

**Indigenous Marginalisation and Subjugation:
Ecofeminist Reading of Hidimbi in *Bhima:
Lone Warrior***

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ABSTRACT

Through the reading of *Bhima: Lone Warrior* by M T Vasudevan Nair, this paper examines the indigenous marginalisation and subjugation faced by Hidimbi in Mahabharata. Analysing Hidimbi, the paper throws light on the condition of tribal women who are being negated under the Varna system and patriarchal subjugation. This paper argues that Hidimbi was highly stifled and smothered for the sole reason of being a tribal woman. This paper analyses the status, condition and repression that Hidimbi was exposed to. Interestingly, the canonical or dominant narrative of *Mahabharata* does not bring Pandavas under any scrutiny, particularly, with regard to their approach to the tribal community. On the contrary, Nair's work brings forth the subalternity faced by Ekalavya, Ghatotkacha, and Hidimbi. This paper uses ecofeminist theory to elucidate the exploitation met by Hidimbi. Through an ecofeminist lens, the paper attempts to understand the manner in which Hidimbi was equated to nature wherein both the ecology and the woman was equally exploited by the guardians of patriarchy. In doing so, the paper attempts to unravel the alternative narrative of Hidimbi that the canon silences.

Keywords: Tribal woman; subjugation; repression; segregation; Mahabharata; patriarchal; ecofeminism, marginalisation

INTRODUCTION

Significance of Research

The research paper makes use of ecofeminist theory to deconstruct the manner in which Hidimbi has been constructed as a problematic figure. In doing so, many popular versions and re-tellings of *Mahabharata* has carefully chosen parts wherein there is an absolute absence or careful presence in the manner in which Hidimbi has been characterised. *Bhima: Lone Warrior* put forth ideas that counter the brahmanical and patriarchal narrative which consists of a set of norms constructed in line with dominant narratives. Though the text is narrated through Bhima's point of view, it does reflect on Hidimbi's position as a woman and as the wife of Bhima (one among the Pandavas) which has been negated for a long time, as her very existence is rooted in tribal background. Most of the studies done with respect to the characterisation of Hidimbi looks at her role in a manner that incorporates space for women. Also, they look at her portrayal in the independent sense of thoughts and actions disregarding the circumstance carved out for her under the brahmanical structure of narration and narrativising. But they do not look at the politics behind such portrayal. Most of the research done in this field look at Hidimbi through the same lens which is used to understand other women characters like Draupadi, Kunti, etc. which is problematic, that this paper attempts to point out. In contrast to the works done in this field, this particular paper attempts to bring in the ecofeminist approach, situating her in the text to unravel her indigenous marginalisation, unlike the other characters. In trying to mark a shift from such studies, this paper focuses on the specific kind of marginalisation that Hidimbi faced unlike other women in *Mahabharata*, associating it to the exploitation of nature which is equivalent to the exploited status of women.

Thesis Statement

The retelling by M T Vasudevan Nair closely calls into question certain misogynistic and anti-humanistic idea perpetuated by ancient writings that bear a significant role in constructing a dominant ideology that can pave way for unheard voices. Nair's work is a contested platform that portrays the conflict between heard and unheard. Hidimbi is an extremely marginalised character in *Mahabharata* coming under the purview of unheard voices. *Bhima: The Lone Warrior* by M T Vasudevan Nair clearly elucidates the subjugation being drawn against Hidimbi by those who accommodated superior position in the Varna system. Distancing from the popular versions of *Mahabharata*, this text hints at the indigenous marginalisation and subjugation of Hidimbi which can be located within the framework of ecofeminism.

Objectives

- Locating Hidimbi as a tribal subject in this popular myth
- Situating Hidimbi within the purview of ecofeminism
- Introducing the concept of a tribal woman's suppression and subjugation, here, Hidimbi is contrasted against mainstream women in *Mahabharata*.
- To throw light on the life of Hidimbi which is different from all other women characters in *Mahabharata* and in turn reflect on how tribal community is viewed in *Mahabharata*.
- Locating the different ways in which Hidimbi faces suppression, subjugation, and exploitation.
- To understand the nature of exploitation.

- To bring in the idea that Hidimbi is not just an object of patriarchy but beyond that which is deeply rooted in the caste system.
- To locate the role and significance of Hidimbi in *Mahabharata*.
- To introduce the fact that Hidimbi is a victim of the institutionalised system of caste.

