrative always involves an imaginative process of configuration that results in "an unstable mixture of fabulation and actual experience" (1992:162 cited in McNay 2000:96), shows that "there is no escape from the politics of representation" (Hall 1996:473 cited in Mcnay 2000:97). But such an idea "suggests a way of understanding the relation between women and dominant representations of femininity in terms other than those of dissimulation and misrecognition" (McNay 2000:97). A further illustration of Ricoeur by McNay reveals that he extends the exploration of the idea of the productive imagination from a theory of semantic innovation in metaphor to the idea of agency. For the latter, thus, "imagination is constitutive not just of individual action but also of intersubjective relations and collective forms of action" (McNay 2000:100). And in order to draw out a more active conception of agency it is sufficient then to say that individuals have the potential to respond in a non-defensive and occasionally creative fashion, to the complexity and contradiction regardless of whether these differences are effectively

reconciled or not. Though identification becomes the mode of recognition of the coherent subject, disidentification or the idea of non-identity is also celebrated. It is the importance attached by constructionist feminism to politics of desire based on a refusal of identification with stable subject position. This disidentification becomes the necessary mode of recognition of the excluded non-subject. However, this 'false anti-thesis' between identification and disidentification "does not adequately explain the internal inconsistencies within the social construction of gender identity" (McNay 2000:104). Moreover, the idea of disidentification/distantiation does not provide sufficient grounds for an understanding of agency. Disidentification is denoted only in

> "relation to dominant norms which is neither one of recognition and consent (identification) nor refusal and rebellion (counter-identification); it refers to a form of dislocation arising from the deployment of the tools and symbols of the dominant by the marginalised, a 'working on the subject form' from within"
>
> (Hennessey 1993 cited in McNay 2000:103).

In case of the text though, distantiation takes four forms. The first moment of distantiation occurs in the dialectic of event and meaning that is constitutive of discourse. However, the fixation of meaning in writing leads to the autonomy of text in the three other respects: with regard to the intention of the author; with regard to the cultural situation and sociological conditions of production of the text; and finally, with regard to the original addressee. It follows from this that the autonomy of the text that proceeds from the objectification of discourse, (in the first place) is constitutive of interpretation. And the ability of the text to transcend its original psycho-sociological conditions of production creates a potentially limitless series of readings, displacing the authorial intentionality. Here, the interpretation revolves not only around understanding the direct matter of a text, but also around the subject's ability to engage with the alternative vision of the world that the text projects 'in front of itself'. This interpretation has implications for the subjectivity

of the reader who, in order to understand the text, must not project the self on to the text, but must unrealize it. We can imitate Ricoeur to say that, "as reader, I find myself only by losing myself. Reading introduces me into the imaginative variations of the ego" (1981:144 cited in McNay 2000:108). Such a disappropiation of self also shows how understanding involves both identification and distantiation. Like distantiation in texts a meaningful action goes beyond its relevance to a particular situation, in the sense that "their meaning no longer coincides with the logical intentions of the actors" (Ricoeur 1981:207 cited in McNay 2000:108). This therefore means that action may address itself to an indefinite range of possible readings.

Having dealt with the idea of narrative identity, McNay felt that the implication of such an idea couldn't be examined without being placed in the context of power relations. The feminist criticism identifies a weakness in Ricoeur's idea since it disregards the analysis of the ideological and the institutional context in which narrative forms operate. Hence, analyses of power relations are incorporated for a better comprehension of narrative and identity. The feminist concern for understanding how gender differences are transformed into inequalities addresses the connection between narrative and power more explicitly. For them, "culturally sanctioned narratives are central to the imposition of hegemonic identities and the emergence of new or contestatory forms inevitably highlights the relations of power that underlie the production of narrative discourse" (McNay 2000:114). Therefore the idea of a narrative structure to identity supplements the post-structural dispersion of the subject, with an account of the formation of a more coherent sense of self. Hence, the focus of our study shifts to restructuring of gender relations. New

forms of autonomy and constraint can be seen to be emerging which can no longer be understood through dichotomies of male domination and female subordination.

Moving forward from this general schema of linking narrative with feminist methodology, the next step will inevitably be to find out how things stand in reference to the development of Indian literary theory. The evolution of Indian literary theory is a very large narrative in itself. According to Krishna Rayan, the focusing is broadly on a concept more significant than others- *Rasa Dhvani* (The Suggestion of Emotion). Also, it is more diachronical in nature than synchrony. For him, it is "exploring the ways in which *rasa* (the spectator's or reader's emotional response to a text) is generated by the constituents of the text by the method of *dhvani* (suggestion)" (Rayan 1997:12). However, this process involves the activity of certain 'human' agents. He explains the following terms, in the context of a performed 'text'. The possible agents here would be one or more of these: the author; the presumed real life original of a character; the character; the actor and the spectator. For our analysis of the agents of a written 'text'-will be the character (as having a real existence in it's time), and the spectator (the reader), since the others cannot intervene in any significant way. The rasa-dhvani concept then originates from, what Rayan says, " the vibhavas and anubhavas (objective factors) and vyabhicarins (subjective factors) acting conjointly to produce the *rasa*" (1997:13). That is, "just that concatenation of incidents and images which would make... emotion comprehensible and inevitable"[10] (Kenner 1960: 87-88 cited in Rayan 1997:13). It will therefore suffice to say that, character, as a seat of emotion then becomes important. Hence, the experience of character becomes important to be understood. This is done by the three functions of language as, denotative meaning; transferred or metaphorical meaning; and, suggested meaning. The

suggested meaning however is connotational, associative, plural and mainly emotive. A process of loose, variable signification generates it. The other, that is the stated meaning, is literal, denotative, referential and determinative. In most cultures, "the bond between the 'object' which is the signifier, and the emotion which is the signified tend to become loose, variable and ambiguous" (Rayan 1997:15). Suggested meaning resides at a higher level than the stated meaning and the transferred or metaphorical meaning.

Our understanding of the character/self can be further honed by taking in some aspects of feminism more relevant for Indian society than others. For example, whereas the binary structure of analysis always implies the subordination of one element to the other, where one function always emerges in direct opposition to the other and relinquish it; for example, birth is superceded by death, good overcomes evil, heaven subordinates hell, etc, it remains invalid for some situation. This is because not every narrative reflect a opposition of characteristics, also they are unidentifiable in cases where a narrative describe a philosophy of life or has a ideological discourse embedded in its structure. Moreover, a binary analysis leaves little space for the reader's freedom to misread, interpret, or even refuse to interpret the text. As here, the apparent binary opposition in fact constitutes two equally important aspects of the reality not only at the social level but also at the philosophical or spiritual level. This may be translated as passive- active, static-dynamic forces, where one cannot function without the other[11]. Therefore, when and if we raise the question: Is there an Indian ideology regarding women, the answer is 'yes'.

The ideology though modified, nevertheless has a distinct cultural entity. And as noted earlier, it may be either stated or implied (suggested) meaning. Moreover, what is stated may be contradicted by what obtains in actuality or may be conformed to in practice.

As we trace our trajectory forward we will also notice that this ideological history is not monolithic. It straddles three levels, the spiritual or metaphysical, the legendary level as demonstrated in epics and tales, and, the actual level i.e. the existing reality in contemporary society (Rayan 1997). It is the second level that guides our work. When we move on to this, which is of legends and myths, the lore in India regarding the apotheosizing or deification of women is rich. Women were thought to be occupying a valuable place in social and religious spheres of life. However, it is not the women in puranas but the epic heroines who emerged as most legendary of Indian womanhood. There has been a whole gamut of writing about the figures of Sītā (*Rāmāyaṇa*) and Draupadī (*Mahābhārata*), supposedly sharing between themselves all the possible experiences of being a woman. But there were other women too. Damayanti, the prototypical suffering woman, Śakuntalā, the idyllic heroine, or Sāvitrī who challenged Yama, the god of Death to win back her husband's life, and one can go on counting numerous others. Thus, gender and literature are very closely related as neither can be conceived apart from society and culture. In the patriarchal social set up, where masculinity implies strength, action, self-assertion and domination, femininity is also projected to be lying in the traits of weakness, passivity, obedience and self-negation. And literature being related to society reflects the social reality. But does it always 'reflect' the above male and female virtues? Does it not shape them through 'represention'? Is it not that there are complex ways in which men and women organize themselves, their interpersonal relationships and their perception of the socio-cultural reality? The idea then is to deconstruct the construct of patriarchy, more in the way of finding out instances when women tried to be more than just being defined by the patriarchy. To focus on the inner

experiences of women, who are rendered invisible, considering them to be trivial and unworthy. The renewed visibility will aptly describe how the roles of women were restricted by their womanhood, the experiences of their muted self. This work though not struggling to dethrone the myth of femininity, to reject the constructs and to re-order the word, will definitely be an attempt to make us aware of these, crying for recognition of the differences in the monolithic construct of female.

From here then we can move on to examine the way that feminism can undertake gendered analysis, focusing simultaneously on the large-scale structures at the level of discourse. The intention will be not to see the narrative content as a given. It is to see the substance of texts as something, which is the negotiation of textual elements and codes. At the same time, there are forces outside the text, which influence both the way that the text is constructed and the way we decipher it. As Carter and Simpson states:

> "discourse analysis should...be concerned not simply with micro-contexts of the effects of words across sentences or conversational turns but also with the macro-contexts of larger social patterns" (1989:16 cited in Mills 1995:159).

Thus, this focus on the analysis at the level of discourse will not concern itself with individual lexical items but with the larger structures and patterns which determine their occurrence. Moreover, it also concerns itself with the effect of these structures on the reader. Is it possible that the larger notion of ideology is linked in the textual patterns and structures? From here it may follow that the discourse is profoundly gendered, functioning at a stereotypical level. Our work will be mainly concerned with the construction of character in texts in this background. Specifically the roles that female characters can fill drawing on the modified version of the previous chapters work on narrative. Thus, the interest lies in the way that there are structures at the level of narrative and the level of

association which are determined by the ideology of gender difference, and in turn, also determines them. For us, the characters become important not only in themselves but also by the reader's perception of them. The reader learns how to construct them into a set of ideological messages drawing on her knowledge of the ways texts have been written and continue to be written. The views circulating within society about how men and women are, and yet finding each to be different from the other. This is how/when construction is interfered by human agency. Though there seems also to be a set of skills, which we as readers have acquired in interpreting the ideological knowledges of gender that texts can provide, the effort is to go beyond it. It is to dig out the self or agency in gender.

Thus, for us feminist critic must break sex/gender systems, using language as weapon and tool, and then labour to renew history, society and culture. Inspired by the critics who have decomposed the representation of women in culture, images, stereotypes and archetypes, the work will unravel the tapestries of "conscious assumptions and unconscious presumptions about women" (Mills 1995:160). To find the woman as, beautiful other, as aesthetic object whose power is that of eros and glamour. As mother she has will and power which if checked and directed will succour. Also, the woman as schemer, whose will and power can devour.

There are however methods of articulating these experiences in feminist readings-in terms of narrative strategy. When we see gender in relation to narrative strategy it unveils additional meanings. This is because strategy is different from theory. Where the latter seems to codify some general propositions, the former is more subjective. Hence, strategy is a move in a game, and the objectives are not available at the surface level of narrative. It occupies a space between language and plot, and, between plot and character. Though all

narratives need not have a strategy, most narratives do have one. This depends though on the complexity of the 'text'. When the experience, which is been narrated, is unconventional or unusual, is radical in its standpoint, or displays strength, and thus moving against the current, that strategy is resorted to. Moreover, it is in the interpretation that culture and gender positions can become important and that is why narrative can bear re-reading. Our re-reading will try to shed light on how re-reading helps in identity formation. As identity in itself can perhaps only be realized by a process of exploration into the shared past and individual experience. The shared past is shared only to a limit of external events while the individual experience is different almost in every way- emotionally, physically and socially.

The strategies has been applied under several categories. In our case, that is in reference to myth and scripture, women writers seek to re-interpret and act myths anew and the stories of the epic(s), in the feminine contexts[12]. They question traditional concepts and values while exploring women in different roles. It is in this vein that the narratives in the *Mahabharata* are analysed. For us, they are not simply events or happenings. They are much more than this as they indicate reaching out to others, withdrawing, rebellion or some similar stance. Thus, the use of narrative strategy will be different in perspective though not different in form. But it is about the responses of women, of the shadows, which they alone can see, and the anguish they alone can feel; the nebulous and complex nature of the feminine situation.

