

Transformation of Female Characters of the Sanskrit Epic Mahabharata in Cinematography

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Abstract: The study examines the question of the transformation of female characters of the ancient Indian epic “Mahabharata” in the cinematography. The questions, discussed in the study, now are more important than ever and require careful study. In the era of emancipation and the global “equality” of the sexes, the women’s question is as relevant as ever. The object of study is the ancient Indian epic Mahabharata in Indian literature and cinema, namely the film of 1965 and TV series of 1988 and 2013. The Subject of the study is the epic images of women in Indian cinema. Using the comparative method, the analysis of women’s images of cinema and epic is presented their transformation in modern cinema is examined. After watching these movies one can clearly follow the trend of changing the attitudes and drawing attention to the urgent problems of Indian women: position in society, upbringing, education, freedom, family relationships, confirming the relevance of the chosen topic. In these screen versions the tradition and innovation are combined. In each screen version the women’s issue is more acute due to the transformation of female characters.

Key words: Female issues, the ancient Indian epic, the female characters, Hinduism, transformation

INTRODUCTION

Indian epic works attract attention of different people by monumentality, abundance of characters, rich storylines. It is an inexhaustible source of Indian art, thoughts, self-improvement. The number of scientific publications on the Indian epos is great but still there are many “white spots” for research in addition, the new ones are formed. The questions, raised in our study are now more relevant than ever and require careful study. In our opinion, at the era of emancipation and the global “equality” of the sexes, the women’s question is as relevant as ever.

The object of our study is the ancient Indian epos Mahabharata in Indian literature and cinema, namely the film of 1965 and TV series of 1988 and 2013. The subject of the study are the epic female characters in Indian cinema. Using the comparative method we aim to analyze female images in the movies and epos and decide how the female images in contemporary cinema have transformed and to try to understand what needs of society such transformation responds to.

Despite of a long history, ancient Indian epos is still of interest for the researcher. “Mahabharata” is a huge work, created by generations of authors over many centuries. Mahabharata is not only the tale of the enmity

of two family clans and their struggle for power. In the storyline didactic and philosophical teachings are inserted which sometimes take entire books (Mahabharata consists of 18 books). These teachings, in our opinion, complement the storyline by the fact that treating the problems of law, morality, higher debt and religious duties of a person, they help to understand and justify the actions of the characters from the point of view of Hinduism which is based on the concept of Dharma, the most important for the central parts of the epos (Grintser, 2004). According to scientists, Grintser (2004), Neveleva (1991) and Sutherland (1989), “Mahabharata” is created as both heroic and didactic epos. This research still plays an important role in social and spiritual life of Indian people. Indians perceive it not only as a masterpiece of literature, it is spiritual and religious component of their lives: they worship Krishna or Rama and Draupadi and Sita are the ideals of women. Even from birth children learn about the exploits of Rama, the loyalty of Sita and the great battle of Kurukshetra. The plot and the issues raised in the epos are still relevant and attract attention of filmmakers.

There were several films and TV series based on the story of this great epos: in 1965 in India there was a film “Mahabharata” in 1988-the TV series of 94 series, in 1989 Peter Brook shot three-series film “Mahabharata” and in 2013 the 267-series remake of the TV series of 1988 was

presented. Depending on the time of the shooting the story has evolved, attracting attention to certain problems of society. Historically, the women's question in India is still acute and is an unsolved problem. After watching these movies one can clearly follow the trend of changing attitudes and drawing attention to the urgent problems of Indian women: position in society, upbringing, education, freedom, family relationships which confirm the relevance of the chosen topic. This should be a comparative analysis of TV series and epic works to identify changes in the representation of female images.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodological basis of this study is a systematic interdisciplinary approach, allowing us to use theoretical foundations of classical and modern Oriental studies and of other sciences (philosophy, history, literary studies, religious studies and cultural studies). As we are interested in the relationship of the studied artwork with civilization, its culture, historical traditions and social environment, so that the method of cultural-historical analysis is acceptable. It will help to study the evolution of literature source through the prism of the spiritual national character. The hermeneutic method makes it clear that the investigated artwork is a factor of culture in interpretation of it, it is necessary to reconstruct its place in the spiritual history of mankind. Comparatively-correlative method helps to identify patterns, similarities and differences in the interpretations of female images in the "Mahabharata."

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Attitude to woman and her position in the Vedic age (roughly the 1st thousand BC) is still not unequivocal (Outstanding women of India, 2002; Forbes, 1999). On the one hand, she was treated as a goddess and on the other hand she was required complete obedience to the man. Female characters, presented in the epos are conditioned upon the age. The evolution of attitudes towards women can be traced in the writings of Jawaharlal Nehru "The Discovery of India". Of course the facts, provided by him are quite restrained but it is possible to understand that the social position of a woman has only worsened for centuries. It is worth noting that the position of the prominent Indian women who played a major role in the spiritual and socio-political life of India was not unique too: each of them stood near by no less great man whose ideas and views she shared and helped to promote (Outstanding women of India, 2002). Either father, husband or grandfather had a huge impact for girls they raised them as their associates. Great women of India

managed to combine the opposites: the traditional reverence and respect for the man with the adoption of his innovative ideas and views.

