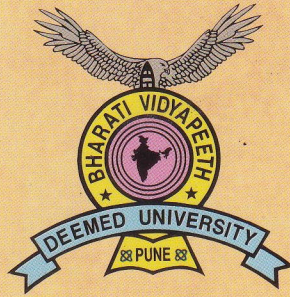


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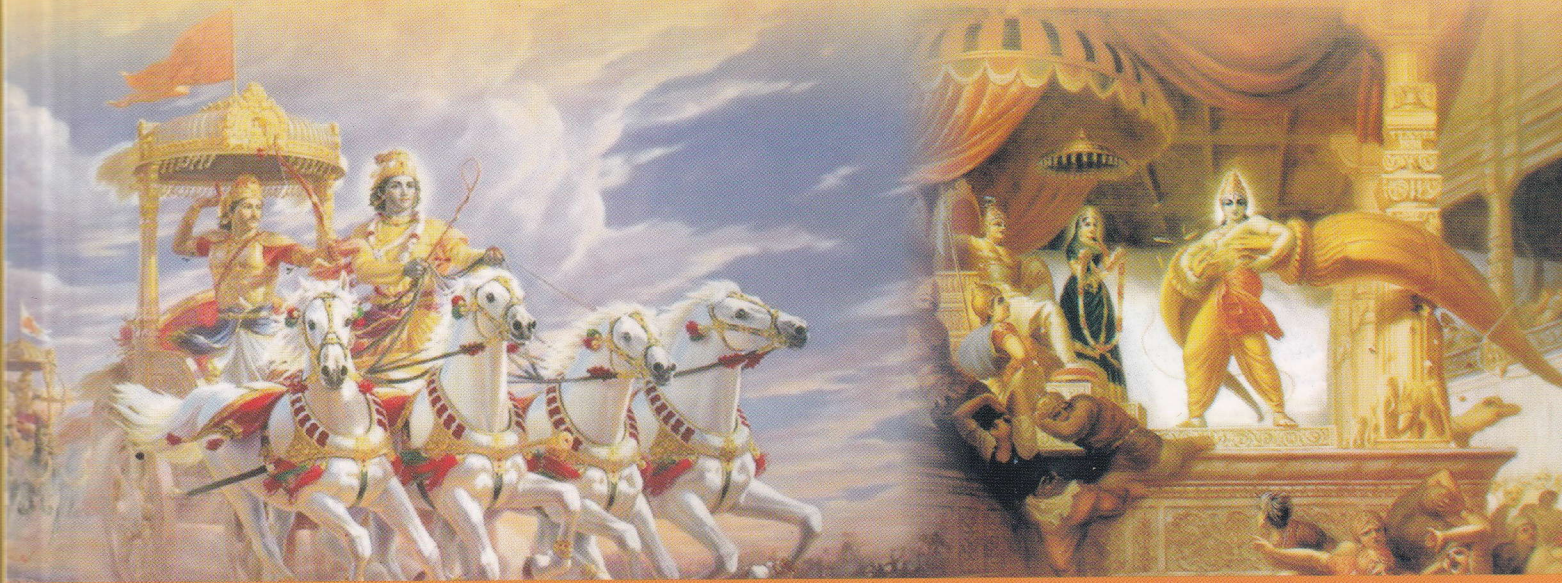
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UGC SPONSORED NATIONAL SEMINAR ON

**The Influence of *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*
on Indian English Literature**

20th & 21st FEBRUARY, 2012

Souvenir



Organised by
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Reflections of the Women Characters from *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* in the Selected Novels of Manju Kapur.'

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'The Ramayana' and 'The Mahabharata' hold a special significance and fascination for the Indian reader. These epics have had a tremendous effect on the Indian reader and they offer us characters that consciously and subconsciously continue to shape the Indian psyche. Memorable characters that impart life-lessons are the hallmark of 'The Ramayana'. 'The Mahabharata', on the other hand acquaints us with various characters that are fallible and yet have achieved mythic proportions in the Indian Diaspora. This paper tries to trace elements of certain women characters from both these epics and sees how they have influenced the creation of female characters in the Indian English novel. This study is restricted to the novels of Manju Kapur, a woman novelist based in Delhi whose novels deal with women and society of today.

'The Ramayana' and 'The Mahabharata' have several women characters, but this study focuses on three characters each, from these epics. From 'The Ramayana', are Kaikeyi, Sita and Urmila. From 'The Mahabharata', we have Gandhari, Kunti and Draupadi. Each of these women are archetypes of womanhood and we find traces of these characters in the portrayal of women even today. Kaikeyi is the brave wife of King Dashrath, who is granted a boon by her husband when she helps him on the battlefield. Kaikeyi bides her time and when she realizes that her son is being overlooked and her stepson, Ram is to inherit the throne, she invokes the boon and banishes him for fourteen years, away from the kingdom and the throne. The 'wicked stepmother' stereotype can definitely be traced from this incident. Kaikeyi's efforts are for her son, Bharat and her maternal instincts are on the right track, but her methods are wrong. Her defeat is complete when Bharat refuses to ascend the throne and remains a guardian of the kingdom till his brother's return.

