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Narrating the Untold and Resurrecting the Unheard Voices in Karthika Nair's *Until the Lions: Echoes from the Mahabharata*

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Abstract:

Reconfiguring and reimagining mythological narratives have become a new literary discipline amongst contemporary Indian writers and poets. They endeavour to underscore those incidents and characters who have been either placed at the bottom of the hierarchical ladder or been completely swept under the carpet. Writers like Amish Tripathi, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Mahasweta Devi, Kavita Kané, Meena Kandasamy, Ranu Uniyal, Devdutt Patnaik, Ami Ganatra, to name a few, have subverted the conventional representation of the mythological figures bringing them in a new light and rendering voices of their own either reading them through feminist lens or through dismantling the grand narratives of the Ramayana or the Mahabharata. Karthika Nair, a French-Indian poet, strives to dissect the dominant narratives of the Mahabharata to pave the way for individual narratives of the nameless, voiceless, and marginalized figures in her highly distinguished volume, titled "*Until the Lions: Echoes from the Mahabharata*." (2015) She also reconceptualizes the perspectives on war, violence, and memory through multiple unheard figures of the Mahabharata. This research paper intends to examine Karthika Nair's aforementioned

assemblage of verses and prose to unleash an entirely fresh perception of the minor, unidentified characters and the unheard voices of the Mahabharata through their narratives.

Keywords: The Mahabharata, contemporary retelling, peripheral figures, subjugation, patriarchy, war, violence, female body, marginalization.

India, one of the oldest surviving civilizations, has a vibrant legacy of culture, literature, value and philosophy. Contemporary literature based upon the ancient epics comes up with new dimensions of understanding the Indian epics in depth and with a novel perspective. It gradually becomes important to explore the contemporary structure of revisionary myths to understand the socio-cultural construct of contemporary India. Karthika Nair is one such author who emulates the same lead. Nair, born in Kerala, is a French-based poet, author, dance producer and curator. Her first book titled *Bearings* is a collection of poetry published in 2009. (caravanmagazine.in) *Until the Lions* is her second phenomenal assemblage of poems that won *The Tata Literature Live! Book of the Year Award* in 2015 in the fiction category for poetry.

The title of her later collection, which aptly suits Nair's inspiration to record this collection, has been derived from Chinua Achebe's interview with the Paris Review, where he quotes:

"There is that great proverb — that until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.... I had to be that historian..... it is something we have to do, so that the history of the hunt will also reflect the agony, the travail— the bravery, even, of the lions." (*Chinua Achebe, theparisreview.org*)

The poet uses this beautiful collection of poems to give voices to the peripheral and sidelined characters who were only briefly or never heard in the narrations of the Mahabharata. It alludes to what Achebe said in his interview, and Nair justifies the same in her book. In this poetic

imagination, she explores the untold voices of suppressed characters in her inquisitive way. “I’d just read a contemporary retelling of the Mahabharata and been intensely annoyed by its reductive approach to two layered, heroic yet wilful protagonists.....And that got me thinking about all the others, especially the ones who feature as supporting cast”, she notes the reason in an interview. (jaiarjun.blogspot.com) This text has been written from the viewpoints of women as mothers, spouses, sisters, daughters, lovers and concubines. Basically, it is primarily women in this book who drive the narrative and tell their stories to provide a counterpoint to the much-quoted verse from the ancient epic, the Mahabharata:

“All that is found here can be found elsewhere, but what is not here can be found nowhere”.

Nair's poems capture the epic through the lenses of not only nameless soldiers, outcast warriors, handmaidens, abducted princesses, tribal queens, regents, dowager, a gender-shifting God and even non-human but also a few central characters like Draupadi, Kunti, Krishna and the like from the epic. When these silent catalysts and peripheral figures are given the opportunities to pour out their innermost thoughts and feelings, one witnesses how their lives and stories have been buried under the edifices of heroism and victory for aeons. (everand.com). *Until the Lions* is an outlet for the unsaid words, quenched desires and choked sorrows of the marginalized and muted characters like Satyawati, Poorna, Sauvali, Bhanumati, Hidimbi, Dusshala, Kunti, Amba, Ambika, Ambalika, Mohini, Gandhari, Uttara, Ulupi, Vrishali, Padavits, spouses and lovers of the soldiers to have their say. Kartika Nair seeks to move beyond the dominant narratives to include all the voices that have been at the margin. In an interview with Vikram Zutshi, she opines:

My aim was not to switch binaries but to hint at the layeredness of characters..... Within the 18 parva of what we know as Vyasa’s Mahabharata, we come across something as subaltern, as radical as the *Stree Parva*, an entire book where the women of both clans mourn their dead and

rail against the futility of war....a book that culminates with Gandhari cursing Krishna, the supreme being, with the destruction of his clan and a horrible death for the untold sorrows he catalysed — a curse, incidentally, that comes to fruition. Similarly, the various episodes devoted to Karna leave us in no doubt about the injustices meted out to him for his low birth, indeed we even hear this admission from the mouth of Krishna. (Nair, sutrajournal.com)

Basically, she does not attempt to de-center any fact, incident, or dominant narrative; instead, she strives to give equal space to the unheard and suppressed voices of select dramatis personae from the Mahabharata. *Until the Lions* is inundated with the most tormented and hunted characters from the Mahabharata, wherein women share the most significant section. Nair enumerates them rigorously and distinguishes each voice through elaborate monologues. She carves enough space and paves ways for personal narratives to bring the single, local, small and individual narrative into focus who has been treated as mere footnotes in the original version of the epic. It aptly resonates with what Mohanty argues in her path-breaking essay, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses”. C. T. Mohanty rejects the idea that “a coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location, or contradictions, implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy... which can be applied universally and cross-culturally.” (p.335, Under Western Eyes) She believes that identifying women or any group as ‘universal’ often neglects the historical or cultural context of their roles in a specific society. Karthika Nair records, “It may only be contentious when we prefer to hold the Mahabharata as a monolith, instead of a palimpsest”. (sutrajournal.com) To accomplish this objective, she has incorporated varied poetic forms like the Provencal sestina or canzona, the Malay pantoum, the Pashtun landay, the Spanish glossa, si harfi, a form used in Sufi and Punjabi mystic poetry, Petrarchan sonnets, rimas dissolutas, a French form and the Japanese haibun. Nair

advocates that “reinterpretation is a political act” and it involves challenging the conventional narratives and power structures. By centring the voices and experiences of marginalized groups, such as women and subaltern communities, she disrupts the traditional and grand interpretations of the Mahabharata.

Traditionally, the mythological epics have been told by an omniscient narrator who is usually stereotypically male, but Karthika Nair uses a spectrum of female voices. Satyavati, mother of Vyaasa, Chitrangada and Vichitravirya and a very identifiable voice takes over the narrative and holds the “vertebrae, i.e. the spinal column of the book”. (Nair)

She resurrects the voice of Satyavati under the *Fault Lines* series. Her monologues embody her narratives, *"This is not the whole story, nor a lyrical history of mankind: It is what I know to be mine"*. (Until the Lions, 19) She narrates her birth, renunciation from her father, husband and son and repercussions and ramifications of war and violence through her own voice and her own perspective. She is scathing and burning with vengeance and hate. Her narrative is characterized by metafictional elements as she addresses her readers directly to talk about the genesis of "old hate". She clamorously reiterates:

Listen. Listen: hate rises, hate blazes, hate
billows from battlefields.....Old hate, descended
from heavens, leavened on my land. Old hate,
diffused through blood and womb and semen.
Old hate that I too begat, old hate bequeathed
and bartered, won in battle, given as bride-
price, hate that blighted six generations of this
clan, deforming husbands, grandsons, aunts

and nephews, brides and celibates.

(Until the Lions, 3)

Satyavati's monologues are also crucial as they subvert the grand pronouncements of Bhishma and Vyasa. Dusshala, amongst other peripheral figures, explicitly opens up on her bruises and vehemently eulogizes the death of her hundred brothers. She is synonymous with grief and separation and is devastated by the war. Her version of the Mahabharata underscores the repressed excruciation of a lone sister. Through the monologue of Dusshala, Nair offers the reader a glimpse of narrative that has been buried under dominant discourses. Nair's *Until the Lions: Echoes from the Mahabharata* echoes every sigh and unshed tears, every quiver of anger and hatred, every tremble of helplessness and grief and then it gathers everything close until they roar loud and clear.

