SAMHITA ARNI'S DARING DEBUT: THE *MAHABHARATA* REVISITED IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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SAMHITA Arni tells her readers in her preface to *The Mahabharatha: A Child's View* (1996) that she had started to scribble down her version of the episodes of the great Indian epic when she was only four.[1] Her mother had encouraged this exercise as she saw that her precocious daughter was wading through her story books at an incredible speed and was becoming bored. Arni's mother also thought that, apart from keeping her child busy, the project would also greatly benefit Samhita's writing skills. The young girl took up the challenge with enthusiasm and began to compose her stories; she also began to illustrate them using a ball-point pen.

It is not surprising that such a young child should be so familiar with the stories of the *Mahabharata*. Indian children are brought up on stories from both the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* from a very early age, so the characters become role models for boys and girls alike. The episodes of these stories about kings and warriors are regular bedtime stories to the extent that the mythological characters become household names. What is surprising is that Arni should know her *Mahabharata* so well that she could even rewrite her own version. Her mother recognized that these very early drawings were simple, as is to be expected, but were at the same time intensely dramatic. Arni's mother encouraged her to continue with her project, and, when she was eight years, old her mother showed the illustrations and writing to Gita Wolf, a publisher, who immediately realised that the naïve scribbles and drawings contained a riveting retelling of a classic tale and, more importantly, had a great deal of potential. And thus they were published (Geetha and Wolf 7).

This article is divided into four parts. First, I discuss the continuing importance of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* in Indian society; second, I explore the nature of literature intended for children in India in order to showcase how Arni's contribution adds to and also differs from this body of work; I then comment on

four examples of Arni's rewriting of the epic; finally, I outline some of the current ideas in Indian feminism that clearly resonate with her youthful text—a text in which she creates her own scenario that improves upon women's and lower-class people's reality. To exemplify the quality of the work, I include some of the drawings that Arni created to illustrate the episodes she re-told.[2]

Foundational Texts

INTEREST in and knowledge of the epics by a child like Samhita Arni is in itself by no means unusual. There are countless versions of both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata,* but the original of the former is generally attributed to the sage Valmiki, who is said to have written it between the years 500 and 100 BCE. The *Mahabharata*, considered to be the work of Vyasa, was compiled some time between the third century BCE and the third century CE. The stories of these great Indian epics are still meaningful for contemporary audiences, as Vijay Mishra points out: "They are critiqued, their values challenged, their structures destabilized, even parodied, but they remain foundational nevertheless" (4). This claim is borne out by the continual remakes and reinterpretations of these epics. In contemporary India the censorship laws have been relaxed somewhat in recent years, and viewers can now see controversial or delicate issues explored on television and in the cinema, but the way these dilemmas are addressed and solved remains firmly rooted in the moral code outlined in these traditional texts. As I have argued elsewhere, Indian films depicting social change tend to carry within them a wise solution to the moral dilemmas the protagonists are faced with—based on the outcome of similar dilemmas in the epics—without which the audience would feel it had been somewhat cheated out of a glimmer of the "truth" (see especially pp. 56–60). The popularity of comics has also contributed to these two epics' continuing influence, since from the 1960s Indian publishers such as Amar Chitra Katha have produced large numbers of comics clearly inspired by Hindu mythology and Indian history (Krishnamurti 285).

As a result of such a pervasive presence, the major figures in the epics are still household names, so that even children's bedtime stories often feature their exploits, which are frequently called on to represent "Indian" values. Many of today's urban Indian families aim to bring up their sons and daughters equally, but traditional ideas die hard, so girls still have to be protected, which means forbidding any behaviour that might be construed as socially unacceptable. While boys may go out freely, dress as they wish, and not collaborate with their sisters in household chores, girls are often constrained by strict gender roles, a situation that does little to educate young men or young women about feminism and women's rights. The classics these children are raised on do contain numerous examples of strong women, but many of the best-known female figures are venerated for their stoic resignation to the role that their gender has etched out for them. According to the tenets of Hinduism, "a wife's great

and ongoing *vrata* is thus the *pativrata*, the ascetic dedication to her husband (*pati*). … Orthodox texts encourage Hindu wives to regard their husbands as gods" (Rodrigues 98; original italics). Sita, in the *Ramayana*, exemplifies this regard.