The first field of activity to do this then will be, deconstructive. The second is reconstructive. Cultural productions (text is also one) themselves reveal change, concrete restructurings of consciousness in language, and through language. They can prove that

desire for change need not be aimless, faithless, wishful, and wistful. In our case, the very act of feminist criticism, its readings and interpretations, seek to foreground these demonstrations. However, a number of reasons have compelled our attention to the past. Through the re-reading of *Mahābhārata*, the wish is to untangle the social and cultural causes of women's sufferings. One must act within history if one is to reflect the structures of power and document feminist convictions. Running the risk of being criticised along the line that feminist critics have erred in the past, in their unquestioning acceptance of a theory of 'mimesis', that a text is a 'real representation of the real', the work will try to maintain a cautionary guard against this. As Linda Nochlin has already warned us against a "misconception of what art is...the naïve idea that art is the direct, personal expression of individual emotional experience, a translation of personal life into visual terms. Art is almost never that, great art certainly never" (1970 cited in Stimpson 1988:125). Because though to a degree mimesis is there in what a text says and in the conditions of its production, transmission and reception, it also has its independence. For us, language of text is only a referential system, a conveyer of meaning, and a medium. Through language we search for revelations of difference and for the signifiers of a femaleness that 'may' flow beneath and below various cultures, societies and temperaments. I use 'may' because to cast a binary opposition of 'female' and 'male' forms can lead to another reconstitution of an older pattern. The idea is to celebrate a "multiplicity of joyousness, and heterogenity which is that of textuality itself" (Stimpson 1988:127).

Hence, our attempt to understand will embrace a wide spectrum of intellectual and even technical constructions and extensions. They seek to reposition our very perception on figuration, textuality, representation, narrative and subjectivity. These together launch

an exploration of the construction of 'femininity' and 'subjectivity' in the understanding of the bewildering experience of 'womanhood'.

NOTES:

[1] Here, within is referred to the debates between Marxists and materialist feminists, radicals and liberals etc, while the one outside is between feminist praxis and feminist theory.

[2] Husserl's project was radically different from Kierkegaard's,in the sense that his aim was to develop a method by which the essential character of any phenomena could be known independently of the philosophical, scientific, or common-sense pre-suppositions, and hence sometimes criticised as too much of reductionism.

[3] Zalewiski in her book *Feminism After Postmodernism* (2001) used these concepts for identifying socialist feminism.

[4] Feminist studies in religion can be is distinguished from women's and gender studies on the one hand and traditional religious studies on the other. In some cases feminist studies in religion have amplified the attention these fields have focused on a particular problem. For example, where there have been tensions, raising the question of who has the authority to speak about and critique religious traditions and institutions (Castelli 2001).

[5] As discussed in an article by her *Gender for a Marxist Dictionary: The Sexual Politics of a Word* in Castelli 2001.

[6] Her treatment of the story of Antigone from Sophocles's 15th century Greek Tragedy in *Thinking the Difference: Towards a Peaceful Revolution* (1994). Here in opposition to the dominant reading of the myth which tended to interpret Antigone's actions in the light of a fundamentally patriarchal familial piety, for Irigaray, one layer of this mythic tale represents a deadly struggle between power located in the male-centred structures of the city-state and a different source of female-centred power located at or beyond the margins of the privileged viewpoint. In this way the symbolic monopoly of the masculine is challenged.

[7] The whole notion of 'ideology' and its relationship to discourse is far too complex to discuss extensively. Here I propose the definition as "particular ways of representing and constructing society which reproduce unequal relations of power, relations of domination and exploitation. Ideologies are often (though not necessarily) false or ungrounded constructions of society" (Wodak 1997:16).

[8] Here, I am indebted to feminist stylisticians in particular. They are concerned with the general emphasis of theoretically set of 'possible' readings, though a remarkable extent of agreement is seen over the range of interpretations that are produced. It is basically the variety of discourse analysis dealing with literary discourse" (Leech 1973:151 cited in Mills 1995:7).

[9] Here narrative and discourse is used interchangeably.

[10] I will not delve deeper into the article as it appears to be dealing with the meaning of the poetics.

[11] The ideas in this case are those that are given by the literary critics on the question of gender in literature. These expositions are found in various discussion about the place of gender within literature, and the next ideas also follow from here.

[12] Anita Desai in both *Cry, the Peacock* and *Voices in the City* follows the arguement of the Bhagwad Gita closely. The arguement is whether to be involved or to withdraw. Nabaneeta Debsen's stories on the character of Sita dismantles the myth by projecting the protests that she may have made but which ultimately died in the face of patriarchal pressure. She uses feminism as a projection for the self of Sita and also an escape route from the dominating imperial/male world.

CHAPTER IV

THE '*MAHĀBHĀRATA* ' ITSELF

My objective here is to apply feminist analysis to the exclusionary discourses of tradition and femininity constructed in The *Mahābhārata* and reconceptualize the relationship between feminine and masculine, tradition and modern, hence making an attempt to redefine the concept of feminine. This will be based on a complete openness to leading questions about the nature of Indian female identity, the importance of symbolic identities, the functions of language and culture, and their historical roots. Arising from such a treatment there will not be a hegemonic identity of womanhood, but a maze of identities, each as important and as true as others. This schema however will be viewed from two distinct angles: from the angle of a few major characters in the principle plot; and, from the angle of a few later comments on women given in some of the subsidiary stories. Together with this we will also explore the contours of Bengali life and culture, their religious sentiments and ideology, as and when they appear along the 'text' of Bengali *Mahābhārata* . This attempt to re-read the narrative(s) of the *Mahābhārata* is to subject it through the present socio-historical context, and how it shaped 'common sense' conceptions of Indian culture, belonging and identity. But before commenting further, the text under consideration necessitates some kind of introduction.

I

The Mahābhārata figured along with *Rāmāyaṇa* , in a class of poems called *Dvisandhana* in which two stories were told in the same poem through the use of '*slesha*' or *double entendre* (Raghavan 1980). But, while according to Indian classical literature, *Rāmāyaṇa* falls in the genre of sanskrit '*kavya*' or poetry, *Mahābhārata* is more of an '*itihaasa*' or history of the heroic age of Aryans. However, the *Mahābhārata* defines itself not as an epic, but as "*arthasastra*, *dharmasatra*, and *mokshasastra*; as *purana* and *itihasa*; as *veda* and *samhita*" (Bhattacharji 1988:77). Nevertheless an epic in terms of content, characterization, description and sheer volume, it surpasses the epics like *Illiad*, *Odyssey* and *Gilgamesh*, and forms the cultural roots in understanding India. There have been great debates however about the epic itself, starting from whether it's a myth or reality, to the dating of Mahābhārata war, its importance as a historical fact, and the characters involved in it.

But then, what is *Mahābhārata* ? It is an epic, and no epic is ever a diary of events or simple narration of incidents, which have occurred at some given, time and space. According to S.P.Gupta, "it may be a fiction, a pure fiction, or else it may be based on a tradition handed down through the ages, or else on a mythology held by the people as sacred, at one time or the other. [O]r else, on an event which actually occurred and was known to the author, either personally or through someone he had no reasons to disbelieve" (1976:26). But it can be ultimately stated that any epic is a distinct creation of the author, with variations from the actual facts of history, or even tradition or mythology. Further, it is common knowledge, that hardly there has been an epic writer who could

completely cut himself off his times and describe the past exactly as-it-was; 'present' imperceptibly creeps into the 'past' which comes to the notice of the critics and not the devotees. So, the question that arises is not just 'myth or reality'? But, how much of it is myth and what is reality? Moreover, the debates concerning the exact time period of the Mahābhārata war or when it was written are far and wide. Divergent dates viz 3100 BC, 1400 BC and 900 BC are allocated by several school of scholars, or as historians like V. C. Pandey (1977) and B. P. Sinha (1968) says, it could have taken place between 1200 BC and 1042 BC. After larger debates it is now conventionally accepted to be composed between 500 BC to AD 400. But then our concern is not about the factuality of *Mahābhārata* itself or when exactly was it written. This is because we have already established in the earlier chapters that questions like whether 'myth is history' are irrelevant, as both are narrative, and it is the transhistorical and transcendental quality of narratives that makes them powerful to shape ideologies. It is in the light of this quality of narrative that our examination of some of the particular narratives in *Mahābhārata* will concern itself.

Scholastic in form and philosophical in content it presents a global view of India. But its central action is in the north, in the Ganga- Yamuna doab. No texts regarding *Mahābhārata* as such survive from the time between 500 B.C. to A.D. 400, and it is only of the medieval period from which the oldest versions of the Sanskrit epic survive (Hiltebeital 1991). As it is well known, the work exists in at least two major recensions: the northern and the southern texts typical of the '*Aryavarta*' and the '*Daksinapatha*', respectively. By the mediaeval period, the *Mahābhārata* had also been recast in other south Indian vernaculars, with the oldest versions being in Grantha (Tamil). There are

some indications that the "Tamil epic tradition is closer to the southern recension of the Sanskrit epic than to the northern. But more evident, the Tamil versions, from as far back as one can identify their contents, are more closely linked with distinctive regional folklores than they are with anything distinctive about the southern recension of the Sanskrit epic"[1] (Hiltebeital 1991:xx}. This would also seem to be the case for other South Indian vernacular versions of the *Mahābhārata* as well, like Telegu and Malayalam.

Moreover, even in the northern recension it has been written in several languages apart from Devanagari, ranging from Sarada, Nepali, Maithili, Bengali and even Kasmiri (Sukthankar 1933, see Appendix 1). With this in mind one should stress that the *Mahābhārata* cannot be viewed simply as a classical text, for even if there was once a prototype, it no longer exists. Hence the approach to the epic will be as an ongoing, fluid tradition; one that is sustained both in Sanskritic and vernacular forms.

The central story remaining the same, the classical epic is told through 18 epic books or 'parvas', a structure it retains in many versions. These are *Ādiparva, Sabhāparva, Banaparva, Virātaparva, Udyogaparva, Bhīṣmaparva, Droṇaparva, Karṇaparva, Salyaparva, Sauptikaparva, Strīparva, Śāntiparva, Anuśasanaparva, Asvamedhaparva, Aśramavasikaparva, Mausalparva, Mahaprasthanikaparva, and Sargārohanaparva* (Chakravarti 1965). The original book was called *Jaya*, which simply means 'victory'. On which generations have added on to form the present *Mahābhārata* . According to Irawati Karve, (1991) in its earlier form the narration told of the triumph of a particular king over his rival kinsmen. Narrators who were court bards called '*sutas*' henceforth preserved this story. The same happened with the *Rāmāyaṇa* (a book similar in many respects) and out of these grew a later type of literature called the '*puranas*'. The *Mahābhārata* , the

Rāmāyaṇa and the *Puranas* have been given a special name by Dr. S.V. Ketkar (as cited in Karve 1991:2), who called these the *sauta* literature, i.e. literature belonging to the sutas, preserved and sung by the sutas and perhaps largely composed by them. But then, as Dr. S. Sukhtankar (Karve 1991:2) has convincingly showed, the *Mahābhārata* at a certain point of time went from the sutas to the keeping of a Brahman clan called *Bhrigu*. The Bhrigus then zealously guarded this literature and added to it from time to time. This has led to the later extrapolations characterised by the particular social and historical conditions of the time. Thus, while the core of the story is of a dynastic struggle culminating in an awesome battle between two branches of a single ruling family-the Kurus, it has been enhanced by peripheral stories that provide a social, moral and cosmological background in the climactic battle.

Being the longest epic in any language it consists of as many as 8,800 verses in its shortest recension when it was called *Jaya*. It grew to 24,000 verses when it was called *Bhārata* to the 1,00,000 verses in the present form of *Mahābhārata* (Vaidya 1905). Three narrators render the whole length of the epic. The first is the sage Sauti (or Suta-of the group of Sutas) who related the story to Śaunaka and other sages assembled at the Naimisa forest (as narrated by Vaiśampāyana to the king Janmejaya). Then there is Vaiśampāyana himself, who is the narrator of the greater part of the work, and narrated the story as told to him by Vyāsa. And finally, there is Sanjaya, the courtier and constant attendant of King Drtarāstra, who was given celestial sight by the sage Vyāsa in order that he might give the blind king a complete account of the fighting. Thus the main narrators are as follows, Sauti for the early chapters of Ādiparva, Sanjaya for Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Karṇa and Salya Parvas, and Vaiśampāyana for the rest (Vaidya1905; Karve1991; Gupta and Ramachandra1976).

The story opens with the great snake sacrifice of King Janmejaya, great grandson of Arjuna. At the conclusion of the snake sacrifice, the sage Vyāsa, who is in a sense grandfather of Arjuna, arrives, and the King wants to hear from him the history of the great battle of his ancestors. Upon this the sage commands one of his disciples Vaiśampāyana to narrate the history. Hereupon starts the history with King Śāntanu of the Kuru race. When he grew up, his father King Pratipa bade him that he should marry a girl, appearing young and beautiful, if she wishes him to marry without asking any questions of her whereabouts. This maiden was the river goddess Ganga whom he eventually marries. She extracts a promise that the King will never ask questions about her actions, lest she will leave him. After this, eight sons were born to them and Ganga drowned each of them in the river. But when she was about to do the same with the last son, Śāntanu forbade her because he wanted a progeny. Thereupon Ganga left him with the son, who was named Devabrata or Gangeya. After a few years when Devabrata was the crowned prince, the King went to the forest for hunting where he met Satyavatī, the daughter of the leader of the fishing community, and fell in love with her. Devabrata came to know of this and went to the father of the maiden to seek her hand in marriage for his father. Satyavatī's father however made the condition that any issue that his daughter might bear to the King should succeed to the throne. Devabrata accepted this condition and besides abdicating all rights to the throne, took a vow of lifelong celibacy so that no offspring of his might claim the throne and threaten the progeny of the fisher girl. Such a terrible vow earned him the name Bhisma and the boon from his father whereupon death was to come to him at his will.