Sita, Ram's wife is perhaps the model for the quintessential Indian woman. Of unknown parentage, she was found by King Janak in the fields, adopted by the king and became a princess. Ram won her hand in marriage through a display of strength and took her as his queen. Sita is revered because of her image as an ideal wife who accompanied her husband during his banishment to the forest for fourteen years. Apart from this she is known for her spotless virtue, even willing to undergo a test by fire to prove her purity to the questions raised by society after being kidnapped by Ravan. Her trials and tribulations extend beyond this. After the purity test, Sita returns to the forest, insulted by the demeaning demand to prove her purity. Pregnant with twins whom she gives birth to in the forest, she is reunited with Ram through her sons. For a paragon of virtue to suffer like this is indeed a mockery of her selfless nature.

Urmila is Lakshman's wife. When Ram is banished, his wife and brother, Lakshman, choose to accompany him. Urmila is left behind to suffer a life of abandonment and loneliness. Blinded by brotherly love, Lakshman does not spare a thought for his wife whom he leaves behind without regrets. Urmila's tale is poignant and highlights the plight of the Indian woman who is relegated to the background while society focuses on the husband and sings paeans to brotherly love.

'The Mahabharata' presents before us three unusual women who lead extraordinary lives. Gandhari,

married to a blind king, Dhritarashtra, spends her life with a blindfold to share her husband's plight. Wives are regarded as the 'ardhanginis' of their husbands. They share the physical, mental and moral aspects and repercussions of their husband's lives equally.

Kunti is married to Pandu who is impotent. Religion grants her the permission to bear children from various Gods and Kunti becomes the mother to three of the five Pandavas. Unknown to all, Kunti has committed a transgression in her youth and has borne a son, Karna, from the Sun God. Interestingly, her morality is never questioned and she is portrayed as a shrewd woman who commands unquestioning loyalty from her children.

Draupadi, is the wife of the Pandavas. Her hand in marriage is won by Arjun, who brings her home to his mother. Kunti, without realizing what her son has brought back from the battlefield, asks him to share his 'win' with his brothers. This, then, is Draupadi's fate. To be shared by five brothers to honour a mother's word. Her version of events is never considered, nor is her plight pitied. Sexual politics and tensions in an ancient text, indeed. Polyandry then, is as much a part of our culture as polygamy is. Draupadi's exploitation does not end here. She is used as a pawn by her husband in a gambling bid and is publicly humiliated and disrobed by the 'winners' of the gamble. Her savior is her brother, Krishna and not the five husbands she has been forced to marry.

Against the backdrop of these characters for the two great epics, we can study the women characters depicted by Manju Kapur in her novels, 'Home', 'The Immigrant', 'A Married Woman' and 'Custody'. While some live up to the established archetypes, some rebel and act in ways that make us believe that the Indian woman has changed and is challenging social norms, at least through literature.

'Home' has Nisha as the protagonist. A beautiful girl born in a middle class business family, Nisha battles with childhood abuse at the hands of her cousin which she escapes when sent to live with her aunt. Later, Nisha falls in love with disastrous results. Suresh, is of a different caste and gets involved with Nisha hoping to latch on to the family money. Diffident sexual encounters with Suresh leave Nisha with pangs of guilt that manifest into a psychosomatic disorder and severe eczema that mars her beauty. Bereft, Nisha turns to education and pursues a Masters degree followed by a business venture that brings succor and success to her. Marriage to a widower, due to the pressures of society and the birth of twins follows, bringing peace to her parents and a feeling of belonging for Nisha. The novel reinforces the ideals of purity and beauty that are expected from an ideal Indian girl. Brought up on a diet of rituals to secure a 'Ram-like' husband, the protagonist blames herself for not living up to the expectations of her family and society. Finally, she adjusts to an unsuitable husband, an interfering mother-in-law and the giving up of her business to live an ordinary life with a semblance of normalcy.

Nina, the protagonist of 'The Immigrant' is a woman in her thirties, unmarried with a widowed mother who is anxious about her daughter's future. Eventually, Nina marries Ananda, a dentist settled in Halifax, Canada to the delight of her mother. An uncertain future awaits Nina in the alien land. Ananda has sexual anxiety and is unable to perform in bed. This leaves Nina sexually dissatisfied, unable to connect with Ananda on an elemental level. His food habits, faux Anglicized ways of life make it difficult for her to mould herself to his life. They arrive at an uneasy truce of sorts and slowly, Nina adjusts to the way of life in Canada. Nina joins a Library Science course to keep herself occupied and there, meets Anton. A married man, Anton manages to breach Nina's defenses and they have a torrid affair. Ananda, visits therapists to deal with his sexual problems

and through the help of a surrogate manages to overcome his debility successfully. Apart from his wife, he seeks sexual partners outside the marriage and engages in an affair with his secretary. Emboldened by this progress, he also starts enjoying one-night stands in the absence of his wife. Nina returns from a visit to India to find a blonde hair on her pillow. Her guilt about her own affair prevents her from confronting her husband and the marriage disintegrates gradually with Nina moving out to look for a job at the end of the novel. Sexual fidelity, impotence and inability to procreate are all intertwined in the narrative making it a complex tissue of psychological, ethical and moral issues.