Let me insist, these stories are expected to be exemplary for children. Ram, as an avatar of Lord Vishnu, represents the ideal son, husband, and king—the perfect man in all respects. Similarly, Sita's choices at critical junctures in the story exemplify the ideal woman and wife. Overall, she is a picture of unwavering devotion to her husband, which is demonstrated at several points throughout the story. First, when on the eve of his coronation Ram is exiled to the forest by his father, Sita insists on accompanying Ram and foregoing the luxury of the palace. She insists that a wife should stay with her husband, regardless of the obstacles he might face or the pain she may have to endure in sharing those hardships. Although this could well be construed as an act of defiance, Sita gains nothing beyond her dignity. She loses her position as queen, as wife, and as mother. Even as she wins, she sacrifices herself, and this, as Rashmi Goel argues, is the message for young girls of course.

One of the most frequently quoted stories of the *Ramayana* is the episode of the ordeal by fire that Ram, Sita's husband, subjects her to in order to prove her chastity. She has been abducted by the evil demon Ravana and kept prisoner in his palace for a year, but Ram will not believe that she is still pure despite Sita's assurances. She survives the ordeal by fire as the flames do not touch her, but still Ram is not convinced. Finally, Mother Earth opens up and swallows Sita—her name means *a furrow*—as she takes pity on her and, in a way, punishes Ram for his disbelief.

The best-known female figure in the *Mahabharata,* Draupadi, is also an obedient wife, although in some ways she is quite different from Sita. A much longer work than the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* contains numerous outstanding characters, but possibly the best known are Arjuna and Draupadi. Arjuna is the third of the five Pandavas (all brothers) and one of the major warriors in the Kurukshetra War; he is famous for having been instructed with the knowledge of the *Bhagavad Gita* by his mentor, Krishna.[3] Arjuna is a brave warrior who becomes even mightier after his dialogue with Krishna. He is also one of the husbands of Draupadi. Draupadi, about whom more will be said later, was born from a fire sacrifice and is a rare example of polyandry in Sanskrit literature (Spivak 183; see also Williams).

There is no one standardised official version of either of the great epic poems. Countless versions do exist with varying degrees of subversiveness—especially many Southern Indian versions. To some, "its myths, ideas, and precepts symbolize hierarchies and horizons of [the] ancient history of India" (Singh 39); others note the fact that, although "the *Mahabharata* condemns many of the appalling things it depicts, … one area where its response is more tepid concerns the treatment meted out to women" (Truschke). Regardless of how these texts are approached, however, there is no doubt about their all-pervasive influence in contemporary India.

Children's Literature and a Homogenized India

IN A RECENT analysis of over fifty writers of children's literature who are either residents of India or living in the diaspora, Michelle Superle identifies two recurring features. The novels she examines reveal a social mission, which in the case of women authors "might be considered a feminist literary project" (16). At the same time, and perhaps contradictorily, these novels also present a very homogenised vision of India and Indian people, a vision that—as Superle points out—"values unity over diversity" (92). In fact, I would argue that this narrative homogenization owes a great deal to the centrality of the great epics in contemporary India, which celebrate a mythical India where everybody knew his or her place. As M. S. Gore reminds us, religion permeates daily social life in India despite the state's avowed secularism, and Aditya Nigam observes the conflation of national identity with Hinduness in children's literature written in India, which logically underscores this sought-after homogeneity.

This essentialized representation of Indianness falls short of being self-orientalization; it has left room for more subversive rewritings of these classic poems, principally narratives that allow female characters to tell their stories relatively unhampered by patriarchal constraints. As Stella Chitralekha Biswas discusses, many contemporary Indian novels for children portray girls who have agency as opposed to the passive girl of colonial fiction. Thus, as Margaret Meek argues, "children's literature plays [a part] in the development of their [the readers'] understanding of both belonging and differentiation" (x). Nevertheless, beneath even fiction written today there lies a value system that underscores traditionally female attributes: "care, cooperation, and interdependence" (Superle 49). Boys, on the other hand, are depicted as individuals and highly competitive (Biswas). Moreover, both genders are encouraged to pay allegiance to the concept of duty, or *dharma*, a value system that can trace its origins back to the great epics.