Śāntanu had two sons by Satyavatī, Citrāngada and Vicitravirya. Citrāngada died young and Vicitravirya succeed to the throne. Bhisma captured by force the three

daughters of the king of Kāśī in their swayambara to become the brides of Vicitravirya. The oldest of these daughters, Ambā declared her love for Salya, and was therefore set free. The other two princesses, Ambikā amd Ambalikā were wedded to Vicitravirya who died without having any issue by them. Thereupon, for the perpetuation of the dynasty, Satyavatī called her son, by the sage Parāśara, who was born to her before her marriage to Santanu. This son is Kṛṣṇadvaipayana Vyāsa, through whose grace were born Dhṛitarāṣtra and Pāṇḍu by Ambikā and Ambālikā, respectively, and Vidura by a maid servant of Ambikā. In due course, Dhṛitarāṣtra married Gāndhārī, the daughter of Subala, the king of Gāndhāra. Since he was blind by birth, Gāndhārī blindfolded her eyes perpetually so that she may not excel her husband in anyway. She gave birth to a hundred sons, the Kauravas, of whom Duryodhana was the eldest, the second Duhṣāsana, and a daughter Duhṣala. Gāndhārī's brother Śakuni played a substantial role in the conflict that emerged afterwards between Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas.

Pāṇḍu, who was made the King because of his elder brother's incapacity, had two wives, Kuntī and Mādrī. Once Kuntī was taught by the sage Durvāsa to invoke the gods to obtain offspring. She took advantage of this advice even before her marriage and had a son Karṇa, fathered by the Sun god. To conceal her transgression, Kuntī abandoned him at birth and a charioteer named Adhiratha brought him up. After some years of her marriage to Pāṇḍu, her husband was placed under a curse that restrained him from begetting children. Kuntī told of her power and with his permission she was able to produce three sons Yudhiṣthira, Bhīma and Arjuna; and aided Mādrī who had twins, Nakul and Sahadeva. These five brothers came to be known as Pāṇḍavas. Pāṇḍu died soon, and Mādrī joined him in the funeral pyre, leaving her sons to the care of Kuntī.

Vidura and Bhīṣma looked after the Pāṇḍavas and the former became the trusted counsellor of Dhṛitarāṣtra, who was now managing the kingdom. Bhīsma engaged Droṇa, the great archer, as the teacher of both the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas. Droṇa was anxious to take revenge on King Drupada, who was his childhood friend but subsequently disowned him. In due course, Droṇa conquered the kingdom of Drupada with the help of his pupils especially Arjuna, the most skillful and favourite. In his turn, Drupada, craving vengeance against Droṇa prayed for, and obtained a son Dhṛiṣtadyumna and Draupadī from a fire sacrifice, the former destined to be the slayer of Droṇa. When the heroes have completed their education, there was an arrangement for a display of their skill and strength. In the course of display, Karṇa entered the arena and challenged Arjuna, emulating every one of the feats of Arjuna. But he was refused because of not being a Ksatriya. Duryodhana made him the king of Anga and thus secured a valuable ally against the Pandavas.

Meanwhile, on account of his uncontrollable jealousy and rivalry to acquire the throne, Duryodhana attempted to kill the Pāṇḍavas in a fire from which they escaped through Vidura's help. After various adventures they reached the court of Drupada where Draupadī's swayambara was taking place. Dhṛiṣtadumnya announced his readiness to give away his sister to anyone who could perform a prescribed feat with a mighty bow. All the kings gathered tried and failed, except Arjuna. Disguised as a Brahmana, he succeeded and won Draupadī. By the command of the mother, Kuntī, all five brothers married the princess. Thereafter, Vidura adviced Dhṛitarāṣtra to seek reconciliation with the Pāṇḍavas and accordingly the old King bestowed on them a portion of the kingdom with the capital at Indraprastha. After a while Arjuna went on a pilgrimage, in the course of which he met

and fell in love with Lord Kṛṣṇa's sister Subhadrā. Encouraged by Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna took her away from the city of Dvaraka and married her. A few years passed when the Pāṇḍavas celebrated a great sacrifice- Rajsuya yajna in their magnificient palace of Indraprastha. This event inflamed the jealousy of Duryodhana whose uncle Śakuni then gave him the idea of challenging the Pāṇḍavas in a game of dice. He knew of Yudhiṣṭhira's weakness for gambling and was confident that he could play upon it to Duryodhana's advantage. In the game, which followed, Yudhiṣṭhira first lost all of his wealth, and then pledged his brothers and himself at stake. After losing all he staked the princess Draupadī whom he lost too. Henceforth, Draupadī was dragged to the court and insulted by the Kauravas, her humiliation reaching its zenith when Duḥṣāsana attempted to disrobe her in the presence of the entire court. The effort failed because of some miracle and the abashed king Dhṛitarāṣtra restored the kingdom to the Pāṇḍavas. But they were again challenged to the gambling match with the provision that the losers should spend twelve years in exile in the forest and the thirteenth year incognito. Yudhiṣṭhira lost and had to go in the forest with his brothers and Draupadī.

In the course of these twelve years, Arjuna, who was actually the son of Indra, the king of the celestials visits him in the heaven and acquired many powerful weapons from him and other gods, a useful move that later helped him to win the war. The Pāṇḍavas spend the thirteenth year in the court of Virāta, where each took a disguise. Yudhiṣṭhira as Kanka, a courtesan, Bhīma as a cook naming himself as Vallabha, Arjuna as Bṛihannalā, an enunch dance teacher of the princess Uttarā, Nakula and Sahadeva as keepers of cattles and horses, respectively. Draupadī took the guise of Sairindhri, a companion to the queen. The king's commander in chief, Kīcàka conceived an uncontrollable passion for Draupadī

and pursued her with such determination that she had to seek the protection of Bhīma, who killed Kīcaka in a hand-to-hand fight. At the end of the year the Pāṇḍavas were able to save the kingdom of Virāta from the Kauravas' invasion who attacked once Kīcaka was dead. The greatful king bestowed his daughter Uttarā, on Abhimanyu, Arjuna's son by Subhadrā.

Having spent the stipulated period of thirteen years in exile, the Pāṇḍavas were now anxious to claim back their kingdom by peaceful means. However, at the same time, they prepared for war in case the peaceful mission failed. Emissaries were exchanged. In the first place Drupadas priest called on Dhṛitarāṣtra who sent back his emissary Sanjaya, not only to plead for reconciliation but also to ascertain the strength of the Pāṇḍavas. This mission was followed by Kṛṣṇa himself to secure the restoration of the Pāṇḍava kingdom by peace. But all the efforts failed because of Duryodhana's obstinacy, and both sides had to resort to war.

The fighting took place in the historic plains of Kurukṣetra and lasted for eighteen days. During the first ten days, Bhisma was the supreme commander of the Kaurava forces, but on the tenth day he allowed himself to be mortally wounded, and for the next five days Droṇa became the commander. He was made to give up the fight by an untruth uttered by Yudhiṣthira to the effect that Aśvatthāma (which is the name of Droṇa's son) has been slain. Karṇa took up the charge next, until he was slain by Arjuna. On the last day Salya led the Kuru host and was killed by Yudhiṣthira. The Pāṇḍavas won the fight, but during these eighteen days, Abhimanyu on the Pāṇḍava side, and all the Kauravas except Duryodhana were killed.

After this, Duryodhana took refuge in a lake but was traced and challenged by the Pāṇḍavas to a single combat. In the mace duel that followed between Duryodhana and Bhīma, a blow below the belt mortally wounded the former. That night, three of Duryodhanas supporters, Kṛpa, Kṛtavarmana and Aśvatthāma, led by the latter slayed the Pāṇḍava forces while they were fast asleep. The only survivors of this wholesale massacre were the five Pāṇḍavas, Lord Kṛṣṇa and Satyaki. Thus the Pāṇḍavas succeeded to a devastated kingdom over which Yudhiṣṭhira ruled for fifteen years while Dhṛtarāṣṭra continued as the nominal king. Thereafter Dhṛtarāṣṭra retired to the forest followed by Gāndhārī, Kuntī and Vidur, and shortly afterwards they were consumed in a forest fire.

Some twenty-one years later to this, Lord Kṛṣṇa himself chose to leave the world after all his kinsmen killed themselves in a drunken orgy, and the Pāṇḍavas also decided to conclude their earthly existence. They proceeded to the Himalaya Mountains and one by one they all fell by the wayside except Yudhiṣṭhira. He was finally welcomed to the heaven but did not find his brothers and Draupadī. Instead he found Duryodhana occupying an honourable place in heaven, and chose to leave the heaven to look for his brothers and his queen. By an illusion he was shown a view of them all in the hell with Karṇa, but this illusion was soon lifted and he was reunited with them in heaven. And since heaven is a place where no animosity can prevail, the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas were finally reconciled[2] (Das reprinted 1987; Karve 1991; Hiltebeital 1991; Gupta and Ramachandra 1976).

As already observed, beyond this core narrative, *The Mahābhārata* available to us today in its grand and gigantic form includes-

(1) legendary matter from the bardic repertoire having but a casual connection (or no connection at all) with the epic heroes;

(2) myths and legends of Bramanical origin and didactic sections pertaining to Brahmanical philosophy, ethics and laws stressing the superiority of the Bhramanas;

(3) cosmological, genealogical and geographical matters in the nature of puranas and local fairytales and myths;

(4) myths of Visnu and later Siva;

(5) fables, parables and moral stories;

(6) ascetic poetry; and,

(7) prose pieces and Brahamanical legends and moral tales, partly or entirely in prose

(Gupta and Ramachandra 1976:3).

My concern in this part of our analyses will be around some particular stories, involving some of the well-known female characters of the epic. Such a choice however, is entirely the result of my bias in bringing about the narratives of female characters to examine the ways of life of women in that era. The stories that are to be discussed are taken from Bengali versions of the *Mahābhārata* , mainly the translated, popular text by Kāśīrāma Dāsa (original publication 1801-1803,reprinted 1987), and, another more critical version by Kaliprasanna Sinha (1983), aided by an almost direct translation of Haridas Siddhāntavāgīśa (only Ādiparva Vols 1-4, & Udyogaparva republished 1938). The edition by Kāśīrāma Dāsa (popularly known as *Kāśīdāsī Mahābhārata* and to be referred as such from now on) was intended to be the evidential vernacular text that may reflect the folk elements or some of the characteristics of regional culture. The Siddhāntavāgīśa edition

proved to be functioning as the guideline of the original Vyāsa *Mahābhārata* thereby helping us to understand how different or similar the vernacular version is, while the much later work of Kaliprassanna Sinha is characteristic of the renaissance Bengal when there was an upsurge to revive the rich cultural heritage of the land. The work by Sinha, though entirely written in the vernacular prose form was not my first choice because the language here is too refined and sanctified and has failed to appeal to the masses who identified more with the *Kāśīdāsī Mahābhārata* . The emphasis here is more on, how the status of women has changed through the years and reflects upon the particular place that women within the Bengali society may have. I do not know for sure whether there are contradictory evidences about the position of women. If so, what may be the reasons behind this? In the subsequent parts, a feeble attempt has been made to analyse these through the narrative of Śakuntalā, Satyavatī, Gāndhārī, Kuntī, and the legends of Ambā and Madhavī.

II

In the first book of *Mahābhārata* , the *Ādiparva* (Dās 1987; Siddhāntavāgīśa 1938)) itself, we find the narratives of Śakuntalā and Satyavatī. In the course of tracing the ancestry of the Kurus, we encounter **Śakuntalā**. As the story runs, she is actually the daughter of the celestial nymph Menakā by the sage Viśvāmitra. Abandoned at birth, she is raised by ṛsi Kaṇva as his own daughter in his aśrama as Śakuntalā (one who is protected by birds). In her youth, she meets king Duṣmanta, who had come to the forest for hunting. The king falls in love with her and asks her to marry him. Śakuntalā refuses at first by saying that she cannot do so without the permission of the ṛsi, who was not present in the

asrama at that time. But finally, she succumbs to the pressure of the king after obtaining the promise that her son, born of this union, must succeed the throne. They unite in a *gandharva*[3] marriage, and soon the king leaves. A few days after, Kaṇva returns and comes to know of this union. Śakuntalā eventually gives birth to a son and when he is six years old, Kaṇva sends her to the king along with the son. The king however, refuses to recognise her and acknowledge the son and rebukes her in front of everyone present in the court of being a conniving prostitute (1987:111-13) and too ambitious a woman. Śakuntalā (Appendix 2) on hearing her character being maligned breaks open in a rage. She criticizes the king's action in harsh words (a whole paragraph is rendered on how she admonished the king) and decides to leave the place with her son (1938:1018 sloka24; 1034-35 sloka 93-97), when a voice from the heaven speaks about her and her son's true identity, asking the king to accept them both. Thereupon they were reconciled and the son was named Bharata, the first in the line of Kurus.

