
The “New Woman” Hidimbi in Gokhale’s Lost in Time: Ghatotkacha and the Master of Illusions

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Article Received: 15/05/2024

Article Accepted: 20/06/2024

Published Online: 21/06/2024

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2024.6.6.72

Abstract:

There are many stories and myths regarding Hidimba who is known as a demon goddess. She is sometimes regarded as evil, sometimes a rakshasi but history has not regarded her as a good mother to Ghatotkacha and a dedicated wife to Bhima. Namita Gokhale in her ninth work of fiction *Lost in Time: Ghatotkacha and the Master of Illusions* (2017) has given a voice to two of the most unknown characters from the Mahabharata: Hidimba and Ghatotkacha. The paper explains the undisclosed peripheral character of Hidimba gaining insight from Gokhale’s fictional work. Revisionist writing of mythology and mythic characters has helped bring the marginalised character to the mainstream media which has helped in filling in the gaps of history. Taking various excerpts from the book a new shade of the mythical character Hidimba is evolved throughout the paper. Namita Gokhale’s foray into mythological revisionist rewriting has also brought a revolution in the examination of the subaltern characters.

Keywords: Myths, Mythology, Marginalisation, New Woman, Namita Gokhale

Introduction:

Namita Gokhale, a celebrated contemporary Indian writer, finds fabulist writing fascinating and enjoys revisiting myths and legends. Her foray into mythology began with her work *The Puffin Mahabharata*, a retelling of the great Indian epic Mahabharata, written for young readers. *The Puffin Mahabharata* was published in the year 2007 and ‘like a modern-day *suta*— storyteller, Gokhale brings alive India’s richest literary treasure with disarming ease and simplicity’ (Gokhale, 2009). Retelling this epic made her read it more closely and she discovered that it has many interesting characters, many of whom receive little attention in the text. So, in her ninth work of fiction *Lost in Time: Ghatotkacha and the Master of Illusions* (2017) she revisits the forgotten saga of Hidimbi and her son Ghatotkacha. She also lends new perspectives to her characters which unfolds her simplistic yet fabulist way of writing.

Modern boy Chintu meets Hidimbi and her son Ghatotkacha.

The story unfolds from the point of view of a fourteen-year-old boy, Chintamani Dev Gupta, also known as Chintu-Pintu. He believes he is dealing with several setbacks, one of which is his parents' frequent fighting and impending divorce. He is then sent on a vacation to Sat Tal Lake for a birding camp where Chintu accidentally hits his head against a big rock while swimming in the Lake. He loses consciousness and upon awakening discovers that he has been transported to the lost era of Mahabharata much like Alice did when she went down the rabbit hole to Wonderland. There he comes across a big creature, enormous in size like Godzilla in the magical woodlands, he thinks of it as the Loch Ness monster from Scottish folklore coming to life. But it turns out that he is a genial giant who introduces himself as Ghatotkacha "born of the lord Bhimasena and the lady Hidimbi." He claims to be the supreme monarch over hills, valleys, jungles, and streams, guarding the forest's spirit and all its inhabitants. The book is an easy read for young and adult readers full of revealing facts both known and unknown. Gokhale finds a new way to narrate this particular ancient tale and through her fabulist technique weaves a young boy of modern times into the narrative. It's interesting to note how Chintu Pintu views Ghatotkacha's enormous frame and describes it by borrowing an analogy drawn from modern sci-fi movies and Scottish lore that a young contemporary reader can imagine and visualise. Books meant for young readers have to be visually invoking because children love to read stories and imagine them.

This book has beautiful illustrations by Ujan Dutta. In an interview alongside Namita Gokhale, he talks about how he graphically brings out the images for his viewers. There are creative choices that the illustrator makes while illustrating a character. Ghatotkacha is also known as the "Bald Pot " in Sanskrit because his head was fashioned like a 'ghatam', or a pot, and was hairless (utkacha). But Ujan created the image of Ghatotkacha, giving him long hair and a kind expression. According to Hindu mythology, Ghatotkacha was born to Lord Bhima and Lady Hidimbi who was a rakshasi. Rakshasas are typically depicted as having a huge physique, an evil appearance, and red eyes but Ghatotkacha is described in the book as exceedingly attractive, charming, with compassionate gorgeous eyes. When Ujan first heard the story, he claims, "I thought it to be extremely interesting and it resonated with me because it was something that was packed with magic and everything." He used great artistic skill to depict the friendship between Ghatotkacha and the small boy Chintu Pintu. Because it was written mainly for young readers, it was especially crucial to portray Ghatotkacha as a friendly giant rather than a terrifying one.