The quest for both belonging and differentiation that Meek identifies as something that appeals to readers of Indian literature written for children is also characteristic of child writers. In her study of nineteenth-century juvenilia, Christine Alexander notes that, for many of the well-established canonical authors she examines, imitation of adult writing is frequently the goal that they aspire to ("Nineteenth-Century Juvenilia" 19); yet, when these "child narrators turn their gaze onto the adult world," they also tell stories about "a variety of fictional relationships" in order to "test the boundaries of the self" (27). Whereas the authors of the children's books Superle studies tend to "imagine hopeful scenarios which improve upon reality" (7), the child writers whom Alexander studies tend to satirize the adult world (17), but both of these approaches convey an awareness that reality can be improved upon. These similarities between the aspirations of youthful writers and the kind of ideological content of much literature destined for Indian children illuminate the aims and accomplishments of the Indian child writer Samhita Arni.

Arni comes from a wealthy, upper-middle-class Indian family; her father is a diplomat, and the family has lived in a number of different places. At the time Arni

started her own personal *Mahabharata*, her father had been transferred to Karachi. As a diplomat's daughter, she had the use of the consulate library, where the majority of the books were religious; however, it also contained several versions of the two great epics (Arni, "My Version" 10). As an adult, Arni has rewritten the *Ramayana* from Sita's point of view in her 2011 graphic novel *Sita's Ramayana*, but she herself has stated that she prefers the *Mahabharata* because, according to her, Vyasa "maintains a more or less impartial account when compared with Valmiki" ("My Version" 10).[4] In fact, when her family asked her why she had chosen the *Mahabharata* rather than the *Ramayana* or any other well-known Sanskrit classic, the young Arni replied that she liked it so much because "it is so evil" (8). This does not mean that she enjoyed the evil for its own sake; rather, she reads the evil actions of the characters critically, seeking to find justification for their deeds. The young Arni was clearly captivated by the stories of bravery and cowardice, cunning and ingenuity, cruelty and justice.

Her final version of the epic turned out to be a medley of various available versions, including Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* (1989), the videos of which had entertained the child for hours on end in the months leading up to her decision to start writing her own version, but she also put her own personal stamp on the version she produced.[5] As mentioned earlier, Arni has rewritten the *Ramayana* as an adult from Sita's perspective in her graphic novel, *Sita's Ramayana* (2011) and indirectly in her crime novel, *The Missing Queen* (2014). However, the latter is perhaps more of a critique of contemporary Indian politics than a feminist rewriting. When reading her juvenile rendering of the *Mahabharata*, by contrast, one cannot fail to be struck by Arni's fearless feminist and egalitarian stance, striking for an Indian girl of eleven, brought up on didactic texts designed to instil societal norms and an acceptable code of conduct in the child reader.

Despite the input she received and the support and encouragement from her family, Arni's naivety in embarking on such a momentous task as a contemporary rewriting of a classical work needs to be remarked on. The *Mahabharata*, which recounts the struggle between the Pandavas and their cousins the Kauravas for the kingdom of Bharata (which corresponds to North India), is possibly the world's longest known epic poem, one of its many versions consisting of well over 200,000 lines. Arni has deliberately omitted certain episodes and daringly added new ones without deviating from the overall plot. In the next section of this essay I focus on four significant episodes of Arni's text, in order to highlight the young child's ingenuity, her humanity, and her independent thinking, with regard to social class, rigid or judgemental attitudes, and gender roles.

A Child's View

ONE EXAMPLE of Arni's personal stamp is her version of the story of Ekalavya. Ekalavya dares to ask Drona, the great brahmin warrior, for lessons in archery. The

response was to be expected: "How dare you, a shudra of low birth, come and ask me, a brahmin to teach you archery!" (51). Ekalavya is not put off; he makes himself a clay image of Drona and pretends that the image is teaching him the art of archery.

