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Andrzej Wierciński & Andrej Božič (*Eds.*)

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The Gadamer–Habermas Debate through *Mahabharata*'s Women

Intersectional Feminist Engagements with Tradition and Critique

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Abstract

Despite their affinities in criticizing the Cartesian subject, contextualizing texts, and upholding dialogue as integral to interpretation, there are differences between the hermeneutic projects of Gadamer and Habermas. While Gadamer emphasizes real dialogue and continuity with tradition, Habermas highlights ideal communication and critical distance. With regard to the underexplored feminist intervention in their debate, it can be said that there are greater affinities between feminist thought and

Gadamer arising from their commitment to historically situated thought. But the vantage position of tradition in Gadamer has generated its set of feminist apprehensions. The paper scrutinizes the consequences of intervening in the Gadamer–Habermas debate on the hermeneutics of tradition from a feminist perspective. Analyzing women characters in the Indian epic *Mahabharata*, it argues that the intersectionality between their gendered identity and varied social locations of class and caste leads to diverse feminist perspectives. In conclusion, the paper ponders over whether they are all equally critical and the extent to which they can be reconciled.

Keywords: hermeneutics, critique, feminism, dialogue, tradition, Gadamer, Habermas, Mahasweta Devi, *Mahabharata*.

Povzetek

Diskusija med Gadamerjem in Habermasom skoz perspektivo žensk v *Mahabharati*. Intersekcijski feministični spoprijemi s tradicijo in kritiko

Kljub njuni bližini glede kritike kartezijanskega subjekta, kontekstualizacije besedil in zagovarjanja dialoga kot sestavnega dela interpretacije obstajajo pomembne razlike med hermenevtičnima projektoma Gadamerja in Habermasa. Medtem ko Gadamer poudarja resničen dialog in kontinuiteto s tradicijo, Habermas zastopa idealno komunikacijo in kritično distanco. Če se obrnemo k premalo raziskani feministični intervenciji znotraj njune diskusije, je mogoče ugotoviti, da dejansko obstaja večja bližina med feministično mislijo in Gadamerjem, ki izhaja iz zavezanosti historično situirani misli. Toda prednostni položaj tradicije pri Gadamerju je vendarle priklical določen niz feminističnih zadržkov. Članek iz feministične perspektive obravnava posledice intervencije v diskusijo med Gadamerjem in Habermasom glede hermenevtike tradicije. Na podlagi analize ženskih osebnosti v indijskem epu *Mahabharata* prispevek zagovarja misel, da intersekcionalnost njihovih spolno zaznamovanih identitet in mnogoterih družbenih položajev znotraj razredov in kast vodi k raznovrstnim feminističnim perspektivam. V zaključku skuša članek pretehtati, če so vse enako kritične in če jih je mogoče do določene mere medsebojno spraviti.

Ključne besede: hermenevtika, kritika, feminizem, dialog, tradicija, Gadamer, Habermas, Mahasweta Devi, *Mahabharata*.

> *There would be no hermeneutical task if there were no loss of agreement between the parties to a "conversation" and no need to seek understanding.*
>
> Hans-Georg Gadamer: "Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and the Critique of Ideology"

This paper examines the implications of the hermeneutic debate between Gadamer and Habermas for the possibility of a feminist engagement with tradition.[1] Instead of the isolated thinker, both Gadamer and Habermas, acknowledge the role of history and social practice in the formation of the subject. As a result, they endorse dialogue as integral to interpreting and understanding texts handed down by tradition. Yet, they differ with respect to their understanding of dialogical interpretation and tradition. Gadamer tends to emphasize the symmetry of "I" and "Thou" between dialogue partners, as well as continuity with tradition in interpretation. Habermas distinguishes between real dialogue as fractured by communicative distortions and ideal speech exhibiting the kind of symmetry that Gadamer envisaged. Their relationship with tradition similarly differs with Gadamer emphasizing continuity, and Habermas pointing to the ruptures within traditions. The dimensions of dialogue and tradition, highlighted in the unsettled Gadamer–

1 I am indebted to Margaret McLaren, Biraj Mehta, Madhavi Narsalay, Sachchidanand Singh, and the two reviewers of this paper for their valuable suggestions. I thank Sachchidand Mishra for his kind help. My paper has benefitted from comments and discussions from participants at the following forums where it was presented either in part or in other versions: *Subaltern Hermeneutics and Social Transformation* (seminar organized by the Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, September 19–20, 2006), I.C.P.R. *World Philosophy Day* lectures (at the Department of Philosophy, University of Pune, November 16, 2006, and at the Department of Philosophy, University of Calicut, November 29, 2009), *Voices of the Marginalized* (seminar organized by the Departments of English, History, and Political Science, Jhunjhunwala College, Mumbai, January 18, 2013), *Women in Indian Knowledge Tradition* (seminar organized by the Department of Philosophy, Kamala Nehru College, New Delhi, and the Indian Council of Philosophical Research, New Delhi, February 8, 2017), and *Indian Languages* (refresher course organized by the UGC Human Resource Development Center, University of Mumbai, February 11, 2021, online). However, I am solely responsible for all the shortcomings this paper.

Habermas debate that did not refer to feminist issues even diagonally (Hekman 2003, 183), are integral to feminist engagements with religion, myth, philosophy, and the like. A dialogical critique of taken for granted assumptions and their conceptualizations[2] has been constitutive of feminist interventions in philosophy and religion.

Hence, this paper attempts to explore the implications of the Gadamer–Habermas debate through a gendered lens. Feminist discussions reveal that a critical relation to tradition does not necessarily translate into a disavowal of Gadamer and an affirmation of Habermas. Indeed, Habermas overlooks the ambivalence in Gadamer's account of tradition, while Gadamer's countering of Habermas ignores the possibility of a situated critique without an Archimedean point outside tradition.[3] Yet, there are many points of contact between Gadamerian hermeneutics and feminist philosophical concerns. Their critiques of individualism and abstract rationality, emphasis on receptive thinking and stress on participatory knowledge emerging through interpretation are cases in point. However, there is cause for feminist apprehension with both thinkers. Gadamer's focus on the authority of tradition could endorse women's stereotypes, while the critical moment in Habermas's hermeneutics, notwithstanding its ahistoricity, can obstruct feminist goals.

Clearly, a feminist intervention in the Gadamer–Habermas debate is rather complex, as it belies easy dichotomies of tradition and critique. Yet, the feminist relationship to tradition is at stake in gendering this debate. Some of its key questions are: Can critique reconcile an understanding based on interpretation with social transformation without appealing to an ahistorical individual? If critique is not the same as repudiation of tradition, how do feminists connect with tradition? This paper is an attempt to discuss these questions by gendering the Gadamer–Habermas debate in the intersectional context of women characters, divided by social privilege and its absence, in the Indian epic *Mahabharata*.[4]

2 Specifically, within the traditions and histories underlying religions, myths, and philosophies.

3 For the debate, see: Habermas 1970, 1980, 1988, and Gadamer 2006. See also: Mendelson 1979–1980, Warnke 1987, and Hekman 2003 for accounts of the debate.

4 All references to this text are from the following editions and translations: Karve

I. Gadamer and Gender

The engagement with text and tradition is an inevitable part of the feminist philosophical project, which attempts to make women who have been erased by the canon visible (Witt 2004). The recovery of women philosophers, such as Gargi, Sulabha, Meerabai,[5] Hypatia, or Anne Conway has been an ongoing task.[6] Besides inclusiveness, such a project also entails a critical exposé of the canonical conception of women, in which male thinkers have written about women's nature. In addition, it attempts to redeem hitherto devalued concepts, such as care. Feminist thinkers have further demonstrated how taken-for-granted philosophical concepts have gendered undertones. Thus, for instance in the Indian context, feminists have deconstructed the casteist masculinist underpinnings of the Indian philosophical tradition (Belsare 2003). Western feminists have similarly exposed the patriarchal assumptions underlying the notion of an impartial disengaged ethical agent (Hekman 1993; Gilligan 1993; Noddings 2013).

Such gendered intervention has not abandoned the philosophical canon, despite the latter's patriarchy; it has, on the contrary, tried to rebuild it to see ways, in which thinkers and concepts with seeming antipathy to women can be integrated with feminist concerns.[7] Feminist philosophers have opened ways of engaging with tradition that are heterogeneous, exploratory, and

1991, Ganguli 2003, Badrinath 2006, Uberoi 2005, and Pattanaik 2010a. The specific edition of the *Mahabharata* has been cited when episodes have been narrated and analyzed in detail. The paper does not use diacritical marks or italics for Sanskrit words to retain a flow with English language and with Mahasweta Devi's work.

