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The Lone Ranger: Reimagining Hidimba as the Maternal Outlier in Chetan Datar's Dance-drama *Mata Hidimba*

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Abstract: In the Indian context the institution of motherhood and the experience of mothering, happens to be a one of the glorified aspect of Indian femininity. Childbearing is considered as a sacred role, that a woman must perform as her social, moral and evolutionary duty, in order to carry forward the line of descent of her husband, his family and community. While radical feminists have opposed to this glorification of women's power of procreation, which is according to them is a patriarchal means of controlling female body, but another school of feminist thinkers consisting of Adrienne Rich and Julia Kristeva propounds that the care work associated with mothering infuse maternal sensitivity into masculine space. Although the politics of sentiment associated with motherhood can't be entirely denied, but if the act of care work in mothering can be reimagined, then mothering can turn out to be an empowered and positive experience within the feminist discourse. While becoming a mother is considered both necessary and admirable for a woman in the Indian context, but it should be noted that not all kinds of mothers and their mothering is celebrated. The Indian society have been a witness of a diverse set of non-normative or unconventional mothers, whose mothering practices remain so unheard, uncelebrated and invisible that it also remains academically under-examined. Chetan Datar's dance-drama *Mata Hidimba* is one such re-examination of a non-normative or unconventional mother, Hidimba, from the Indian epic *Mahabharata*. In the dance-drama, Chetan Datar has reconstructed the character of Hidimba, as the maternal outlier who defies the perspective norms of patriarchal control associated with the idea of motherhood by her act of mothering.

Key Words: Mother, mothering, motherhood, maternal outlier, non-normative, patriarchy.

The mother figure is omnipresent in the Indian cultural ecosystem. The institution of motherhood and the experience of mothering, is one of the glorified aspect of Indian femininity. In the Indian society girls grow up with the hegemonic idea that motherhood is both admirable and inevitable. As if,



becoming mother is a biological urge and by becoming a mother, a woman adds higher meaning and purpose to her existence. Nobody is taught to question the rationale behind procreation. Childbearing is represented as a sacred, fantasized role, that a woman must perform as her social, moral and evolutionary duty, in order to carry forward the line of descent of her husband, his family and community. But not all kinds of motherhood are considered sacrosanct. There are mothers whose idea and practice regarding motherhood have remained at the margins of motherhood practices. Their mothering practices seem to challenge the patriarchal models of normative motherhood. These mothers are to be read as ‘mother outlaws’ or ‘maternal outlier’, who defy the perspective norms of patriarchal motherhood. The present paper examines one such maternal outlier, an otherwise invisible character, Hidimba, from the Indian epic *Mahabharata*, reconstructed by Chetan Datar in his dance-drama *Mata Hidimba*.

Second wave feminists like Shulamith Firestone, Simon de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, have always viewed motherhood as a form of oppressive institution meticulously structured by the patriarchal society. According to them, motherhood is a source of women’s inequality and even emphasized that if women wants to liberate themselves from the shackles of patriarchy, they must call for an end to procreation. Shulamith Firestone, in *The Dialectic of Sex*, claims that “pregnancy is barbaric” (Firestone 198). “ Nature produced the fundamental inequality—half the human race must bear and rear the children of all of them —which was later consolidated, institutionalized, in the interests of men” (Firestone 205), says Firestone. Radical feminists have laid bare instances from everyday life showing, how exploitation and subjugation of women continues under the banner of motherhood. Care work associated with upbringing a child, according to the second wave feminists, is not an essential or natural part of female sex, instead this is a result of persistent coaching and socialization of women over the ages. Even if the politics of sentiment associated with motherhood can’t be entirely negated, but if the act of care work in mothering can be reimagined, then mothering can turn out to be an empowered and positive experience within the feminist discourse.



Motherhood studies remains a relatively under-focused area when compared to other issues studied within the purview of feminism. Professor Emerita Samira Kawash in her article argues that “academic feminism has marginalized and neglected both mothers as mothers and the study of motherhood more generally”. She has tried to draw the attention of the academic feminists towards the necessity of including motherhood studies within the feminist discourse. Third wave feminist thinkers like Adrienne Rich and Julia Kristeva elucidates in their body of work the “possibility of empowered and affirmative mothering” (Nandy). Sara Ruddick claims that “there is a peacefulness latent in maternal practice and that a transformed maternal thinking could make a distinctive contribution to peace politics” (Ruddick 137). A transformed maternal thinking enables us to break free from the various kinds of narrative associated with motherhood and mothering within the patriarchal system. A feminist counternarrative mode of mothering positions the mother in Rich’s words “as outlaws from the institution of motherhood” (Rich 195), ascribing agency to mothers and adding value to care work, associated with mothering. In the feminist counternarratives of mothering, motherwork turns out to be a “socially engaged practice that seeks to effect cultural change through new feminist mode of socializations and interactions with daughters and sons” (O’Reilly 10). In Chetan Datar’s re-imagination of the mother-son relationship in his dance-drama *Mata Hidimba*, we come across this “new feminist mode of socializations and interactions” (O’Reilly 10), practiced by the mother to bring up his son, that turns out to destabilize the patriarchal institution of motherhood.