Figure 1. Ekalavya*, practising archery with the clay idol as guru, from* The Mahabharata: A Child's View*, by Samhita Arni, p.54. Copyright Tara Books Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India,www.tarabooks.com, with permission.*

In this way he becomes an expert and is discovered one day by Drona, who challenges him to prove his skill by fighting with his other pupils. Ekalavya beats them all effortlessly. In Arni's own words:

> Drona was angry that somebody was able to defeat Arjuna, his best pupil, so easily. He decided to maim Ekalavya. He said to Ekalavya, "Since I am your guru, I want my fee." "Your wish is my command but I haven't got anything", Ekalavya said softly. Drona said shrewdly, "Then give me your right thumb." Ekalavya turned towards the image and bit his lip. He then turned around and said, "I'll do it." He cut off his thumb and gave it to Drona. Drona was satisfied that Ekalavya would not be able to wield a bow anymore. *He returned to the camp without even saying a word of thanks to Ekalavya.* (54; emphasis mine)

Compare this with one of the many traditional versions of the story, in this case Pratap Chandra Roy's well-known translation:

> Hearing these cruel words of Drona, who had asked of him his thumb as tuition-fee, Ekalavya, ever devoted to truth and desirous also of keeping his promise, with a cheerful face and an unafflicted heart, cut off without ado his thumb, and gave it unto Drona. (Book 1, Section 134: 315)

It is clear that Arni has added the final detail of Drona's insensitivity—his failure to say "a word of thanks"—to emphasize the injustice meted out to the young man. Here is a child writer with the self-reflexive potential to address class and caste prejudices.

Arni similarly critiques class bias when she adds an invention of her own to the plot in order to explain why a character should nurse hatred towards his nephews. Shakuni is one of the villains of the epic, best known for masterminding the infamous Game of Dice between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, which I will return to later. However, in Arni's version, long before this evil deed occurs Shakuni is enraged that his sister Gandhari should be pledged in matrimony to a blind man, especially since all of his brothers were killed in the war of conquest. Shakuni swears to destroy the Kuru dynasty; this is why he consequently plays an instrumental role in fuelling the flames of conflict between the cousins. His father, during his last days, told him to take the bones from his dead body and make a pair of dice that would always obey him. The dice would later be instrumental in Shakuni's plan for revenge on the other branch of the family, the Pandavas. This story does not form part of Vyasa's text.

Thus, with a child's logic, Arni has invented the colourful explanation for Shakuni's wickedness so that the story will make better sense. Without this explanation, Arni must have considered that her readers would not have understood how anyone could be so evil without motivation. This addition to the story also suggests that, according to this child's understanding, the *Mahabharata* needs bringing up to date. The focus of the epic is on good versus evil; Arni's aim, by contrast, is to show that nobody is totally bad, that there must be a reason for so much hatred and violence. This is why she portrays the traditional villains with a certain dose of sympathy. She is willing to delve into their past to find—or invent—the clues that show why they have become so monstrous and unfeeling. Even characters like Duryodhana (the hero Arjuna's chief antagonist) and Drona (Arjuna's archery teacher) are not depicted in black and white terms. Arni captures the ambiguities that real people might display. Traditional retellings of the *Mahabharata* tend to stress the good and evil attributes of the major characters, but Arni's "bad guys," if not exactly rehabilitated, are certainly more *human*.

One of the strong women of the *Mahabharata* is Draupadi, her father's fire-born daughter: she emerged out of a fire sacrifice her father had lit to avenge himself on Drona. Arni disregards this story, however, and instead narrates how Draupadi and her twin brother were born naturally. Draupadi is extraordinarily beautiful, but Arni adds personality. In her telling, Draupadi is

> … dark, with a beautiful complexion. Her large, black eyes looked as if they had two bright stars dissolved in them. Her long, curling eyelashes enhanced the beauty of her eyes. She had a long, slender nose with a small, red mouth. She had well-defined cheekbones with rosy cheeks. Her long, thick hair fell to her knees. She wore elegant clothes and beautiful jewels, and had a queenly beauty about her. *In those eyes of hers, you could see pride in spite of her young age.* (85; emphasis mine)

The addition of this last sentence, which insists on Draupadi's independence and assertiveness, serves to highlight the fact that Arni's Draupadi is clearly more than just a pretty face. Roy's translation describes her as follows:

> Of eyes like lotus-petals and of faultless features endued with youth and intelligence, she is extremely beautiful. And the slender-waisted Draupadi of every feature perfectly faultless, and whose body emitteth a fragrance like unto that of the blue lotus for two full miles around. (Book 1, Section 143: 162)

Although this version grants Draupadi "intelligence," there is no mention of the "queenly … pride" that is central to Arni's description.