5 Gargi is a woman sage from the Vedic period around 700 B.C. who in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* questioned an established male sage, Yajnavalkya, on metaphysical matters (Mahadevan 2014, 16). Sulabha is an ascetic figure from the *Mahabharata* well-versed in philosophical arguments (Mahadevan 2014, 67–69). Meerabai was a saint poet (ca. 1498–1565) who questioned traditional norms of marriage in her quest for spirituality (Mahadevan 2014, 69–71).

6 See Waithe (1987–1995) for an enumeration of almost two hundred women philosophers in the western tradition.

7 Kanchana Natarajan (2013), for example, reconstructs Vedanta from the point of view of a woman saint Avuddai Akka. Susan Hekman (1993) has rehabilitated Sartre's notion of freedom through her feminist critique.

even indeterminate. In this process, tradition is redefined and reconfigured through critique. The hermeneutics of philosophy and critique—especially that of Gadamer and Habermas—[8] has an obvious relevance to such feminist concerns with tradition.[9]

Gadamer's hermeneutics as philosophy emerged as an alternative to the dominant scientism of the twentieth century and the methodological hermeneutics of the nineteenth. Since Bacon, science was seen as an asocial project, where a thinking individual discovered objective facts equal to knowledge (Gadamer 1975, 312).[10] The latter was discovered through experimental techniques, quantitative methods, and formal vocabulary, whereby interpretation and understanding were erased. As a result, technocratic expertise enjoyed hegemony and discouraged art, culture, and tradition from the scope of knowledge.

The cultural turn effected by modern hermeneutics strived to recover the intentions of the text's author[11] or the historical actors of a by-gone era[12] through methodological rigor. Against this, Gadamer maintained that the human subject is not an isolated thinker, but is formed through historical and social practices. Moreover, epistemological advances become possible only when there is dialogue with the text that involves understanding and interpretation. Gadamer upholds that hermeneutics cannot be reduced to a method specific to literature or social sciences.[13] A method is an individual effort at mastery; as

8 This paper limits itself to Habermas's hermeneutic period through his response to Gadamer.

9 For several aspects of this relation, see Code 2003b.

10 Gadamer notes that Bacon himself had brought in two levels of meaning in his experimental method. It is, on the one hand, the isolation from vagaries of change for a stable measurement; but it also means a "self-purification of the mind" (Gadamer 1975, 313) by confronting it with the unexpected that has to be excluded so that it proceeds gradually towards axioms. Bacon himself realizes the limits of pure measurement. He puts forth an "enumeratio simplex," in which accidental observations are generalized through numbers, and "interpretatio naturae," in which experts give an account of the inherent properties of nature (cf. Gadamer 1975, 312).

11 This is Friedrich Schleiermacher's position.

12 Wilhelm Dilthey represents this trend.

13 He critiques Schleiermacher and Dilthey for falling into the positivist trap with their emphasis on method.

experts in planning and scientific research attest, it is forgotten once its goal is achieved. It is neither universal nor reflexive (Gadamer 1975, 278–289).[14] As Gadamer himself noted, his approach to hermeneutics has bearing on literary works and epics, on works that have been transmitted and preserved over the years with the capacity to speak to the contemporary and without being determined by a given historical time (1989, 160–164, 288). They have a close relationship with readers who are both free and mobile, whereby "being read belongs to literature by its very nature" (Gadamer 1989, 161). While Gadamer circumscribes readings to written texts, a text, such as the *Mahabharata*, has also been read in the course of being handed down orally. Gadamer rightly notes that readings of texts cannot be confined to the historical genesis or the author's intention. An epic framing cultural life through myths that often narrate stories of moral dilemmas cannot be viewed as historical. Although, given the entanglement of myth and history, one cannot characterize it as being normative as Gadamer does (1989, 288).

Hence, following Gadamer, there is no ready-made meaning either in the text or in the mind of an interpreter. Texts handed down by tradition acquire meaning through the interpretation of stories and historical events that precede and follow them (Habermas 1988, 155). Meaning, therefore, cannot be completed, described, or realized at any given point, but is always incomplete. The methodological focus converts knowledge into a homogeneous body of measurable facts, which do not account for interpolations and multiple sedimentations within texts, such as the *Mahabharata*. With respect to the latter, the colonial orientalist scholar's search for an "original" (Sukhthankar 1957, 31) or "epic nucleus […] of the primitive kshatriya tale of love and war" (ibid.) is a reflection of such homogeneity. Hermeneutics is, as Gadamer highlights, not a method to be used in a specialized discipline, but a sensitivity inextricably linked to the human condition.[15] The interpreter is different from the thinker in being related to others through language. Moreover, meanings that are interpreted and understood differ from facts, as they are not absolutes

14 This critique of method is derived from Gadamer's critique of technical knowledge.
15 This echoes Heidegger who maintains that human beings are beings-in-the-world and cannot escape the existential inevitability of understanding (Dallmayr 2000, 832).

available all at once to a method. Rather, the interpreter is open to a plurality of meanings, methods, points of view, and innovation in the process of trying to understand a text, a culture, a speech act, a monument, an artefact, and so forth. For Gadamer, this also opens the domain of interpretation to art and culture as having cognitive significance.

Gadamer characterizes understanding as an activity encompassing the practical, the intellectual, and the existential (Gadamer 1975, 231). In understanding anything—a machine, a trade, or a text—one sees tacit connections and draws out hidden implications, while knowing one's own way about it. In this disclosure of that which is hidden, there is also a self-disclosure, where one finds one's way and projects possibilities, both in everyday-life situations and while reading texts (225). For Gadamer, therefore, "[…] a person who understands, understands himself [sic!], projecting himself [sic!] according to his [sic!] possibilities" (231).

Given this relationship towards the self, the reference to experience becomes inevitable. For Gadamer, what is transmitted through tradition, becomes available through hermeneutic experience (1975, 321). Tradition is like another person—a friend—with whom the interpreter dialogues; the latter gives birth to meaning, which makes understanding possible. Thus, tradition is accessed through the process of interpretation, collaborative meaning, and understanding—all of which are rooted in the experiential self. The social sciences, according to Gadamer, approach tradition immediately by treating it in a detached way as an object that is made transparent. In this, they follow the methodology of the natural sciences—since Hobbes—applying it to social sciences (Gadamer 1975, 322). But this does not do justice to the plurality in social sciences and also tends to remove the hermeneutic character of experience. Gadamer suggests that the interpreter reflectively, instead of immediately, relates to tradition through "mutual recognition" and a "dialectic of reciprocity" (Gadamer 1975, 323). There are claims and counterclaims—there is an attempt to understand the other better than the other's own understanding of himself or herself. Such an understanding is possible because there is an openness to each other—a "belonging together."

Understanding, according to Gadamer, is linked with tradition and its authority, as a partner in communication. Since the interpreter never

understands from an absolute point free from presuppositions, understanding becomes possible through the fore-structure of the interpreter being-there in the world (1975, 235–236).[16] The interpreter starts out by projecting a meaning onto the text, inherited from the complex fore-structure of his or her location. Yet, this projection is only tentative; it has to be examined and even revised by listening to the text, which has its own history of interpretations, contexts, and assumptions. According to Gadamer, the interpreter who acquires the text from tradition will have to concede greater authority to it.[17] When the interpreter projects a traditionally given meaning onto the text, it needs to cohere with it—provided that the unity of the text and the principle of charity are taken into consideration. After arriving at meaning, the interpreter projects it back onto the situation. Thus, interpretation and understanding take place within a hermeneutical circle, where the fusion of horizons of the text and the interpreter leads to meaning (158). For Gadamer, "[t]he horizon is a range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point" (1975, 269). In demarcating his/her own situation, the interpreter has to necessarily imagine the other or the text to arrive at an original meaning in the text empathetically or to impose his or her own meaning onto it.

Feminist responses to Gadamer, in comparison to poststructuralist thinkers like Foucault or Derrida, have been rather limited. Indeed, his stress on tradition has led many feminists to criticize him for advocating gender stereotypes.[18] Besides, Gadamer himself did not explicitly engage with themes of feminism. However, an alternative strand of thinking among feminists, since the past two

16 Heidegger's acknowledged influence on Gadamer is apparent. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger proclaims: "Whenever something is interpreted as something, an interpretation will be founded essentially upon fore-having, fore-sight and fore-conception. An interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us." (1962, 32.) Gadamer similarly maintains that prejudices or pre-judgements (*Vorurteile*) enable the interpreter to project appropriate meanings onto texts. They are not personal biases, but inherited through history and practice or the effective historical consciousness; such a consciousness is always sensitive to something outside it (1975, 262–265).