The dance-drama *Mata Hidimba* opens with an episode from the *Mahabharata* where the Pandavas along with their mother Kunti has escaped to the forest tricking the Kauravas into believing that they all are dead. The forest where the Pandava brothers arrive along with their mother Kunti is reigned by Hidimba and her brother Hidimb. Hidimba is a non-Aryan born in a *rakshasa* matrilineal eco-community that strongly despises the class division between the Aryans and the non-Aryans. During their stay in the forest, one night when Bhima goes to fetch water, he unknowingly enters the *rakshasa* forest territory. There he is challenged by Hidimb to a fight. Unable to withstand Bhima’s strong blows, Hidimb gets killed by Bhima, but ironically his sister Hidimba falls in love with Bhima. A love interest develops in Bhima for Hidimba too, but when Hidimba expresses her desire to marry him, Bhima says



that unless his mother Kunti agrees to the match, he won't be able to engage in a matrimonial relationship with her. Listening to this, Hidimba decides to engage in a conversation with Kunti.

Through this conversation, Chetan Datar show cases a highly dramatic scene of power-play between Kunti and Hidimba. Kunti being an Aryan born belonging to the superior race, she is totally against her son's desire of marrying a Non-Aryan *rakshasi* woman. Kunti tries to demean Hidimba by pointing out that she belongs to a far inferior race and now she is only trying to use this romance as an opportunity to uplift her social status. She further humiliates Hidimba by referring to her as a helpless woman who is simply trying to save her 'honour' by desiring to marry the man who has defeated her brother or she is desiring this marriage as an appeal to their mercy as an orphan, as she is left with no one to take care of her after her brother's demise. Hidimba confronts Kunti by saying that she belongs to a matrilineal eco-community where she stands to inherit the entire forest. She is confident and courageous enough to take care of herself. She needs no protection from anyone. She desires to marry Bhima, only because she loves him. Her love for Bhima is driven by no socio-economic factors. Kunti, falling short of words in winning this matrimonial negotiation with Hidimba, she directs the matter to the eldest Pandava brother, Yudhishtir. Yudhishtir, gives his consent to the marriage on two conditions, first – while matrilineal societies require the husband to move to the wife's residence, Bhima can never permanently move to Hidimba's abode, instead Bhima would return every night to the Pandava household to serve their mother and second – Bhima would renounce his wife, the moment an heir is born to them. The hegemonic patriarchal power tries to control Hidimba's conjugal and body rights. Hidimba feels insulted and shocked at the same time. She is shocked at Bhima's silence during this moment and also because of his lack of protective instinct towards his beloved. Hidimba realizes that the man whom she has loved is so much possessed by the ideas of his patriarchal household that he can never be relied upon to share any kind of responsibility. Only out of her love for Bhima, for the time being she accepts the two proposals of Yudhishtir and agrees to marry Bhima, while having in mind some other plans for the future.



Hidimba might agree to be a part a typical patriarchal household of the *Mahabharata*, where “men acted, men directed and women suffered”(Karve), but she never forgets the humiliation she faced from the members of the Pandava family. At the right moment she turns the table. The moment Hidimba conceives their child, it is Hidimba who renounces Bhima. Hidimba makes it very clear that she needs no man to protect her and to bring up her child. She loathes from sharing any kind of parental responsibility with the man who is driven by patriarchal ideologies.

Hidimba: "Bhim Sen, I was even ready to give up my kingdom and come to you but you trapped me in your conditions. I thought my love could transform you - but you could never forget those conditions. If you think you can send me away once the child is born, I pre-empt this by asking you to leave now. I do not need you to bring forth this child into the world. I am capable of rearing him on my own". (*Mata Hidimba*, Act I, trans. Uma Narain)

In the dance-drama, Chetan Dhatar places the character of Hidimba in sharp contrast to Kunti's character. Kunti in the *Mahabharata* not only fails to save herself from the poisonous tentacles of patriarchy, but also she turns out to be a legacy carrier of patriarchal discourses. As per whims the patriarchal society has appropriated Kunti's power of procreation. She could never exercise the right on her body as a mother. Kunti had to give away her first born child, Karna because according to the unwritten guidelines of patriarchy, a woman cannot become a mother without getting married. Existence of a husband figure in a woman's life is very necessary to bring up a child. Where Kunti abandoned her first born child because she did not have a husband, here is Hidimba choses to bring up her child all by herself by renouncing her husband. Later, when Kunti gets married to prince Pandu, once again her power of procreation is controlled by patriarchy. Pandu turned out to be an impotent husband with an unquenched desire of becoming a father. When Pandu comes to know about Sage Durvasa's boon to Kunti, that whenever she desires Kunti can invoke any god to gift her with a child, Pandu wanted her to fulfill his desire of becoming a father by exercising this boon. Kunti bears three sons – Yudhishtir, Bhim, Arjun, and invoked Ashvins to help Madri to give birth to two twin sons – Nakula and Sahadeva, by exercising the boon granted to her by Sage Durvasa. Both Kunti and Hidimba raise their child as a