It is impossible to understand and appreciate the role and status of Indian woman "without referring to her mythical ideal and prototype of the divine mother goddess". In Hindu mythology, almost all divinities have a couple and the goddess appear as powers (Shaktis) of their spouses, representing the power of creative, inspiring energy. The idea of Shaktism since the mid-19th century began to penetrate actively into the ideology of the Indian national-liberation movement. "Its theorists began to promote the image of the Motherland, India as the incarnation of the divine Mother. In general, an important aspect of the idea of the divine feminine in the Hindu tradition is the idea of the sacredness of the earth and above all, the land the Indian subcontinent as a whole. The image of the land of India as the great goddess is a part of Gupta ideology and if the king, the representative of Vishnu on earth, embodied himself to the masculine, the earth-to female, it is this attitude to the earth and the woman that is observed in the TV series of 1988: the keynote is the theme of the exceptional role of a woman as a mother (this is her main predestination in life).

It should be noted that the female characters share similar traits. They are devoted Indian wives, obedient daughters and virtuous mothers, all of them are distinguished by unquestioning obedience to a man, whether he is a father or a husband. But it's not just mindless obedience: they are brought up in such a way and therefore it is quite natural for them. In "Mahabharata", instructions are given and examples of true stories of Indian wives who even after the loss of the husband don't leave the Patriarchal tradition. For example, Satyawati, remaining a widow after the death of king Shantanu, makes all decisions jointly with Bhishma and following the recommendation of Vyasa, goes along with the daughters-in-law to the forest to perform an austere penance".

The question of choosing a husband in most cases is decided by parents: Satyawati's father sets up the conditions of marriage, Kashi princesses are kidnapped by Bhishma and the parents do not oppose, parents of Gandhari, thinking it over, decide to marry her to a blind Dhritarashtra and Madri was simply bought by Bhishma. But there are other ways of choosing a husband- Swayamvara where the girl is sometimes given the right to choose her husband (e.g., Kunti has chosen Pandu herself. It is also obvious that the attitude to the mother was respectful they followed her advices but she might be respected because she managed to give birth to sons.

In the epos the contradictory attitude to woman can be traced: Bhishma takes the Princess away by force but treats them “as if they were his daughters-in-law or younger sisters or daughters”. Draupadi’s friend-Krishna supports her in difficult times and wants to help to revenge her offenders but at the same time claims that “women are one of the fourth worst vices, born by passion who kidnap the Royal luck”. Of course, Draupadi, being the main heroine of the Indian epos is depicted most vividly. Her image is carefully studied by many native and foreign scientists (Grintser, 2004; Neveleva, 1991; Sutherland, 1989).

Beautiful Draupadi has as vivid and violent nature as the fire from which she was born she is considered to be an ideal Indian woman (over 400 temples have been built in her honor) this is the “heroic wife”, the Queen (Neveleva, 1991). She is well educated, aware of the responsibilities of a wife she is the decoration of her spouses. Satyabhama asks Panchali (Draupadi) for advice, of how to be a good wife, so everyone knows about her virtues. But she could not endure silently the insults in her address, she just requires vengeance. She complains to Krishna for her unhappy fate, she has a long conversation with Yudhishtira, trying to encourage him to action. In the image of Draupadi there are elements of Shaktism, she is a dynamic, creative force that presents an active source, forcing her husbands to act. In the character of Draupadi, the ambivalent nature of Shakti is shown: on the one hand, good and creative and on the other-destructive. Partly, the goddess Shri has become incarnated in Draupadi but her character is closer to Durga or Kali, she wants revenge and justice.

Analysis of a literary text and its film versions leads to the logical conclusion that cinematography reflected the historical reality in which it was shot. Let’s analyze the transformation of female images in movies. In the film of 1965 female images are revealed a little. Gandhari and Kunti do not look like Queens but as ordinary people in modest sarees and sometimes it seems that the Director would have removed them from the film but there are episodes which are impossible without them. Their role is minimized to the maximum. At the time when the film was shot, modesty and asceticism were trendy that consequently was reflected in the movie. In the TV series of 1988 and 2013 both the main character and others, namely, Satyavati, Gandhari and Kunti are presented quite clearly. Let us consider their images in more details.

Satyavati of 2013 is a very energetic, ambitious girl, lusts after power, she is driven by different desires and she is not afraid of anything and does not think about where these primal desires can lead to. Her image is built on the contrast with the image of the king Shantanu. He’s

the old king, he has the perfect heir, he wants to enjoy peace in the arms of a beloved Satyavati but Satyavati does not want peace. She sets up her own conditions and, due to Bhishma, becomes the Queen. She doesn’t want to serve the King, she wants to rule and becomes the victim of her insatiable desires. The image of Satyavati of 1988 is closer to epic. In the epos Satyavati is calmer, she takes her decisions carefully, listens to advices.