17 This is Gadamer's way of avoiding the idealist impasse by referring to a perspective outside of the interpreter.

18 For overviews, see Code 2003a and b. For criticisms, see Fleming 2003 and Fiumira 2003.

decades or so, argues for taking Gadamer's work as an ally, for many of his concerns resonate with their own (Code 2003b; Hoffman 2003; Warnke 1993, 2003). Contemporary feminists, having diagnosed Cartesian subjectivism as patriarchal,[19] argue that the thinking subject is a covert male figure who is falsely universalized. The notion of detached rationality, as Luce Irigaray argues, where a singular subject wishes to know and identify an object fully, originates in male domination (1985, 243–256).[20] Gadamer's apprehensions of Cartesianism and his rehabilitation of prejudice have been interpreted in a positive sense by feminists who underscore the historical rootedness of thinkers (Hoffman 2003). From an epistemological point of view, feminists have argued that de-linking scientific truths from society produces a technocratic culture of experts that renders women vulnerable (Kelkar 1999). Moreover, they oppose the scientistic separation of fact and method arguing that pure science cannot be segregated from the so-called application or technology. As historical enterprises, each has a reciprocal relation that enables and constrains scientific research (Harding 2001, 298–299). The latter, which includes research in fields, such as military, medical, and health sciences, reveals that scientific research is not entirely determined within the laboratory (297), but requires "the context of discovery" (Harding 1986, 238). Thus, feminists maintain that natural sciences are not outside the sphere of ideology and society. The natural science researcher has an identity constructed through an interface with tradition—in this instance, the scientific one. Tradition, following Gadamer, is a conversational-interpretative process that can acknowledge both patriarchal and feminist possibilities; this is often because of its ambivalence, which is reflected in its being handed down through myths and legends (Alcoff 2003; Freudenberger 2003). Thus, feminist interventions have enriched Gadamer's hermeneutics by extending it to the context of epistemology and even natural science (Gadamer did not intervene in the latter domain).

Turning to social science and culture, feminist readings of Gadamer have acknowledged his insight that tradition is not a given (Code 2003b,

19 See Hoffman (2003) for a feminist epistemological rehabilitation of Gadamer.

20 She claims that Plato's allegory of the cave epitomizes this phenomenon in repressing the bodily dimension to affirm pure thought as the basis of subjective identity and knowledge.

11). Hence, Warnke suggests that feminists adopt his fusion of horizons to comprehend the processes, through which gendered identities can be interpreted.[21] She upholds that Gadamerian hermeneutics is crucial for intervention in the feminist sex/gender controversy, which examines whether gendered identities are naturally given or socially constructed. Gadamer has the resources to move beyond this imbroglio to comprehend gender as "[…] an interpretation, a fusion between wants and needs of developing individuals and the history of interpretations of them, including objections to those interpretations" (Warnke 2003, 72). This fusion is not a permanent, but a fragile act that is open to change. Thus, if the gendered subject is to replace the cogito, thought is replaced by conversations between historical agents and their life-worlds, as Fleming notes (2003, 109, 110). As a result, Gadamer's advocacy of otherness in dialogue can also be relevant to the feminist project (Fleming 2003, 111).[22] A conversation takes place when the speaker's alternative point of view allows the adopting of an unfamiliar perspective within the familiar, and vice versa. Traditional texts can be read, by conversing with their women characters, for instance, from the perspective of contemporary feminist concerns. Gadamer's sensitivity to otherness can enable the reading of traditional texts from the perspective of contemporary feminist concerns. Thus, Gadamer's insight that understanding consists in application—albeit differently—has been adopted by feminists in their endeavors to re-read canonical works in deconstructive and constructive ways.[23] The feminist inquiry of being situated, finite, and dialectical (Code 2003b, 3–4) fits in with his urge to appropriate variable readings of traditional texts as the following discussion of *Mahabharata* will attempt to show.

21 For a detailed account of this relation, see Warnke 2003.

22 However, Fleming (2003, 111–131) goes on to argue against Gadamer's notion of radical otherness as antagonistic to feminist concerns because it only has an instrumental value.

23 For a qualified feminist appropriation of Gadamer's notion of tradition, see Alcoff 2003.

II. Gendering the *Mahabharata*

The *Mahabharata*, one of the lengthiest, oldest epics and a resource of Indian philosophy, government, history, culture, religion, and psychology, has a long and complex hermeneutical history. It cuts across the boundaries of orality and writing, as well as history[24] and myth, through text, performance, culture, and art, both in the popular and the classical domains. Its multi-layered, expansive repetitive history of interpretations suggests, in a Gadamerian vein, that Vyasa's authorship is only nominal,[25] perhaps as a generic name for the various narrators of the text at different phases.[26] Since the nineteenth century, its written history of translation and criticism includes both non-Indian and Indian scholars, in both the colonial/orientalist and the postcolonial contexts.[27]

Interpretations of *Mahabharata* have focused on the hermeneutic circle of the normative frame of duty (dharma) of its royal protagonists, often from the point of view of its male characters.[28] It has, thus, often been read as a series of illustrations of moral dilemmas (Matilal 2007, 86). Matilal demonstrates how the text embodies different types of moral conflict, such as the struggle against temptation or weakness of will with reference to Yudhishthira who led the five righteous brothers or the Pandavas.[29] Yudhishthira was called the Dharmaraja or the King of Duty, but he had a weakness for gambling. In the first instance of gambling, he lost everything he owned—his kingdom, himself, his brothers and their wife—to his enemy cousins, the Kaurava princes. But when challenged to

24 Karve (1991) has called it itihasa (history) in contrast to kavya (poem).

25 Narayan (1989, 12–13), in contrast, prefers to see Vyasa as an author who directs the text with his thoughts in keeping with the modern novel form.

26 See, for example, Sukhthankar 1957.

27 For a detailed account, see Sukhthankar 1957, 1–31 and Dhand 2008, 5–13.

28 See also Sutton 2000.

29 The two discussions of the moral dilemma in *Mahabharata* are derived from Matilal. The five Pandava brothers, who are Yudhishthira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva, had a common wife Draupadi. All of them belonged to the kshatriya varna or caste that was recognized as having the function of ruling. The *Mahabharata* devotes considerable attention to governance and the duties of a king (Brodbeck and Black 2007, 3). It recognizes a four-tiered caste/varna system and treats forest tribals, such as the nishadas, as outside of civilization. It endeavors to communicate widely across caste and gender lines (Black 2007, 54).

gamble for the second time, he went ahead despite his bankruptcy; justifying his choice on the basis of his position as a prince to cover his temptation or weakness of will. For Matilal, a more "genuine" moral conflict (one where one does not quite struggle with oneself) is also embodied in the *Mahabharata*. He refers to Arjuna caught between his duties as a kshatriya to fight the war and his responsibility as a member of the human race towards pacifism. Arjuna, Matilal argues, resolves his conflict in a pragmatic way by continuing to kill, but with sensitivity towards his victims. After the war, Arjuna paradoxically did not have a sense of genuine victory in a kingdom of war survivors rife with old people, widows, and children (Matilal 2007, 98).

Such interpretations of duty (dharma) and conflict have for most part engaged with its dominant male characters.[30] Contemporary feminist concerns have motivated interpreters to examine its women characters as contending with duty (dharma), its conflict, and even criticizing figures, such as Yudhishthira and the other Pandava princes for failing in their duty.[31] Contrary to R. K. Narayan's (1989) claim, women do not simply occupy ornamental positions in the *Mahabharata*, but play a vital role in its articulation of dharma or duty and examination of the human condition.[32] Women-oriented interpretations of the *Mahabharata* often foreground Kunti and Draupadi (Bhattacharya 2000, 2006), who are among the panchkanya or the five "women of substance" venerated in the Hindu tradition; the others being Ahalya, Tara, and Mandodari from the epic *Ramayana*.[33] None of them are wives in the conventional sense of the term.[34] But they do fulfill their wifely duties (dharma) with utmost sincerity. More significantly, they are instances of independent and critical thinking—

30 Although in its *Vanasparvan* section, a prominent female character, the royal princess Draupadi, also reflects on dharma, she perhaps does not do it with the same intensity as male characters.