As mentioned, Draupadi comes to have not one but five husbands. Her father holds a *swayamvara*—the practice of choosing a husband, from among a list of suitors by a girl of marriageable age—which turns out to be a contest in the skill of archery. Arjuna wins the contest and thus his bride, but when Arjuna and his four brothers return home with Draupadi and one of the brothers shouts out that Arjuna has won a prize, their mother responds before opening the door that he should share his prize with all his brothers. One might think that there are advantages to having five husbands, but in fact the *Mahabharata* focuses on how Draupadi's husbands fail to protect her, especially during the episode of the Game of Dice. In this classic story that everyone remembers so well, Yudhishtira, one of Draupadi's husbands, turns out to be excessively fond of gambling when the villain Shakuni orchestrates a bet using the dice fashioned out of one of his dead father's bones. As Shakuni has foreseen, Yudhishtira loses everything that he gambles, including his own self. He still refuses to give up and decides to stake his own wife. He loses once again. Draupadi is then summoned to the palace, but instead of obeying the summons immediately she sends a message, asking how her husband could have promised her when he no longer owns himself. One of the Kauravas, Dushashana, forcibly brings Draupadi to the court, dragging her by her hair. He even attempts to disrobe her in front of everyone. When the insulted Draupadi calls on Krishna to come to her aid, he protects her honour by providing her with an unending sari. As Dushasana unwraps layers and layers of her sari, it miraculously extends. Draupadi ends up surrounded by lengths of cloth that

protect her modesty. This particular episode highlights the weakness of one—if not of all—of her husbands, who fail in their duty towards her.
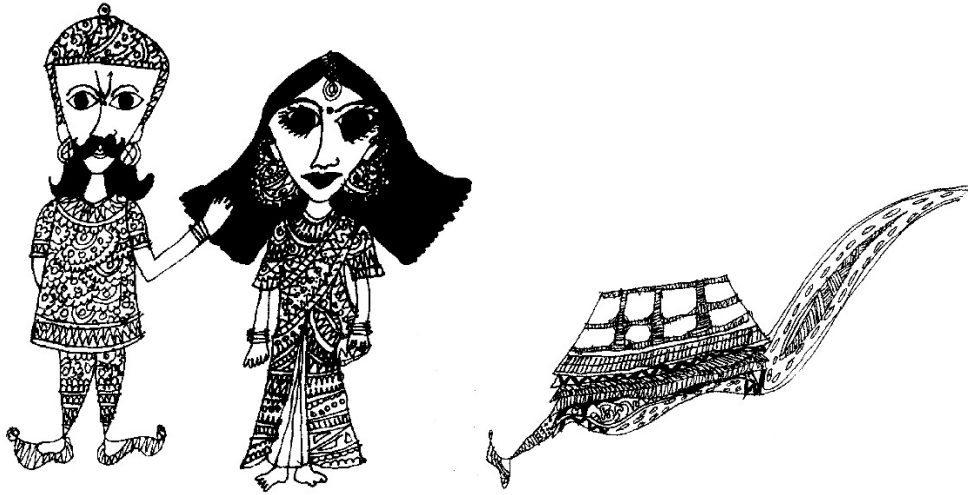

Fig. 2. Yudhishtira and Draupadi *(left);* The pile of saris *(right), from* The Mahabharata: A Child's View*, by Samhita Arni, pp. 159, 121. Copyright Tara Books Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India. www.tarabooks.com, with permission.*

Even though she has no choice but to accept the four additional husbands in the first place, which means obeying five men rather than just one, Draupadi's unanswerable question hovers in the air and renders her a more assertive character than Sita.

Roy's version of the text says the following:

> She faintly cried "Wretch! it ill behoveth thee to take me before the assembly. My season hath come, and I am now clad in one piece of attire." But Dushasana dragging Draupadi forcibly by her black locks while she was praying piteously unto Krishna and Vishnu who were Narayana and Nara (on earth), said unto her "Whether thy season hath come or not, whether thou art attired in one piece of cloth or entirely naked, when thou hast been won at dice and made our slave, thou art to live amongst our serving-women as thou pleasest." (Book 2, Sect. 47, p. 140)

In Arni's adaptation of this momentous scene, Draupadi's voice is anything but faint:

> Her fiery eyes blazed with anger, and in a silent assembly her voice rang out, "Yudhishtira had no right to pledge me after he pledged himself. See the wrong that has happened here." (119)

Arni has Draupadi address her question to the assembly directly, her voice ringing out as she vociferously reproaches her tormentors by refusing to be considered a dispensable commodity. Arni's Draupadi is far more self-assured and challenging than Vyasa's.

