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In Quest of a Lost Tradition: Revisiting the Mahabharatha to Discover the Subdued Mother Cult

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Abstract— The paper attempts to trace the elements of the mother goddess cult in the Mahabharatha. Fertility cults centring mother goddesses preceded all the institutionalised religions. A deep critical study of the women in the Mahabharatha shows the influence of this culture and also the transition to a patrilocal culture that Vedic Aryans established.

Keywords- mother goddess, fertility, matri-local culture, agency, reciprocal acculturation

“Thrice a day shalt thou embrace me; but do not lie with me against my will, and let me not see thee naked, for such is the way to behave to us women.” (Satapata Brahmana xi.5.1)

The epics of India, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharatha* have been the threads linking the common cultural ethos of the South-east Asian nations with the epics manifesting themselves in the sculptures, paintings and in the popular art forms of the respective nations. The plots transmute themselves to become adaptive to the new terrain they found themselves in the course of their travel. The *Mahabharatha* has always drawn the interests of scholars in India and abroad for the intrigue it has aroused being a storehouse of culturally heterogeneous elements and polyphonic counter discourses tactfully blended into the complex narrative. Set against the historical context of its evolution, the plot of the *Mahabharatha* speaks more than what the narrative overtly reveals.

The paper aspires to trace the fertility elements and mother goddess images of the subdued Indus culture in the *Mahabharatha* by using the theory of Mikhail Bakhtin who reiterated that literary texts being utterances, words cannot be divorced from particular subjects in specific situations. Like other kinds of utterance, literary texts depend not only on the activity of the author, but also on the place they hold in the social and historical forces at work when the text is produced and the text is consumed.

Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear.

The processes of centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification, intersect in the utterance; the utterance not only answers the requirements of its own language as an individualized embodiment of a speech act, but it answers the requirements of heteroglossia as well; it is in fact an active participant in such speech diversity. (*The Dialogic Imagination* 272).

The Aryan invasion which was both a political and a cultural conquest, must have taken immense efforts to relocate the native culture in manners favourable to their culture and norms. This conflict could be perceived through a study of the women characters in the epic which the paper proposes to undertake. The paper argues that the deterioration of mother goddess worship and the reciprocal acculturation that culminated in a patriarchal socio-religious hegemonic structure could be discerned from an analysis of the women in the *Mahabharatha*.

Until the archaeological evidences of 1925 that revealed the urban ruins of the cities of Mohenjodaro in Sindh and Harappa in west Punjab, it was widely contended that the first Indian cities of importance appeared only during the first millennium BC built by the descendants of pastoral nomads, the Aryans who entered India from the north-west (*The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India* 53-54). The discovery of this civilisation changed the very perspective of historians since it revealed a rich civilisation that was superior to the Egyptian, Sumerian and the Babylonian civilisations in agricultural production, international trading, town planning, architecture and civic organisation (*The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India* 54). Like most autochthonous societies of Greece, Mesopotamia and Babylonia, the Indus Valley Civilisation that flourished at the end of the fourth millennium BC shows ample evidences pertaining to the existence of matriarchal societies with the mother-goddess cult dominating the religious faith as well as the socio-economic structures of the society. The Great Bath excavated at Mohenjodaro has been discerned not as an ordinary tank, but as one of ritualistic importance devoted to an elaborate fertility ritual associated with the union of human beings with nymphs, very similar to the customs of mother-goddess worship of Sumer and Babylonia (*The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India* 68).



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Numerous grotesque terracotta figurines of female goddesses were found along with totem animals and male figures carved on merchants' seals. This made historians conclude that while the rural agriculturalists and the priesthood who controlled the revenue of the land worshipped the mother goddess, the trading class developed secondary cults, excluding the mother-goddess.

According to Kosambi, it was this trader class that perished at the hands of the invaders at the end of the Harappan civilisation. The rural population, the women and the lower classes with their cults centred around the mother-goddess survived as the wives and slaves of the invaders (*Myth and Reality* 2.9). While the urban culture of the Indus Valley Civilisation gradually disappeared, the rural culture with the mother-goddess cult remained and slowly got assimilated into the Aryan culture.

The *Mahabharatha* that expanded over the long span between 300 BC and 300 AD (*The Hindus* 252) has been treated not only as a legend, but also as a socio-literary chronicle that freely appropriated the historical events to write the saga of the power structure. The ruling dynasties and religious authorities have used the epic over the years to uphold their respective ideologies. The braided narrative pattern adopted in the epic facilitates multiple layers with stories and discourses functioning as a sort of super structure which subtly conceals historical and social elements in its base structure. The predominant fertility cult that worshipped the mother-goddess and celebrated sex and procreation in an unabashed manner could be traced out through a reading of the epic from the perspective of the women characters.