31 See, for example: Karve 1991; Bhattacharya 2000; Brodbeck and Black 2007; Dhand 2004, 2008; Chakravarti 2016; Shah 2012.

32 See Kalyanov 1977–1978.

33 This enumeration of the Panchkanyas is based on Bhattacharya (2000) and Shah (2012); in other readings, Sita replaces Kunti.

34 For instance, although Draupadi is committed to the pativrata ideal of loyally serving her husbands, she never fails to complain about her husbands' failures (Shah 2012, 87).

at times even challenging patriarchy through their choices (Karve 1991; Bhattacharya 2000).[35] Thapar who defends a feminist version of Shakuntala found in the *Mahabharata* observes that the epic's unique quality is its strong women, adding Gandhari to the list (1999).[36] Others have profiled Shakuntala, Savitri, Suvarchala, Madhavi, and Draupadi as strong characters because of their ability for self-control.[37]

Kunti and Draupadi offer grounds for explicitly feminist readings. As the mother of Yudhishthira and the Pandavas, Kunti is related to Draupadi as her daughter-in-law. The *Mahabharata* venerates Kunti as a mother so that the Pandava brothers are consistently referred to as sons of Kunti.[38] Kunti is also portrayed as a fiercely independent woman in her choice of pre-marital and post-marital motherhood, as well as in her compassion towards her step-sons.[39] She gets her son Bhima married to a Rakshasa woman, Hidimba,[40] as Kunti foresaw that their child Ghatotkacha would save her other son Arjuna by giving up his own life. Moreover, Kunti was also responsible for her five Pandava sons marrying one woman, namely Draupadi, so that they remained

35 Shah (2012) opens the possibility of reading the Panchkanyas in a subversive way.

36 See Mahadevan (2007) for another feminist intervention in the Gadamer–Habermas debate that engages with Thapar's Shakuntala from the perspective of Gadamer's hermeneutics.

37 For feminist-oriented accounts of Draupadi, see: Sundari 1993; Sarabai 2004; Pattanaik 2010b.

38 Bhattacharya quotes Yudhishthira paying tribute to his mother Kunti: "Isn't it said that obedience to gurus is a supreme virtue? What greater guru than one's mother? To me this is the highest *dharma*." (Bhattacharya 2000.)

39 Dhand (2008) narrates how the practice of niyoga, in which a wife bore children with other men when her own husband was impotent, was constantly evoked in the *Mahabharata*. Kunti exercised her autonomy in her choice of number of sons through niyoga. For a detailed discussion, see also Bhattacharya 2000. Kunti uses a magical power to give birth to a child before son. This is Karna, born through her liaison with the Sun-God, Surya. Kunti marries Pandu who could not reproduce. When Pandu asks Kunti to beget children from other spouses, she obliges only after a long resistance. With Dharma (duty), Kunti has Yudhishthira, she has Bhima with Vayu (wind), and Arjuna with Indra (thunder and rain). In addition to these sons, Kunti adopts the sons of Pandu's second wife Madri: Nakula and Sahadeva who become her Pandava sons. Yet, Kunti's past haunts her as her son Karna becomes an opponent of her five Pandava sons.

40 See *Adiparva Hidimba-vadha Parva*, Section CLVII (in Ganguli 2003). Rakshasas were forest dwellers with supernatural powers.

together—albeit unknowingly.[41] In fact, Kunti intervenes to ask Krishna to advise her sons to opt for a righteous war, rather than compromise through peace. Yet, after the war, Kunti returns to the forest with Dhritarashtra and Gandhari (parents of the Kaurava princes with whom Kunti's Pandava sons were in battle) to spend the rest of her life tending to them and subsequently perishes in a forest fire.[42]

Draupadi, the wife of Yudhishthira and the Pandavas, is a strong character with a mind of her own (Bhattacharyya 2000, 38–39). She is depicted as someone who controls her desires and performs her household duties selflessly. She stands up for her rights, when her husbands are not able to protect her from humiliation by their enemy. At the infamous game of dice, her husband Yudhishthira gambles even Draupadi after losing everything.[43] Draupadi is brought to the public assembly by their enemies to be humiliated and disrobed in a menstruating condition (Chakravarti 2016, 128). On being dragged violently into the assembly, Draupadi realizes that there is no one to protect her. In this context, she asks her husband Yudhishthira: "Whom did you lose first, yourself or me?" (Chakravarti 2016, 137.)[44] Her resistance and torment reflect Draupadi to be the epitome of wifely loyalty or pativrata. Thus, she is apandita (intellectual) and pativrata (wife) simultaneously, someone who argues, doubts norms, and yet does her wifely duty (Malinar 2007, 89; Shah 2012, 80–81). She boosts the morale of her spouses and nurtures them during their exile. On regaining his kingdom, when her eldest husband Yudhishthira wavers to take power, Draupadi counsels him on duty (dharma). Yet, despite her devotion to her spouses, Draupadi is often deeply disappointed by their inability to defend her. She is portrayed as "husbanded but not protected" (Bhattacharya 2000,

41 See *Swayamvara Parva*, Section CLXLIII (in Ganguli 2003).

42 The details pertaining to Kunti and other characters often vary in differing versions of the *Mahabharata*.

43 Yudhishthira was challenged into gambling by his cousins, the Kaurava brothers (hundred in number). He loses his family, wealth, and kingdom after the first game and is forced to go into exile with his family after losing the second. However, when the Kauravas refuse to return their kingdom to the Pandavas, the latter resort to war to regain their kingdom.

44 In the epic, Lord Krishna comes to Draupadi's rescue by expanding her single piece of cloth endlessly, so that the disrobing becomes unsuccessful.

2001; see also Pattnaik 2010).[45] These readings of the *Mahabharata* from the perspective of its royal women, Kunti and Draupadi, reveal the influence and limits of a unitary feminist horizon from the contemporary perspective.

Yet, not all readings of Kunti and Draupadi are feminist. They have a function within the larger cosmic order of keeping their family units assimilated; they do so by performing their duty (dharma)—Kunti as a mother (whose duties as a mother to her family are considered natural)[46]and Draupadi as a wife (who has to perform her duties as a pativrata).[47] They also strive hard to motivate their sons (Kunti's) and husbands (Draupadi's) to perform their duty (dharma) of fighting what they perceive as the righteous kshatriya war. Their keen desire to avenge the wrongs done to the Pandavas makes both women uncompromisingly war-oriented. Their commitment to war in the public political space is linked to their dedication to their families at home. Their self-assertion also reflects the limits of the dharmic patriarchal order, where women's primary task is the preservation of their family ties.

Indeed, there are very few instances of solidarity among the royal women in the *Mahabharata* who are related to dominant male figures whose interests they strive to preserve.[48] It is precisely such femininity that appealed to both Subramanian Bharati (Ramanujan 1999) and Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (Bhattacharya 2000) who invoked Draupadi in their nationalist agendas.[49]

45 Draupadi impatiently reproaches Yudhishthira about getting back his kshatriya status, while he responds by preaching the value of patience or kshama (*Aranyaka Parva*, Section XXVIII–XXXII; in Ganguli 2003).

46 *See Sabha Parva*, Book II, *Sisupalavadha Parva*, Section LXXVIII (in Ganguli 2003).

47 "Draupadi is conversant with virtue and economy." (*Sabha Parva*, Book II, *Sisupalavadha Parva*, Section LXXVII; in Ganguli 2003.)

48 "I am always engaged in waiting upon my Lords" (*Vana Parva*, Section CCXXXI-CCXXXIII; in Ganguli 2003), says Draupadi in her conversation (samvada) with Satyabhama on the duties of a wife.

