

**Evolution of female
characters of the sanskrit
epic Mahabharata in
cinematography**

EVOLUTION OF FEMALE CHARACTERS OF THE SANSKRIT EPIC MAHABHARATA IN CINEMATOGRAPHY

EVOLUCIÓN DE LOS PERSONAJES FEMENINOS DEL SÁNSCRITO MAHABHARATA ÉPICO EN LA CINEMATOGRAFÍA

ABSTRACT

The article deals with the problem of the ancient Indian epic “Mahabharata” female characters and their evolution in cinematography. The issues, covered in the work, are more essential now than ever and demand thorough research. In the time of emancipation and the global gender “equality”, the women’s question is a vexed point. The object of study is the ancient Indian epic Mahabharata in Indian literature and cinema, namely the 1965 film and TV series of 1988 and 2013. The subject of the study is the epic images of women in Indian cinema. Using the comparative approach, the analysis of women’s images of cinema and epic is presented; their transformation in modern cinema is examined. 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, confirming the relevance of the chosen topic. Screen versions of Sanskrit epics combine tradition and innovation; moreover every new screen version makes the women’s issue more acute due to the transformation of female characters.

KEYWORDS: Female issues, language, the ancient Indian epic, the female characters, Hinduism, oriental studies.

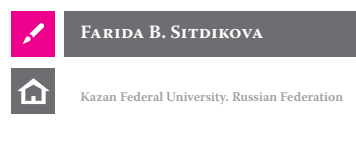
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RESUMEN

El artículo aborda el problema de los antiguos personajes épicos femeninos indios del “Mahabharata” y su evolución en la cinematografía. Los temas, cubiertos en el trabajo, son más esenciales ahora que nunca y exigen una investigación exhaustiva. En el momento de la emancipación y de la “igualdad” global de género, la cuestión de las mujeres es un punto conflictivo. El objeto de estudio es la antigua epopeya india Mahabharata en la literatura y el cine indio, es decir, la película de 1965 y series de televisión de 1988 y 2013. El tema del estudio son las imágenes épicas de las mujeres en el cine indio. Usando el enfoque comparativo, se presenta el análisis de las imágenes del cine y la épica de las mujeres; se examina su transformación en el cine moderno. Al mirar estas películas uno puede seguir claramente la tendencia de cambiar las actitudes y llamar la atención sobre los problemas urgentes de las mujeres indias: posición en la sociedad, educación, educación, libertad, relaciones familiares, confirmando la relevancia del tema elegido. Las versiones en pantalla de epopeyas sánscritas combinan tradición e innovación; además, cada nueva versión de pantalla hace que el problema de las mujeres sea más agudo debido a la transformación de los personajes femeninos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Problemas femeninos, el lenguaje, la antigua epopeya india, los personajes femeninos, el hinduismo, los estudios orientales.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Indian epic works draw attention of different people by their abundance of characters, monumentality, rich storylines, has been an infinite source of Indian art, self-improvement, thoughts for a few ages. The questions, discussed in our article, are now more actual than ever and demand thorough study. In our view, at the time of emancipation and the global “equality” of the sexes, the women’s question is as crucial as ever.

The object of our study is the ancient Indian epos “Mahabharata” in Indian literature and cinema, namely the 1965 film and TV series of 1988 and 2013. The subjects of the study are the epic female characters in Indian cinema. Using the comparative method, we are planning to study female images in the movies and epos, and find out how the female images have transformed in modern cinema, and to try to discover what needs of society such transformation corresponds to.