Through the reading, understanding and analysing of *Bhima: The Lone Warrior* by M T Vasudevan Nair, this paper explores the segregation and subjugation faced by Hidimbi. *Bhima: The Lone Warrior* is a re-telling of the ancient Indian epic *Mahabharata* narrated through the point of view of Bhima, the second Pandava. *Bhima: The Lone Warrior* is chosen because it is the apt book for this particular research as the text narrates the story of *Mahabharata* through the voice of Bhima; Hidimbi being the wife of Bhima can be critically analysed. Bhima more than anyone else has a compassionate attitude towards Hidimbi and this book throws light on that aspect. This book is used to examine the suppression, subjugation, and exploitation faced by Hidimbi. The paper analyses how Hidimbi faced isolation for the sole reason of being a tribal woman.

Indigenous segregation and subjugation of Hidimbi have been chosen as the area of research because of multiple reasons. First, most often the character of Draupadi is analysed and critically appreciated than the other women characters in *Mahabharata*. Second, the researches and study on Hidimbi are often limited to the fact of 'Hidimbi as a woman' getting isolated, but not beyond that. Third, which is similar to the second statement, that Hidimbi is a victim or object of patriarchy is often researched. But this paper is focusing and is emphasizing on the fact that Hidimbi being a tribal woman is subjected to indigenous segregation and subjugation which is different from the other women characters in *Mahabharata*. It is evident that

other women characters in *Mahabharata* are prey to the patriarchal society. But this is not the case of Hidimbi. Hidimbi faces unique repression because of her tribal origin. Most of the women characters in *Mahabharata* exists throughout the text. But, Hidimbi's character does not over stay in the text. Reference to Hidimbi is not there anywhere in the popular versions after the Pandavas leave the forest. This paper uses the theoretical framework of ecofeminism to prove and substantiate the research problem. Viewing through the lens of ecofeminism will throw light on reciprocity, nurturing and cooperation which are common markers in women and nature. Thus, equating nature with women thereby adding strength to the research problem in analysing Hidimbi and her state.

Review of Literature

Bhima: The Lone Warrior, Reflection on Hidimbi's Status

Bhima: The Lone Warrior by M T Vasudevan Nair is the primary text of this research. It is blatantly and strikingly bringing into the frame the suppression and cruelty that Hidimbi was subjected to. Several aspects in the text that hints at the characterisation of Hidimbi have been taken into this research paper to try and understand the destabilised position of Hidimbi in the grand narratives. Further, the characterisation is played close attention to bring in the ecofeminist lens through which Hidimbi can be perceived, of which much research has not been done to date. First, M T Vasudevan Nair throws light on the physical construction of Hidimbi. Her physical appearance was closely associated with that of animals meaning to suggest that she belongs to the forest. Suggesting that she wore bracelets and chain carved from the tusks of animals, the author is trying to articulate the idea that she is far away from human form. This distinctly lends meaning to her subservient position.

Signalling to me to wait, she ran into the thickets and came back carrying a heap of large leaves. She stood next to me, stitching the

leaves together with thorns, and I caught an unpleasant odour of animal fat from her dishevelled knot of hair. Grabbing my upper cloth, she placed the stitched leaves on it. How easily she had made a container for me to carry water (Nair 101).

Here, even the smell of Hidimbi is concomitant with that of an animal. This is to distinctly mark the difference between the tribal women who see the forest as their home and resource and the women belonging to the Varna system who are seen as typical human beings.

In *Bhima: The Lone Warrior*, the language of Hidimbi is warily illustrated to point out the different lifestyle in which she is classified into. “She replied in a dialect which was Prakrit heavily mingled with Paisachi: ‘I’m alone most of the time’” (Nair 102). Here, to note, the etymology of the name implies that it is used by pisacas or ghouls, suggesting that it is a dead language. In other words, the language is seen as that of having no surviving speakers or as a language spoken by the dead. This particular aspect imparts to the meaning that Hidimbi was seen as an outcast.

I reached out for her, and she wound herself around me like a black serpent. Her hair with its odour of animal fat came loose from its knot and spread darkness over my face. The night I had remained frozen with the servant woman in my arms seemed like a foolish dream. I now felt that my teachers should have taught me the subtleties of a woman’s body. The fire within me had seventy flames, not seven. No, not seventy, ten thousand. It was as if one who performed the sacrifice desired to be offering, fire and ashes all at once... (Nair 103).