What transpires from this story? Can she be depicted as the protagonist, who is an active female agency? The Śakuntalā of the Mahābhārata is vastly different from the Śakuntalā of Kalidāsa (Vaidya1905). Popular rendition of this episode (e.g. Kalidāsa's Abhigyanaśakuntalam) depicts her as a beautiful nymph, a seductress whose sexuality lured the king to marry her, and afterwards, a tragic heroine whose husband forgets her. However, she is not a refined amorous lady as Kalidāsa has made her, but an honest country girl, full of the dignity of moral greatness. Here, she comes out to be a bold personality. Though in the Bengali version, Kāśīrāma Dāsa inserts the essence of a wife being 'patvrata' and how important it is for a man to be a wife (the specific lines are- "param sahay sakha pativrata nari'', "bharja bina grhasunya aranyer pray" etc), he does not

subdue the voice of the heroine as Kalidāsa. He retains Vyāsa's characterization but infuses it with some of his own understanding. As the Bengali poet reveals, her bitter words are supported by a deeper conviction about wifely duties- such as giving birth to a son, to follow the husband and so on and so forth. This in another level reflects the cultural background of the time when he was writing, for in a Bengali household the wife was supposed to share both, her this worldly and otherworldly life, with her husband. However, as I may say that by this time it was also the pan-Indian image of a wife, a contribution of the Brahmanical age. The particular verses on relationship between husband and wife is absent in the literal translation of Siddhāntavāgīśa, which portrays Vyāsa's Śakuntalā as more interested in reminding the king of his duties as a lord and master. Even earlier when she agreed to the wishes of the king, she negotiated the situation, to retain some dignity for her. It can be so that she deliberately made the king to promise, for it was not unknown that kings in those days married many and only the mother of the crowned king had any right or importance in the kingdom. Moreover, she reflects the courage of a righteous woman who refuses to be subjugated or afraid by the society. In criticizing the king she uses both threat and cajoling into accepting the son as his own[4]. Do we see here a demonstration of the role of an individual as an agent in different social situation? As an agent she is active to secure her position as a woman (demanding to be a wife), and protect the rights of her son (in extracting the promise). Another interesting point that captures my attention is that never once did she appear to seek the permission of her father, or feel guilty of her actions. As a woman she is independent enough to decide about herself, and is both entangled by and manipulated the situations in her own way. But is it a conscious way of retaining one's position? How much of her action stands in conformity to the role of a

female? Is it her origin that made her bold? Did the women of royalty behaved in a more demure way, maintaining certain propiety in their behaviour? These and other questions perplex us more and more as we move forward in our analyses.

As most of the stories in *Mahābhārata* , the story of **Satyavatī** (*Adiparva*- Das 1987:139-147; Siddhāntavāgīśa 1938:679-96,1116-29,1147-1180) originates from a mysterious point. Once, the Chedi king Upāricara, (a contemporary of Pratīpa) goes to the forest for hunting. He falls asleep and dreams of his beautiful queen. He awakes to find that his vital seed had left him and fallen on a leaf nearby. The king summoned a hawk to carry that leaf to the queen. The hawk flies but another one attacks him thinking that he is carrying food. In the midst of this the leaf falls into the river Yamuna where a mother fish (she is actually Adrikā, a nymph who was cursed) swallows it. After some time, a fisherman (the leader of the fishing community Daśraja) catches the fish to find a beautiful baby girl lying in the stomach of the fish along with a boy. The Chedi king took the boy but left the girl-child with Dasraja. She is named Matsyagandhā, since she carried a peculiar smell of fish. When she reached her youth, she is entrusted with the task of ferrying a boat across Yamuna. One day, while ferrying the sage Parāśara, he desires her. Their union in the boat itself results in the birth of Kṛṣṇadvaipāyana Vyāsa, whom the sage takes away (1938:695,sloka120). Matsyagandhā is now Satyavatī, who regained her virginity and the fish smell of her body turns into a sweet odour. Some years later, she meets the king Śāntanu (1938:1116-29) who, smitten by love, wants to marry her. Her father however consents only after the promise that the son born to her must be the king[5]. Next when we find her, she is in a dejected state, as both Citrāngada and Vicitravirya, her two sons are dead without any issues. She asks Bhīṣma first, for parenting a son with either

Ambikā or Ambālikā, the queens of the deceased king. But when he refuses because of his vow, she tells him about Vyāsa and with his permission welcomes him in the palace to beget sons, and practically forces the fearful princesses, Ambikā and Ambālikā, to be with Vyāsa. After a few years she retires into the forest.

This narrative emerges in a complex way, showing once again how each woman as an individual reacts in a different way. She is daring enough to give her body to the sage without the bond of marriage, or is it that it was useless to refuse? Or else, she saw it as a duty to serve the Brahmana? but then at the same time refused to carry the burden of being an unmarried mother (asking Parāśara to take away the son). Next, she manipulates the king to secure throne for her children and hence retain her control over the family. Was she insecure with the feeling that once the king was dead, she will not be left with much dignity because of being a fisher girl? Sure enough of her priorities, when the need arises she is ready to pursue Bhīṣma and Vyāsa, so that the Kuru line can thrive, and is not ashamed to reveal about her frivolities. Is it because it was more important to her to keep up her husband's line, than anything else? Surely the concept of *niyoga*[6] was widely accepted in those days, but why was she so determined? Was it just not an act of defiance to talk of her pre-marital engagements and bring a Brahmin to father the Ksatriya clan? Or does such an act bears testimony to the fact that societal norms were more relaxed in those days? The attitude towards a female more open, as she could demand and talk freely about her deeds without afraid of being reprimanded. Or was it an exceptional case of Satyavatī being an extraordinary woman? Perhaps it was exceptional because of the circumstances, in a society, which saw the necessity to perceive a greater good (birth of progeny and continuation of the race) as more, than to succumb to the usual notions of morality? More

important than not accepting the *niyoga* of a *Kaninputra*[7]. But what did Satyavatī achieve in this midst? Can her actions be explained as those of a frantic woman, who saw that all she has wanted to achieve, the power in the kingdom by being the queen and the queen-mother was about to slip away from her; or did she merely acted as a *pativrata*[8]. Was she tormented, caught between duty and desire[9]? But may be in her case particularly duty and desire came together for once. The duty of seeing that her husband's line does not perish, and the desire to have children and subsequent grandchildren succeed the throne. Kāśīrāma refrained from making any characteristic comment in this narrative; he just followed Vyāsa's rendition. As we will see in the following passages the overwhelming and conspicuous dilemmas that many of the women faced, the conflict of duty and desire. In other cases, this was a constant negotiation between good and bad, between morality and humanity, between good and necessity, and, between *dharma* and *adharma*[10].

As we come across the next character, the negotiation of female agency and the status quo of women in the society appear to be more complex. The tale of **Gāndhārī** is spread over different episodes in the *Mahābhārata* - chiefly in the *Ādiparva* (Das 1987:151-54), the *Udyoga Parva* (Das 1987:) and the *Strīparva* (Dās 1987:1042-45,1067). She is first mentioned in the epic as the daughter of Subala, the king of Gāndhāra. Well known for her piety and virtue, Bhīṣma asks her hand for Dhṛtarāṣtra. Thereafter, her brother Śakuni escorts her to Hastinapura, for the purpose of marrying her off. When she comes to know of her husband's blindness, she takes a piece of cloth, folds it many times over and covers her eyes so that she may not supercede her husband by the power of her sight (*Ādiparva* Siddhāntavāgīśa 1938:1202). After her marriage, she conceives before Kuntī, the queen of Pāṇḍu, but couldn't give birth for two years. On hearing that Kuntī has

already given birth to a son, she beats her womb in frustration and gives birth to a mound of flesh. Vyāsa separated this flesh into hundred-and–one pieces and put them into clarified butter. From these Duryodhana and his ninety-nine brothers, along with their sister Duḥṣala took birth. Later, during the preparation of war, Gāndhārī again comes back to the narrative. She is now seen as requesting Duryodhana to stop the impending war, for she is sure that her son cannot win because the throne is not his, it is *adharma*[11] to claim the throne. Her righteousness forbades her to wish victory (*jaya*) for Duryodhana when he seeks her blessing before going to the war. She only says that victory will be to those who have pursued righteousness (*dharma*). After the massacre of the war, devastated with the loss of all her sons, she curses Kṛṣṇa (Dās 1987:1067). She accuses that he, who had the power to stop the great war and its destruction, had done nothing and similarly after thirty-six years, his race, the Yadavas will also perish, fighting amongst each other, just as the Kurus did. Moreover, when the Pāṇḍavas now comes to seek her blessings, Gāndhārī, in grief and anger (of Duryodhana being killed unjustfully), accidentally looks through her fold at the small finger of Yudhisthira's toe, which burned immediately.

Irawati Karve (1991) in her characterisation drew the picture of a scathingly bitter and vengeful Gāndhārī, of how she was stunned to hear of her husband's blindness; her grief and sorrow over the loss of her children, and of her disillusionment of the world. This poignant understanding brings about several questions that clamours for our attention. What was the purpose of her actions? Why did she cover her eyes forever? Is it just to follow her husband's footsteps, or, just refusing to face the bleak future of being married to a blind man? She must have felt betrayed when everyone, including her father ignored to inform her about her husband. Has she, in her anger and betrayal deliberately refused to

see? By such an act did she actually foreclose the possibility of facing up to the various implications of being married to a sightless man. For surely, instead of keeping herself blindfolded, she would have been more useful and helpful to the king in keeping her eyes open. It seems difficult to believe that it was just a way of showing her *streedharma* (wifely duties). The poet's insistence that Gāndhārī thought the marriage only to be the result of her fate, can be relegated to the authors own religiosity and belief in the Karma-philosophy, one of the basic tenets of Hinduism. But for us the question is of unearthing female agency and not only accepting the dictate of the text. As way to obviate the possibility of being superior to him, was her action a display of duty, or love? Or, a consequence of nothing but distress?

Otherwise in the narrative she also emerges as a farsighted and prudent person. She was impartial and kept herself aloof from the selfish ways of her sons (Jhanji 1996). A result of her earlier experience in life. Again and again she warned Dṛitarāṣtra, that his blind love for Duryodhana would ultimately bring misfortune to the family. She even cautioned Duryodhana to stop the fight, and gave sagacious and pragmatic advice. But with all her discretion and clarity of mind, she actually appears helpless in doing anything worthwhile to avert the impending doom. This reflect on the other hand, how insignificant women were in the decision making process, the politics of power having a tendency of thwarting their active agency time and again.

In regard to her relationship with her son, she was tormented when faced to choose between duty and desire (Bhattacharji1988). Her wisdom and righteousness and her duty as an individual compelled her to morally support the Pāṇḍavas. However, on the other hand, her love as a mother must have prompted her at times to desire victory for her son.

Irrational as it may seem, but was she able to forget that inspite of conceiving first; she couldn't give birth earlier? Though she never could bless victory to her son, she must have been embittered with the fact that because of fate, her son wasn't the eldest to claim the throne. Did she earlier hit her stomach in frustration of losing the only way she could have some power over the throne, by delivering the earliest child to the family. Her pain and sufferings as a mother outgrew the betrayal of her husband. It drove her to blame the Pandavas[12] for the loss of her sons, curse Kṛṣṇa for the destruction.

Throughout her life she faced several moral and ethical dilemmas. Every time she had to choose between duty and desire, or, between morality and love, she tried to come out as a detached individual, preparing to cope with her emotional losses. A helpless witness to the emotional and material ruin, her only way to avenge herself for her loses ultimately culminated in cursing Kṛṣṇa. No one could have blamed her femininity at this outrage, as being too emotional as a wife and mother, for this was only a last resort to keep herself sane. Throughout her life she struggled to transcend the stigma of the so- called 'irrational female', to emerge as a wise, rational individual, which nevertheless makes her sufferings much more when compared to others.