49 Bhattacharya (2000, 45) has compared Draupadi to Demeter and Helen in being subject to utilitarianism and violence. Bhattacharya (2000, 50), citing Naomi Wolf's feminism, observes that Draupadi is punished by a patriarchal culture for her sexual independence. He notes how—being motherless—Draupadi's desire to find a mother in Kunti fails because she (Kunti) uses Draupadi to keep her five sons together (Bhattacharya 2000, 45–46). Draupadi is not portrayed as a nurturing mother to her own sons. Moreover, none of her husbands really stand up for her, each marries again and her husband Yudhishthira uses her in the game of dice. Draupadi's predicament is

Bharati, for instance, compared India under British rule to Draupadi's suffering due to her husband's enemies. For Chattopadhyay, Draupadi exemplified resilient self-control and self-sacrifice. For Bharati and Chattopadhyay, Draupadi is a woman with steadfast determination, chastity, and dedication to duty. Her being subject to violence and exploitation mirrored in the interests of Colonial India provoked nationalists, such as Bharati, to read Draupadi as a trope of resistance to colonization.[50]

These readings of Kunti and Draupadi reveal the possibilities of a feminist hermeneutics of tradition. They also expose its limits, such as that of a patriarchal gate-keeping, which women have resisted. As Georgia Warnke notes, how one "reflectively engages with the tradition with which it is involved, points up the inconsistencies in their ideals and practices […] in the face of their historical experience and historically conditioned experiences of women" (1993, 90). The diverse interpretations of Kunti and Draupadi as feminist or dharmic women who serve their community are not necessarily antithetical to each other. They show the unity and continuity of the themes of the *Mahabharata* through human action (karma) in Gadamer's spirit. Both Kunti and Draupadi have to contend with challenges to their performance of duty (dharma) due to their actions and circumstances. In this respect, they too have to face moral dilemmas of the kind described by Matilal, but these dilemmas result from their position as women in relation to their communities. Against the accepted masculine reading of the destruction of war (from Arjuna's perspective), these readings turn to the royal women and their stakes in the war.

Following Gadamer, gendered readings of the *Mahabharata* suggest that there are varied registers for interpreting a text, which could be conflictual (Warnke 1993, 91–92). However, it is not clear whether these conflicts can be put into a process of mutual interaction, as their gaps could be enormous. The sensibilities of the twenty-first century suggest that the feminist hermeneutics, which engages with the *Mahabharata* from the point of view of its royal kshatriya women, Kunti and Draupadi, is not critical enough. Women are not united by

reflected in her solitary death (Bhattacharya 2000, 44).

50 However, Indian feminists have also exposed the patriarchal strands in anti-colonial nationalism in India during the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. For a detailed overview, see Chakravarti 1989.

a common dharma, since the kshatriya or royal dharma applies only to women with privileges of caste and class. As Chakravarti (2016) notes, Draupadi's question as to who did Yudhishthira stake first assumes social inequality to be the norm. For instance, by staking himself, Yudhishthira becomes a dasa or a slave, and thereby loses his right over her as her husband, given her royal status.[51] Moreover, it also implies that she cannot be treated like a dasi, given her royal status as a kshatriya woman, suggesting that slave women can be humiliated. Draupadi's question is about being afflicted with slavery, rather than the oppression of women. Her anger with the charioteer who comes with the order to bring her to the assembly, given his class status, reflects as much as Chakravarti notes. Indeed, as Chakravarti observes, "[i]f she had spoken for all women, not just for herself as a *dāsī*, she would have asked a different question […]" (2016, 151). Draupadi would then have questioned why any woman—royal or slave—should be subject to sexual humiliation.[52] However, she does not question on this wider note.

As Devi enunciates in her short story "Five Women" (2005), such royal dharma also conflicts with that of the masses. She depicts five women, Godhumi, Gomati, Yamuna, Vitasta, and Vipasha,[53] who are from a peasant background, and their relationship with the Pandava royalty, whom they have come to serve after the war.[54] They are unable to understand the passage into widowhood by Kunti, Draupadi, and the other wives of the Pandavas. Their freedom and life spirit are pronounced, against the lamentations of the royal widows in their proclivity towards death and a casteist social order. The five working poor women also experience a greater degree of freedom and

51 Draupadi's question (*Sabha Parva*, Section LXVI) has received much scholarly attention. See, for instance: Karve 1991; Kulkarni 1989; Chakravarti 2016. Draupadi's humiliation in the *Sabha* (Assembly) is referenced in the critiques of using rape as a tool of political control.

52 Chakravarti (2016, 151) invokes Devi's retelling of the Draupadi episode in a short story "Dopdi." It narrates the resistance of a tribal Santhal woman Dopdi who challenges the police after being raped. Devi notes how Lord Krishna is not there to protect a humble Santhal woman. For the short story, see Devi 1990; for an interpretation, along these lines, see Mahadevan 2002.

53 These are all names of rivers.

54 In the war, the five Pandava brothers win over their Kaurava cousins.

happiness in comparison with Kunti, Draupadi, Subhadra,[55] and Uttara.[56] Devi shows how these proletarian women lost their husbands in the war as their husbands were foot-soldiers without access to even basic self-protection like armors. Besides, their husbands were also outside the frame of salvation, as they were not protagonists in the righteous war. Instead, as poor men, they were instruments in the tussle for kingdom between the two warring kshatriyas, the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Hence, Devi's five women claim that the war was not a righteous one for them, but was instead an avaricious combat, which had a meaningless destructive impact on those not connected through kinship to the warring factions. Devi articulates the dimension of ordinary people's lives that has been rendered as unfamiliar in the *Mahabharata*—the dharmic war was waged by exploiting poor peasants and their wives.

Devi also distinctly brings out the royalty's indifference to peasants and tribals. In a telling moment, Kunti indicts Draupadi for equating justice with revenge for her (Draupadi's) loss of honor, for being lost in self-pity and not heeding the suffering of the Kaurava widows (Devi 2005, 7–8).[57] With this, she shows that the war had a uniformly destructive impact on women in a gesture of feminist solidarity that is missing in the epic. As Chakravarti (2011, 2016) notes, Draupadi's attitude to slave women is revealed in her question about who was staked first after Yudhishthira gambles her away. Although there is no certain answer to Draupadi's question, several nuanced points emerge regarding the validity of an addict (Yudhishthira) who plays the game, the validity of a game where there is cheating, the extent of the authority of a husband over his wife (Kulkarni 1989; Karve 1991). To this, one might add the difference between royal women and slaves. Draupadi believes that a slave (dasa)—though male—has no right over royalty; moreover, as a royal woman she could not be treated as a slave (dasi). She, thus, implies that slave women

55 She is Arjuna's other wife.

56 Uttara is Draupadi's pregnant daughter-in-law.

57 Kunti counsels Draupadi: "Have you ever looked at the bereft Kaurava women who have lost their husbands and sons? Are they responsible, tell me? […] Try to feel a little compassion, a little pity. A little affection for them. You'll see how it will soften your heart." (Devi 2005, 8.)

can be treated without dignity, while royal women cannot.[58] Her constant affirmation of feminist entitlement as a Pandava wife is premised on her royal privilege.

Devi's short story "Kunti and the Nishadin" (2005, 25–40) portrays Kunti in old-age as introspecting in the forest, lamenting her fate and repenting her failure to follow her dharmic duties to her sons and daughters-in-law. She is confronted by a nishadin, a forest dwelling woman who judges such repentance as limited to royalty or rajavritta. She reminds Kunti of an episode that she had forgotten. Kunti had tricked the Nidshadin's mother-in-law along with her five sons into a situation where they were burnt to death, so that she and her Pandava sons could be saved.[59] Once again, Devi brings out the difference between the queen Kunti and the tribal women: Kunti's dedication to her family cast her in an exploitative relationship with underprivileged woman, whom she never recognized as equal enough to respond with guilt.[60] Kunti's relationship to ordinary people and tribal communities or lokavritta is deeply problematic. She urges her son Bhima to marry the forest dwelling Hidimba only so that it could benefit him. Hence, Kunti's dharma of being a good mother to her sons leads to violence towards those who are socially marginalized. Devi's stories bring out a complex facet about reflective women like Kunti and Draupadi: it is through their privileged relationship with socially vulnerable women that their assertiveness becomes possible. Devi's stories

58 Draupadi accepts Arjuna's wife Subhadra when she dresses herself as a cowherd woman and says: "I am thy maid." (*Adi Parva, Subhadraharana Parva*, Section CCXXIII; in Ganguli 2003.) When confronted with the specter of Yudhishthira's slavery, Draupadi wishes his redemption from such a state so that her son is not known as a child of a slave (*Sabha Parva*, Book II, *Sisupala Vadha Parva*, Section LXX; in Ganguli 2003).

59 See *Adi Parva*, Book I, *Jatugriha Parva*, Section CXLIII (in Ganguli 2003). Ambedkar (1987, Riddle No. 18) attributes to Manu the view that nishadas are a mixed caste comprising brahmins and shudras. Pattanaik (2010a, 65) defines them as forest-dwellers. The forest-dwellers were outside the castes of the Hindu community. The Ekalavya episode also illustrates the kshatriya-brahmin violence on the nishadas (Pattanaik 2010a, 64–65).