single mother but Kunti becomes a single due to the early demise of his husband, Pandu. Kunti becomes a single mother not by choice, but rather by misfortune. In sharp contrast to Kunti, Hidimba, emerges as a strong, independent, opinionated woman. She marries for love and then when she realizes Bhima's incompetency as a responsible lover, husband and father, she does not shy away from abandoning her husband once her child Ghatotkach is conceived. She chose to bring up her son as a single mother so that her "maternal thinking" can make a distinguished contribution in ensuring a humane upbringing of her child. Hidimba in Chetan Datar's re-imagination, emerges to be the one among the contemporary heterogeneous group of unconventional mothers, in complete control of her body as a mother. She is the maternal outlier or what Adrienne Rich terms as mother "outlaws from the institution of motherhood" (Rich 195), a non-normative mother, who defy perspective norms of patriarchal motherhood.

The dance-drama is not about the son Ghatotkach, it is about mother Hidimba, bringing up her son as a single mother so that her "maternal thinking" can make a distinguished contribution in ensuring a humane upbringing of her child. In the Act II, it is shown that, Hidimba's son Ghatotkach, the eldest Pandava son, is growing up as a child of mother-nature, amidst a eco-friendly matrilineal community. One fine day, Ghatotkach is spotted by Krishna, taming a wild elephant. Krishna who knows that the Pandavas will need strong warriors to win the war, approaches Hidimba, to remind her that, as the eldest Pandava son, Ghatotkach owes a parental debt to the Pandava family. So, now is the time to repay the debt, so Ghatotkach must be sent to Dronacharya's camp to receive war training, in preparation for participating in the war of Kurukshetra. The snare of patriarchy is very meticulously laid for Ghatotkach. Ghatotkach is sent to the training camp of Dronacharya, where a young enthusiastic mind will be fed with the hollow ideologies of war. But what comes as a surprise to the audience is that, both the character of Dronacharya and Hidimba is played by the same actress. The actress playing Hidimba doubles up for playing the character of Dronacharya. Chetan Datar by transforming the same actress once into Hidimba and then into Drona, is trying to portray that Ghatotkach in spite of being under the rigorous war training sessions of Dronacharya, cannot forget the teachings of her mother Hidimba. Ghatotkach seems to oppose the patriarchal forces that speak in favour of war and destruction by the humane lessons that he has learnt while growing up under his mother's guidance. Hidimba's maternal



thinking and upbringing infuse a masculine space with sensitivity. Ghatotkach finds himself in a great dilemma like Hamlet. To be a progenitor of toxic masculinity that favours violence, or not to be, that is the question for Ghatotkach now.

Drona: "Ghatotkach! Remember three things; a soldier, bravery and war. We are always just and ethical. Every opponent is an enemy to be vanquished. No one is related to you. Kill! Revenge! Kill and the world is yours". (*Mata Hidimba* Act II, trans. Uma Narain)

Hidimba: "Son ! Remember that we along with plants, animals, the river-water, air and sky are all part of the same ecological system. We are the children of mother Nature. When forced to kill a man-eater lioness, do not forget that you kill a mother." (*Mata Hidimba* Act II, trans. Uma Narain)

Drona: "Listen carefully! Bring utmost cruelty to mind when you hold the weapon. Concentrate and go for the kill." (*Mata Hidimba* Act II, trans. Uma Narain)

Hidimba: "Son! Kill only when hungry. Never strike a scared or wounded animal. When you mount the weapon, be most serene". (*Mata Hidimba* Act II, trans. Uma Narain)

Withstanding the lures of patriarchy's craze for power is not so easy. The young mind of Ghatotkach gets filled with the hollow ideologies of war and he proceeds to participate in the war of Kurukshetra. At the battlefield, Ghatotkach is sent to confront the great archer Karna. Karna, the first born abandoned son of Kunti, out of rage uses the rare weapon on Ghatotkach that he had all along saved for Arjuna. Ghatotkach is killed by Karna. The purpose of Krishna is served. Now defeating Karna remains no more a big deal for the Pandavas. The power thirsty progenitors of Indian patriarchy do not even hesitate to use their own sons as mere tools to serve their selfish agenda. Hidimba might have resisted the subjugation of the Pandava household all her life but in the end brutal patriarchal forces took away the life of her son. The dance-drama closes with the lament of a mother for her son. Ghatotkach dies as a proud son of a single mother, articulating his wish to be buried by his mother. Peace that remains latent in maternal practices wins over the ideas of destruction propagated by



patriarchy. Ghatotkach wishes his mother to perform his last rites so that he can remain armoured in love and care forever.

Hidimba's new and empowered feminist mode of socializations and interactions with her son Ghatotkach, turns out to be a socially engaged practice by which she seeks to destabilize the patriarchal institution of motherhood. In Datar's re-imagining, Hidimba emerges to be the "outlaw" (Rich 195), one among the contemporary heterogeneous group of unconventional or non-normative mother, in complete control of her body as a mother. Chetan Datar's *Mata Hidima* is an exemplary feminist counternarrative of motherhood, "concerned with imagining and implementing a view of mothering that is empowering to women as opposed to oppressive... patriarchal institution of mothering" (O'Reilly 10).

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