The image of Gandhari of 2013 is a female-sufferer: an unhappy daughter because the parents gave her in marriage to the blind Dhritarashtra and after some time died in prison; a miserable sister because her brother Shakuni, trying to avenge her, brought her a lot of grief; an unloved wife because her husband blamed her for the blindfold for she could not give birth for a long time, he did not listen to her opinion; a poor mother because her sons were brought up by Shakuni and nothing good ever happened of it, the decencies were observed but her sons hadn’t true love to the mother; even the daughter married unhappily. Gandhari of 1988 is not as religious as an epic heroine and not as miserable as the heroine of the remake, she has a good relationship with her husband. It should be noted as the couples are represented in the series: they talk, discuss emerging problems, consult with each other, seeking for comfort and support in their mates, even discuss the affairs of the state. Literary Gandhari is “worthy, glorious, deserving of compassion, virtuous”, obviously, she’s religious, she has fulfilled her main task-gave birth to one hundred sons.

The image of Kunti in TV series is not much different from the epic one. In the TV series of 1988, she is listening with great attention to the teachings of the wise men about the purpose of the woman, about her place in life and becoming a mother herself, teaches her sons. Kunti of 2013 is shown as the perfect mother of the Pandava brothers rather, she is trying hard to be the best, despite of the fact that she abandoned an illegitimate son of Karna. She doesn’t struggle with the hardships of fate, she carries them bravely and patiently. The Pandavas love their mother selfless and try to do everything that she was proud of them. All her life she suffers from the fact that he refused Karna. Kunti is modest, quiet, not wearing expensive jewelry is not power hungry. She defends Draupadi to protect her children, she is ready for everything.

Speaking of Draupadi we should start with her birth. If the epic said a few words of her birth and in the series of 1988 it is almost an everyday event in the series of 2013 it’s an event which is strongly opposed by the king Drupada. He agrees to take the daughter but she should possess such qualities which not many gods can boast of (Ep. 84-King Drupada wants his daughter to know the

struggle and the pain as they strengthen character to see the dirt all over the world but remained pure herself, etc.) his words sound like a curse, dooming Draupadi for a miserable life. The image of Draupadi from the movie of 1965 is absolutely opposite of the epic there is nothing divine in it, she is an ordinary woman, brash and frivolous, at times rude. In the TV series of 1988 Draupadi also appears as an ordinary woman and only Krishna reminds her of her amazingness: “you’re not just a woman, you’re a symbol of women’s pride, so don’t talk about your grievances” [EP. 78]. Her image in the series of 2013 is not less bright, than in the epic. She is the embodiment of Shakti, she was born to become the Queen of the most powerful state and she possesses all the necessary qualities for this. The main, the culminating episode of the series is, of course, the scene of the humiliation of Draupadi in the Assembly hall. She understands that there is no one to protect her except God and she prays to Govinda. He comes to her rescue in any difficult situation, whether with the counsel or with action, he’s always there. It is from his mouth are the words about the suffering of women and the need for their liberation. If the epic Draupadi is forced to defend herself and rescue the husbands in the series she is helped by Krishna in everything. All women suffer from men and their desires, only Krishna protects them [EP. 157] or they themselves. Women in the series of 2013 are depicted strong, active, energetic and courageous and men are weak (in the most complex key situations, they either cry, or fail to act or refuse their wives).

In this study an attempt was realized to explore how the images of women are presented in the TV series and to identify significant problems of the relation to women in society. In India, religion is an integral part of human life and “Mahabharata” is revered as a sacred and authoritative text, so TV series and films, shot on the plot of this work, become quite popular and controversial. Consequently they could be used by their authors to attract attention to the urgent problems of society, family, gender relations. In these film versions tradition and innovation are combined. In each film version the female issue was more acute due to the transformation of female images. In the TV series of 1988, these questions become, first of all, a definition of the roles and responsibilities of a woman. A woman is first of all a mother and a wife these are her main roles. Secondly, a woman should be protected and the state in which a woman is treated as Draupadi was treated has no right to exist. It is from the lips of men are the words of the protection of women. Also, the analogy of Woman- Mother-Earth is set

up. These three concepts are combined into one: we need to care of the Earth, the homeland as well as of a woman and respect and honor her as a Mother.

Looking through the daily twenty-minute episode of for example, series of 2013, the viewer sees the beloved, revered heroes, a familiar from childhood story but with new ideas that make you think. The demands of society are changing. If previously Mahabharata inspired the Indian for the liberation movement against Muslims or British and they wanted to live like in the era of Ram Rajya but now when India has already been an independent state for almost 70 year, the question of the status of women is still relevant. It is obvious that the female characters of the Mahabharata have transformed, now they have a strong character, firmly and courageously overcome the problems they have in life, remaining gentle, loving and loyal, combining the dual nature of Shakti.

CONCLUSION

Women do not want to remain in the shadows of their husbands, someone wants to rule (Satyavati), some of them demand respect and justice (Draupadi) and some want to love and be loved (Gandhari). Summarizing we can say with certainty that the transformation of female images of the ancient Indian epic “Mahabharata” reflects changes in the attitude of society towards the status of Indian women.

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