Kunti, Vrishali, Bhanumati, Uttara and Ulupi belong to a category of voices that stand in contrast to the dominant narratives. They collectively form the jeremiad of mothers and wives whose sons and husbands either deserted them or died in war. Ulupi and Hidimbi, are presented as doubly subalterned—first as a sea-dweller and second as a woman. Even though she goes against her clan and marries Arjuna, he disavows both her and her son, Aravan. She is thoroughly undervalued and ultimately renounced by him. Kunti, in the poem entitled "*Ossature of Maternal Conquest & Reign*" is in conversation with her daughter-in-law, Draupadi. She lays her heart bare and overtly admits that Karna is her biological son whom she abandoned at birth.

Nair unearths the obliterated voices and resurrects them in her distinctive way. She expedites and nudges her personae to unlock their fetters and vocalize their unheard desires, hushed voices, unshed tears and despondencies that they endured. She ventures to unveil the ordinary and customary accounts of majoritarian narratives to bring forth the stifled and subdued voices of the outmoded characters.

Hidimbi, one of the muted figures in the Mahabharata, restores her voice in Nair's version. She, the forsaken, is the first wife of Bheema but not blessed enough to be with her husband despite the fact that she guards him from the pitfalls and menaces of the jungle during their exile. She, along with her son, Ghatotkach is ultimately marooned by Bheema and his family. In *Until the Lions* she pleads for if not she, at least her son to be accepted by Kunti and Bheema. She pleads with Kunti:

My son's eyes glow
just like yours, while his laughter - full and slow -
is all Bheem. Of this first grandchild, your heir,
I'll keep writing to you. (156)

Hidimbi is one of the poignant figures Karthika Nair excavates. She carved a strong enough niche for herself to be heard— as a woman, a wife and a mother.

Foot-soldiers in dominant narratives of the epics have been pushed to the margins, or it could be aptly said that they were swept entirely under the rug. They are the first casualties in any war, and despite this fact, they are the ones who are omitted from the history and given no recognition. They are left anonymous and unsung. They are trained to just act on commands. Nair bulldozes the convention of sweeping the history of these obsolete voices and breathes new life into the least known characters by revitalizing their untold stories.

Until the Lions moves beyond the mainstream characters and spot the light on the figures on the periphery whose voices have been overlooked or not studied in detail or sometimes used as cautionary tales. This book unfolds the pent-up and smothered voices of the renounced characters whose lives, sense of supremacy and entitlement have been turned topsy-turvy by the male chauvinism. In Nair's most venerated book, it is primarily women who drive the narrative.

In the *Constancy* series, spouses and lovers keep coming back to the story at different junctures to articulate their emotions. (Nair) Here, Nair penetrates the seeped history of the forlorn character and breathes fresh narratives that have never been voiced before. Spouses and lovers of the belligerents are the ones who suffer the collateral damage. Nair gives voices to the, unacknowledged, silenced and unheard lamentations, agony, trauma and distress and the pangs of separation through this series.

Before you leave home, banished to a land named Alone

Before I lose my voice — voice that will roam spheres seeking yours (Until the Lions, 239)

In Nair's *Until the Lions*, Drupad's wife—queen of Panchal, mother of Draupadi, Dhrishtadhyumna and Shikhandi and a woman without a name throughout the Mahabharata—witnesses what it means to raise one's children who are war-mongers and filled with hatred and anger.

Dhrishta and Draupadi too dream,
though theirs is hate inherited:
its contours blurred, origin roiled
in the story they've learnt by rote.

For hate can outgrow memory. (Until the Lions, 69)

They are shaped as instruments or weapons for vengeance by their own father. The monologues of Drupad's wife are full of accusations. She is the voice of anger and sustenance:

The stranglehold of fatherhood
will prevail, mothers will weep stones.

.....

No mother should

outlive her blood. I will. I will.

The heart has no bones to shatter.