“Mahabharata” is a huge work, produced by generations of authors over many centuries. “Mahabharata” is not only the story of the enmity of two family clans and their strive for power but also didactic and philosophical teachings, which sometimes take entire books [Grintser P.A., 2004 and Xiangyi et al., 2016]. According to scientists’ opinion [Grintser P.A., 2004;Neveleva S.L.,1991;Ignatiev A.A., 2017;Sutherland S.J., 1989], “Mahabharata” can be regarded as both didactic and heroic work. This epos still plays a significant role in spiritual and social life of Indian people. Indians see it not only as a masterpiece of literature; it is religious and spiritual part of their lives: they worship Rama or Krishna, and Sita and Draupadi are the ideals of women. (Zhapbekova, 2018) There were a few TV series and films based on the plot of this great masterpiece: in 1965 in India there was a “Mahabharata” film, in 1988 - the TV series of 94 episodes and in 2013 the 267-series remake of

the TV series of 1988 was released. Depending on the shooting time the story has developed, drawing attention to specific society issues. Historically, the women’s question in India is still acute, and represents an unsolved problem. Having watched these movies one can clearly see the trend of changing attitudes and drawing attention to the urgent problems of Indian women: education, position in society, freedom, upbringing, family relationships which show the relevance of the chosen topic. A comparative research of epic works and TV series should be held to reveal changes in the representation of female images.

2. METHODS

The methodological basis of this research is a systematic interdisciplinary approach, which allows us to apply theoretical foundations of classical and modern Oriental studies, and of other sciences (history, philosophy, literary studies, religious studies and cultural studies). Since the main focus for us is the relationship of the studied epos with civilization, its historical traditions, culture and social environment, therefore the method of cultural-historical analysis is acceptable. Such an approach will be of help for studying the evolution of literature source via the prism of the spiritual national character. Comparatively-correlative method helps to identify patterns, common and different aspects in the interpretations of female images in the “Mahabharata.” The hermeneutic method clarifies that the investigated artwork is a factor of culture, in which interpretation it is important to reconstruct its place in the spiritual history of humanity.

3. RESULTS

Attitude to woman and her position in the Vedic age (roughly the 1st thousand BC), is still not unequivocal [Outstanding women of India of the twentieth century / 2002;Nehru J., 1989;Forbes G., 1999;Heer, S.K.]. On the one hand, she was treated as a goddess and on the other hand, she was demanded complete obedience to the man. Female images, presented in the studied artwork, are conditioned upon the age. The change of attitudes towards women can be seen in the works of Jawaharlal Nehru “The Discovery of India”. Of course the facts, provided by him, are quite restrained, but one can understand that the female social position has only worsened for centuries. It should be noted that the position

of the prominent Indian women, who played a crucial role in the spiritual and socio-political life of India, was not unique either: each of them stood behind a no less great man, whose ideas and beliefs she shared and helped to promote. Either father, husband or grandfather had a great impact for girls; they brought them up as their associates. Great Indian women managed to combine the opposites: the traditional reverence and respect for the man with the adoption of his innovative views and beliefs.

It is difficult to realize and value the role and position of Indian woman "without referring to her mythical ideal and prototype of the divine mother goddess" [Albedil F., 1996:71]. 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 can be seen in the TV series of 1988: the keynote is the theme of the exceptional role of a woman as a mother (it is her main predestination in life).

It is worth noting that the female characters share similar characteristics. They are devoted Indian wives, virtuous mothers and obedient daughters, each of them can be characterized by unquestioning obedience to a man, whether he is a father or a husband. However it is not a mere mindless obedience: they are raised in such a way, and hence it is rather natural for them. "Mahabharata" contains instructions and examples of true stories of Indian wives, who despite the loss of the husband don't leave the Patriarchal tradition [Adiparva, / 1992: I. 119].

The problem of getting married is mostly decided by parents: Satyavati's father sets up the marriage conditions, Kashi princesses are kidnapped by Bhishma and the parents do not object, Gandhari's parents, having thought it over, choose 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 option to choose her husband (e.g., Kunti chose Pandu herself). It is also obvious that the attitude to the mother was respectful, they listened to her and followed her advice [Adiparva, / 1992: I. 149-150, 11: 13. 104-108], but she might be respected, because she of giving birth to sons.

