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REREADING HIDIMBI: THE UNACKNOWLEDGED FIRST DAUGHTER-IN-LAW OF THE PANDAVA IN KAVITA KANE'S BHIMA'S WIFE

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Abstract

Kavita Kane's *Bhima's Wife* portrays the character of Hidimbi who is an overlooked character in the Mahabharata. In the mainstream narrative of Mahabharata she appears as the first daughter-in-law, wife of Bhima the second Pandava son and as the mother of Ghatotkach. Her life, her choices and her story is completely erased. Kane's story depicts how an abandoned and unacknowledged wife brings up her son who is later served as a powerful weapon in the war and sacrificed his life for the same family who abandoned them. Through Hidimbi, Kane exposes the social systems and norms which produce the very term 'outsider'. By retelling Hidimbi's story Kane exposes how social hierarchies deny recognition for being a rakshashi woman. This paper examines the inner life of Hidimbi, her emotional struggles and how it affects her. By rereading Hidimbi, the study explores the affective economy of emotions and the politics of pain.

Keywords: Rereading, Belonging, Pain, Loss, Recognition.

INTRODUCTION

"...the text is a transformative space in which those resonances shape how the text is read..." The above statement by Sara Upstone indicates that when a text is read there appears multiple interpretations and meanings according to the time and situation of the reader. It is closely related with the experiences and emotions of the reader and these connections change how a text is understood. Rereading a mythological text helps us to question the old age accepted rules and norms and also let the readers to listen to voices that have been ignored.

"Contemporary retellings work with 'timeless' myths and adapt them to fit modern

readership" (Chatterji 141). In Indian mythological retellings one such prominent writer who uses myth as a platform is Kavita Kane. She uses the most neglected women characters from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. She re-narrates the stories of such characters give them voice and agency.

In the Mahabharata a character called Hidimbi appears only as a rakshashi wife of Bhima. The only story that we know about her is that after Bhima and Hidimbi meets at Kamyaka they fell in love and then they married. Hidimbi gives birth to an extraordinary "son named Ghatotkacha who proved to be a great asset during the war of Kurukshetra and destroyed a sizable portion of the enemy army" (Kumari). Bhima has forgotten both of them. Thus, in the long epic of Mahabharata she is almost a forgotten character. But Kavita Kane's *Bhima's Wife* invites readers to reread Hidimbi not as a minor character rather as the protagonist of the novel. Kane provides a platform for Hidimbi and retells her story as a woman with deep sense of self and emotions.

In *Bhima's Wife*, Hidimbi is portrayed as the abandoned wife and daughter-in-law of the Pandava family. She is the first daughter-in-law yet she is not acknowledged socially and legally this paper employs Sara Ahmed's 'affect theory' and how it makes Hidimbi to be excluded from kinship and legitimacy. Affective forces like fear, disgust and shame are attached to Hidimbi, this prevents her from being fully accepted as the daughter-in-law of the Pandava family.

Affective Economy of Emotions and the Rakshashi Body

In the novel *Bhima's Wife* the emotional and social marginalization of Hidimbi can be interpreted as a result of affective economy of emotions. As Sara Ahmed says that society labels people through emotions and this emotional labels are attached to bodies creating social hierarchies. "Emotions shape the very surfaces of bodies...". Bodies are "Shape through



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repeated actions overtime” and interactions with others and social expectations (5). It can be interpreted that Hidimbi’s position is not internal and confined rather it was shaped by the broader relationships with the social and cultural structures which continues to define and redefine her. Thus, emotion is not something personal and internal but it is political and social.