In the *Mahabharatha*, several *apsaras* (celestial nymphs) and river nymphs are mentioned as the early progenitors of royal genealogies like Urvashi (the wife of Pururavas, the ancestor of the lunar race), Menaka (the mother of Sakuntala), Ganga (the wife of Shantanu), Ghritachi (the nymph who is the mother of Drona), and so on. The *Mahabharatha* states how Ila (a prominent goddess in the Rig Veda) was both father and mother of Pururavas (*Mb* Book I Sambhava Parva 75), the ancestor of the Kurus. According to Kosambi, the change of sex in later accounts is clearly meant to link Pururavas to Manu (*Myth and Reality* 2.7), the son of Vivasvat, the male sky-god of the Aryans hailed as the progenitor of the human race (*Mb* Book I Sambhava Parva 75). Pururavas, thus stands in the text as a figure of the transitional period when fatherhood became of prime importance; that is, of the period when the patriarchal form of society was imposing itself upon an earlier one.

The only possible explanation lies in a dash of cults mentioned in a hymn of the Rig Veda that of the native mother-goddess Ushas, the goddess of dawn, being crushed by the new war-god of the patriarchal invaders, Indra (Rig Veda iv. 30.8-11). That she survives after being 'killed' can only indicate progressive, comparatively peaceful, assimilation of her surviving pre-Aryan worshippers who still regarded her, as mother of the sun, wife of the sun, daughter of heaven. If the Rig Veda, composed between 1700 and 1500 BC (*The Hindus* 103), accepted the divinity of the native goddesses, by the time of the Atharva Veda, composed between 1200 BC and 900 BC (*The Hindus* 103), *apsaras* like Urvashi degenerate into witches by the natural development of the combined society, which really and finally kills their cult, except for local survivals in villages and the jungle (*Myth and Reality* 2.3).

The *Mahabharatha*, in spite of the various interpolations, moral discourses and stories added over the ages to establish Brahminical supremacy and the code of the *Dharmashastras*, still evades the reason of the contemporary reader in terms of its queer treatment of gender and ethical issues. The polyphonic utterances regarding the concepts of sex, virginity and fidelity have made the text open to speculations and research. The text exhorts patriarchy and has a gallery of patriarchs, but yet the pre-dominant mother image refuses to recede and stays dominantly until Book X of the text when it is completely annihilated.

The "Adi Parva" (Book I) of the *Mahabharatha* serves not only as the introduction to the epic, but also as a foundation of the text in establishing itself not just as a legend of the Kurus but also as a religious discourse narrating the genealogy of gods, humans and their mutual relationships in the 'world of humans,' which is nothing but the land which the Aryans identified as their 'world', the conquered land of the natives. The 'womb' image recurs in Book I in several instances as the pots that gave birth to Vasishta, Agastya and Drona (*Mb* Book I Sambhava Parva 131) and the pots that Vyasa sets to revive the dead embryos of the Kauravas, representing the fertility symbol centred around the celibate mother-goddess, the fertility goddess of the Indus culture. The very concept of asexual reproduction through the medium of inanimate objects associated with the stories of the origin of sages that appear in the Vedas as well as in the *Mahabharatha* are the remnants of the ancient civilisation which the Aryans used as the foundation to build up their new culture centred around the male gods like Agni, Indra, Vayu, Mitra, Varuna and so on.



The prominence of the mother, the side-lining of the father and the portrayal of the female body as the controlling locus of sex and procreation are the remarkable features of the *Mahabharata*, presented through the women in the successive generations of the Kuru dynasty. Shakuntala, who discourses on the importance of wife to Dushmanta (*Mb* Book I Sambhava Parva 74), Satyawati who asserts to Vyasa that “there cannot be the least doubt about it that the mother, hath as much power over them (the children) as the father (*Mb* Book I Sambhava Parva 105), and Yudhishtira who tells Drupada that since the ways of morality are subtle, he prefers to obey the command of his mother in the matter of marriage (*Mb* Book I Vaivahika Parva 197) are instances in the epic to prove the existence of a matri-local culture where the mother wielded power over all the crucial issues affecting her children. The power over body and sexuality that women initially enjoyed gradually deteriorated as matriarchy was crushed by the conquering tribe’s patriarchal ethos which can be perceived in the epic that can be read as a power discourse that portrays power relations and conflicts not only in the plot, but also in its appropriations of historical events in its plot as it developed and transmuted over the ages.

