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From Silence to Speech: The Transformation of Mythological Women in Contemporary Indian Retellings

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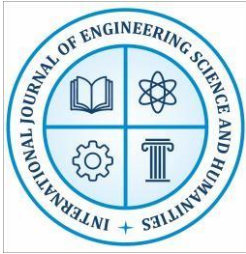
Abstract

This paper explores how the organising transformation of contemporary Indian retellings of myths is from silence to speech. It argues that silence in the Sanskrit epics is not one but a differentiated system, at least four forms of which can be distinguished, namely: (structural) silence, where a woman never gets a chance to speak in the narrative; imposed silence, where she is not allowed or even prevented from speaking, or where her speech is punished; strategic silence, where she decides not to speak because of her own self-protection or refusal; and unheard speech, where she speaks fully but is not heard by anyone. Each of these forms is answered by different narrative devices in contemporary novels like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's, Kavita Kane's, Pratibha Ray's, Volga's, and others: first-person retrospective narration; expanding dialogue into argument; the insertion of the lament and the letter; and the sustained use of interior monologue. The paper follows Tillie Olsen's description of unnatural silence, Audre Lorde's notion of the transformation of silence to language, bell hooks's theory of talking back, Gayatri Spivak's discussion of subaltern inaudibility, and Adrienne Rich's idea of re-vision and Uma Chakravarti's account of Brahmanical patriarchy, to see how these retellings translate silence into narrative substance. It also claims that the genre's most probing observation is the possibility of separating voice from power; the most potent voice in the Kuru assembly belongs to Draupadi, and only the retellings that acknowledge this—that is, that draw attention to the lack of impact, not just the presence of speech, but the failure of uptake—make a more sophisticated feminist statement than those in which a powerful voice is used as a proxy for a powerful consequence.

Keywords: Silence, voice, speech, mythological retelling, Indian writing in English, Draupadi, Sita, Urmila, Amba, subalternity, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, feminist narratology, Brahmanical patriarchy.

Introduction

This study's archive is made up of English-language Indian mythological novels published between 2008-2021, along with English translations of Indian Odia *Yajnaseni* by Pratibha Ray and *The Liberation of Sita* by Volga. The standard English translation of the two texts (Kisari Mohan Ganguli's translation of *The Mahabharata* and Ralph Griffith's translation of *The Ramayana*) are all consulted. It's a feminist approach to narratology. The paper does not try to classify novels, but it singles out the category of silence and elaborates a typology of silence's forms and how each of these is treated in the contemporary novel through specific techniques. This is preferred as it allows comparison across texts and languages and also



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because it positions the politics of this genre within its formal processes instead of its stated goals. A novel can claim to give a woman her voice back and can only hear a monologue about her voice that is not heard by anyone else; the typology can register this difference (Lanser 342). Three restrictions need to be mentioned. First, the paper has to depend on the scholarship of Nabaneeta Dev Sen, Paula Richman and A. K. Ramanujan for access to Bengali, Odia, Telugu and Tamil women's telling traditions, as the paper cannot access them in the original. Second, that it makes inferences about market and devotional constraint which would be supported by data and reader research. Third, it assesses the novels as pieces of writing, and some of these are questionable; it is criticism which refuses to appraise popular fiction which condescends to it. The dichotomy of imposed silence and personal choice is echoed in the words of Emily Dickinson in the poem "The Soul selects her own Society" where she withdraws, as if by choice:

The soul selects her own society,

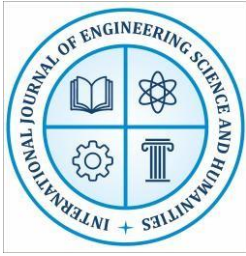
Then shuts the door;

On her divine majority Obtrude no more.

— Emily Dickinson, "The Soul Selects Her Own Society" 26).