Hidimbi was not regarded as a woman who had legitimised relationship with Bhima, but as a woman who had enticing power over Bhima. Through such kind of a depiction, she was relegated to an object that can be used for men’s physical desire.

“A change came over Hidimbi after three days of mourning. She began to wear flowers in her hair and around her neck” (Nair 108). Here, it is very much discernable that Hidimbi has no

choice, but to forget about the losses she writhed and move on in her life with whatever little she has got in her life.

Bhimasena was a pauper who had nothing valuable, not even something that would serve as a sign, to give her or the child who was going to be born to him. She had prostrated herself at my feet. I raised her, pressed my lips to her head and stood helpless, unable to find the words to say goodbye to her. Then I hurried to catch up with the forms that were growing distant in the faint darkness (Nair 109).

Last, Hidimbi embodies an object that has been used and thrown. She had nothing to corroborate her relationship with Bhima or the Pandava family. Hidimbi stands for the whole tribal community who has nothing but the brutal impressions or marks left by the people that come under the Varna system.

All the above quotes come under the larger framework of ecofeminism. For instance, all the performances and actions that Hidimbi is caught in is set in the forest. And it is in this forest that Hidimbi faces exploitation. Drawing specific attention to Hidimbi's portrayal that Nair brings one's attention to, this research paper equates Hidimbi to nature wherein both are equally exploited on a one to one correspondence.

Dalit Rasa

Several studies have been carried out in concern with *Mahabharata* and its retellings. Often, these studies look at the dominant characters and their traits. Most of the feminist works in this field are centred around upper caste characters like Draupadi, Kunti, etc. And they are epitomised as the ideal women representing a particular caste and class. On the contrary, this research paper looks at the problematic portrayal of Hidimbi in the dominant narratives of *Mahabharata* which Nair's retelling reveal. Even though the character of Hidimbi has been put into scrutiny by several scholars, not much work has been done in the field of ecofeminism to throw more light on

Hidimbi. In trying to bring forth the ecofeminist lens through which Hidimbi can be understood, this research paper looks at the general politics in the portrayal of Hidimbi unlike the retelling presented by Nair.

Dalit literature and aesthetics are unique. They have different taste than that of mainstream literature. So, aesthetics of mainstream literature cannot apply to the Dalit literature; just as Dalit aesthetics cannot apply to the mainstream literature. This is the chief reason that Sharankumar Limbale, Arjun Dangle, Omvedt Gail, Om Prakash Valmiki, Harish Mangalam, and other Dalit writers, critics and scholars have rejected the aesthetics of the mainstream literature. These Dalit literati elites have presented new rational and sociocultural based aesthetics for Dalit literature. The Dalit writers and critics have depicted the irrational facts to justify Dalit aesthetics (Dalit Identity: Aesthetics of Dalit Literature 241).

Most often writers focus on the aesthetics of beauty and pleasure. The aesthetics of the literature in the mainstream is not the same when one focuses on Dalit literature. It's not a sense of pleasure that one attains from reading Dalit literature, but that of shame, fear and loss. It is a disturbing fact to state that not much of research is done on the pain and suffering which reflect the real state of the tribal community which is explored in this paper through Hidimbi. All the fear, trauma, labour and sufferings undergone by Hidimbi was because of the neglect and suppression she was exposed to by the Pandavas. This neglect and clamping down faced by a woman, specifically, a tribal woman has got its root in Varna system in *Dharmasastra*.

Varna System in Dharmasastra

"*Dharmasastra* texts are viewed by a group of modern scholars as the fountainhead of every evil plaguing the contemporary Hindu society" (Padia 62). *Women in Dharmasastras: A Phenomenological and Critical Analysis* by Chandrakala Padia deals with ancient texts that take into account the several ritualistic and cultural practices that were prevalent in India, rooted in its

tradition. Padia's work is used in this research paper to try and understand the women's position in Hindu scriptures like Dharmasastras that legitimises the position itself. Thus, in this paper, it is important to talk about the Varna system which helps in locating the position of Hidimbi.