(Ibid)

Nair's dramatis personae autonomously co-exist without losing their sense of authenticity and individuality. It is that their trauma, anguish, hatred, repentance and vengeance that bind them together. She single-handedly untangles the intricate tapestry of suppressed voices and manages to redeem them. She unearths the complex layers of misogyny and male chauvinistic practices by delving deep into the realms of literary representation and their retellings. Satyavati, Abma, Ambika, Ambalika, Poorna and Sauvali have been subjected to male chauvinism, objectification, abduction, sexual humiliation and forced liaison. "Their bodies become territories, then detritus: conquered, ravaged, ploughed for produce, cast aside", notes Nair. Satyavati, the matsyagandhi, is coaxed by a rishi :

I want you. I want you,

I want every bit of you, your skin the glow of

star-kissed night, the rippling rivulets of your

tress, breasts that are twin demilunes, the velvet

address between those legs.... (23)

And then he decides her fate for good and ends his utterance with "*Now relent before I turn insane*".

Women have perpetually been weighed as subservient and a private asset to men. Their desires have been marred and erased from history. Bheeshma takes offense at Vichitravirya not being invited in the swayamvar of Amba, Ambika and Ambalika—the Kashi princesses. Consequently, the three women got abducted by him against their consent. Bheeshma:

The next chapter of the
Kuru half caste history Kashi so decried will
be written on her daughters' bodies..... For I seized all her crown
jewels – Amba, Ambika Ambalika – from the swayamvar sabha. (Until the Lions, 57)

They are treated as commodities who could be abducted, get forcefully married and even coupled with a man other than their husbands against their will. They are, in a way, treated as domestic chattels and alms.

Simone de Beauvoir's book 'The Second Sex' explores how societal discourse perpetuates men's misogyny, particularly in how they define and perceive women. She records, "Women? Very simple, say those who like simple answers: she is a womb, an ovary; she is a female: this word is sufficient to define her. From a man's mouth the epithet 'female' sounds like an insult; but he not ashamed of his animality, is proud to hear: 'He is male!' "(p. xli, Beauvoir)

Nair's rendition of the Mahabharata underscores the plight of women who are supposed to abide by the established norms of patriarchy. Poorna, a handmaiden to Ambika, is thrust into Vyaasa's chamber for her womb to be plowed in pursuit of an heir for Kuru dynasty— despite her reluctance. Poorna, as a young woman, has some sexual desires which she expresses prior to the incident:

Begin with the labia, Lord. Make
me a word, swift and feather-light, a flurry
beneath the philtrum nuzzling the upper,
then lower lip, teasing teeth apart.....Sip. For tonight, we need no food to dine
For mating, like music, is no race:
no clocks await at start or finish. (Until the Lions, 87)

But her predicament, after the forced and inhuman sexual act exercised upon her, reiterates the idea that women are considered solely an object for fulfillment, sexual gratification and mere vessels for reproduction. Poorna outrageously howls in pain:

In my tongue, what you sanctioned – schemed– is defined
rape, sex under duress. (Until the Lions, 90)

History testifies that women's bodies are often anthropologically defined as submissive and are devalued. Nair exhibits her concern on the heinous act like sexual assault and violence meted out to women by applying a feminist hermeneutic perspective. She introduces another character Sauvali, a concubine to Dhritarashtra. Like Poorna she is also a victim of forced liaison where Gandhari's unending incubation forces her to Dhritarashtra's bed. Nair poignantly conveys her devastating experience:

When the king decides to rape me or my kind, no one will use the
word rape. The word does not exist in the king's world. This body is
just another province he owns, from navel to nipple to eyelid, insole to
clitoris. (Until the Lions, 119)

Sexual violations of women can be criticized on the grounds of their damage to victims' sexual subjectivity. Linda Martín Alcoff opines that "As a concept, sexual subjectivity provides an alternative to the singular focus on the violation of our consent, desire, the capacity for pleasure, or will... our central concern with sexual violations should be their inhibiting and transformative effects on sexual subjectivity or our self-making capacities". (Alcoff, 111).

Among the trends of retellings of the Indian epics, Karthika Nair's *Until the Lions* is the most unbiased piece of writing as it does not “switch binaries” between the good and the evil. She treats each unheard voice individually, as she identified them as “downtrodden of history” in an

interview. One of the significant accomplishments of Nair for this book is her expertise in maintaining each voice of the nineteenth characters while balancing an overarching as well as cohesive vision that transcends the conventional narrative of the Mahabharata. She restores the dignity and agency of the overlooked and silenced characters by foregrounding their personal and multifaceted stories to create a more inclusive, compassionate world. *Until the Lions* is a relevant take on the nuances of individual voice.

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