The marginalization of Hidimbi is due to her Rakshashi identity. Ahmed argues that “ signs become sticky through repetition...”. “If a word is repeatedly used again and again, then that ‘use’ becomes intrinsic...” (91). The term Rakshashi is repeatedly associated with words like savagery, danger and moral excess in the epic tradition. So, these words stick to the identity of Hidimbi yet the meaning of these words do not originate in her body but “an effect of a history of articulation, which allows sign to accumulate value” (92). Those ‘sticky signs’ adhere to Hidimbi’s identity restricting her from entering into a familial relationship with her husband’s family. “Stickiness helps us to associate ‘blockages’ with ‘binding’” (91). This statement suggests that emotions can both prevent movement or openness and connect things together. Here in the light of this statement Hidimbi’s identity as the rakshashi serves as a blockage in the “affective economy of disgust” preventing her full integration and acceptance into the royal household. Thus, Hidimbi’s exclusion is not natural rather it is socially and culturally produced.

When Hidimbi and Bhima talked about their relationship, their conversation reveals issues of identity, shame, exclusion and class hierarchy. Hidimbi’s states that “Not suitable enough to be presented as a fine bride in that fine palace. As the Kuru daughter-in-law.” (99) shows how her identity differentiates from the expectations of the royal family. These words express her realization that the royal household will never truly accept her. Another statement of Hidimbi, “A tribal. A mountain girl. A pariah who is forbidden to step inside a palace”

(52) reflects Ahmed’s description that “affective encounters” produces identities. Her identity is constructed as ‘others’ apart from the royal space. Hidimbi’s description of herself as ‘a pariah’ exposes the politics of inclusion and exclusion. She comes to realize that love cannot transcend the boundary set by the society.

Hidimbi calls Kunti as “Ma”. She uses this particular word to address her not simply out of respect but she is trying to create an affective attachment to form kinship and belonging. As Ahmed argues that “...emotions create the very effect of an inside and an outside...”(10). The word ‘Ma’ has significant weight of emotional intimacy and acceptance.

However, despite Hidimbi’s effort the immediate response of Kunti in the form of sharp question “Why do you call me Ma? Don’t you have a mother?” (121) breaks that affective belonging that Hidimbi tries to construct. When Hidimbi declares to Kunti during their conversation that “you are my family”, Kunti sharply corrects her that “We are but strangers and you have given us shelter for the time being” then Hidimbi continues that “This is home, you are safe here. Yes, we are strangers – I don’t know you or your son at all. But I do know I love him.” (124). Here Hidimbi tries to use love and trust as binding bonds while Kunti’s demeanor upon hearing these words reveal Hidimbi that no matter how hard she tries she is still an outsider. In that moment, the opportunity that Hidimbi creates to move from ‘an outsider’ to ‘an insider’ is crumbled. She feels that she is being “...strictly assessed and studied... it would be impossible to become intimate with the mother...” and that there is “a barrier” between them (125). Thus, Kunti’s response and attitude reinstates the boundary again.

Conditional Love and a Daughter-in-law without Belonging

“There was no good love that, in speaking its name, can change the world into the referent for that name.” (Ahmed 141) which means that love cannot make the world a good, harmonious and a perfect space. Love is never innocent or completely free from the social structures, ‘speaking its name’ won’t be able to erase the inequality, exclusion and power politics in the society. It is also evidently found in the conversation between Kunti and Hidimbi that the latter seeks permission for marriage with her second son, Bhima, to get Kunti’s consent, she shows how much she can sacrifice for her son. She even lowers herself and declares -



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“Even now, I am prepared to renounce everything in my life for his sake. Allow us to get married while you stay in these woods; I promise that I shall not ask for more.

There, she had said it: her last desperate gamble of appeasement! She had bared open her heart to the mother of the man she loved.” (128)

Her words make Kunti ‘struggled for self-control’ by clenching and unclenching her hands for she also knows that if she opposes her son might go away or be heartbroken, she wishes neither so she must accept what Hidimbi says. Hidimbi knows that even if Kunti gives her permission it is not genuine rather obligation as she awares that Kunti sees her as inferior culturally and socially and will never fully accept her in their family of royalty. Hidimbi calls herself “Not blue-blooded, I am the lowest of the low in your royal esteem; I am just a wild mountain tribal unsuitable for a prince” (128). These words clearly depict her internalized marginalization. When Kunti again responses “you dared to ask for my son’s hand in marriage” (129), Hidimbi realizes that her love for Bhima is taken as bold and improper.