Modern Female Sutas retelling the Epics.

Iravati Karve in Yuganta- a collection of essays on the Mahabharata claims that the stories of Mahabharata were narrated by a particular class of people known as the Sita's in the courts of ancient Kings. She puts it: "Sita's were the illegitimate progeny of the Kshatriyas who performed various functions at the court and told their

stories which consisted mainly of exploits of love and adventures of ancient and ruling kings and princes” (Karve). Out of these oral narrations sung at various places grew a type of literature which talked about the ancient past— a Purana and then over time these Puranas which also included Mahabharata and other epics got written. Karve quotes the late Dr V.S. Sukhatankar who made the argument for how the Mahabharata eventually moved from one to the other and into the keeping of a Brahmin clan known as Bhṛigu. This clan used the chance to incorporate tales from its own kin into the Mahabharata. According to this source, the Brahmins gained control of not just the Mahabharata but also nearly the entirety of the Sanskrit literary legacy, who then turned into envious guardians of it and periodically added whatever came into their possession. Since then, there have been numerous retellings, revisions and adaptations of epics by various writers. This tradition continues even today and interestingly many female writers have retold many ancient stories drawn from the Epics. The revisionist retelling was seen as an opportunity by authors to give voices to the voiceless. They frequently added their interpretations, imagining the perspective of the epic female character or characters that seem marginalised while drawing inspiration from the original text.

Narendra Kohli, a writer of short stories in Hindi, was equally enthralled by the story of Hidimbi as Namita Gokhale was. He wrote a novella called Hidimbi in which he gave the character, who was depicted in the epic as a rakshasi—a demon—human qualities such as feelings, emotions, angst, and conflict. It emphasises the bravery and clarity of the character. Hidimbi and Bhima's encounter is brought up again by Kohli. Because Hidimbi is not a typical wife, she recognises her place in Bhima's life. She knows that she will not be accepted by the Pandavas and their family because she is a forest dweller, and her son will never be entitled to a prince. But if she stays back, her son will live in the forest as a prince. The incidents narrated by Kohli gives a glimpse into the character of Hidimbi and Ghatotkacha.

"If my interests are the only thing on my mind, I might drop everything and follow you. But now I also need to consider my son. My son Ghatotkacha is the king of this forest-," Hidimbi said. "Will he be able to become the king if I accompany you? " And she acknowledged, "Perhaps he couldn't become a prince. I won't be able to become a queen or serve as the queen's mother.” (Kohli, 2016, p. 57-58)

Hidimbi is celebrated as a strong female character by many authors for many reasons. Hidimbi raises her son on her own and sacrifices him at the altar of the Great Battle of Mahabharata when Bhima calls for him, Hidimbi never receives the heroic recognition she so richly deserves. She is portrayed as a forest-dwelling demon in the stories of the Mahabharata, which is all that a layperson may understand about her. This little story, nevertheless, is a long epic in and of itself about a mother’s fortitude and love for her son. What about Hidimbi’s loss? Who talks about her? Gokhale’s revisionist writing gives a glimpse into the bond of love shared by Hidimbi and her

son Ghatotkacha and as readers, we sense the human side of storytelling. (Translated from the Hindi Original Hidimbi by Narendra Kohli, Pg- 57)

When Namita Gokhale was questioned why she retells the story of Ghatotkacha in a new way in her book *Lost in Time: Ghatotkacha and the Game of Illusions* she said- “Ten years ago, I was asked to write Mahabharata for young readers and in all those stories there was one story that moved me to the core, which was a story of the firstborn son of the Pandavas and because he was from the Rakshasa race he never got the due of being the most courageous one, the most beautiful, the most loyal of all the Pandavas”. Namita further added that “there was a hierarchical society which was not always fair to everyone as no society ever is”. So Namita has written this novel with a purpose i.e to give Ghatotkach and Hidimbi their due respect. In another of her interviews on the eve of the book launch organised by Jaipur Journals, when asked why she is writing on the lesser-known tale of Hidimbi and her son Ghatotkacha. She makes a very interesting comment “while writing the Mahabharata I came across certain strong characters about whom nothing much is told. I find these characters fascinating and I write about them to fill in the gaps of history”.