Kuntī's (*Ādiparva* Dās 1987, Siddhāntavāgīśa 1938)) life is rather unstable as compared to Gāndhārī's. A daughter of the royal family, she was born to king Śurasena, but was adopted by his cousin and childhood friend Kuntibhoja. Pṛtha, a girl of unparalleled beauty was named Kuntī from then on. An incident took place when she was in the palace of Kuntibhoja, having profound impact on the rest of her life. It runs that once sage Durvāsa visited the palace with the purpose of providing the king an heir. She pleased him by her services (her father Kuntibhoja asked her), whereupon the ṛsi reciprocated by

giving her a 'mantra' (*Ādiparva* Siddhāntavāgīśa 1938:775,sloka135) which would enable her to have a son from whichever god she propitiated. While still a maiden, she invoked the Sun god out of a young girl's curiosity. But when he arrived, she was overcome with fear and requested him to go back. The Sun threatened to bring misfortune if she did not accept to unite with him. Kuntī relented due to this threat and as a consequence of this union a son was born, Karṇa. Sun blessed her to regain virginity and afraid of the social stigma of being an unwed mother, she bequeathed the baby in a basket and into the river. Shortly after her marriage with Pāṇḍu, a sage cursed the king of death if he ever indulges in sexual activity as he hunted the sage when he (the sage) was in the act of copulating with his wife in the form of a deer. He went into the forest accompanied by Kuntī and Mādrī, with the intention of living the rest of his life there. Some time after with the desire of progeny, Pāṇḍu begged Kuntī to conceive sons from a Brahmin. At this request, she told him of the 'mantra' given to her by the sage Durvāsa. Eventually, she got three sons from three gods- Yudhiṣṭhira from Yama or Dharma, the law giver; Bhīma from the god of winds and storms, Marut; Arjuna from Indra, the king of celestials. After Kuntī gave birth to the three sons, the younger queen Mādrī begged to get the 'mantra', Kuntī agreed and Mādrī called upon the heavenly twins Asvins to give birth to Nakul and Sahadeva.

Shortly afterwards, Pāṇḍu died while uniting with Mādrī, and the latter joined him in the funeral pyre, leaving the sons in Kuntī's care. Kuntī came back to the kingdom with the five sons and Bhīṣma and Vidura took care of their upbringing. When the Pāṇḍavas grew up, Duryodhana hatched a wicked plan to kill them by setting fire to a house made of lac in Varaṇavata, where he invited them to stay. The Pāṇḍavas came to know about this through Vidura, and escaped along with their mother Kuntī, leaving a tribal woman with

her five sons who died in their guise. Kuntī, along with her sons wandered in exile for several years and finally returned to the kingdom with Draupadī as the wife of her five sons. She was living as a queen mother in the palace of Indraprastha- the new kingdom of Yudhiṣthira, when he gambled away everything in the game of dice. This time, because of her old age and frail health, she did not accompany the Pāṇḍavas but stayed in Vidura's place. Next she comes back in the scenario in Udyoga parva (Dās 1987), during the preparation of the war. When Kṛṣṇa came to her as the messenger of the Pāṇḍavas, and asked whether they should fight, in no uncertain terms did she stated that it is the dharma of the Kṣatriya to fight and win back the kingdom that is lost to him. She tells the story of Vidulā[13] and rebukes them for cowardice, ordering that Yudhiṣthira must never make peace with the deceitful Kauravas. Her next step to secure the victory of Pāṇḍavas, was to go to her eldest son, Karṇa and ask him to join forces with the Pāṇḍavas (*Udyogaparva* Dāś 1987:786). She revealed that he is the oldest of her sons and hence is entitled to the throne. She tried but failed to lure him. In the end she came back with the promise that he (Karṇa) will not fight with any of the other brothers, except Arjuna, and whatever happens, she will ultimately have five sons, as either Arjuna or Karṇa will be dead. The carnage of war was over, and the women were wailing the death of their husbands and sons, when she told Yudhiṣthira about Karṇa being their elder brother and faced reprimand (Yudhiṣthira criticised her for being a heartless mother) from him. A few years later, she went to the forest with Dhṛtarāṣtra, Gāndhārī and Vidura and soon died in a forest fire.

Thinking of the events that Kuntī went through, her character emerges as that of a powerful woman ready to combat, whatever may come. Abandoned in her childhood she never did enjoy the life befitting of a cherished daughter or of a queen and queen- mother

for long. A third of her lifetime was spent in forests. The father who had adopted her did so only to employ her in the service of sage Durvāsa to beget a son. As Karve says, "service in this context meant personal service; being at the beck and call of the sage, doing his bidding and even sharing his bed if he so desired"(1991:44). The miraculous birth of Karṇa then can be explained by his being actually the son of Durvāsa[14]. Kuntī was serving the sage for a year, and that she should bear him son was not such an extraordinary occurence[15]. Though she gave away this child for fear of retribution, this was a constant source of dread and sorrow to the 'mother' in her.

The narrative does not display her anguish at being married to an impotent man[16]. Such a marriage led her to accept 'niyoga', be it from either some Brahmana or God, maybe against her wishes. It became greater when she was contemplating to return to the kingdom as the mother of the heir, Pāṇḍu died, leaving her at the mercy of her in-laws. Suffering as she was, she could not claim Karṇa because of social disapproval[17]. This cowardice must have haunted her till the end, together with the guilt of abandoning him. A very poignant verse by Tagore (*Karṇa-Kuntī Sambad*) represents the yearnings of a mother for her son, and of a son (Karṇa), who craved to know his mother all through his life. This act however, seems quite strange, since some treaties declare that even illegitimate son born to an unwed mother, can share the rights over a kingdom, if the king do not have a direct progeny. Then the question is why did she do this? Was it because she didn't want a constant reminder of her humiliation in the home of her adopted father? Or, was it just for the sake of remaining virtuous in the eyes of the people? This same Kuntī, however, did not show any pangs of guilt when she went to Karṇa to lure him for the safety of her other five sons. As an ideal mother, she may have failed Karṇa but for the Pāṇḍavas she acts in

every possible way in order to protect them. This same woman urged her sons to fight for the sake of Ksatriya dharma. Was she torn between choosing the duty of a Ksatriya woman and the love of a mother for her sons? Such actions reveal the inner conflict that she had to constantly face. How could the same woman, who somewhat ruthlessly rejected her first-born, later be ready to accept him? Or, was it just a ploy, a move to protect the Pāṇḍavas, especially Arjuna from death at the hands of Karṇa? And, why did she leave the luxury of the hard-earned kingdom to go in the forest with her brother-in-law and his wife? Does her action show that she was a free-willed agent, or, a woman bound by traditions and a sense of morality?

Pragmatic as she was, it made her sound to be a hard and unjust woman at times. But it is the life which Kuntī was left alone to drudge that made her hard. Unjust she was not, as Mādrī could peacefully leave her sons in Kuntī's care (Jhanji 1996). As a mother and guardian, she tried to be impartial, giving equal or perhaps more love to Mādrī's sons. In order to protect her sons, she had no qualms in sacrificing six persons in fire. Her wisdom made Bhīma to marry Hidimbā (*Ādiparva* Siddhāntavāgīśa 1938:1589, sloka 38, Dās 1987:200), in the hope that the union will come out to be helpful for the Pāṇḍavas in future. Moreover, though the narative suggests that she accidentally asked her sons to 'share equally whatever they have got'(1938:1838, sloka 2) when Arjuna won Draupadi, it might be a deliberate and well-thought action. Perhaps it was because she "saw in Draupadī a potential threat to the unity of the five brothers" (Jhanji1996:36), and hence made this move to effectively weild them in an unbreakable whole. Moreover, this later proved to thwart all plans that Duryodhana may have had to set them against one another.

Whatever she did can only be realized if we are to understand her mortification- which she faced from the very first day of her life: her hope for the future- for which she strived time and again; and, her unbending will-by which she was ready to take any course of action to fulfill her dreams (Bhattacharji 1988). It can also be that she was only fulfilling her duties as a wife, to successfully secure the rights of her deceased husband, and when she finished doing everything she could, she retreated in the forest in the hope of achieving the long saughted peace. Whatever it may be, she lived an intense life, with heights and depths, tension and despair, love and hates, scourging through every possible avenue in life.

Thus, the lives of these female characters do seem to portray various facets. On the one hand, clearly there was societal pressure on women to treat their marriage and marital identity as sacrosanct, yet the possibility of negotiating as an active agent and not only a receiver was strong among them. However, when looked from this angle, Gāndhārī's actions may seem to be the result of approbiation associated with being a chaste and pious wife, of Kuntī preserving and protecting the sons as her husband's memory, yet there is something more to them. A different story of femininity emerge once we follow the critical trajectory, to bring about the nuances in each character.

In terms of the political scenario, each of these women tried to acquire some power in relation to the men in their lives- either husbands or sons. On the other hand, the mother-child relationship went through tortuous dilemmas in terms of duty and love. Torn between these, each tried to solve the conflict in their own way. In terms of the role that a female should play in a given society, none of them is found to follow the norms steadfastly. They questioned their husbands, their sons, trying to live independently, through manipulating

and negotiating their ways, while not breaking the structures and rules of conformity in totality.

III

Such analyses however, makes us face a peculiar position in terms of what is written throughout the narrative itself, about the roles and duties of a woman, and a few legends or minor stories poses a threat to the earlier glorifying picture of agency and freedom. But before going into the disturbing debates, let us see what the society at large prescribed for women in the age of the *Mahābhārata* . A compilation of the duties of women and men's duty towards them is given as follows[18] : -

1. *(A woman must) daily be engaged in the work relating to fire and give offerings of flowers. Accompanied by her husband she should eat what is left after giving to gods, guests and servants.*
2. *All activities are futile where these are not honoured. When virtuous and respectable women grieve, that family at once becomes non-existent.*
3. *Of a man wife is the half; she is his greatest friend and the source of his group of three (viz. dharma, artha, kama). The wife is the friend of one when one dies.*
4. *A woman, who is under the control of many, is considered to be a harlot.*
5. *O Yudhisthira, she always eats the remnants of her husband's food, and, acting in accordance with the husband's mind, looks upon the husband as god.*
6. *O princess, observer of vows, in no monthly course, should the wife live apart from her husband – this is known as dharma by those who are versed in it.*
7. *(A woman) should always get up at dawn, should be devoted to the service of the superiors, should keep the house well cleaned and besmear it with cow dung.*
8. *So, a man should look upon his wife, who is the mother of a son, as (his own) mother.*
9. *That woman is pious who attends on her husband who is poor, sick, weak and fatigued by journey, as on the son.*

10. *(A woman) should always be engaged in the service of the gods, guests, servants, father-in-law, mother-in-law and ever have her senses under control.*
11. *That woman is pious whose longings for objects of desire, enjoyment, prosperity and happiness is not so much as that for the husband.*
12. *The long stay of women with the relatives is not liked. It destroys reputation, character and piety; so do not stay long.*
13. *Of a woman there is no sacrifice, no Sraddha nor fast. Her dharma is the service of the husband; thereby she wins heaven.*
14. *There is no independence of women, women are indeed dependent. A woman does not deserve independence – this is the opinion of Prajapati.*
15. *Almost same as No. 13 above.*
16. *This will happen to the wife who, appointed by the husband for the sake of issues, does not act as desired.*
17. *That woman is devoted to the husband, who, though harshly spoken to and looked at with a cruel eye, has a delighted face towards her husband.*
18. *The father protects (a woman) in childhood, the husband in youth, the sons in old age; a woman does not deserve independence.*
19. *That chaste woman of restrained conduct is pious who frequently looks at the husband's face as that of the son.*
20. *O lord of men, women should always be honoured and fostered.*
21. *A wife dying earlier waits for the husband in the other world. A chaste wife follows the predeceased husband.*
22. *The woman, who maintains with food Brahmanas, the weak, the orphans, the distressed, the blind and the wretched, (enjoy the fruit of) devotion to the husband.*
23. *Whatever, O princess, the husband says, be it lawful or unlawful, should be done accordingly (by the wife) those who are versed in dharma say so.*
24. *O twice-born one, it is the duty of women to serve the parents and the husband.*
25. *It is the highest tribute to a woman that she obeys the husband; she gets the highest state before the husband.*
26. *She quickly looks beautiful like a female pigeon in heaven.*

27. *A woman, who duly takes the food that remains (after distribution among guests, servants etc) and whose people are contented and healthy, is always endowed with dharma.*
28. *A woman deserves independence in the other remaining periods of time. Good people tell this old dharma.*
29. *These women are indeed goddesses of fortune; they should be honoured by desiring prosperity. O descendant of Bharata, the woman, fostered and unrepressed, becomes a goddess of fortune.*
30. *That woman is an ascetic who, endowed with virtues, while pleasing the mother-in-law and the father-in-law, is always devoted to the parents.*
31. *She (i.e. a good woman), of good conduct, pure, skilful, wishing well of the relative, always does what is beneficial to the husband.*
32. *The chaste woman, who looks upon the husband as god, becomes pious and has dharma as the highest object.*
33. *She is a wife who is skilful in household affairs, she is a wife who has issues, she is a wife to whom the husband is life, and she is a wife who is devoted to the husband.*
34. *Having regard to the fact that pleasure, love and dharma depend on the women, a wise man, though very angry, should not utter unpleasant words to them.*
35. *A woman, of good nature, pleasant speech, good conduct, good appearance, whose heart is not attracted to any other person and who has a pleasant face to the husband, is pious.*
36. *To supersede the former husband (and to marry another) is an act of very great illegality for women. (Banerjee 1976:).*

While very few of these norms (No.1, 3, 8, 20, 29) strive to project a somewhat elevated if not equal status of women in the society, a great many of them depicts a derogatory position for them.