Indeed Kunti agrees and gives permission but on a condition that her son cannot be with her forever and he must return with us to his lost kingdom. From that moment on Hidimbi could foresee her future that she has “no place” in Bhima’s future kingdom eventhough she is his wife. She can have Bhima only for a “borrowed time” she can never get the “respect and status reserved for a royal princess”, she would always “remain the outsider in this family. Never accepted, not acknowledge, not ever approved or appreciated” (129).

According to Ahmed “...love comes with conditions however unconditional it might feel...”

(141). This means that there is no unconditional love and it is always structured deeply by societal norms and expectations. Kunti gives approval to Hidimbi for marriage but only “On one condition” that she must allow Bhima to leave ‘once the baby is born’ (132). “...I agree to this wedding though I must tell you that this “marriage” won’t be recognized as per our mores’ (131). This statement of Kunti shows that her love is accepted yet her status is denied. Hidimbi is allowed to be a mother and a wife but cannot legitimize her marriage socially. Eventhough Kunti doesn’t reject Hidimbi openly she prevents her from entering into the royal household. This condition reminds Hidimbi that she and her child will never be a part of the Kuru family. Thus, love is recognized through condition and belonging is denied.

Hope and Motherhood without Recognition

“Without hope, the future would become impossible: bodies would not reach for it” (Ahmed 185). This line explains that hope makes the bodies to move towards future and allows bodies to endure pain. “After we leave, you will have the baby- he will give you new hope.”(133), When kunti says this line to Hidimbi she wants to redirect her future towards motherhood to move forward after abandonment. And also remark that “... the baby will keep you happy later.” (133) shows the assurance of Kunti that her future survival will depend upon her baby and her emotional pain for abandonment will be replaced by motherhood which will enable her to move forward and divert her emotional pain.

When Hidimbi realizes that she was pregnant ‘a deathlike feeling came over her...she felt horribly scared’ as she knows ‘She was going to have a baby and she was going to lose Ballav forever so she tries ‘to delay getting pregnant knowing fully the implication of the terms of her marriage’ (152). She is not able to enjoy her pregnancy because their days together are now numbered. She clearly accepts the bare fact that she won’t be able to stop Bhima. Her love and attachment for him is hurtful and like as Ahmed argues “In order to move away from attachments that are hurtful, we must act on them...”(173), Hidimbi decides to have happy reminiscences rather unhappy regrets. After Ghatotkach is born Kunti comes to meet with Hidimbi and gives ‘a single gold bangle’ which she takes from her thin wrist and says “I am sorry, but there is one last favour I ask of you”. Kunti’s gift of the bangle can be seen as a strategy before making her promise to completely detach herself from the royal lineage. There Kunti says, “Promise me you will never come to Hastinapur”. Hidimbi answers “Why would I come to a place where I am not welcome?...What could you give me there that you could not give me here?” She



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further says “You want me forgotten; I shall stay forgotten, Ma. You want me hidden; I shall hide away here safely in my forest” (173).

Hidimbi’s words make Kunti flinches and she is amazed by the calmness of her voice.

Hidimbi’s character does not allow to “ontologise woman’s pain as the automic grounds of politics” (Ahmed 173) as she refuses to identify herself as a woman with pain instead she determines to love consciously and let go without attachment.

Bhima tells Hidimbi that when his mother sees how much he loves his baby maybe she would agree to let him stay behind or takes hidimbi and their son with him. Kane’s words “Oh the agony of hope!” aligns with Ahmed’s idea that “being hopeful may be necessary” to keep possibilities open however it is not sufficient enough “for the determination of the future” (185). Hearing Bhima’s words Hidimbi perceives that future is shaped by actions not by hope. So with a strong self-determination she declares that she will be ‘the guardian queen mother’ and she will lead her ‘people to prosperity’ until their son ‘comes of age’. She reveals the fact between their relationships and says “I can’t leave my land and you need to go back to yours. That is the fact of our life.”(177). Thus, Hidimbi tries to remind Bhima that as he has his duty to reclaim his lost kingdom she also has her own responsibility to protect her son, her people and her land.