Who is Hidimbi?

In the 9th sub-parva of the Adi Parva of Mahabharata, the tale of Hidimb-Hidimbi is narrated. Duryodhan, in his desire to become the next king of Hastinapur, tried to burn alive his cousin brothers- the five Pandavas: along with their mother Kunti; they escaped and sought refuge in a forest called Hidimbi Van where this rakshasa Hidimb lived with his sister Hidimbi. The forest belonged to the rakshasa-both Hidimb and Hidimbi. They love the taste of human flesh and so they would eagerly wait for humans to arrive in their forest. They would kill humans and make tasty food for themselves.

One day, Hidimb was sitting atop a tree when the smell of human flesh reached his nostrils. Since he was very tired, he ordered his sister Hidimbi to hunt the humans. Hidimbi was a sweet-natured demon, who immediately acted as instructed. She went to look for the humans who were resting beneath the tree. The moment she saw the sleeping Bhima, she was enamoured by his muscular body, lean hips and wrestler’s thighs and instantly fell in love with him. Hidimbi knew that the humans would never accept a demoness like her, rather they would fear her. So she used the power of illusions to transform herself into a beautiful maiden and approached him. Bhima heard her footsteps, saw her and he immediately fell in love with her, without knowing who she was. She too confessed her love for him and then warned him of the threat. She informed them that her brother Hidimb loves to eat human flesh and so he would hunt them as well. Soon after their proposal to each other, Hidimb who was very restless for his dinner came in search of his sister and found both Bhima and his sister talking.

He flew into a rage and threatened to kill them both. Hidimbi promised to protect Bhima and his family since she utterly loved Bhima and so it was her duty to protect them. Hidimb and Bhima got into a good fight until Hidimb was dead. Hidimbi saw her brother dying with remorse, but she was overjoyed that Bhima was still alive. Hidimbi then proposed to him for marriage and Bhima with the consent of his mother married her. Hidimbi again proves her strength as a sister and her dedication as a wife. Bhima had also warned her before marriage that they are wanderers and cannot stay with her forever. Hidimbi accepted her fate and promised to not shed tears when the time came for him to leave. They lived together near the sacred lake of Salivahana. Hidimbi gave birth to a beautiful son whom the Pandavas named Ghatotkacha. They played with him until their time of departure had come. Bhima loved his firstborn son dearly and it pained him to leave both his wife and his son behind. He blessed his son and left the forest to begin their wanderings again. When the Great Battle of Mahabharata takes place, Ghatotkacha is called upon. Hidimba honours her relationship with Bhim and sends her son to war only to lose him there.

Women in the Mahabharata:

Most of the writing of Namita Gokhale focuses on ancient stories with strong female characters as protagonists. Similarly, she doesn't forget to highlight the character of Hidimbi through her writing. In one of her interviews with Anushua Mukherjee, when asked why "your novels are known for their strong women". As a female novelist, do you do that consciously? She replied that "I come from Kumaon, from a family of strong women. The women of Kumaon/ Uttarakhand are among the strongest I have ever encountered anywhere. I think it's a combination of a very tough life, the beauty of the surroundings and the fact that they are always confronting the basics that give them this strength. When I am writing about strong women, I am writing from the memory of those women I have known, and I don't write to validate any theory: it's just that I haven't known any other kind of women."

The representation of women as strong and celebrating their strength and character is not a new phenomenon in literature. Many female writers have paved the way where women have been recognised for their exemplary dauntlessness. The Book of Women, the first part of the book Mahabharata Volume 7, translated, edited, and annotated by James L. Fitzgerald, discusses the exemplary courage and compassion displayed by women in times of crisis and distress, enduring the loss of life, particularly the loss of husbands, brothers, and lovers.