The Kuru assembly hall scene is foundational for all studies of women's speech in epics, and it is foundational because it is complicated, it is the opposition of silence and voice that is complicated. Draupadi is NOT silent. The flaw is that a man has already staked himself and has lost him, and he no longer has a wife to stake; she answers that argument to an assembly of men constitutionally competent to answer that argument. But what is being missed is not her silencing, but their failure. The elders turn away at Bhishma's hesitation on the subtlety of dharma; there is no response to the question. When it does arrive, the resolution is not a legal one, but a miraculous one. This construction is accurately named theoretically. But whether the subaltern produces sound is Gayatri Spivak's argument; the subaltern can't speak because her speech is not taken up. The sabha is almost a complete illustration of literature. A woman speaks; the institution records the sound; the institution refuses to be called (Ganguli 112). This scene has been the obsession of contemporary Indian mythological fiction and this paper suggests that the reappearance of this scene is diagnostic. The genre has a good sense of the fact that, at its best, the problem it inherits is not just that women in the epics don't speak. Many of them do. Kunti speaks, Gandhari curses, Savitri argues with the god of death and wins, Amba rebukes a king in open court, Amba petitions a generation of warriors. The issue is that their speech is received without change, and that the narration is not in their possession, so even their strongest utterances are reported not inhabited. The change from silence to speech is not as simple as the word implies.

It encompasses at least three separate operations: giving speech to those who were speechless, giving narration to those who were speech, but not in the narration role, and giving consequence to speech that was absorbed but without effect — the hardest, and least often done



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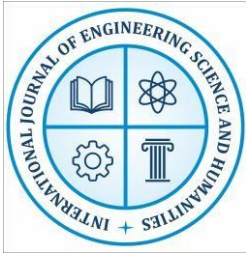
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— giving consequence to those who already have speech but have not yet achieved narration authority. This paper is an examination of all three (Spivak 308). Since at least Tillie Olsen's *Silences*, in which silence is given as a key category to be differentiated from natural fallow periods of any type of writing life, and unnatural *silences* caused by circumstance—such as poverty, domestic labour, discouragement, lack of a tradition to write in—*silence* has been the subject of feminist criticism. The first movement is made by Olsen who insisted that these *silences* are not “natural” but are made: this turns “not happening” from a fact of nature into evidence of a mechanism.

Lorde's formulation incorporates the ethical component. Silence is often used as a mode of safety and Lorde is suggesting that the safety is a false one; that the structures that create the danger are not disarmed by a person's non-naming. This has a straight application to the epics; in the epics, the strategic silence of the women, Kunti's concealment of Karna's birth being the most significant example, is seen to stave off disaster rather than to stop it. The third term is provided by bell hooks. Her description of talking back is about a process where someone who is supposed to be talked to becomes a talker and for someone who is subjugated, it's a process of transgression and not self-expression. The child who contradicts an adult, the servant who contradicts an employer, the wife who contradicts her husband in public: the act is punished not for what it is about, but for who it was that did it. The epics affirm this. Surpanakha's suggestion is met with mutilation, not for what she actually said, but because she is who she is, she said it. (Lorde 44)

These foundations are the basis for the development of a working typology of silence that is used throughout this paper. The first is silent structure. The woman never has the chance to speak in the story, since the story is structured around the things that do not concern her. The simplest case is Urmila: 14 years later, Valmiki's text makes space for genealogies, battle formations but not her. The second is the silence imposed. In principle, speaking is allowed, but in practice it is forbidden or punished. The women of the inner apartments who aren't allowed in the assembly: Ahalya - petrified, unable to state her case, Surpanakha, whose speech is answered with a blade (Aranya Kanda 21). The third one is strategic silence. The woman's speech is withheld on purpose as protection, refusal, or as an expression of power. Here is Kunti's hiding, along with Gandhari's blindness, which is a silencing of sight, and a fidelity and a protest. The fourth is unheard speech. The woman speaks with full volume and the speech isn't heard. Draupadi in the sabha; Amba asking Bhishma, Salva, Parashurama and all the kings to kill her one by one, but none agreeing. The typology is important because the modern novels react differently to each type, and because a criticism that does not differentiate between the various kinds of silence will praise a novel for its resolution of a problem which it did not address. It is important to avoid stereotyping the Sanskrit epics as having a consistent anti-feminine stance to women's speech. Speech of outstanding power is found in *The Mahabharata*, especially. The tradition does not exclude articulate women of course, as



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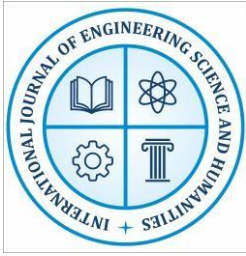
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Draupadi's interrogation in the sabha, Gandhari's curse upon Krishna after the war, Kunti's invocation of the gods, Savitri's sustained argumentation against Yama and Shakuntala's rebuke of Dushyanta in the Adi Parva all attest to that, and Romila Thapar has shown that the woman's legal assertion in the latter work exceeds anything in Kalidasa's later courtly reworking.