In the epos we can trace the contradictory attitude to woman: Bhishma takes the Princess away by force, but treats them "as if they were his daughters-in-law, or younger sisters, or daughters" [Adiparva, / 1992: 96.41-59]. Draupadi's friend - Krishna aids her in difficult situations and is eager to help to revenge her offenders, nevertheless he claims that "women are one of the fourth worst vices, born by passion, who kidnap the Royal luck" [Aranyakaparva / 1987: 14. 1-17]. There is no doubt, that the main heroine of the Indian epos Draupadi is depicted most vividly. Her image is carefully studied by a great number of native and foreign scholars [Grintser P.A., 2004; Neveleva S.L., 1991; Sutherland S.J., 1989, Ford J., (2012),].

Beautiful Draupadi is of vivid and violent nature as the fire from which she was born, she is regarded as an ideal Indian woman (about 400 temples have been built in her honor), this is the "heroic wife", the Queen [Neveleva S.L., 1991: 30]. She is well educated, conscious of the responsibilities of a wife, she is a true decoration of her spouses. Satyabhamma asks Panchali (Draupadi) for necessary advice, of how to be a good wife, so everybody is aware of her virtues. But she could not keep silent getting the insults in her address, she just demands revenge. She complains about her unhappy fate to Krishna, has a long conversation with Yudhishtira, trying to make him to act. In the image of Draupadi there are Shaktism elements, she is a creative, dynamic force which presents an active source, encouraging her husbands to act. In the Draupadi's character the ambivalent nature of Shakti is shown: on the one hand, positive and creative, and on the other - destructive. Partially, the goddess Shri has become incarnated in Draupadi, still her character is closer to Durga, or Kali, she wants vengeance and justice.

Analysis of a literary text and its cinematographic versions leads to the logical conclusion that films reflected the historical reality in which it was shot. Let's analyze female images transformation in movies. In the film of 1965 female images are revealed a little. Gandhari and Kunti do not look like Queens, but as simple people in modest saris and sometimes it might seem that the Director would have put them out of the film, but there are episodes which are impossible without them. Their role is minimized to the maximum. At the time when the movie was shot,

modesty and asceticism were in trend, which as a result was reflected in the film. In the TV series of 1988 and 2013 both the main character, and others, namely, Gandhari, Kunti and Satyawati are presented quite clearly. Let us study their images in more details.

Satyavati of 2013 is a very ambitious, energetic girl who lusts after power, she is driven by various desires, and she is not afraid of anything and does not think about where these primal desires can lead to. Her image is based on the contrast with the king Shantanu image. He is the old king, he has the perfect heir, he wants to enjoy peace next to a beloved Satyawati, but she does not want peace. She sets up her own conditions and, owing to Bhishma, becomes the Queen. She does not want to serve the King, all she wants is power and thus she becomes the victim of her insatiable desires. The image of Satyawati of 1988 is closer to epic. In the epos Satyawati is calmer, she thinks over her decisions carefully, listens to good advice.

The Gandhari image of 2013 is a female-sufferer: an unhappy daughter, because her parents gave her in marriage to the blind Dhritarashtra, and some time later 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 words; a poor mother, because her sons were raised by Shakuni and nothing good ever happened of it, the deficiencies were observed, but her sons had no true love to their mother; even her daughter married unhappily. Gandhari of 1988 is not as religious as an epic heroine and not as miserable as the heroine of the remake, her relationship with her husband can be characterized as good. Special attention should be paid to the way the couples are represented in the series: they talk, discuss emerging problems, ask for each other's advice, seeking for support and comfort in their mates, even discuss the affairs of the state. Literary Gandhari is "glorious, worthy, virtuous, deserving of compassion", obviously, she is religious, she has fulfilled her main task – gave birth to one hundred sons.