It may not be stated that a wife should follow the husband in funeral pyre (*Sati*), but she is described to be always a follower in every possible way. A woman's condition is

explicitly described, in terms of only one man and his family in her life, her husband. She is robbed of her 'self', in following every footsteps of her husband, in doing whatever he wishes her to do, attend to him and his family in all conceivable manner, be it right or wrong, for it is her *streedharma* (same as *'pativrata'*) (Bhattacharji 1988). Under no circumstances should she lose her senses, and her chastity and devotion lies in pleasing her husband. Naturally then there can be no independence, as she is destined to be protected all her life. The duty of a woman far excels the duty of a man; he is required to do duty only when the woman fulfills all her obligations. Accordingly, as we move on to the following narratives, an attempt is made to show how completely her life depended by the males surrounding her. Even the notions of morality and immorality changes at the whims and mercy of the others; the patriarchal values of the society determining them. The following instances perhaps will better describe the situation.

The first is the case of **Ambā** (*Mahābhārata* Das 1987:808-10 *Bhīṣmaparva*; Siddhāntavāgīśa 1938:1144 *Ādiparva*), the eldest daughter of the king of Kāśī. During her swayamvara, she was forcefully abducted by Bhīṣma, along with her other two sisters, Ambikā and Ambālikā, with the intention of marrying them off to the king Vicitravirya. But just before the marriage, Ambā told Bhīṣma about king Salya, whom she has already chosen as a husband, and even assured that Salya reciprocated the choice (1938:1144 sloka 61). She was immediately send back to Salya, where she faced unmitigated condemnation. Salya refused to marry her, stating that she is *'anyapurva'*[19]. He condemned her as Bhīṣma's capture, and stated that she has become unchaste, being touched by Bhīṣma during the abduction. A long series of pleadings by Ambā, who said that she had nowhere to go and never desired anyone but Salya, falls into deaf ears. Thereafter, she rejected her

former life and wished for ascetic penance. But even the Brahmanas in the forest asked her to go back to her father. This is because a young girl without husband must seek the protection of her father, who alone can decide what she should, or should not do. Hereafter the story runs that she meets her maternal grandfather and through great persuasion achieved the end[20].

This incident describes, quite thoroughly, how others determine a woman's fate. Her virtue and chastity are too fragile, always defined by the men in her life. She is only a commodity, whose value depended on how others will judge her conduct. The society was too unmerciful in guarding her purity. This vivid description, of how, through no fault of hers, she faced a lifelong misery, because of the narrow notions of purity and impurity needs mention. Both Salya and Bhīṣma accrue unjust treatment, the first by believing that she had been unfaithful; the latter, by refusing to marry her when she came back, helpless and homeless and pleaded him to marry her. Though Bhīṣma refused in order to keep his vow, could he not marry her with Vicitravirya? Or, is it that he too thought her to be unchaste only because she had desired someone else before? Strangely enough, even Ambā's wrath was directed on Bhīṣma for making her unsuitable to be a bride, never did she blame Salya. Was it because she was also moulded by the twisted logic of moral and immoral? For it was only her body that was violated being touched by another man, but never her mind.

Another minor story, told by Narada to Duryodhana (Sinha 1983:792-97,*Udyogaparva* -episodes 113-121), comes to reveal some shocking truth about the status of women in society. Once, a sage Gālava, came to king Yayāti. He asked the king for ten-thousand silver coins to buy horses (special for being white with one black ear), to give

Gurudaksina[21]. The king however, did not have the money but instead offered her daughter, **Mādhavī**, saying that he (Gālava) could marry her off and claim bride price to buy the horses. Henceforth, the sage married her to four kings, subsequently, to obtain the necessary money to pay his Gurudaksina. She stayed with each king for a year, till she bore a son to each. After each childbirth, the sage Gālava would come to take her away. At the end of the purpose, Gālava returned her to her father and a swayamvara was arranged for her. It is then that she renounced the world and went to the forest to live an ascetic life. The story does not end here though. When king Yayāti died, he could not attain heaven because he did not fulfill the amount of penance required to achieve this, and then he took a share of Mādhavī's ascetic penance to be in heaven.

This poignant narrative reveals too many aspects of a woman's deprivation. As a daughter, she was only a commodity to be given away, because the King could not contain his greed of attaining piety by serving a Brahmana. The sage also, did not feel any qualms in using her in a deplorable manner to achieve his ends. What is interesting is the ease with which she was treated as a commodity and offered to different kings. Although she never verbalized her anguish at being pawned away from one to another, and abandoning her new- born sons by parting for an unknown destination, yet one can imagine how she must have suffered (Jhanji 1996). When she comes back, her father once again tried to earn the virtue of '*kanyadana*'[21]. She retaliated at the last, unable to survive any more humiliations, and took recluse in the forest. But even then she had too give away piety she earned through her penance. She was cheated, both in terms of her this worldly rights as a woman and her other worldly virtues, attained on her own.

A crude example which describes the status of women, the worth of a woman comes out to be only a commodity, a commodity to give and enjoy freely. For the father, she is just a means to obtain piety, and hence he never hesitates to even push her into some kind of prostitution. For the four kings who married her, she was just a means to obtain the end, to procure progeny- the only requirement of a wife. Even the learned sage did not see any wrong in mitigating such ill- treatment to her (Bhattacharji 1988). Once again, this reconfirms the rule prescribed earlier. Her status of the lowest in the society, even after the servants of the family (No 1, 10 etc.). She is not a person but a thing, a living non-entity, that exists only to obey and never to question.

In the later part of the *Mahābhārata* , viz. the *Śāntiparva* (Dāsa 1987, Sinha 1983), Bhīṣma is shown to tell Yudhiṣthira that there is nothing more evil than women are, and hence men should not show any weaknesses towards the female. Several paragraphs follow, in which she is said to be evil, a hailer of curses and grief. She is like a poisonous snake and should never be given freedom. He went on to say that, to be born as a woman is the result of some evil deeds in the earlier birth. Similarly, without being married a woman does not go through the process of culturation, it is a form of second-birth (*upanayana*) to her. In the *Salyaparva* we come across the daughter of the sage Aunigargn (cited in Bhattacharji 1988), who had been involved in penence all her life, but had to get married for one night, just to be able to go through *samskara* (ritual) of marriage. The plights of widows are depicted in the *Anusasanaparva*, where a *sloka* says that a woman who lives without her husband lives constantly in sorrow. Without her husband, it is the same whether she is dead or alive.

More and more is she projected as either a temptress, or as fragile and vulnerable to be immoral. She is an easy pray, to be seduced easily because of her inherent weakness for sex[22], for licentious behaviour, and hence to be avoided in order to lead an austere and spiritual life. But interestingly at the same time, in yet another level, she is glorified as the mother. A legacy of the worshipping of female deities? A belief in the restorative quality of motherhood? Or, is it that the society thought it safer to control women through the binding of motherhood, afraid to confront her as an unbound and willful individual? This paper has tried to answer these questions, which though not 'new' nevertheless search for a deeper understanding. For our quest is not limited to the surface explanations that are always 'given' but to unearth subtexts within the text.

IV

However, while at one level *Kāśīdāsī Mahābhārata* can read in the context of identifying female agency and helps in exploring the links between gender and culture through narrative, it can also provide information and help in interpreting the culture and society of Bengal in a specific era through the glimpses that the poet painted in his words.

The *Mahābhārata* , curiously in contrast to *Rāmāyaṇa* is more revered as a religious text than the later which is received as a literature, a '*kavya*'. While the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Krittibasa Ojjha (a work as popular as the *Mahābhārata*) is more indigenous in terms of its content and style, the *Mahābhārata* of Kāsirama Dāśa is more in tune with the original Sanskrit text. Some critics (Chakravarti 1965) say that this was because the creator of the Bengali *Rāmāyaṇa* did not know Sanskrit and his story was based on folklores of the region, oral renditions of the Sanskrit kavya and his own poetic

imagination, which is why it contains certain special characteristics of the Bengali ethos. It is also the reason why the average Bengali identifies more with the *Rāmāyaṇa* .

As regard to *Mahābhārata* however, this identification became difficult to some extent. Firstly, the complex ways in which the characters negotiate with each other, even stooping to supposedly immoral and unnatural ways of conceiving, battling for possession, and, pursuing one's end with a callous regard of the means, makes it difficult to identify with the comparatively peaceful existence that the Bengalis believe in. Secondly, as the author was familiar with the Sanskrit work there has not been much infusion of folk element or popular culture. The folk rituals and belief, its heritage etc were never projected in the way the *Rāmāyaṇa* incorporates it.

Despite this, *Kāśīdāsī Mahābhārata* forms an important part of the Bengali literature and culture. Categorised in the genre of '*pacali*'[24], a specific type in the history of Bengali literature, it is chanted on several occasions like the 'sraddha'[25] ceremony when certain verses from Virātaparva and Gītā are recited; or for example when someone dies verses from Śāntiparva are recited to ease the pain of loss. Another distinctive feature is the manner in which the biography of the author appear time and again in the text. At the opening verses we find him explaining his belief of Mahābhārata to be the foremost of sastras (religious texts) including the exploits of the lord Kṛṣṇa in one of his many forms, for the lines are

> "sarbasastra bicaria kahi punorbar
> Sri Mahābhārata grantha sarba sastra-sar"
> (Dasa 1987:50)

His vaiṣṇavism becomes more apparent when the author declares his devotion for Kṛṣṇa in verses like "kasirama dasa kahe govinda-carane" or "srutimatra harinama pape

mukta hoila" meaning, 'I devote myself at the feet of Krsna', and, 'by hearing the name of Kṛṣṇa one can be free of his bad deeds', respectively.

Other than this the text reflects a few more characteristics of medieaval Bengali literature. Firstly, it is written in a rhythm peculiar of that time and popular even today. It is in the form of couplets where the end words of each line rhymes with the other, called 'payarchanda' in Bengali. Second, the illustrative feature of the author introducing himself within the text at some point of time. This is evident in the lines where the poet say

"Kamalakanter suta hetu sujaner prta
Birocilo kasirama dasa"
(Dasa 1987:1072 *Santiparva*)

meaning that he is the son of Kamalākānta, and that he wants to give pleasure to others through his writing.

Apart from these a few originalities that can be recognised are (1) the chronological order is not always maintained. Kāśīrāma Dāsa illustrated *Gadāparva* and *Aiṣikaparva* separately, while the *Anuśasanaparva* and *Mahāprasthanikaparva* are not dealt with in greater detail as in the original but forms only a part of *Śāntiparva* and *Sargārohanaparva*, respectively. Also, even if the number of parvas are same, Kāśīdāsī Mahābhārata has different ordering of parvas and their names (Jahnavi Kumar 1965). (2) In the addition of tales like that of the '*Śrivatsa-Cintā Upakhyana*' (Dasa 1987: 437-57 *Banaparva*), the legend of the king Śrivatsā and his queen Cintā. Taken from folklore of East-Bengal (Dineshchandra Sen 1969), it reflects the authors awareness and sympathy of popular culture. The tale is about the goddess Lakshmi (the deity of bounty) and god Śani (an evil deity) and how they interact with the wise king to establish their superiority and how the kings wins the favour of both the deity by his prudence. This depicts how important these

deities were in the religious life of the Bengalis, for though goddess Lakshmi is popularly worshipped in many parts of the country, the other god Śani has a more regional following. The other instances of regional culture are the episode when the author explains the eminence and sublimity of the Lord Jagannatha (another form of Kṛṣṇa) in "*sṛketra mahatya*" and "*ekādaśī*" (a fortnightly fast two days before the onset of new moon and full moon) or of "*śiva-caturdaśī*" (about Lord Śiva) and "*anantavṛta*" (about Lord Narayana/Kṛṣṇa). This also supports his Vaiṣṇav philosophy on one hand and the customary acceptance of other faiths like Śaivism. But we should try to remember that the author was conscious of incorporating elements and judiciously avoided much indigenous interpolations, because he himself admitted that his endeavour is to render in the form of lyric poetry which Vyāsa has written in Sanskrit-

> "sanskrita slokachande birocila Vyāsa
> gitachande kahe taha Kasirama Dasa"
> (Dasa 1987:55)

An understanding of the folk elements and of the connectedness of biography and history, which may be discerned in the text, is also accompanied by the analysis of the female agency in the text. This freedom of interpretation is the legacy of linguistic, stylistic, structuralist and deconstructionist criticism which has reconceptualised the 'meaning' in texts. The following paragraphs try to perceive this freedom that the text of *Mahābhārata* provides.