60 For an account of these episodes, see also Karve 1991, 51–52; 53. Karve (52–53) observes that the Critical Edition (Sukhthankar's) does show the innocence of the nishadin, although other narratives try to show the Pandavas in a good light.

reveal that Kunti's and Draupadi's horizons cannot be fused in a Gadamerian way with those of women from the underprivileged sections of society. Thus, there is no unitary and linear narrative of women in the *Mahabharata*.

Some of the issues that arise with reference to the hermeneutics of the *Mahabharata* include: How can one read it (or any other text) in a critical way? How can one have a more inclusive feminist interpretation, which is sensitive to those who serve the royal women as care-takers? How does one work towards a critical hermeneutics that takes the ethics of care, rather than just a pre-ordained caste duty (dharma), as its point of departure?

III. Interpreting critically

In the spirit of Habermas's critique of Gadamer, one could read the above tensions between women in the *Mahabharata* as resulting from a Gadamerian emphasis on the continuity of tradition. Hence, it is tempting to turn to Habermas's critical hermeneutics for resources to read the *Mahabharata* from the point of view of underprivileged women. Habermas (1980, 204) criticizes Gadamer for idealizing language by not distinguishing it from relations of power. He argues that social criticism demands a distance between tradition and interpretation, so that one can reflect on tradition to evaluate epic texts (1980, 168). According to this view, critiques of the *Mahabharata*, such as Devi's, are possible only when there is a distance with tradition. For Habermas, this requires a methodological commitment missing in Gadamer. In criticizing tradition in a retrospective way, one has to transcend tradition without necessarily appropriating it by legitimizing its pre-judgements or prejudices (Habermas 1980, 169–170). Gadamer's model of moral learning through didacticism in epics and classics does not allow for moving beyond the internalism of tradition and its assumptions (Habermas 1980, 169). Yet, Habermas fails to see the affinities between his own position and that of Gadamer. As Gadamer himself responded, Habermas does not acknowledge that he (Gadamer) does not think of the "cultural heritage of a people" as being exclusively linguistic, since he observes: "One would want to admit rather that every linguistic experience of the world is experience of the world, not experience of language." (1975, 495.) Work, power, and modes of domination underlie ways of experiencing

culture and expressing it in language. For Gadamer, the criticism of such domination requires that it be based on reason rooted in language (496). In support of Gadamer, one can also note that a methodological perspective on hermeneutics would make it inaccessible to sections of society suppressed by power as method, and its rigors are often upheld by experts who exercise their power. Hence, only when hermeneutics is ontological, in the sense of being the existential condition of the all-pervasive quest for meaning, can it be redeemed from subservience to experts making it democratic. Gadamer's (1975, 496) plea for orality in transmissions assists such a democratization in the Indian context. For it does not restrict interpretation to written formal documents available in institutions, but enables oral narratives of texts that are informally handed down, such as the *Mahabharata*. Habermas's indictment of Gadamer as being indifferent to critical reflection overlooks his (Habermas's) own appreciation of hermeneutic understanding, where the need for interpretation or translation arises when there is a "disturbed consensus" (Habermas 1988, 148) with respect to a common reference point (1988, 144–148). Gendered interpretations of the *Mahabharata* have taken place in contexts of "disturbed consensus," since women are not outside the tradition they criticize, but are very much a part of it.

Habermas's feminist critics, such as Butler, Benjamin (Meehan 1995), and Fleming (1995, 130),[61] argue, his notion of critical distance presupposes a subject position that stands outside tradition. Such a disengaged impartial subject transcends embodied cares and concerns of practical relationships, when it has patriarchal privilege, for women typically occupy the material space of connectedness. Moreover, as Susan Hekman reveals, Enlightenment thinkers, such as Kant, disparaged such immersion in concrete relationships as hindering women from disengaged thought (Hekman 2014, 76). Thinkers,

61 There are important differences between these thinkers, although they do converge on this point. Their criticism is relevant with respect to Habermas's early writings on hermeneutics in his debate with Gadamer. It also has a bearing on his early view of language (1970). However, this criticism cannot be applied wholesale to Habermas's own later account of language as communication; the latter is a reconstruction of linguistics and Kohlbergian psychology, both far removed from the isolated and ahistorical subjectivity (Habermas 1989, 187).

such as Carol Gilligan, have precisely questioned such an unrealistic ideal of rationality that is often available only to men with the privilege of others doing their labor (Gilligan 1993; Hekman 1995). Hence, interpreting the *Mahabharata* in a feminist way, through distance from history and tradition, would only endorse its patriarchal interpretations. But this critique ignores that criticism for Habermas—as for Gadamer—never possesses "a monological claim to self-certainty […] it is always tied to the tradition on which it reflects" (Habermas 1980, 209). Hence, for both Habermas and Gadamer, the language user is a historical agent—not a singular subject of thought—who subscribes to idealizations of freedom and equality while conversing with tradition. Meaning is generated when a discussion ensues between speakers and listeners—or interpreters and texts—who are both free and equal. Habermas himself does not show how a subject who is embedded in history can nevertheless be critical.

Turning to Gadamerian hermeneutics for an account of Habermas's critique, it can be said that Gadamer upholds interpretation as an act of translation, for reading is translation, which in turn is indefinitely repeatable (Gadamer 1975, 497). Acts of translation require bringing the foreign or what is dead "into our own language" (1975, 497). Thus, the unfamiliar or the alien is rendered in ways that are familiar to the self. For Gadamer, hermeneutic consciousness is characterized by the experience of the interpreter. Rather than discovering a given, experience negates false generalizations and stereotypes through sensitivity to human finitude and the unplanned. The term "experience" is used in two senses: as fitting in and confirming that which one has. The latter process is for Gadamer always negative—a "determinate negation" that is "dialectical" (1975, 317); it is a productive process wherein one does not merely discover something that one has not seen earlier. Rather, one improves upon an earlier perspective to acquire a more comprehensive view by rejecting and preserving parts of what one has thought before. There is, thus, a historical aspect to experience, in which there is repetition and confirmation or rejection. On the basis of an experience—once one has one, one can predict what was not expected thus far— there is openness to new experiences. Yet, disappointment is also a possibility in store. According to Gadamer, insight is also a necessary part of experience, which has prospects for fulfilment or deficiency (1975, 319–320), both of which are determined by the interpreter.

The experience of the interpreter also frames the dialectic of question and answer necessary for conversing with the text (Gadamer 1975, 325–341). The text poses questions to the interpreter, who, while answering them, comes up with his or her own questions. Thus, for Gadamer questions govern hermeneutical understanding. Following the Platonic dialectic of dialogue, he attributes the task of directing discussions to questions, which enable the interpreter to apply the text to a situation. Hermeneutical understanding consists in finding answers to questions: both of the text and of the interpreter: "[…] the working out of the hermeneutical situation means the achievement of the right horizon of enquiry for the questions evoked by the encounter with tradition" (1975, 269).[62] Hence, according to Gadamer:

> (i) The question brings something into speech in such a manner that its further determinations are left ambivalent.
>
> (ii) The question leads the conversation, in which alone a meaningful answer can be given (Gadamer 1975, 326; 330). Thus, it avoids the free-floating mire of opinions (330).[63]
>
> (iii) The logic of questioning—rooted in the interpreter—determines hermeneutical understanding of meaning in a given text (333).

Thus, the question gives focus to the hermeneutic act of seeking meaning. For Gadamer, hermeneutics is a process of translating an alien idea into the language and experience of the self (interpreter), through whose questions the text is filtered. For Gadamer, a question, thus, both opens and limits the text; it directs the dialogue between the self and the other without confounding the participants. Gadamer considers meaning or sense to be inherent in the question. Such a focus on the interpreting self tends to leave the other—such as a dialogue partner, text, monument, narrative—in a disadvantaged position. The very notion of approaching a text with a question that frames and orients

62 Discussions that end in an aporia are ones where the question prevails over the answer.

63 Thus, what Habermas terms as a dialectic or "crucial balance between mute union and mute isolation, between the sacrifice of individuality and the isolation of the solitary individual" (Habermas 1988, 150) is a part of the dialogue with tradition.

its interpretation rules out approaching it from unpredictable points of view (Fiumara 2003, 136). It fails to explore objects that transgress its limits, it predetermines its answers (137). Warnke (1987, 99) cautions against the interpreter's opportunism of imposing his or her own cultural presuppositions onto tradition, as well as against the conservatism of tradition's own assumptions being imposed on the interpreter. Contrary to the standard readings, Gadamer seems to veer towards an opportunistic, rather than a conservative reading of texts.