An interesting detail that Arni fails to highlight is that in the Sanskrit version the insult or dishonour is far greater because Draupadi has her period: "My season hath come, and I am now clad in one piece of attire." Including this detail can only strengthen the gravity of Draupadi's situation; Arni's omission of it may be due to her young age. Alternatively, however, it is possible that she refuses to use Draupadi's menstruation to reinforce the weakness of her position. Instead, Arni chooses to create a forceful character who, far from "crying piteously in affliction," swears vengeance: "I will never tie up my hair until the day I wash it in Dushasana's blood," screamed Draupadi, enraged" (121).

Fig. 3. Draupadi's Revenge, *for the ignominy she suffered, from* The Mahabharata: A Child's View, *by Samhita Arni, p. 239. Copyright Tara Books Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India, www.tarabooks.com, with permission.*

The final example of Arni's youthful rewriting of the epic that I have selected is the scene from Book 6 in which Arjuna's young son Abhimanyu is killed in battle.
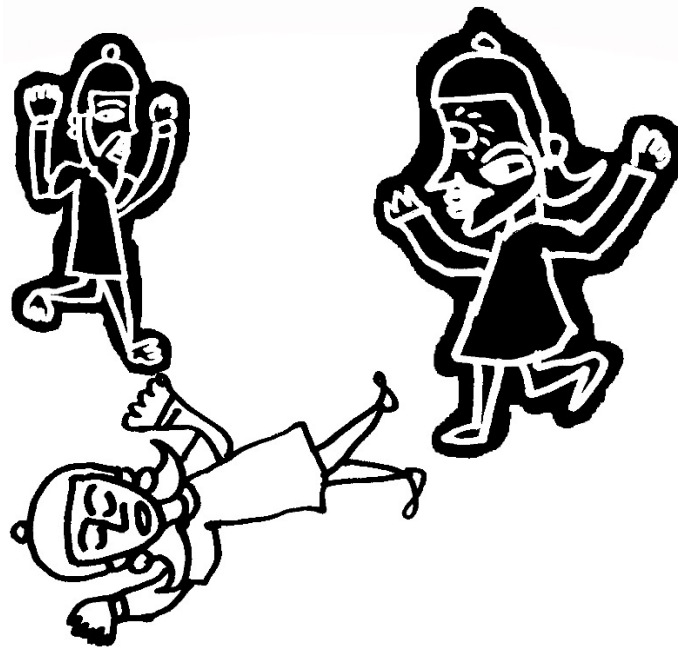

Fig. 4. The Warriors Dance*, after killing Abhimanyu, from* The Mahabharata: A Child's View*, by Samhita Arni, p. 202. Copyright Tara Books Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India, www.tarabooks.com, with permission.*

The original text goes into great detail about the boy's military prowess and the large number of warriors he kills, but Arni chooses to focus on the tragedy of the death of a teenage boy and the callousness of his enemies:

> Just as Abhimanyu was rising, Laxman swung his mace. On one stroke, Abhimanyu was killed. Happy that Abhimanyu was now dead, the warriors danced around the body, just as vultures circle their prey. Six warriors were happy that a sixteen year old boy had died through their efforts. *They felt no remorse or shame. They only rejoiced.* (202, emphasis mine)

In Roy's translation we read the following:

> As he lay dead on the field, the heroic Abhimanyu looked like a wild elephant slain by the hunters. The fallen hero was then surrounded by thy troops [who] were filled with great joy. And they repeatedly uttered leonine shouts. … Beholding Abhimanyu, resplendent as the

> sun or the moon, lying on the ground, thy troops were in transport of joy, while Pandavas were filled with grief. When youthful Abhimanyu, yet in his minority, fell, the Pandava divisions, O king, fled away in the very sight of king Yudhishthira. (Book 6, Section 49, 100)

While many classic versions insist as this one does on the heroism of Abhimanyu and the celebrations of victory by the Kaurava troops, the young Arni instead laments the untimely death of an adolescent boy and criticizes the heartless insensitivity of his enemies.