The complex attitudes about women that are woven in the text of *Mahābhārata* seem to embody the perennial paradoxes of female existence in a male-centric weltanschuung. Women are both revered and hated. Even when welding power over men, they are vulnerable in the hands of men. The Mahābhārata depicts this in a more explicit

and vivid manner, perhaps because of its sheer volume. As it covers a wide range of time and spacing, starting from the ancient Vedic society to the later Puranic society- a span of about 800 years, the society is described in a more detailed manner, accounting for the changes it must have undergone over the years. This can also provide for the differences in attitudes towards female in the earlier parvas, as compared to their ongoing diminishing status. This is certainly a reflection of changing times. The epic not only covers a protracted period of centuries and an extended, even variable social space, but is also internally fissured by the different versions layered into its composition, and, by social difficulties that are barely acknowledged in extant prescriptive texts.

Thus in our attempt to examine the narratives we see that, symbolic attribution, social ascription, ideologies and narratives interact in an emphatic way, in maintaining the sexual division and in structuring women's role. "Female incitement, a significant and recurring narrative or discursive unit of convoluted agency" (Sangari 1999:384) is reflected in the instance of Kuntī-a woman calling upon men to act (a mother inciting her sons to fight). Moreover, "since men are usually perceived as having both rights and duties; and, women as having primarily duties; any claim to rights, unless effectively disguised becomes a sign of woman's evil nature" (Sangari 1999:385). Several instances shown earlier (Śakuntalā, Satyavatī), reflects how well the women did so, in constantly renegotiating their ways through the prevailing ideology. Social ascriptions however do not seem to have much importance – not all the women that we talked about originates from a royal family (Śakuntalā and Satyavatī), and even when of royal origin, their fates differed (Kuntī and Gāndhārī as compared to Ambā and Mādhavī). In the earlier narrative episodes however, women were comparatively free to act according to their will, assertive

and autonomous as opposed to the quintessential submissive responses that came into being much later. Though not sharing equal status with their male counterparts they did not succumb to the subjugation without at least questioning them, if not changing them. She was portrayed more as an individual than as a commodity, with a capacity to think and having rather strong mental capacity. But through the passage of time an increasing sense of inferiority was inculcated in terms of her status in society. No longer is she an individual but becomes only a subordinated part of the male. Such an ongoing transformation may be relegated to the fact that the earlier episodes (*Ādiparva, Sabhāparva*, parts of *Vanaparva* and *Virātaparva, Udyogaparva* to *Stṛiparva*) consists of the actual *Jaya* (predominantly a Ksatriya story), dating much back in time, while the rest (from *Śāntiparva* to *Swargārohanaparva*) were later additions by the Bṛigu clan of Brahmins who zealously guarded the text and introduced legends and stories reflecting the rules and norms of their society[23]. Often criticised of being unimportant extrapolations, they are important for us in revealing the historical changes in the status of women, explaining the curious differences in patterns of male-female interactions.

Such an endeavour in conceptualization of gender identity as durable but not immutable has been prompted by a rethinking of agency. This rethinking occurred in terms of the inherent instability of gender norms and the consequent possibilities of resistance, subversion and, emancipatory remodeling of identity. A close and critical examination of how these narratives are structured in the text and received by the audience reflects an essentially negative understanding of subject formation. Essentially glorifying the actions of these women as a marker of their dedication, the pativrata image in case of Gāndhārī, ideologizing motherhood in relation to Kuntī, virtuousity in the tale of Mādhāvī, the effort

has been to veil the autonomy of the woman, as subject. Moreover, the tendency has been to epitomise the later Brahmanical injunctions on the behaviour and role of the female, in the continuous re-telling of the narrative over the years. In other words, it leaves unexplained the capabilities of individuals to respond to the gender structuring in a more creative and less defensive fashion or deliberately forcloses the existence of those possibilities.

A review of the narratives shows existence of forms of autonomy and constraint, which no longer can be understood through simple dichotomies of male domination and female subordination. In certain cultures, such as ours, where the tendency is to impute a kind of inherently subversive status to the role of female: my idea has been to suggest that a varied account of female agency is required, to explain the differing motivations and ways in which individual women struggle over, appropriate and transform cultural meanings, and hence, subvert the constraints of negative paradigms of womanhood. At the same time such a review also brought into forefront the enduring linkages between cultural ideas, women's images and the perpetuation of gender dichotomies. The basic endeavour has been to locate the enormous variety of women's images, identify the ideological inspiration and underpinning behind these images, and comprehend the manner and processes through which these images were veiled, reduced to a single hegemonic identity (of mother and wife) which affect, shape and determine the reality of women's life in India.

Thus while at the level of narrative the possible implications of female agency seems endless, the narratives are themselves part of a specific culture that is, Bengali culture, within the broader framework of the Indian culture. In the circumstances we need

to be sensitive towards the interconnections and co-existence of texts, histories and culture, and of the intimate connections between high and popular culture and their relevance in unraveling the concerns about human expressions of self-identity.

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[1] Alf Hiltebeital in his book *The Cult of Draupadī* (1991) discussed this when talking about the mythologies of Gingee, or commented on Obyesseker's work.

[2] This is a rough outline of the text in *Mahābhārata* to familiarise the readers with the narrative. Moreover, I take the entire responsibility in presenting the story in the way I thought fit.

[3] A form of marriage among the eight forms of marriage in a Hindu society, this do not require the permission of the parents and only the husband and wife is involved. The other seven forms are- *brahma, daiva, arsa, prajapatya, asura, raksasa and paisaca.*(Thappar 1999).

[4] The paragraph in Appendix 2 tesifies this.

[5] Already referred in the earlier pages.

[6] 'Niyoga' means "the appointment of a brother or a near kinsman to raise issue to a deceased husband by marrying his widow".

[7] 'Kanin' means someone who is born of an unmarried mother.

[8] The notion of 'pativrata' means that the wife must do anything and everything that can be considered best for her husband and his family.

[9] This conflict between duty and desire afflicts almost all of the characters in this epic, male or female in their actions.

[10] The word 'dharma' means righteousness and 'adharma' is wrong. Used frequently in the epic it has moral and immoral connotations.

[11] It is 'adharma' or wrong because Yudhiṣṭhira is elder by birth, and as the son of the deceased king Pāṇḍu, is entitled to the throne.

[12] She was about to curse the Pāṇḍavas when Vyāsa and Kṛṣṇa intervened, with the result that only Yudhiṣṭhira's finger was burned by her anger, and the curse was redirected to Kṛṣṇa.

[13] A story where Vidulā, the protagonist recriminates her husband for ungainly behaviour as a ksatriya king.

[14] In many ways Karṇa reflected the qualities of Durvāsa, his proud and haughty nature, quick flaring temper etc are the mannerisms often associated with the sage.

[15] Satyavatī before this bore a child by a Brahmana. Moreover, the myth of several gods bearing a son to Kuntī can just be a supposition to explain away Pāṇḍu's impotency and hence the subsequent 'niyoga'.

[16] This is the only possible explanation as to why Pāṇḍu saught recluse in the forest while at his prime, along with his two wives. It maybe that he wanted to secure progeny by some Brahmin in the forest, and hence, keeping the whole matter obsecure.

[17] When Karṇa challenged Arjuna at the display of skills in front of the court, he was not accepted because he was known to be the son of Adhiratha, a 'suta' and not a Ksatriya.

[18] Taken from the book *Indian Society in the Mahabharata* (1976), they give a very generalised notion about the status of women based on the Smṛiti material in the Mahābhārata.

[19] A bride about to be wedded to another. The irony here is that it is for the same reason that Bhīṣma released her.

[20] When her grandfather, a friend of Rāma (Parāśurama), persuaded him to fight and kill Bhīṣma, failing which, the sage granted her the boon that she, reborn as Shikhandin will be the cause of Bhīṣma's death. It is strange that her anger was directed solely on Bhīṣma, and never once did she talk of punishing Salya.

[21] A kind of homage required to pay to the teacher after a student finishes his learning.

[21] The scriptures says that a father earns the piety of being a highest giver when he gives away her daughter in marriage.

[22] The tale of Apsara Yunakarni, where she is made to say that a woman's penchant for sex is more than the man (Bhattacharji 1988).

[24] A kind of lyric to be chanted during different occasions, ranging from day to day worship of the family deities like goddess Lakshmi and Śani to the festivals concerning local/regional deities, the 'pacali' was a very popular form in literature in medieaval Bengal.

[25] A ceremony undertaken on the eleventh or thirteenth day after the death of a person, in order to free him from the bonds of this world.

[23] Such suggestions has been given by many critics, while explaining the length of the epic. The critical edition testifies the fact as also the comments by M.R. Yardi (1986), Chintaman Vaidya (1905) and Sukumari Bhattacharji (1988).

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In our final analysis then, we try to find the thread that binds our arguments over the previous chapters, culminating in representing ways of "women's self-perception and self-fashioning and the ways in which they may be understood as constituting moral discourse in which gender...identities are constructed, negotiated and contested"(Raheja & Gold 1996:1). We have already established the power of narrative in constituting and re-constituting the frame of a culture. More precisely, myth as a narrative takes the form of a single determinate discourse, a single interpretative frame, which then becomes a token of coherent and totalizing 'culture'. And, it is in this sense that the narrative of sacred texts about women like Gāndhārī , Kuntī etc conjure up a determinate discourse for the generations of women to follow. The mythological narrative(s), (inculcating a strong sense of history) therefore portray, all too frequently the Indian woman "as a silent shadow, a given in marriage by one patrilineal group to another, veiled and mute before affinal kinsmen, and unquestioningly accepting a single discourse that ratifies her own subordination and a negative view of femaleness and sexuality" (Raheja & Gold 1996:2).

I therefore found that it is of critical importance to stress the multiplicity of discursive fields, within which social relationships are constructed, defined and commented upon in terms of gender. Also, it automatically followed that such analyses of multiplicity can only rely on feminist criticism of narrative in the 're-presentation' of women. Lévi-Strauss and Barthes have set the opening, through their arguments of 'myth

as history' and 'myth as narrative' respectively. More importantly, it was Barthes's consideration of text which means, "precisely to suspend conventional evaluations (the difference between major and minor literature), to subvert established classifications" (Sontag 1982: xi), that encouraged us to re-read the mythical narrative of the *Mahābhārata.* This mandate to re-read and hence to reinterpret is thus supplied by the Barthesian notion of text and textuality. This translate into criticism, the modernist ideal of an open-ended, polysemous literature; and thereby make the critic the inventor of 'meaning' but not 'a meaning' (Sontag 1982: xii). The term 'meaning' here denotes the freedom of extracting multiple meanings from a text and not just conforming to a single authoritative meaning already given by the earlier reading(s).

In trying to find this 'meaning' that our work reflects feminist concern to understand how gender differences are transformed into gender inequalities through narratives. How the culturally sanctioned narratives of *Mahābhārata* became central to the imposition of hegemonic identities. The emergence of new or contestory forms that we tried to evolve in our analyses only inevitably highlights the relations of power that underlie the production of narrative discourse, and, how it acquired a canonical form from being a mere narrative of a battle in the hands of the later Brahmanical clans.

So, what are we talking about when we try to define the vision of ideal woman, and how do we unveil the image?

To begin with, one can say that the immediate audience of the classical literature written in Sanskrit may have been limited, but its influence spread far and wide. The vernacular literatures adopted many of the old ideals, continuing to recycle earlier themes

and subjects while inducing 'folk' elements. This has happened with the Bengali *Mahābhārata* too. While the readers do not identify with the narrative of the text, they comply with the didactic elements of the *Mahābhārata*. In this respect, it was interesting to note how certain elements were rejected and others were made popular in order to suit the practice of patriarchy. It may be so that the Bengali culture found it more siutable to handle the role of meek and submissive Sita of *Rāmayāṇa* (as already said the *Krittibasi Rāmayāṇa* is much more polular with the masses than the *Kāśidāsi Mahābhārata* because of the present of oral traditions and folk elements), and accordingly accepted those didactic parts of the *Mahābhārata* which conform this role, and studiously overlooked the challenging characters of the women in the latter. Śakuntalā, Satyavatī or Gāndhārī were never held to be as dear as Sītā or Sāvitrī[1], or to some extent Kuntī. However even such identifications are partial, since it is the motherhood of Kuntī that is glorified, the wifely virtues of Sītā that are endorsed, and the devotion of Sāvitrī that is upheld. Also a characters undergoes quite a change when it is made popular, for example the Śakuntalā of the epic tradition is much different from that of the literary tradition, and the latter is comfortably dealt with because she is portrayed as a simple and innocent romantic who achieves happiness after going through much miseries. Thus a woman is always blessed to be a Sītā or Sāvitrī at marriage, but not for once it is acknowledged that the same Sāvitrī has argued with her father in the court that she will marry the son of a Brahmin (Sātyavana) because she loves him (Bhattacharji 1996). She is blessed to be the mother of hundred sons without any regard to the pain that the mother goes through. For Gāndhārī never had any power in deciding her sons' welfare, the moment they were born everything was decided by the father and the other male members of the household. Kuntī too went

through the sufferings of not being able to acknowledge her eldest one, Karna. Our culture glorifies the role of a woman as the 'mother of a son' but effectively covers the distress of being an unimportant part of the child's life. For once the son is born he belongs to the father who has the sole responsibility of bringing up the child and the mother's only role is of nurturance and nothing more. Thus as Sukumari Bhattacharji rightly says, "motherhood ...came to be increasingly glorified as compensation for an imposed reality in which women merely gratified society's preference for male progeny" (1990:WS-50).