While interpreting, the text and the interpreter bond through a shared reference point of language, which makes conversation possible (Gadamer 1975, 347). Translations, which mediate between two foreign languages, are not like conversations because of the linguistic gulf that belies the unfamiliar aspect from being understood through familiarization (345–346). Where understanding takes place, one moves from translation to speech; the latter overcomes that which is different and alien by conquest, resulting in homogeneity. Yet, by situating hermeneutic understanding in the familiarity of the self, Gadamer weakens the possibility of interpreting traditional texts in ways that take the unfamiliarity of otherness into account. This becomes clear with respect to the dominant interpretations of the *Mahabharata* from the gendered point of view. If one approaches the text with the question of enumerating its women characters, the danger of highlighting its royal women looms large, given their prominence in the text. Kunti could not, despite being an earnest dutiful mother, protect her son Karna, who was born out of wedlock, and Draupadi could not earn the protection of her husbands, despite fulfilling all her wifely duties (pativrata) to them. Their feminism is limited to the kshatriya caste and royalty; hence, it neither criticizes the woman's condition *per se* nor does it ally itself with women outside of royalty. Fusing the horizons of the interpreter and the text to an extent does cultivate a critical identity by discerning the gendered moments in the *Mahabharata*. As the discussions of Kunti and Draupadi reveal, it also infuses contemporary feminist themes that negotiate the given and the constructed (Warnke 2003, 68–79). But the question as an entry point into the text does not necessarily explore women outside the domain of the familiar. In reading the *Mahabharata* from the stances of familiar figures, such as Kunti and Draupadi, one adopts the vantage

point of the universe of the privileged interpreter, albeit gendered. This does not quite enable the engagement with other approaches to duty (dharma), such as that of Devi's five peasant women or the nishadins. Both the question and the answer become versions of monologues by privileging the universe of the interpreter. Such a monologue is also palpable in Draupadi's question to her husband as to who did he stake first. The assumptions underlying the notion of the question *per se* show that it is not quite as open-ended. Fiumara remarks: "Adhering to the primacy of the question would thus be the way to participate in the dominant 'forms of life'—even if they turn out to be 'forms of death'." (2003, 136.)

Thus, a hermeneutical questioning of the *Mahabharata* from an abstract women's point of view would repeat the oversights of the abstract disengaged thinker that Gilligan and Hekman have cautioned against. It would focus on royal women, their duty, and conflict, taking what Devi calls the rajadharma into consideration. It brings the other—namely, women—into the domain of the "self" or the mainstream reader from the privileged social communities. It does not read the text from the point of view of those, who are the others of the other, namely women from tribes and underprivileged castes. Reading from the perspective of women who labor doing care work for the queens, what Devi terms as lokadharma requires that the self be surrendered to the other. The latter ruptured reading is a discontinuous one, which does not necessarily fuse the horizons of tradition with contemporary concerns; it goes beyond licensing the question to listen to Kunti's and Draupadi's references to the nishadins and the dasis.

Devi's critical understanding of the text becomes possible by listening to the silences or the speech of characters that the text presents as insignificant. Such an interrupted listening is an action that translates the text's universe, its rhetoric, its seemingly insignificant characters. It does not domesticate the text by making it familiar to the interpreter's universe. And it is also not a process of the interpreter singly engaging with predominant characters in the text. Rather, it entails turning to characters other than *dramatis personae*, such as Kunti or Draupadi in the *Mahabharata*; it entails solidarity with those others, who are outside the range of family, class, and caste, or, in short, the self. The move beyond the self, inherent to interpretation and translation, brings the self

into contact with the others—whereby otherness is discerned in the self, rather than conversely. In order to move beyond the familiar terrain of one-self, the hermeneutic questioning has to be replaced by listening.

Moreover, against Warnke (2003, 71) one can say that, rather than the fusion of horizons where the familiar assumptions of the interpreter dominate the interpretation via questions, listening is about trying to hear unfamiliar voices through ruptured horizons. Such listening is sensitive to ruptures in tradition, which become apparent in the differences and hierarchies. It becomes possible when the interpreter listens to and cares for those who do not typically own or belong to a tradition—such as the tribals and peasants in the *Mahabharata*, a text that has been transmitted through listening. The ruptured listening to the *Mahabharata*—to the voices of Kunti and Draupadi articulating their attitudes to dasis and nishadas—reveals a dissonance between rajadharma and lokadharma. Drawing upon various scriptures, dharma is undoubtedly a complex term whose meaning ranges from religion to morality.[64] If dharma is used in the broad sense of moral responsibility, it is incongruous with the kshatriya warfare. For it violates moral responsibility in being based on caste membership and injury by not having shared meaning. Moreover, a context-independent use of the term dharma is not permitted when it is closely tied to rajadharma; the latter roots dharma in caste-based activities. As a result, lokadharma or laboring work, which is performed without sanction from caste, stands in an exploited relation to rajadharma. Lokadharma—the work done by the five peasant women for Uttara—comprises household and farm duties for ensuring an orderly life with food and shelter. The peasant women stopped at the royal household only temporarily, as they could not walk through a field of burning funeral pyres for their husbands. They were ready to leave when the earth started cooling. Hence, they were not permanent slaves (Dasis). Responding to the royal Subhadra beseeching them to stay, they argue that they want to leave because "[…] the fields will lie fallow, the cattle will be uncared for […] We need husbands, we need children … We will … create life. That's what Nature teaches us." (Devi 2005, 22.)

64 For an account of dharma with reference to the *Mahabharata* and other Hindu scriptures, see Badrinath 2006, 77–112; 370–464.

Devi's description of such a morality and life of peasant women—named after rivers—as lokadharma resounds with the ethics of care articulated by thinkers, such as Gilligan (1993), Held (2006), and Tronto (2013). Care—as, following Tronto, a disposition and work—is socially associated with women; it has a potential to transgress the confines of the gendered self, for caring is disinterestedly (for the most part) done for the other. Practices of caring are based on the universal comprehensive experience of being "cared for as a child" (Held 2006, 3). One can follow Tronto's broad definition that caring as a tendency and activity "includes everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible" (Tronto 2013, 19).[65] It takes human vulnerability as its point of departure, whereby care occurs when there is interdependence. Moreover, in responding to human dependency, care work heals. Thus, care is governed neither by the caste hierarchy nor the self-sufficient subjectivity. It does not restrict itself to abstract humanity or particular others.[66] Rather, care puts human beings into processes of being with each other through giving and receiving nurture.[67] Care is not an inherently divisive ruling practice—like rajadharma or the kshatriya dharma; it is, therefore, committed to peace rather than violence. Devi's lokadharma is not restricted to caste membership as rajadharma is; Devi's five women are the names of rivers that have no borders and constriction in kinship. From the perspective of care, the other is discerned in the self, for "the burdens, suffering and tasks" (Honneth 2007, 123) are experienced as collectively shared.[68]

65 Tronto (2013, 19) acknowledges that this definition has been criticized by Held for being too wide.

66 Although Held focuses on particular others, which makes it difficult to adopt care in the public context, for it is only in the immediate circle of friends and family that one encounters particular others. Thinkers like Tronto and Gilligan have translated care to contexts that go beyond this immediate circle.

67 This is based on Tronto's (2013, 22–24) account of caring-with as a process of caring-about, caring-for, care-giving, and care-receiving.

68 On an alternative and yet analogous note, Dalmiya (2014) unknots several strands of care ethics with a focus on relationships and humility through encounters with marginal figures in the *Mahabharata*. She highlights the normative affective aspects of specific characters, such as a parrot's relationship to a tree and Yudhishthira's relationship to a dog. Dalmiya (2014, 120) also notes how a brahmin sage from a dominant caste,

The mainstream reading of the *Mahabharata* views dharma as a set of preordained duties founded on the intrinsic nature of persons on the basis of their social location. Thus, someone who is born into the warrior (kshatriya) caste, such as Arjuna, has a duty to fight in the war. Women are procreative, which is why they have the dharma of serving their husbands and families to retain caste purity (Belsare 2003, 170–171); both Kunti and Draupadi were fulfilling their preordained duties as mother and wife on this count. Matilal (2007) broadens the notion of dharma as being inevitably linked to moral dilemmas, since duties are not neatly laid out, since moral vulnerability is inevitable. But Matilal's moral dilemmas are still only those of the royal family. They presume caste-kin based order of duty—which is what makes them dilemmas in the first place. Matilal (2007, 100) attempts to broaden dharma into the path of the mahajana, where "mahajana" can mean the path of great persons. However, his interpretation of mahajana as a "proto-utilitarian view" of the good for "a great number of people" is problematic. For in defending the predominant notion of good conduct that is based on a homogeneous conception of the self, it could both encourage patriarchy and resist it.[69] Matilal, Spivak's "enlightened male feminist" (1992, 192), has not even taken the limited perspective of privileged royal women, such as Yudhishthira's wife Draupadi or mother Kunti, into consideration in his outline of moral dilemmas.