Dominant v/s Alternative Narratives

There is a chance of a dominant meaning being concretised and legitimised as the grand narrative gets circulated. As far as the grand narratives of *Mahabharata* are concerned, it fits itself only within the framework of Pandavas and women characters belonging to the upper caste. *The Mahabharata: A Modern Rendering I* by Ramesh Menon is therefore used as a reference to understand the manner in which the dominant version *Mahabharata* gets disseminated in the contemporary and the kind of relevance it holds. For instance, Menon's work deals with this binary of divine and demon which is a crucial element in this research paper in trying to understand the perception towards Hidimbi. Menon's work presents *Mahabharata* as a magnificent and grand narrative that enchant its readers across the world. Thus, Menon's rendering is one among the modern version that negates the politics behind the portrayal of women characters, particularly those belonging to the lower caste in *Mahabharata*. Thus, his work is used to draw parallels and differences in Nair's work which then underlines the unique portrayal of Hidimbi in *Bhima: The Lone Warrior*.

Ecofeminist Lens

A large and growing body of literature on ecofeminism in the West relates to gender and environment mainly in ideological terms. In India however, growing protests against environmental destruction and struggles for survival and subsistence point to the fact that caste, class and gender issues are deeply interlinked (Rao 1).

This is the same that happens in the case of Hidimbi. Her caste becomes her identity and she gets exploited on the ground of her gender and caste. The theoretical framework of feminism is used in this paper to substantiate and prove the research problem. "Woman revolted for the ill-treatment meted to her and her image nature...against the sole aggressor..."man"! Hence the ecofeminism" (Raj, Davidson 3). This particular idea helps in locating the character of Hidimbi in *Mahabharata* as a tribal subject. "Ecofeminism: The Pragmatic Posture of Feminism in 21st Century", from the *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature* is thus used to comprehend the kind of research done in the field of ecofeminism. The same work has been used to locate the kind of potential ecofeminism as a field of study has in this research paper.

Also viewing through the lenses of ecofeminism by Vandana Siva will throw light on reciprocity, nurturing and cooperation which are common markers in women and nature. For instance, it is evident in *Bhima: Lone Warrior* that Hidimbi is married to Bhima but she was dismissed from exercising the power and role of a wife, even when she was the wife of a prince. She was neither brought to the palace of the Pandavas nor was considered as one among the women in *Mahabharata*. Strangely but the reality is that not many facts about Hidimbi in concern with her life, status, the role is penned down in *Mahabharata* except Bhima getting married to a tribal woman during the forest exile. She is treated far less than a human, being a tribal woman. And is reduced to a victim who has been left with scars on her body and mind. She bears the child of Bhima, notably, the first child in the Pandava family but neither Hidimbi nor her son Ghatotkacha is viewed positively, but only seen with disgust. It is apparent that as human exploits nature, Hidimbi, the tribal woman who lived her whole life in the vicinity of the forest is exploited.

Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism by Pramod K Nayar elucidates various literary theories, specifically, ecofeminist theories. The book systematically analyses literary theories in different texts in an interpretative manner. The work does not restrict itself to literary texts alone, but also other domains. Nayar's work is used in the research paper to validate the theories employed in the paper.

INDIGENOUS MARGINALISATION AND SUBJUGATION OF HIDIMBI

"In the patriarchal framework of *Mahabharata* then, women gain status as wives and mothers through which relationships their sexuality is regulated but which also gives them a voice that cannot be easily dismissed" (Padia 115), then did Hidimbi has a voice in *Mahabharata*? Through the reading, understanding, and analysis of *Bhima: Lone Warrior* by M T Vasudevan Nair, this paper explores the segregation and subjugation faced by Hidimbi. *Bhima: Lone Warrior* is a re-telling of the ancient Indian epic *Mahabharata* narrated through the point of view of Bhima, the second Pandava. This book is used to examine the suppression, subjugation, and exploitation faced by Hidimbi.

The study is an exercise in the history of ideas rather than philosophy. The *Mahabharata's* pre-eminent cultural position, encyclopaedic [ciz.] range and fairly free – wheeling approach to issues makes it a particularly attractive source for the study of the history of this and other ideas in the Hindu tradition. The importance of this great Epic within the Hindu tradition is undeniable for, over the centuries, it has achieved the position of being the single most popular body of literature for all levels of society (Hill x).

"So long as we substitute the word Hindu for Indian, the conclusion follows that amongst all levels of society throughout the centuries, the *Mahabharata* has achieved the position of being the most widely accepted popular body of literature in the Hindu tradition" (Hill xix). The customs, social construct, tradition and decision making to some extent is drawn from

these books. These books serve as a moral guide and it still holds relevance in the present society. The idea articulated in the epic years back have not diminished from the thinking, attitude, and behaviour of millions and therefore, I chose this to analyse Hidimbi who have not acquired any kind of reputed position in the text of *Mahabharata*.