Ganga enjoys the agency to throw her new-born infants into the river without letting the ruling king, her husband to intervene. Similarly, Kunti has the magical *mantra* to invoke gods to beget children without the intervention of her husband. This could be sharply contrasted with the abduction of the Kashi princesses by the patriarch Bhishma and the forced *Niyoga* upon them by Vyasa. In the interesting observation made by Kosambi, the names of the Kashi princesses Amba, Ambika and Ambalika, all mean ‘mother’ (*Myth and Reality* 2.7). The instance when they are abducted and forced into marriage by the first notable patriarch of the Kuru dynasty, Bhishma (*Mb* Book I Sambhava Parva 102) could be seen as the distortion of the *swayamvara* type of marriage where women enjoyed the right to marry men of their choice.

Although the narrator(s)/ redactors painfully seem to intersperse the greatness of virginity in unmarried women and chastity in married women through various discourses by sages and protagonists, there lurks in the midst of the narratives, a by-gone era that celebrated sexuality and procreation, with the womb (woman) holding a pivotal position as the initiator of procreation. Pandu’s words to Kunti, exhorting her to approach another man to beget a son, are remarkable in this context.

...women formerly were not immured within houses and dependent on husbands and other relatives. They used to go about freely, enjoying themselves as best as they liked. O thou of excellent qualities, they did not then adhere to their husbands faithfully, and yet, O handsome one, they were not

regarded sinful, for that was the sanctioned usage of the times. That very usage is followed to this day by birds and beasts without any (exhibition of) jealousy. That practice, sanctioned by precedent, is applauded by great Rishis. ... The present practice, however (of women being confined to one husband for life) hath been established but lately. (*Mb* Book I Sambhava Parva 122)

In his essay “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin observes:

The words of the author that represent and frame another’s speech create a perspective for it; they separate light from shadow, create the situation and conditions necessary for it to sound; finally, they penetrate into the interior of the other’s speech, carrying into it their own accents and their own expressions, creating for it a dialogizing background. (*The Dialogic Imagination* 358)

The utterance so conceived becomes a considerably more complex and dynamic organism than it appears as a direct, single-voiced vehicle for expression. Bakhtin reiterates how there are always two consciousnesses, two language-intentions, two voices and consequently two accents participating in an intentional and conscious artistic hybrid. (359-60). Here, the dialogue is between two cultures- the matriloal and the patriloal ones, the latter trying to culturally appropriate the former’s ethos to its benefit, yet strongly asserting its power over the vanquished since the voice is that of the husband’s, also the king, commanding his wife to do an unconventional act to raise offspring.

As it does with ‘chastity’, the *Mahabharatha* also develops and glorifies the concept of virginity as a physical faculty that could be restored only by gods and sages even after the women have had sexual relationships with them and acquired children. This has a two-fold intention. While the didactic voice of the epic upholds chastity as a necessary virtue among ordinary human beings, it also silences the latent polyphonic voices that endorse the prevalence of a woman-centred community which saw sexuality and procreation as the manifestation of woman’s fertility. In all patriarchal, polygamous cultures, the virgin has conventionally been a symbol of the masculine fantasy of a woman sexually subservient to him, untouched by another man. Over the ages, man has been successfully using the concept to threaten woman by way of social ostracizing and bring her under the sway of phallocentric cultural norms. It has been man’s sole privilege to be either condescending enough to sustain her virginity or to deprive her of it and make her subservient to him either through the socially accepted custom of marriage or by physical abuse, legitimised as the *Paisacha* form of marriage in the *Mahabharatha* (*Mb* Book I Sambhava Parva Section 73) as it is in the *Manusmriti* written in 100 AD.



Polyandry had been an extensive practice as mentioned in the wedding hymn of the Rig Veda (x. 85.36) where the woman is spoken of as one who receives the seed of (many) men. This may perhaps indicate the marriage of a woman with men who may be brothers or clansmen. Sociologist Sharad Patil has observed that the practice of polyandry took two forms, of which maternal polyandry (where a woman married several men who shared no kinship) was more common in the ancient societies. Patil argues how fraternal polyandry as we see in the *Mahabharatha* marks a significant step in the shift towards patriarchy (*Reflections and Variations on the Mahabharatha* 208).