Contemporary Indian Feminism and Arni's Work

INDIAN women are by no means a homogeneous group with a shared agenda. In her description of the evolution of Indian feminism in the twentieth century, Suruchi Thapar draws attention to the strong dissimilarities among middle-class women owing to differences in their educations, religions, and ages, thus putting paid to any overarching categorization of "the Indian woman." Between social classes, as Shruti Jain points out, the differences are even greater; feminism in the Indian context clearly holds entirely different meanings for rural Indian women and for urban middle-class professional women. The priorities of the former include access to necessities like food, water, healthcare, and education rather than issues like equal pay, sexual harassment, and reclaiming public spaces (Jain 8). Social media merely cater for a small, privileged number of activists (10).

Nevertheless, one consistency for women of both classes is that, despite the rise of digital or cyberfeminism, traditional myths about Indian womanhood die hard. Sita's ordeal by fire continues to be glorified rather than condemned, and viewers of the television version of the *Mahabharata* (a series that ran from 1988 to 1990) paid far more attention to the number and quality of Draupadi's saris than to the shame and disgrace of her experience (Nabar 118). For a large majority of Indians, Sita is still their favourite (mythical) woman. As we have seen, she symbolises sacrifice, a woman's greatest virtue according to patriarchal traditions. She lends dignity to suffering and makes forbearance a heroic quality, which makes her a role model for Indian women for whom justice remains a dream, equality an absurdity, and suffering an everyday reality.[6]

It could be argued that the influence of the myths is an insidious one, serving to strengthen the fears and illusions that are used to govern women and instil docility. In fact, there is a fundamental parity between the perpetuation of mythical stereotypes like Sita and Draupadi and any present-day reluctance to admit change that might upset the androcentric, patriarchal set-up. Hira Bansode's poem "The Slave," originally written in Marathi, provides a perfect example of the lasting effect

enshrined in the value system of the great epics. Ahilya was a woman seduced by the god Indra, who disguised himself as her husband:

> To prove she was a pativrata
> Ahilya [had] to sacrifice herself
> to Indra's sexual desire,
> and Draupadi was divided up
> among five men,
> the woman of that country
> still remains a slave … (qtd. in Nabar 118)

Just as Bansode's poem does, Samhita Arni's juvenile text points to the need to rethink these myths, and I claim that that hers is one of the valid contemporary readings of the classics that indicate both the timeless quality and the essential orality of these texts: without the ongoing telling and re-telling or oral texts, they can too easily be fossilized and rendered irrelevant for modern times.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has also reinvented myth in that, since the mid-1980s, they have cast Ram as a strong, martial lord in order to encourage militancy among Hindus. In her own reinvention of the classics, Arni questions the heroic BJP interpretation, with its ingrained habits of patriarchy and male chauvinism (Udayakumar 17–18). Her male heroes, including Arjuna and Yudhishtira, become faulty, more human than they are in the classic versions of the *Mahabharata*, but no less admirable. Even her villains show a realistic, almost justifiable side to their actions, which renders them more relevant to contemporary society. Her Draupadi is another kind of role model, who poses questions about the law and the orthodoxy of religion. In Arni's telling, she is the mythological archetype of the assertive woman who questions the duties of love and honour.

Youthful writing may well be dismissed as being immature, just as Alexander describes ("Defining" 71), but Arni's early rewriting of such a key figure in the popular imaginary as Draupadi shows her participation in her culture's ongoing reinterpretation of its dominant myths; it also shows the path her future creative work will take. One of the female arch-villains of the *Ramayana* is Surpanakha, sister of the demon king Ravana, who abducted Sita. Surpanakha makes advances to Lakshman, Ram's brother, who not only rejects her advances but slices her nose off as punishment for such apparently unfeminine behaviour. Valmiki's epic thus casts Surpanakha into the role of evil temptress who gets her just deserts. However, a modern version of the events by Samhita Arni, in her 2013 adult crime novel, *The Missing Queen*—an updated version of the *Ramayana*, as the action takes place in the late 1990s—allows Surpanakha to tell her version of the events:

> How can I describe that moment? I fell in love in that instant—he
> was the most beautiful creature I ever saw. So beautiful, I was smitten.