With respect to the *Mahabharata*, although its royalty has a moral commitment to their family members and caste groups in ruling their kingdom with rajadharma, it does not consider tribals, peasants, and underprivileged castes as worthy of such commitment. Devi's tale of "Five Women" (2005, 22–23) reveals this loss of privilege as being also a blessing for the peasant women, since they are not chained into domesticity and the rites of widowhood after the war, in which their husbands die. They are free to be together while performing their lokadharma, in contrast to women of the rajadharma, who are primarily related to men. Lokadharma as ethics of care transcends the limits

Kausika, attains "epistemological maturity" by learning from a butcher who does not have caste privilege. Dalmiya, however, states that the *Mahabharata* does not develop an ethics of care in a systematic way and it, thus, cannot be regarded as a feminist text because of its sporadic engagements with care.

69 Thus, Mill gives a utilitarian defense of women's equality with men.

of community and Matilal's utilitarian mahajana. When Draupadi asks the five peasant women whether they would come to meet Uttara's child, their answer is: "Yes we will. And we'll sit here in the garden and sing songs to the baby." (Devi 2005, 23.) Thus, Devi shows women to bond through care work—the Pandava women with the Kaurava, the nishada women with royalty, women from underprivileged castes and tribes with those from the privileged ones. Devi's five women, Godhumi, Gomati, Yamuna, Vitasta, and Vipasha, have the capacity for kindness transgressing barriers of caste and class. Yet, these bonds are tenuous; in order to be more abiding, they have to acknowledge differences between women: that the war was fought for Draupadi, a kshatriya woman's honor; that Kunti was indifferent to nishadas; and that the labor of the socially vulnerable women has a capacity to heal.

Devi's critical interpretation of the *Mahabharata* from the point of view of lokadharma and its struggle with rajadharma does not emerge from questioning the text. Rather, it is the outcome of being sensitive to the taken-for-granted or neglected characters in the text, to listen to them and get involved in their world (instead of translating them to the familiar world of the interpreter). All these are the features of lokadharma or care.[70] Devi's *Kurukshetra* is predicated upon years of working class, dalit, tribal and women's activism. Her critical engagement with the *Mahabharata* is not a reading by a solitary interpreter, but a collective engagement. Yet, her social criticism is an equally inevitable presupposition of activism. Such a hermeneutics endeavors to create a moral culture or dharma that provides "[…] those harmed by disrespect and ostracization the individual strength to articulate their experiences in the democratic public sphere, rather than living them out in counter-cultures of violence" (Honneth 2007, 78). Critical interpretation and activism form the two sides of a transformative hermeneutics. The latter also comprehends care in consonance with morality or dharma—albeit people's or loka—as "nurturing, cherishing, providing more amply, endowing more richly, prospering, increasing, enhancing, all living beings" (Badrinath 2006, 419).

Feminists have argued that their diverse interpretations and perspectives on canonical philosophy reflect "the contested nature of the 'us' of contemporary

70 According to Honneth's (2007, 108) account of Stephen White.

feminism" (Witt 2004, 11). Divergent feminist perspectives on philosophical traditions and established canons emerge from differences among women. For instance, Gilligan and Noddings offer an alternate way of thinking about ethics as relational, personal, and rooted in feminine practices of care to address the dominant canonical stress, such as the Kantian-inspired Kohlbergian stress on autonomy and impartiality (Gilligan 1993; Noddings 2013). Yet, feminists, such as Linda Bell, are apprehensive about care, because it is rooted in feminine roles of a patriarchal society and is inadequately political (Bell 1993, 36–40). However, interpretations of care from public, institutional, and nonpersonal perspectives, such as that of Tronto, have addressed this criticism.[71] Moreover, feminists also engage with the philosophical canon itself in ways that differ one from another. Nel Noddings invokes Hume and his notion of sympathy as integral to her narration of care, while Dilek Huseyinzadegan (2018) suggests "constructive complicity" to rehabilitate Kant without patriarchal and racist underpinnings. There exist hermeneutic differences among feminists with regard to what is established as tradition in diverse contexts, be it the *Mahabharata*, the western philosophical canon, including Kant and Hume, or the ethics of care. These differences emanate from diverse philosophical and ideological persuasions among women, which are also related to their diverse social locations. "Different groups of women have different interests […] and different values. […] They are both rich and poor, dependent and non-dependent, white and black, Anglo and non-Anglo, pro-life and pro-choice, anti-pornography and anti-anti-pornography […]." (Warnke 2003, 76.) Hence, women are interpreted in diverse ways that often point to their conflicting perspectives, as is the case with the royal and the peasant women in the *Mahabharata.* The varied interpretations of women in the *Mahabharata* make visible the presence of ordinary women and also open up discussions on care ethics that is not confined to the militarism of royal women.

Diverse contexts and sensibilities impact readings of tradition (both gendered and other)—often through what Brodbeck, with reference to the *Mahabharata*, termed "eavesdropping" (2007). Readings, interpretations, and translations are, indeed, attempts to get past the barriers in communication,

71 For a detailed account, see Hankivsky 2014.

which are both psychological and social, as Habermas has observed (1970, 1972). The reader is, however, not motivated by a disengagement with the situation in the pursuit of what Habermas terms as emancipatory readings of a text. The engaged reader—a feminist in the instance of this paper—does not criticize from a position of distance, but is rather immersed in what Gadamer has termed as the "forestructure" of the text. Such immersion does not preclude critique as Habermas thinks of Gadamer; indeed, Gadamer's position has prospects for multiple and, therefore, critical readings of texts. Yet, such readings cannot proceed through the one-on-one, "I/Thou," mode of question/answer dialogue, since the question does tend to predict the direction, in which texts are read. Gadamer defines hermeneutic reflection as one that opens a "self-conscious awareness of ourselves and our world" (2006, 288). Thus, approaching the *Mahabharata* with the question, for instance, "Who are the strong women of *Mahabharata*?", can privilege its militaristic women, such as Draupadi or Kunti. To unravel the care-giving work of its five peasant women, Godhumi, Gomati, Yamuna, Vitasta, and Vipasha, or the nishadins, one needs to listen to the *Mahabharata* in receptive ways that heed its conflicting images of women. Such receptiveness might not necessarily be emancipatory, but could be a step in the direction of reconstructing traditions and texts in emancipatory ways. It requires moving beyond the framework of symmetrical dialogue or the question paradigm to hidden implicit dimensions of a text that are often accessible through inadvertent processes of Brodbeck's "eavesdropping" or reading between the lines.

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phainomena

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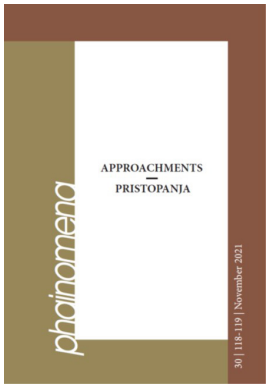

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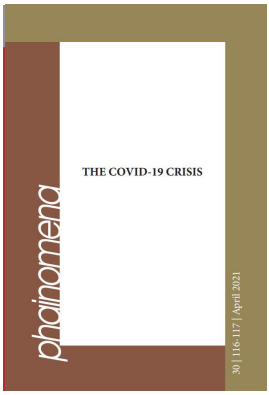

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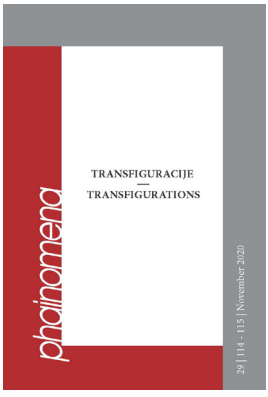
"The COVID-19 Crisis"

Andrej Božič | Daniel R. Sobota | Svetlana Sabeva | Jarosław Gara | Victor Molchanov | Silvia Pierosara | Veronica Neri | Uroš Milić | Zmago Švajncer Vrečko | Paulina Sosnowska | Lea-Marija Colarič-Jakše | Holger Zaborowski | Hans-Georg Gadamer | Polona Tratnik



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»Transfiguracije | Transfigurations"

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