The character of Kunti, perhaps the most powerful female character in the epic could be considered the archetype of the fertility goddess who as stated in the *Mahabharatha*, is gifted with the *abhichara* (blackmagic) spell (Sukthankar 1.113.34) to make the gods sexually subservient to her. Kunti, with the magical spell latent in her, is reminiscent of the witches of many ancient civilisations who essentially practised nature-worship to wield power over natural forces, to evolve into sorceresses. The witches, who were locally revered as demi-goddesses, dominated the religious sphere for a long time to be finally exterminated by institutionalised religions that were androcentric. Using her spell, Kunti invokes the male nature gods to give birth to the Pandavas and raises offspring who share a uterine bond only. This uterine bond when transferred to Draupadi to become the common mother of the sons of the Pandavas, loses much of its agency with the fraternal polyandric norms giving utmost powers only to the eldest brother in conformation with the kinship rules of the Indo-Aryan family system that the Aryans followed.

Through the pawning of Draupadi and the indirect declaration of the wife and brothers as the assets of the patriarch, the epic establishes the androcentric family norms as superior to the codes of morality described as 'subtle' by Bhishma (*Mb* Book II Sisupala-vadha Parva Section 68), the same patriarch who subdued the princesses of Kashi, (the 'mothers') to establish the power of the Kuru dynasty that used women's bodies as mere mediums of procreation through the successive generations. Although Draupadi is portrayed as a fiery and independent woman, she could clearly be perceived as a victim of the hegemonic power structure dominated by the Aryan ethos that exploited woman and her sexuality to serve the interests of family and kinship rules. The futile argument Draupadi initiates with the elders in court establishes the waning stage of the powers and freedom women enjoyed in marriage and family.

The *Dharmashastras* and the Vedas have nothing to say against Yudhishtira's pawning his wife or that of Dushasana disrobing her in public. It is with the gambling episode that the epic proclaims the deterioration of the status of women.

The significance of portraying Draupadi in her season also has to be explained in the terms of the fertility cult with the humiliation of the fertile womb playing a passive, yet a remarkable role in changing the course of events in the epic. That Draupadi is worshipped in the Tamil folk tradition as a goddess reveals how Draupadi portrayed as an ordinary woman in the epic has a goddess image in the ancient oral folk tradition that remained out of the grasp of Aryanisation. The epic portrays the final blow and the complete cultural conquest of the feminine cult in the "Sauptika Parva" (*Mb* Book X Section 15) with Aswatthaman shooting the fatal weapon *Brahmashira* to kill not only the foetus in Uttara's womb, but also to make all the Panchala women, including Draupadi barren.

It is with the establishment of the *Varna* system, a hegemonic class structure based on the four orders that the Aryans cemented the foundation of their social system. In the wake of threats from the new religions that emerged, like for instance, Buddhism and Jainism, the *Mahabharatha* served as a so-called mouth-piece of the Aryans who practised the Vedic religion that was dominated by the Brahmin class (*The Hindus* 26). From the state of a war-ballad transmitted orally by the bards, the text evolved, with frequent interpolations, to become an ideological tool to give due propaganda to the Aryan mode of life and endorse the Brahmin-dominated social system that marginalised women and slaves as inanimate objects functioning only as passive agents to sustain and uphold the patriarchal hegemonic tradition. The epic frequently echoes the dictates of the *dharma-sutras* (300-100 BCE), the *Manusmriti* (100 CE), the *Artha-shastra* (200 CE) as well as the counter-voices of Buddhism and Jainism.

Aswatthaman's infliction on the wombs of the Panchala women (*Mb* Book X Section 15) metaphorically depicts the absolute annihilation of the old matri-local order centred around the fertility cult. Ironically, the performer of the dreadful deed is a Brahmin who is well-versed in the scriptures. The paper maintains that the metaphorical significance of the episode pertains to the complete replacement of the matri-local culture with a patri-local one propounded by the Vedic religion, to initiate a new phallogocentric social order.



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According to Wendy Doniger, “The *Mahabharatha* grows out of the oral tradition and then grows back into the oral tradition. ... The loose construction of the text gives it a quasinovelistic quality, open to new forms as well as new ideas, inviting different ideas to contest one another, to come to blows, in the pages of the text (*The Hindus* 264).” The heterogeneity of the text contributes to its richness as well as its ambiguity. But as Bakhtin reiterates, the polyphonic voices reveal the double-consciousness of the counter-narratives struggling and contesting to take the reader off the track, open new horizons and show new perspectives. The heteroglossia of the *Mahabharatha* reveals not only the conflicts between the Vedic religion and the new religions as studies have revealed, but also the cultural clashes between an old civilisation that struggled on until its extermination and a new one that grew out of its ruins, effecting a reciprocal acculturation serving the interests of the triumphant ones.

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