'A Married Woman' is the story of Astha who after two immature relationships gets married to Hemant. An old fashioned man, Hemant insists on a virgin bride, someone who will be pliant and adjust to the demands of him and his family and be sexually innovative in bed. After two children and the demands of a draining family, Astha develops chronic headaches which leave her completely bedridden. She takes up a job in a school and meets Aijaz, through a street theatre group. Aijaz is killed in the Ram Janmabhoomi riots and Astha becomes involved in his theatre group against the wishes of her family. On one of her trips, she meets Pipeelika, Aijaz's widow. Pipee is lonely, with a widowed mother in Bangalore and in-laws in Delhi, who are still a bit hostile to the Hindu daughter-in-law. Slowly a relationship develops between the women that turns sexual. For Astha, it is a unique experience in stark contrast to the sexual demands of Hemant. For Astha, the experience is special as her headaches gradually disappear and her self-respect is gradually regained. The two live in their own blissful cocoon till reality invades and Pipee realizes that Astha will never leave her husband and children. The novel ends, with Pipee's departure to the U.S. Kapur explores alternate sexuality as a form of protest against the traditional boundaries of a mundane relationship.

'Custody' is written in a slightly different tone and space where Shagun, the protagonist and mother of Arjun and Roohi falls for her husband, Raman's boss, Ashok. Their affair culminates with Shagun divorcing Raman. The desolate Raman finds solace in the arms of Ishita, a divorcee whose inability to bear children ends her marriage. Kapur explores the demands of a traditional marriage in the Indian context where a woman is automatically expected to conform to the new family, satisfy the husband and then bear children, preferably male. Ishita turns the stepmother prototype on its head by lavishing love on Roohi and pampering her till the child rejects her birth mother and chooses to stay with Ishita and Raman.

The four novels at times conform and at times rebel against the received stereotypes of women characters. The different roles that a woman plays in her lifetime come with certain rules and expectations. As a daughter and wife, obedience, correct social etiquette and purity are expected by the society. Examples from the epics are numerous. Sita, has to prove her purity after she is rescued from Lanka. Despite being the King's wife she is not beyond suspicion. In Kapur's novels, sexual purity and guilt are closely associated. Ranging from Nisha's eczema to Astha's headaches to Nina's guilt, made worse by her family's constant probing, purity is a heavily valued virtue. It not only causes physical reactions and discomfort but weighs heavy on their souls, at times changing the course of their lives.

The epics also give us a character like Kunti. From being an unwed mother to bearing sons from different fathers, Kunti is quite the non-conformist. What gives her behavior validity is the social sanction she receives for her transgressions. Being the wife of a king, she has to ensure the progression of the

race and this duty is sacrosanct. Pandu's inability to give her children validates her sexual promiscuity and yet her children are called Pandavas or descendents of Pandu. Kapur's women like Shagun and Pipeelika are quite like Kunti. They are nonconformists too and live life on their own terms albeit without social approval. What is commendable about them is their creation of a personal space. Shagun puts her own happiness before that of her family and is seen as the villain of the novel. But her desire for happiness and freedom finally triumphs. Pipeelika, like the ant she is named after strives slowly and steadily to carve a niche for herself in her relationships. Marrying outside her religion, living alone on her own terms, refusing to get caught up in the politicizing of Aijaz's death and experimenting with her sexual relations, Pipeelika is a new world emancipated woman.

The character of Gandhari is the example of the exemplary wife. A woman who chooses to share her husband's fate in every way even if it means self-created blindness. The lack of sight is a chosen reality for her, the embodiment of her 'ardhangini' status. Kapur's women try to be ideal daughters, wives and mothers. They marry in accordance to their family's wishes and try to be good wives. Astha, Nina, Nisha all strive to be the best wives that they can. Astha and Nisha live on in unfulfilled relationships, turning a 'blind eye' to the imperfections in their marriages.

Urmila and Draupadi are examples of women who are commodified and victimized. Urmila is like an abandoned wife left to her own devices. Draupadi is shared by five men and used as a gambling pawn. This objectification finds echoes in the characters of Nisha and Astha. Nisha is sexually abused by her cousin and later by Suresh. Suresh sees her as a meal ticket rather than a person to love. Astha is manipulated by Bunty, her first crush and later by Rohan, when she is in college. Bunty uses her to satisfy his ego while for Rohan she is a 'good time' girl. She is also manipulated by Pipeelika through Aijaz's memory and seduced at a weak moment, only to be abandoned later. The exploitation is on various levels of manifestation.

Viewed through the perspective of archetypal literature, it is interesting to note that common threads of thought and action run through all these characters. They are in some way embodiments of the age old women characters of the two epics. Although separated by centuries, the epics still find an echo in the works of contemporary writers. The effects of 'The Ramayana' and 'The Mahabharata' are thus long lasting and universal, ensuring that they live on in the human psyche generation after generation.

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