Physical Portrayal of Hidimbi

Hidimbi's construction often resonates the indigenous ideas associated with her. For instance, the way in which Hidimbi is portrayed in the retelling of *Mahabharata* by M T Vasudevan Nair is an important aspect to look at which will lend meaning to the role and status of Hidimbi. Reviewing different versions of *Mahabharata*, it is very much evident that Hidimbi is depicted in such a way that she is not considered as human. But viewed as a demoness or a form which lacks human nature. The colour black is often associated with Hidimbi and her complexion. Draupadi, who is also the wife of Pandavas are often embellished with expressions of magnificence and beauty. In addition to this, she is even viewed as the epitome of women. But this is not the case of Hidimbi, who is subjugated and treated less than a human.

The depiction of Hidimbi in various versions of *Mahabharata* has one thing in common, that is, her physical form is associated with wild objects and animals and kept far away from human life. Most of the versions reflect on ideas like "black", "demoness", "sorcery". There is a meticulous description of Hidimbi in *Bhima: Lone Warrior* which is as follows:

She wore bracelets carved from boar's tusks on her hands, a necklace of tiger – claws and a chain with a single strand, its links shaped in half-squares. Standing next to me, she seemed almost as tall as I was. She was the colour of the heartwood of a blackwood tree. There was a sound of snapping twigs at her ankles as she walked. Her tiger – claw necklace tinkled as she walked around me. Springing from her body, her breasts looked

like the swollen glands of rouge tuskers from the Kamaroopa forests (Nair 101).

“Instead, with sorcery, she had turned herself into a dark human beauty” (Menon 224). These descriptions definitely mirror the fact that she is pictured more like an animal more than a human.

In *Bhima: Lone Warrior*, Yudhishtira, the eldest of the Pandava, regarded Hidimbi as a demeaning object. For instance, Yudhishtira was convinced, “‘It’s her, the tribal woman. She’s a demoness. She walks around in human form in the daytime, then comes at night as a sorceress and steals. We’re lucky she wasn’t greedy for human flesh, or she’d have eaten us” (Nair 104).’ Here, Yudhishtira, very evidently and plainly state Hidimbi is a “tribal woman.” So, she as a woman or she as a person is not valued, but the weight is given upon her community, that is, tribe. He talks about her with a sense of ignominy, unlike the way he praises Draupadi. The indifferent and callous attitude of Yudhishtira towards Hidimbi is often reflected in *Mahabharata*.

Mahabharata at many instances portrays Hidimbi in such a way that Yudhishtira has taken the fact of Hidimbi being a tribal woman for granted. “Yudhishtira warned me, ‘Be careful. These people know sorcery. Don’t let her come near you, especially at night” (Nair 102). At this juncture, Yudhishtira firmly endows Hidimbi as an alienated creature. This kind of an alienation and marginalisation conferred by Yudhishtira gets legitimised for all of the Pandavas and Kunti to behave in a manner of repugnance towards Hidimbi. This is because his words are given due importance as he holds the status of a son, born through the blessing of Dharma. In *Mahabharata*, he is famed by the name of Dharmaputra, Dharma’s son (Nair 21) who holds value, moral and justice firmly and resolutely.

Thus, all these instances that Nair carves for the readers raise a pertinent question with regard to the status given to

Hidimbi by Pandavas. Now, what is interesting here is the fact that the existing popular versions of *Mahabharata* largely are faithful to the original version when it comes to the portrayal of Hidimbi, she being the 'Rakshasi', the other to 'dominant.' In bringing in these hidden silences, Nair deconstructs the politics of representation by reconstructing an alternative reality for us.

Deconstructive criticism would build on these themes of unfinalisability, deference, relationality to show how a text can subvert its own stated philosophical or literary assumptions because it refers to and is open to a (i) a different reading, (ii) another text that rather reinforce its argument might subvert it, (iii) revisions even as it states its meanings in unambiguous terms (Nayar 40).