> I went up to him and I offered myself to him. He smiled and began to banter with me. I thought it was all flirtation—he was coy all the while, suggesting that he wasn't good enough for the likes of me. … finally, I thought it was time for action. So I reached out for him, to press my lips against his. Before I knew it, something flashed between us. … Malice in his eyes, I raised my hands to my face and saw my fingers, wet with blood. (66)

Surpanakha appears to incarnate the deviant female, who becomes a regular character in mainstream—read patriarchal—crime fiction. Among her *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction*, Heather Worthington states that

> … the association of deviant femininity and crime has remained a constant feature of the genre. Inherent in this association are patriarchally fostered masculine anxieties about the feminine, particularly female agency, which is seen as a transgression of traditional gender boundaries and is often represented as criminal in early crime narratives. (41)

As Worthington reminds us, modern crime novels generally reflect a much older view of "deviant femininity," according to which, "when a woman does take to crime, her criminality is accentuated; she is doubly deviant, not only acting in defiance of the (patriarchal) law but also rejecting her proper feminine role" (42). Thus Surpanakha's overt sexuality has long been read as unnatural and highly transgressive. Arni, however, sees fit to allow her to be understood as a woman with desires and needs.

Likewise, Arni's graphic novel, *Sita's Ramayana* (2011), gives a voice to the self-effacing heroine so she can assert her point of view and finally challenge the patriarchal norms. Canonical *Ramayana* narratives silence Sita, so Arni's version, like many other feminist *Sitayanas*,[7] is a refreshing call for solidarity with oppressed women and other ignored and overlooked members of society who do not conform with the ideal of Indianness (Beena G. 48; Krishnamurti 291).

One of the criticisms levelled against child writers is their lack of originality, as they tend to imitate the style and content of established older writers. Yet imitation is not necessarily unoriginal. As Alexander points out, it "involves reworking, writing in the style of someone else […] until we develop our own style" ("Defining" 77). In Arni's case, it would be unfair to accuse her of merely imitating the classics, as she does her best to turn many of the best-known episodes upside down. Moreover, both feminist and political critiques—which are present in Arni's adult writing—already feature in Arni's juvenile work; as Alexander states, "the concept of juvenilia carries with it an implication of later writings" (88). Arni's Draupadi is a powerful feminist

role model, and her debut novel, published when she was only eleven years old, is a challenging dialogue between ancient ideals and twenty-first century social and political issues.

NOTES

1 Transliteration of texts from languages written in the Devanagari script may vary from author to author. Arni spells her title *Mahabharatha*, whereas the accepted spelling in Latin script is *Mahabharata*. In the original Sanskrit the final *t* is unaspirated, so strictly speaking Arni's spelling is incorrect.

2 I am grateful to Samhita Arni for permission to reproduce the drawings that are included in this article.

3 The *Bhagavad Gita* (Song of the Lord) is one of the basic texts of Hinduism. Composed as a dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna, it reveals that all humans and aspects of existence are a unified extension of the Divine that can only be acknowledged once *maya* or the illusion of the material world has been overcome. See Joshua L. Mark, "*Bhagavad Gita*," *World History Encyclopedia*, 15 June 2020, https://www.worldhistory.org/Bhagavad_Gita/.

4 Henceforth all references to *The Mahabharatha: A Child's View* will be cited with the page numbers only.

5 Peter Brook's five-hour film can be viewed on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yhqkRGISQr8.

6 Even if myths form the identity of Indian women, it is just as true, as Graham argues, that countries frequently resort to inventing those myths "that embody values and characteristics [they think] laudable" (105). It is undeniable that mythology serves the purpose of homogenising a nation and these homogenisation projects ultimately underpin a society organized along patriarchal lines. Indian feminism nowadays seeks to challenge the maintenance of gender-blind institutions of state, caste, class, community and region, but the family and marriage remain the stronghold of male dominance in part due to the perpetuation and veneration of the portrayal of women in the epics. The Ram myth has been exploited by the patriarchal Brahminical system to construct an ideal Hindu male, and Sita too has been built up as an ideal Hindu female to help serve the system.

7 *Sitayana* is the title of a feminist version of the *Ramayana* by Indian American author Amit Majmudar (Penguin Random House India, 2019), but I am using the term to refer to any version that places Sita centre stage and questions Ram's actions.

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