The tradition doesn't assign a narrative voice to them. The frame of *The Mahabharata* is incredibly androcentric at all levels, from Vyasa to Vaisampayana to Janamejaya, Ugrasravas to the sages at Naimisha, and this goes beyond mere representation. Each statement is judged in the context of the voice of the narrator that provides the evaluative frame. The reader hears Draupadi via a narration that has already set up the dharmic stakes as the main question and an inverse one of her humiliation as a subordinate. The verse is used here not as a reflection of actual life in early India (which various recent pieces of scholarship have demonstrated to have been very varied), but as an indicator of the prescriptive frame to which narrative possibilities were subjected. The analysis of sexual control by Uma Chakravarti is devastating, the removal of control over women's speech from women could not have been separated from control over their sexuality, and the mechanism by which the endogamous caste order continued to be reproduced was control over women's sexuality. A woman who can speak publicly can negotiate publicly, a woman who can negotiate can choose. There is no silence here in this account, except as a tool to maintain the caste.

This is why a trend can be seen throughout both epics: Women who can speak the strongest words are those whose speech will not affect lineage. Gandhari curses after the war, when everything has been lost. In a frame Savitri argues for her husband and hence establishes the order of the marriage. Draupadi's question is a problem because answering it would necessitate the assembly to admit that lineage-transfer had been done wrong. The acceptable speech is the speech that does not compromise the arrangement (Chakravarti 585). Two other *silences* should be noted as they have now begun to be written about in contemporary fiction. One is the silence of the low-caste and forest-dwelling women — Hidimbi, the mother of Ekalavya, the unknown nishada woman burned in the lac house — women who are completely absent from the narration and have only rarely been retrieved by the genre. The second is the muteness of the female body: menstruation is present only as a complicating factor in Draupadi's humiliation, childbirth as a factor of lineage, no narration of ageing.

The most significant technique is the technique of transferring the narration. The epic's male frame is completely obliterated when Divakaruni, the first person narrator of *The Palace of Illusions*, is an all-female Panchaali. The epical male frame is completely erased, not just tonally but epistemologically, when Divakaruni is a female first-person narrator, Panchaali. The narrator's judgements come as a direct evaluation to the reader, and thus Yudhishtira's dharmic reasoning can be evaluated, but not the frame of evaluation. The game of dice, told from the inside of the body assaulted, no longer remains a constitutional crisis but an assault;



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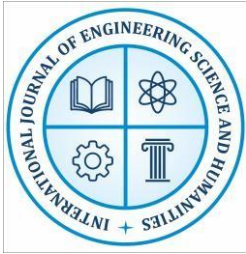
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the miracle of the cloth is not a ‘mercy’ but an ambiguous one, the arrangement remains untouched (Chakravarti 585). Reflective effect is added. After the war, Panchaali tells from a post-war perspective, and she can not only report, she can also render a judgment. This is counter-memory, not an alternative recapitulation of the events, but an challenge to that authority that decided on the meaning of the events, is what Liedeke Plate calls it. Kavita Kane is primarily a third person close narrator, and the story’s focus is on her main character, but it doesn’t give up on social distance. What this allows for are scenes where women speak back to men—males, that is—and, more interestingly, to other women. Typical of Uruvi’s treatment of Kunti for the abandonment of Karna is the fact that it is examined by two women who absorbed the damage in different ways (Plate 93). The criticism has a cost to its technique. Kane’s speech often has expository weight and characters voice analyses that are more suited to the critic than to the character. The other one, which is a feminist readership, a heroine who suffers without knowing, has its costs, but it’s more readable than it is subtle, and someone who’s used to reading a popular feminist piece might not understand what’s going on.