The image of Kunti in TV series does not differ a lot from the epic one. In the TV series of 1988, she is listening with great attention to the words of wise men about the place of

the woman in life, about her purpose and, becoming a mother herself, teaches her sons. Kunti of 2013 is depicted as the perfect mother of Pandava brothers, she is trying hard to be the best despite abandoning an illegitimate son of Karna. She does not fight with the hardships of fate, Kunti faces them patiently and bravely. The Pandavas love their mother selflessly and try to do everything for her to be proud of them. Kunti can be characterized as quiet, modest, not wearing expensive jewelry, she is not power hungry and defends Draupadi to protect her children and is ready for everything.

Talking of Draupadi, the analysis should be started with her birth. If the epic contains some words about her birth, and in the series of 1988 it is almost a usual event, in the series of 2013 it is an act strongly opposed by the king Drupada. He agrees to accept the daughter, but she had to possess such qualities, which not many gods could boast of [ep. 84 – King Drupada wants his daughter to know the struggle and the pain because they strengthen character, to see the dirt of 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 totally opposite to the epic, there is nothing divine in her, she is an ordinary woman, frivolous and brash, at times rude. In the TV series of 1988 Draupadi also appears as an ordinary woman and only Krishna reminds her of her uniqueness: "You are not just a woman, you're a symbol of women's pride, so do not talk about your grievances" [ep. 78]. Her image in the series of 2013 is not less bright, than in the epic. Draupadi is the embodiment of Shakti, she was born to become the Queen of the most powerful state, and she possesses all the necessary features for such a destiny. The main culminating episode of the series is, of course, the scene of Draupadi's humiliation in the Assembly hall. She realizes that there is no one to protect her except God, and she prays to Govinda. He always comes to her rescue in any difficult situation, whether with advice or with action, he is always there. From his mouth we can hear the words about women's suffering and the need for their liberation. If the epic Draupadi is forced to defend herself and rescue her spouses, in the series she is helped and supported by Krishna in everything. All women suffer from men and their desires, only Krishna protects them [ep. 157] or they do it themselves. Women in the

series of 2013 are shown as active, strong, courageous and energetic, and men are weak (in the most complex crucial situations, they either cry, or fail to act or refuse their wives).

4. DISCUSSION

In this work we have tried to analyze how the female images are shown in the TV series, and to identify important issues of the treatment of women in society. In India, religion is an integral element of people's life, and "Mahabharata" is regarded as a sacred and authoritative text, so TV series and films, based on the plot of this work, are rather popular and controversial [Chakrabarti S. (2012)]. Therefore, they could be used by their creators to focus attention on the urgent issues of family, society, gender relations.

5. SUMMARY


In the film versions studied in the given work innovation and tradition are combined. In each film version the female issue was more acute due to the development and evolution of images of women. In the TV series of 1988, these questions become, first of all, a definition of the roles and duties of a woman. A woman is primarily a wife and a mother, these are her main roles. Then, a woman should be protected, and the state, where woman is treated in the way Draupadi was treated has no right to exist. It was a male who declared the words for the protection of women. Also the parallel of Woman – Mother – Earth can be clearly seen: these three concepts are combined into one: we need to take care of the Earth, the homeland as well as of a woman and respect and honor her as a Mother.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Watching a daily twenty-minute episode of, for instance, series of 2013, the viewer sees the favorite, revered heroes, a familiar from childhood story but with some new ideas that make you think. The needs of society are changing. If earlier Mahabharata inspired the Indian for the liberation movement against British or Muslims, and they wanted to live like in Ram Rajya era, now, when India has already been an independent state for almost 70 years, the question of women's status is still relevant. It is obvious that the female images of the Mahabharata have transformed, now

they have a strong character, courageously and firmly overcome the problems they have to face in life, remaining loving, gentle and loyal, representing the dual nature of Shakti. Women are no longer eager to stay in their husbands' shadows, someone wants to rule (Satyavati), some of them require justice and respect (Draupadi), and some want to love and be loved (Gandhari). Summarizing, we can state with certainty that the evolution of female characters of the ancient Indian epic "Mahabharata" reflects changes in the attitude of society towards the position of Indian women.

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