"As The Book of the Women powerfully represents the expression of the grief we expect at this juncture of a war narrative, it just as powerfully represents the ideas and themes about women and the important female realities of the world and themes about women and the important female realities of the world..." (Fitzgerald, 2004)

Gokhale takes this formalistic technique and weaves it into her book to present different shades of Hidimbi. The Mahabharata, an epic written nearly two

thousand years ago reveals to the world that women are not helpless or content to do nothing more than weep over their lot instead they can be strong and diligent. While talking about the book, *Lost in Time: Ghatotkacha and the Master of Illusions*, at a book launch she was asked about her inspiration for writing the *Puffin Mahabharata*. She replied that “she has seen more strong women characters in Mahabharata than she has seen in real life. Whatever is there in life is there in Mahabharata and whatever is not here is nowhere.” She has heard different narratives of The Mahabharata which piqued her interest to write about the great characters, especially the female characters. She believes that women are stronger than they are written about and that is why she brings out the lesser-known characters through her books.

It narrates the tales of great warriors but there are no tales of great warrior princesses. Namita in one of her interviews says that society doesn't want female readers to read Mahabharata. They want women to continue to lack motivation and live within the strict boundaries of society. Furthermore, she says that it is supplemented by daily soaps and Hindi serials which adds to the catastrophe. She presents the concept of “**New Woman**” through her writing where toughness is an epithet that she gives to her female characters. She writes the book which she says is the best thing written, accessible to young readers and even adult readers. The book does not just give us a landscape of the unknown characters, but it also presents them in a new light.

Hidimbi and the Woman Question:

Hidimbi is known as a demon-goddess or a rakshasi who appears in the great epic The Mahabharata. She is a prowess who endures so much pain in her life. There are different stories recounting her life, lineage and her marriage to Bhima. In the book *Lost in Time: Ghatotkacha and the Game of Illusions* (2017), she is described as someone who has long claw-like nails (Gokhale, 2017), which gives an impression to us that she is a rakshasi (not a dangerous one). At the same time, Namita Gokhale presents her gentle side in the book where she is a great mother to Ghatotkacha and a likeable host to Chintu Pintu.

Namita Gokhale has taken the character of Hidimbi and has celebrated her life in this narrative. Hidimbi belonged to a different clan (a rakshasi) but Namita Gokhale doesn't see differences as dangerous. Namita Gokhale who herself is a who herself is a Kumaon/ Pahari sees the character in a different light, which made her resonate so much with the character of Hidimbi and put it in front of her readers with such intricacies. Epics may have termed her a rakshasi, but she is a woman of courage, and valour with undefiable strength. Gokhale has described Hidimbi with that Kumaoni strength in her book *Lost in Time*. There is a temple that is dedicated to Hidimbi where she is worshipped as a goddess. The Hidimbi Devi Temple is in the Kullu region of Himachal Pradesh.

Namita Gokhale mentions that pahadi people like her never view difference as a dangerous thing, their perspective is very inclusive and not dictated by stereotypes endorsed by the popular imagination. The character Chintu encourages

this voice of Namita where she wants to show the inclusiveness of the people belonging to “pahad” or “forests”. This commingling of the human race and the rakshasi race (here, not a dangerous one) can be seen as the inception of the theory of inclusivity. The book *Lost in Time* aims at this inclusivity and at the same time works on a humanitarian level to bring a sense of positive mindset for the world outside to not see differences as dangerous.

The issue of female subjugation in mythological figures has primarily been addressed by Indian feminists because they view it as a reflection of the oppression that women experience in Indian society. Women are now free and liberated, and cultural hegemony has been overthrown thanks to the revision of these mythological figures from a female point of view. Similarly to Namita Gokhale's novel *Hidimbi*, women can relate to these characters in this way and discover a way to have their voices heard. In *Hidimbi*, for instance, the character is portrayed as a strong, independent woman who overcomes numerous challenges to develop her own strength and combat oppression.

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