A third method is to use forms that have traditionally been associated with women’s speech, but are not part of the epic proper. The song of the lament, the song of the marriage, the song-complain, the song of the letter; these are the genres where women’s grievance has been expressed and several retellings have been influenced by women’s laments. In the song traditions of women in Bengal, Maharashtra, Telangana and Awadh there are Sita songs of critical strength – songs which condemn the fire ordeal as an atrocity rather than celebrates it, songs which are sung at weddings which warn the bride instead of congratulating her (Dev Sen 27). In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Divakaruni’s Sita openly insists on writing her own Sita and the novel’s message is that the Sita found is written from one point of view. The fourth technique is for the speech that not does not ever get said. Much of what these novels re-create is not public discourse, but the unspoken: resentment collected over the years, doubts that have never been voiced, desires with no sanctioned object. It is here that genre is most similar to Cixous’s writing that inscribes the body and its repressed knowledge in language. Experience becomes narration, rather than ritual category, with menstruation, childbirth, ageing and disfigurement. Menstruation, childbirth, ageing and disfigurement enter narration, not as ritual category, but as experience (Cixous 880).

Urmila is the purest example of a structural silence and Kane’s *Sita’s Sister* the clearest response. Valmiki provides a name, a marriage and fourteen unnarrated years. It is not a mistake in the text that can fit weapon catalogues and genealogies, it is a criterion, a statement of what is an event? In this novel, Kane claims that waiting has a structure, a duration and a cost, and says so.

The execution demonstrates the challenge. With so little to do in the years, Kane needs to fill the time with conversation, study, and political observation to make the waiting not so empty as the premise suggests. This is not just a failure of a technical nature: it seems to imply



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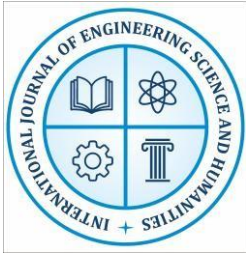
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that the novel, which was devised to tell of change, is poorly equipped to tell of arrested time. The song traditions, which do not use plot but rather render the same material over and over again and in a lament, may in fact hold it better (Kane 272). The problem is not that they don't speak, as in Draupadi's case, which is the most sophisticated of the genre. The retellings provide, first, the interiority around the uttering and second, in the most forceful cases, a dramatisation of the failure to take up the uttering as scandal rather than silence. When the novel fails to convince, it is best to have Divakaruni's *Panchaali*. No, the men don't give up because she argues well. Where the analysis of the genre becomes rigorous is when voice and power are differentiated, when a feminism that confuses them sees the gaining of a platform as the gaining of leverage. The point of Spivak's argument is not that the subaltern is silent but that the systems of representation will not hear her, and the *sabha* is an argument in narrative form (Dev Sen 27).

Amba is the most systematic study of the unheard speech in the epic and she is not given enough treatment in the contemporary genre. She is picked up for her half-brother by Bhishma, and rejected by Salva (who has been in another man's chariot), rejected by Bhishma (who has vowed celibacy), rejected by Parasurama (who intervenes to block others from slaying him), and rejected by each of them in turn. Her only option is the principle of austerity and rebirth – going beyond the order of people who can be called.

What's special about Amba's refusal is that it's not random. All the men who refuse her are doing the right thing in their own universe: Bhishma fulfils his promise, Parashurama pays homage to a former pupil, Salva observes the rules of sexual decency. Amba is annihilated by a system that is functioning exactly as it's supposed to, which is exactly what Chakravarti means to say about the working of caste-patriarchy (Chakravarti 585). If anyone can take this, a retelling would have the most focused novel in the genre, and so far, no one has. The literal image of imposed silence in the epic is Ahalya's petrification: a woman tricked by a god disguised in the form of her husband is turned to stone and awaits a man's favor for her restoration. In Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening*, the moral burden is removed, and the petrification is a symbol of the social death that has befallen a woman whose sexual history has now become public property, while the awakening is a self-recovery instead of an absolution (Rajan 82). Surpanakha case is the added of imposed silence to the marking of the body. *Lanka's Princess* names her and tells her about her childhood before the mutilation, thus making it clear that the ugly epithet is not an essence, but an effect of violence. Her desire is evident as monstrous, for she has been labeled monstrous, a Kshatriya princess doing the same is holding a *swayamvara*. It's at this juncture that the genre veers into the caste analysis it otherwise skips. (Kane 272).