But where naive readers tend to accept every statement in a literary work like *Mahābhārata* as presenting the ultimate opinions about how things are or how they should be, more sophisticated analysis need to pay attention to the temporal and cultural distance in the portrayal of ideology of womanhood.

Moreover, this double identity of classical literature common in its inspiration and influence, elitist in the outlook of its practitioners and supporters, makes it, to my mind doubly interesting as an object of research. The power of language to suggest enables us to deliberately seek for multiple meanings and effects, trying to create a coherent view by bridging social and ideological gaps, both conforming and criticizing at the same time.

Thus, as in most present day feminist thinking, the question of woman becomes actually the question of gender, and the earlier chapters tries to coherently address this question. This takes place as we try to reveal the relationship of the protagonists in the various narratives with the men in their lives, for example Śakuntalā is not just 'a woman' but through her arguments with the king she emerges to question the relationship of husband and wife, of father and son and hence converting it into a gendered discursive

field. Moreover, as reflected through the analyses, gender has much to do with history, practices, and the imbrication of meaning with experience, in other words, with the mutually constitutive effects in semiosis, of the 'outer world' of social reality and the 'inner world' of subjectivity; of the 'social construction' of man and woman, and of the semiotic production of subjectivity. Through the reading of narratives the effort was for a possible elaboration of 'myth and narratives' as a theory of culture that hinges on a historical, materialist and gendered subject. This also shows that the historical fact of gender, the fact that it exists in social reality, that it has concrete existence in cultural forms and actual weight in social relations, makes gender a political issue that cannot be evaded or wished away.

This importance of understanding the intertwinement of both material and symbolic practices in the construction of gendered subject is however not new. The task is merely to unravel the historical and traditional grounds upon which knowledge is based. Much contemporary scholarship has called into question the importance of texts and textual formulations in the values, beliefs and experiences of most women[2]. With respect to the Hindu tradition, it can be said that the vast majority of Indian women (even men)- past and present, have no knowledge of Sanskrit and have never read a single word of the Brahmanical canon, and yet, their lives are bounded by the hegemonic portrayal of a 'subordinated woman and superior man'. While acknowledging the tenuous relationship between literature and life however, it is important to note that the *Mahābhārata* is not a mere text, but carry a great deal of authority. Later Brahmanical values and formulations including those pertaining to the feminine represent a strong current in the cultural stream of contemporary Hindu India.

In doing so, our work sufficiently addressed the question of the role of methodology in feminist evaluations of 'popular' mass mediated texts that engage in the production of exclusionary narratives of identity. These exclusionary narratives reflect masculine ways of thinking in the sense that the text is primarily seen as a story of heroic struggle, a book of philosophical tenets and dharma and only having a canonical impact for the code of conduct in respect to women. The male readers never go beyond the narratives of the female protagonists to encourage new meanings. In addition to describing the historical and discursive contexts, a close examination of narratological features and strategies of representation were also taken up. And while investigating the representational strategies, we rely on mimetic construction (i.e. stories) and not diegetic content (discourse), because it is the stories that turn out to be a moral and cultural resource in the everyday practices, decisions, and relationships. We also located that stories derive meaning not only from their own narrative structures and semiological practices, but also from the sociohistorocal contexts in which they are exacted and narrated, and thus, they may be analysed as 'social' texts (Mankekar 1999).

The social status of the women of a country symbolizes the social spirit of the age. The literatures of Indian history therefore predictably abound with contradictory and conflicting views on the status of women. It can properly be understood only by examiming the socio-cultural condition of the society-in the Indian ethnology than that of religion alone. For as we have said time and again, that religion, law, custom and tradition define the status of women in a quite rigid fashion, the Mahābhārata includes strict regulation in terms of how a woman should act, her duties, her place in the customary set of things, her non-existing rights-the more prominent aspect in defining women's status.

But together with this, we have seen women status can also be defined by their consciousness, Śakuntalā, Satyavatī were conscious of their rights to be respected by demanding marriage and throne for their children; Kuntī was perhaps aware of her power as a mother; and Gāndhārī 's indignation and consequent actions reflects how a woman retains powerful presence within the narrow space of existence as a controlled being. Thus a woman's consciousness of her status must not only be guided by laws and religion as has been imposed by the erstwhile readings of *Mahābhārata*, but the fact that variations exists and women have tried to negotiate and manipulate within the spaces and boundaries, should encourage a new way of identification for Indian women today, as has been our effort.

With regard to issues of gender, a more rounded conception of agency became crucial to explaining both how women have acted autonomously in the past despite constricting social sanctions and also how that may help us now, in the context of processes of gender restructuring. Influenced by Foucauldian idea of the construction of self, this work therefore exemplified an alternative in highlighting an active sense of agency through the narratives of Śakuntalā, Satyavatī, Gāndhārī , and Kuntī. Within sociology the exploration of female agency has been conducted mainly at the level of interpretative micro-sociology, particularly feminist ethnomethodology. Here, however, the effort has been to deal with female agency through narrative theories, as we can no longer rely on a dualism of male dominance and female subordination to capture the complexities of gender relations. These complexities are captured in the character of Śakuntalā when she refuses to obey the king just because he is a powerful male, or through Satyavatī when she practically steers the Kuru clan which was about to extinguish, by

demanding heirs of her deceased sons either through Bhīṣma or Vyāsa, she was much more assertive than the male. Even in the narrative of Mādhavī, where she is supposedly the subordinate female who obeys every instructions laid by the males in her life, especially her father, ultimately refuses to remain within the boundaries of society by choosing to be an ascetic, and salvage her 'self' from the undignified existence. This is ironical in one sense that even when a woman chose to dictate her own life, she can do so only by staying outside of the society and not by remaining within it as a man could.

It is only when we examine a text like the *Mahābhārata*, belonging to a particular literary tradition that we thrive to find out the autonomy of the text in regard to the (i) intention of the author; (ii) cultural situation and the sociological conditions of production of the text, and finally, (iii) with regard to the original addressee. *Mahābhārata* as a text has the ability to transcend its original psycho-sociological conditions of production. It has created a potentially limitless audience and a potentially unlimited series of readings. This autonomy of text is constitutive of interpretation, which now revolves not only around understanding the direct matter of a text (i.e. first order reference), but also around the subject's ability to engage with the alternative vision of the world that the text projects 'in front of itself'. This transcendence also means that action may address itself to an indefinite range of possible readers, and, therefore to an indefinite range of potential readings. It is only in these terms that I have endeavoured to read the narratives that I have chosen, as "human action is an open work, the meaning of which is 'in suspense" (McNay 2000:109).

In relation to the analysis of characters and roles, a structure emerges, describing the different roles that are there for males and females. The female characters are often

found to be recipients of actions, or are the vehicle whereby a problem is solved, either through marriage or through being presented as a gift (Satyavatī and Mādhavī, respectively). The stories although centered around female characters, the characters themselves are not the agency which is central to the structure of the narrative. This constraint of representation therefore have urged me to argue that the characters and roles of women tend to be informed by stereotypes of what is appropriate according to gender norms. This in turn is extremely restricting on women and the need to criticize and find alternatives is more urgent than ever.

Thus, looking through myth as narrative appears to be a fruitful way of trying to enter the tacit premises of culture and interpreting them to inform relationships between male and female. The result of such an endeavour brought about a bloated glorification of motherhood or subordinating sites of women as subjects, with little space of equanimity of the relationship between a male and a female, and a critical reflection of how social conditions influence (the addition/extrapolation of the later Brahmanical Bhrgu clan) the formation of identity, and why later renditions found it wiser to build upon a singular identity of woman. The henceforth homogenous identity of Gāndhārī as 'ideal wife', or of Kuntī as 'ideal mother' has failed to see the complexities of an individual life. This may be a deliberate attempt to control the masses of female subjects, in suppressing their heterogenity as individuals and hence crush the sites of questions and disagreement. It would be a folly to ignore the individual agency of these women in creating subversive sites. As the myth of mother and wife has succeeded in chaining Indian women to the acceptence of wretched condition, the dispelling of such myth and offering a glimpse of the struggle and reality of active participation about the very mythical figures that they

revere, would help to create new selves for women. Hence gender as a category has helped us to examine the importance of "not how men think in myth but myths operate in men's mind without there being aware of it". It has operated in the mind of generations of women who have forgot to question the relevance of such myths and accepted them as a 'given', and the time has come to regard them critically.

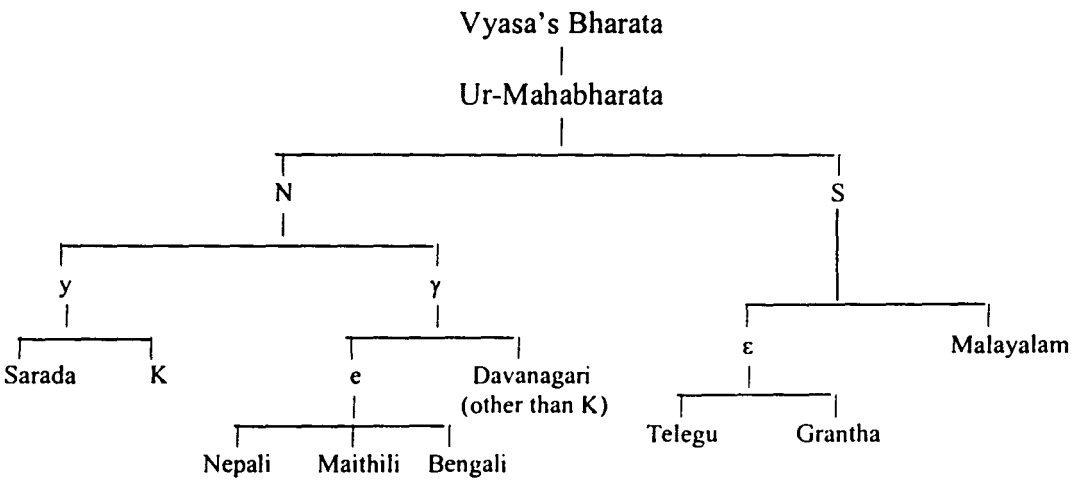
This 'critical' appreciation can amount to a veritable treasure hunt, which points to the variations of a narrative in terms of content and acceptance, influenced by the time and space in history. It underlines the varying nuances of the interplay between culture and history, the changes in the historical context and the effect that the latter may have on the former. This paves way for an extended exploration of myths and metaphors, of intersecting symbols that gives rise to evocative imagery, the structure of oral tradition that is reflected in different art forms, and the intermingling of high and popular culture in different discourses. Of how each society selects what it requires from the past and makes innovations, and how generations are constantly engaged, not in accepting everything that is handed down but in contesting the 'given' definitions. Within the text of *Mahābhārata*, it is necessary to differentiate between the didactic segments and the narratives that are likely to belong to the oral tradition of popular stories. The quest with narrative and feminism does not end here but opens up a rich and expressive area of human culture that is present not only in written text but also in other forms of discourse, like the areas of oral literature, oral tradition, verbal folklore, folk literature, oral performance and popular culture, all the processes that give rise to particularities of identity formation and agency.

NOTES

[1] The story of Sāvitrī found in *Mahābhārata* is another popular tale which is held to be exemplery of womens love and devotion for her husband. The legend goes that when her husband Sātyavana died she refused to live without him and engaged *Yama* (the god of death) into a long debate on the virtues of a good wife. She won her case and the god was forced to revive her dead husband. She stands as the epitome of how a woman should conduct herself in relation with her husband, for she should be ready to take up all hardships for his well-being.

[2] Here, I refer to the work done by scholars like feminist historian Uma Chakravarti, Poornima Mankekar, Sukumari Bhattacharji, Nabaneeta Debsen etc.

Appendix 1



Pedigree of the Adiparvan Version (Sukthanlar 1933)

Appendix 2

Johobāmanyatmanatathanmanyatha pratipadyate
N tasya deva sreyanso asyatamyapinkaranam
(Siddhantavagisa 1938, sloka 33)
atmaja jangan ksetra punyang bama sanatanam
rsinamaspi ka sakti prastung bamamrte prajam
(Siddhantavagisa 1938, sloka 52)

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