Hidimbi’s departing words to Bhima “Yes, we have been defeated. But you’ll see that we haven’t been conquered. Now go. Go!” (180) show her stance that even if they are socially defeated they are not internally subdued altogether. Here she strongly resists that this separation will not let her be defined as woman who has lost everything.

Politics of Pain, silence and consolation

After Hidimbi is left in the forest ‘she buries herself with work and nurturing her son.’ Soon she hears about the marriage of the Pandavas with the Panchal princess Draupadi.

When Hidimbi tells Darita that Kunti has got what she wants and it is something she could not give her, Darita replies that she gives her a grandson who is a “one-kid army and worth more than a hundred platoons!”. Upon hearing Darita’s words Hidimbi suddenly questions herself “Is that why Ma had encouraged her to have a child from Ballav?” (205). This statement suggests that Kunti as a “great strategist” and “a far-sighted statesperson, uses Hidimbi as a tool to provide them with a powerful son to be used in war against Kauravas.”

(Thakur). Again her approval to her five sons to marry Draupadi as their common wife reveals her plan as the ‘sole means of bonding the five brothers’.

Kunti refuses to acknowledge legally and socially her first grandson but her parting words “He is one of the Kurus, the eldest grandson.’(207). It becomes clear to Hidimbi that her son Ghatotkach will surely be used in their war. These words demand Ghatotkach of his loyalty to his father. After realizing all these “she possessed a silent pain none could see but she hid it well in silent suffrance” (208-209). Being a single mother she mutely endures “loss of love and deepening her silent grief” (210). Ahmed says that ‘not all pain involved injuries’ and ‘pain without external injuries’ becomes meaningful only when others validate and acknowledge it (31). Hidimbi does not show her pain. She suffers silently without letting anyone sees what she suffers.

Ghatotkach becomes “the sunshine in her life”. She doesn’t want her son to know about the real relationship between them as she knows “the Pandavas will never acknowledge him as their eldest son, the eldest grandson of the Kurus” and “...no one in Hastinapur, including Bhima, shall give him the dignity he deserves.” (223) But despite abandonment he admires his father and takes pride in his father. Now Hidimbi doesn’t want to do anything with Pandavas for she knows deep in her heart that her son ‘may be unwelcomed but he is not unwanted; Kach is very much wanted!’ because he will be a formidable shield in the coming war. What fears her most now is that “They had taken her all; would they also snatch him from her?”(229) she is afraid that she will lose her son to Bhima.



Hidimbi's pain is expressed by Kane, "His very memories caused her only pain now"(271). The main reason for her pain and anger is because of her fear that they will use her son "to protect themselves, to strengthen their side" during the war and that Bhima cannot pledge that he can get her son 'out of harm's way! In fact he is pushing' her son into it and "Bhima was ready to sacrifice his son!" (278). But Ghatotkach refuses to listen to her mother and says that how can a son not support his father during war and remain silent. Her son's response chokes her, "wounded, her fear of losing him made her a mother more vindictive than a lioness robbed of her cubs."(277) . This line shows her maternal instinct, what only matters to her now is to protect her son from anyone who tries to snatch away.

Hidimbi meets once again with Bhima when Draupadi is abducted by Jayadrath.

When Bhima asks her if she is still angry with him, she answers that he is mistaken and he has been absent for so long for her to stay angry with him, "you were invisible for us. Till now."(291) as invisibility becomes more than physical absence it serves as an affective erasure. Her statement, "I have served my purpose and was of no further use or importance" expresses her realization that she is only necessary for desire and reproduction. She confronts Bhima by saying that he returns only to extract from their son "his love, loyalty and even, perhaps his life". She further tells him that she wishes she never meets him and not to use her son as a weapon for the war. "But I shan't stay silent where my son is concerned" (306) .She refuses to remain silent as a mother who passively accepts everything when the safety of her son is at stake.