There are two approaches for restoring Sita's voice. Divakaruni continues the marriage as the organising relationship between Rama and Ravana, interpreting the final return to the earth as judgment given to Rama. Volga subverts the wifely frame completely, building Sita's identity via other women in the canonical narrative who are kept apart — Surpanakha, Ahalya,



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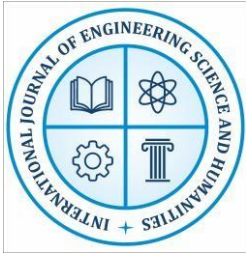
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Renuka and Urmila. The structural insight of Volga is significant, the patriarchal narration excludes women from each other and assigns them to a room together, which is also an analytical maneuver (Chakravarti 585). It's not a lack of nerve, that the more radical text is in Telugu, in the short-story form, from an explicitly political feminist formation, that the more accommodating one is in English for an international market. The genre's treatment of strategic silence is much slimmer than the other three forms and so is more deserving of examination than the other three because it shows a preference embedded in the form.

Among the most significant acts of unspoken speech in *The Mahabharata* is, of course, Kunti's hiding of the birth of Karna. of course the most important act of unspoken speech in *The Mahabharata* is Kunti's hiding of Karna's birth. Young woman tries a boon; bears a child and puts him out to sea; many years later she is disclosing his parentage when it benefits her remaining sons. Each step in the sequence is a choice regarding speech and each is indefensible and catastrophic individually and collectively. As Audre Lorde says, Silence does not protect—what that really means is that Kunti's decades of self-protection only pushed the catastrophe back, but didn't stop it, and the final price was paid by the person who didn't choose to make it happen (Lorde 44).

Kunti is not a favorite of the retellings. Divakaruni's *Panchaali* sees her as an antagonist and Kane's *Uruvi* faces her head-on on the issues of abandonment and the face-off is really exquisite in its impact and in its moral clarity. What's missing is a narration from inside the silence, a novel in which the reader is in Kunti's shoes over four decades of not saying and feels the impossibility of saying build up from the inside rather than from the outside. The case of Gandhari is another one that is similar but with a twist. In the one act of a blindfold, she is demonstrating her marital solidarity and at the same time she is also refusing to look at a world she has not agreed to, and it is read almost solely as an act of marital solidarity. Under the second, it is one of the most poetic protests of the epic: A woman who is not willing to accept marriage does not accept marriage, but refuses to see what the marriage gives birth to. It is a study of the cost of this kind of refusal, but also the fact that the gesture makes her a non-mother, she can't see what her sons become (Spivak 308). Both figures are omitted because of structure. The retrospective confessional novel favors those heroines who speak, and it is Kunti and Gandhari's lack of words that mark them as the protagonists. To tell them is to tell them well, one would have to tell them in a form which would be centred on withholding, and the genre's house style would be disclosure.

The central conceptual contribution that this paper would like to make is that the change from silence to speech, as such, is an inadequate description of what feminist retelling achieves or should strive for. But the exercise of speech is not the same as political status. A genre that revels in acquisition of voice, but does not challenge the conditions of audibility, is at risk of consolation: the woman can explain her subordination at length, in beautiful sentences, while it goes on exactly as before (Butler 147). This could be described as the interiority trap. It has



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symptoms that are known. The narrator speaks clearly; her insights are accurate; her situation is unchanged from the “canonical” novel; and the novel’s ending is that she got the big picture. The understanding is made into the result, the reader being asked to experience the lucidity of the heroine as a victory. There are three ways that the better novels in the field avoid this. Others use failure as an explicit topic, thereby focusing the reader’s attention on the institution, instead of the speaker’s feelings. Some add real weight to speech, though it’s quite limited: in *The Fisher Queen’s Dynasty*, Satyavati’s negotiation changes a dynastic settlement, and the novel is honest that other people suffer as a result, including other women. Others, such as Volga, build alternative audiences—groups of women who can hear what the assembly cannot—marrying the issue of audibility structurally, rather than individually (Adi Parva 438). The notion of an alternative audience has been echoed in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, who writes in her poem “I’m Nobody! Who Are You?” where two marginalised voices recognise each other as joined in a single identity:

“I’m nobody! Who are you?” Are you nobody, too?

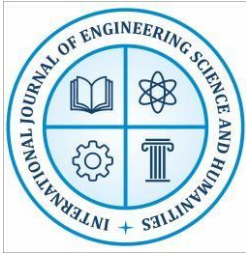
Then there’s a pair of us—don’t tell! They’d banish us, you know.

— Emily Dickinson, “I’m Nobody! Who Are You?” 21).

While the genre’s speaking women can be described more effectively by imperfect repetition, that is the form of subversion that Butler describes in her account. Draws on assigned role, but incorrectly: comments on role, objects to role, or demonstrates lack of connection between role and performer. Where politics resides is the gap. It does not remove the role and shouldn’t be assumed to be removed.

Who can speak in the genre is also an issue. Almost all of its narrators are queens, princesses, and heavenly beings. The nishada woman and her sons who are burnt in the house to let the Pandavas out of the house are silent in the retellings as well as in the original. Ekalavya’s mother doesn’t appear at all, Hidimbi appears sometimes. A genre that is centered on recovering suppressed voices has created the hierarchy of voices worth recovering, and Spivak’s question remains acute even after hundreds of pages of restored queenly eloquence (Spivak 308). Meenakshi Mukherjee describes the Indian writing in English as being caught between the perspectives of the Indian and the global, the latter being expressed in an entirely foreign, and yet unimpeachably Indian, form, which makes the use of mythology so convenient. There are three consequences for the question of speech. The first one is devotional ceiling. For a substantial proportion of the readership the epics are scripture. A heroine can fault Rama’s rigidity, his political calculation, his cruelty to her; she cannot say anything that would make Rama not to be worshipful. Thus the range of speech allowed for in the narrative is predetermined by an outside condition (Oliveira 297).

The second one is the romance frame. The most significant character the heroine interacts with is usually a man she loves and her most significant speech is usually directed to him. Hence Divakaruni’s creation of a new attachment for Karna to Panchaali has polarized critics so



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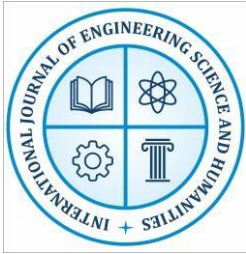
severely; it is the most audacious expression of unsanctioned desire in the genre and the most conventional one which bows to form. The third is the exceptional speaker problem. All of the protagonists are unusually articulate. If it is possible to name his or her subordination, then the silence of the common women becomes a naturalization and the collective aspect of a problem becomes effaced. If solidarity is present at all, it is found in the form of friendship not politics. The important exception is Volga and the exception is instructive.

Conclusion

The transition from silence to speech in modern Indian mythological novels is a reality, technically solid, and lacking of a full analysis. It is real because it refers to a structural, not decorative, way of doing things: transfer of narration, expansion of dialogue to argument, recovery of lament and letter, rendering of the unsaid. Scale is what makes it substantial; these are books marketed to mass audiences, and a feminist questioning of the ordinary has become commonplace. It is, however, incomplete, which is why the following paper has aimed to give reasons for it rather than simply state the fact. The four types of silence identified in this paper are not equally tackled. Structural silence has been dealt with admirably: the fourteen years of Urmila, the invented life of Uruvi, the interiority of Ahalya are true addends to the content of the tradition to be narrated. The enforced silence has been dealt with well, notably in Kane's case of the punished body. The genre of strategic silence is under-studied; this is the case for heroines who speak, as well as for heroines who do not speak; Kunti's not seeing and Gandhari's not seeing can make the stuff of novels not yet written. The genre's most difficult-to-dramatise form is unheard speech, the failure to take up the sound, which is the institution that hears and refuses to be heard. What would a complete fulfilment take? Amba novel would be a study of a system rejecting a woman, each individual in the system doing the right thing. The novel on the nishada woman, which will make the genre look to caste; not feel it. Any other form of retrospective confession, which has grown into its own house style. And a criticism that would differentiate myth-thinking books from those that sell with feminist jargon. Draupadi put her question in an empty assembly. Some two thousand years later, the novels have made their decision to respond for her. It's worthwhile to do. The more important thing he succeeds in doing in the genre is making the silence of the elders audible — as scandal as it ever was — and then questioning why so many assemblies fall silent when a woman raises a question they don't want to hear.

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