Hidimbi is unable to convince Ghatotkach not to involve in the war of Kurukshetra.

He tells her mother that his "dharma and karma both lie on that battlefield" (327). She understands that this war is not just a battlefield but it is a place where death is almost certain. For her words like dharma and karma are not ideals but only a justifications which make her son to sacrifice his life in the coming war. Her intense inner conflict is shown when she thinks she would rather be known as the mother of a coward 'than a dead son'. Yet she cannot stop him and she blesses him and gives him 'a sudden, fierce hug' as if she will never let him go away. When he leaves she thinks that would it be the last time she sees her son and she starts sobbing terribly and uncontrollably "it was her life she was weeping away, her hope of happiness, all her desires and dreams' (328). Her blessing is not for the acceptance of war but the silent sacrifice of a mother whose son is her world. Hidimbi's suffering shows how women endure and sacrifice their love ones in the name of honour and destiny. Ghatotkach sacrifices his life by saving Arjuna's from Karna's infallible weapon in the war. Hearing the news of her son makes Hidimbi shrugs in 'surrender'.

Conclusion

In the prologue of the novel, after the war is ended, Kunti and Hidimbi stands face to face. Their conversations expose hidden emotional conflict. When Hidimbi says to Kunti that she comes to take her home, Kunti replies that she have no home now and she is going to spend her last days to the forest with Gandhari, Dhritarashtra and Vidur. Hidimbi responses she never gets to meet them and but this is your home. Behind these words she is trying to remind Kunti that she is the daughter-in-law whom she abandoned in the forest denying her rights to enter into the Kuru household. Kunti winces "Hidimbi's words like a dagger twisting in an open wound'(viii) and she answers 'you are far away from your home too much higher in the mountains than your Kamyaka forest', Hidimbi says she stays alone and far away from everything as she finds 'peace there'. Kunti remarks that she is in 'search of that peace too. Hearing these words Hidimbi ironically states that after war she must have found her peace as now her sons have won the war regained their throne, the usurped crown and their lost prestige. Through these words she asserts that Kunti regains her throne and surviving sons but Hidimbi loses her only child, her everything.

Kunti mentions about Ghatotkach –

"He died a warrior's death. Ghatotkach saved my Arjun, he saved us from defeat."(ix) This statement reflects the unequal politics of recognition. "Recognition of injustice is not simply about others becoming visible. Recognition is also about



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claiming that an injustice did happen ...” (Ahmed 200). Ghatotkach’s death is recognized as it benefits the Pandavas but Hidimbi’s sufferings and sacrifice as a wife, a mother and a woman is not acknowledge.

While Kunti laments about the loss of her family members. Hidimbi replies “No, Ma I lost all. First, I lost my husband Bhima to you. Then I lost my son to your war”(x), further she tells her that she has sons and grandsons in Hastinapur and here in Kamyaka her grandson Barbarik, son of Ghatotkach is there and they are her family. Speaking about her grandson, she claims her own space in the forest and also quietly but firmly reminds Kunti that she still has family, lineage and royal legacy. But Hidimbi’s loss is undeniable. Kunti is astonished at Hidimbi’s composure ‘despite all the suffering that has been inflicted on her’. Kunti realizes that Hidimbi’s ‘soft tranquility’ uncovers a strength that not she, not Gandhari nor Draupadi could embody in their personal tragedy. “A family she had declined to acknowledge in this very forest. The daughter-in-law she had forsaken.”(xi) The last lines of the prologue expose a deep irony. Kunti is ultimately forced to meet the daughter-in-law she had chosen to reject.

To conclude as Ahmed observes “subjects have an unequal relation to entitlement” so privileged subjects have greater access “narratives of injury” within the public domain. (33). This idea is evidently found through Hidimbi’s sufferings which are not publicly recognized and acknowledged as she is a forest woman who exist outside the royalty. Her grief is largely ignored unlike other characters like Kunti, Pandavas or Draupadi whose sorrows are publicly acknowledged. Thus Hidimbi’s pain and silence serves as an important space for understanding the emotional politics of belonging.

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