Kunti's Outlook towards Hidimbi

Kunti never wanted Hidimbi to be a part of the Pandava family. She, in fact, did not assign Hidimbi the status of a wife to Bhima or a daughter in law to Kunti, unlike the relationship Kunti had with Draupadi, or for that matter, any of her daughter in law's. Hidimbi, for her, was a mechanism through which the Pandavas could effortlessly outlast in the forest with surplus sustenance and other means. In addition to this, Kunti does not want to close her eyes on Bhima who was engrossed in Hidimbi. M T Vasudevan Nair describes the way in which Kunti deserts Hidimbi all alone in the forest although Hidimbi was supposed to be with the Pandavas as she has in her womb the child of Bhima thus:

Mother hurried us. We did not have many preparations to make for the journey. Hidimbi was getting ready to go out and search for the fruits and roots we needed to take with us, Mother glanced at me. 'It would not be right for Hidimbi to come with us.' Yudhishtira placed his hand on my shoulder. 'We have to live amongst them like Brahmins. So.' Hidimbi was trying something up in a packet. She stopped and looked at Mother. Then gazed at me. Unable to meet her eyes, I turned away. (Nair 109)

Here, Kunti occupies the dominant position whose libretti marks the last and final. Hidimbi who in all means has the veracious right to accompany Bhima has been denied her privilege on the ground of her birth in the tribal community. "We have to live amongst them like Brahmins. So..." (Nair 109), here, ellipses are used so that things are left unsaid. Close inspection can bestow meaning to Kunti's silence. Kunti intended to say the Pandavas have to like Brahmins and taking Hidimbi would ruin their plan as Hidimbi does not look like a Brahmin. So, she is implicitly stating that Hidimbi's colour and physical appearance are not like Brahmins. It very clearly proves that Kunti believed in the idea that Kunti and Pandavas are like poles apart, irreconcilable which can never be sewed together.

The Concept of Women and its Relation to Hidimbi

The conceptualisation of women, in fact, takes place from three points of view: ontological, as individual and as social. As an individual, a woman is seen as fragile and delicate physically in a certain sense but emotionally and spiritually stronger than man. As a social being, she is central to the whole social structure in her bio-social role as a mother (Padia 58).

As clearly stated above, first, women, when considered through the gender lens of female, is viewed as tenuous and this particular nature of Hidimbi has been spoiled skillfully and pre-emptively in the notion of Varna system in *Dharmasastra*. Second, women as social being are granted the role of a mother. In the case of Hidimbi, she was made to stand as a woman who only has the role of mother, in the sense, giving birth to Bhima's child. But not given the status of a known or well-identified wife of Bhima. And she had to solitarily up bring Ghatotkacha.

At this point, it is appropriate to look at Aristotle's idea of women which will help in understanding the ranking that Hidimbi was induced into:

Aristotle outdoes even his teacher in denigrating women and private realm of life. He absorbs women completely within the

oikos or household, denies that women have any capability for public role, and precludes the possibility for female self-transformation over time. He regards man as form and woman as matter. To quote his words: Since the form, is better and more divine in its nature than the matter, it is better also that the superior one should be separate from the inferior one. That is why whenever possible and so far [ciz.] as possible the male is separate from the female (qtd. in Padia 82).

Here, it is clearly stated the women's role is confined to household chores and the same was loaded on Hidimbi, in which case, the household disappears from the picture. For Hidimbi, the forest was her home and after marriage also she was deprived of the Palace owned by Pandava but was forced to wander in the open shade, which is the forest. The same idea is reflected here also. Thus, women are merely regarded as a necessary condition of the state. "As the class or category of 'Woman' was regarded as inferior to the class or category 'Man', and was deprived of the right of citizenship" (Padia 83). It was as if the women did not exist at all when it comes to the sphere of social life. In the case of Hidimbi, her socio-political and cultural rights were limited to the forest.

Jeremy Bentham's idea of women also reflects on the notion of women being the second-class citizen wherein the women are not part of the social world but have access only to family and children. Interestingly, Hidimbi didn't even have a family.

Similarly, Jeremy Bentham also sees the relation between the sexes as that of superiority [sic] and inferiority. He offers a few of the traditional encomiums to womankind: the female is more sensitive, delicate, moral, religious, and sympathetic than the male. On the other hand, man is stronger, hardier, intellectually superior, and firmer in mind to her. He believes that women should not enter the public realm as their affection is limited to their own children or to young children generally so they cannot embrace the welfare of their own country, much less all humankind. For him, the family is sealed off from the public

world and relations between the sexes are explored as if they are unrelated to public problems (qtd in. Padia 83).

Patriarchal Subjection

The alluring aspect that men have towards women is something which is often justified. This justification gets validated when men control the women stating that women need to be restricted, placing *Manusmriti* and *Dharmasastra* in front. "Her life is controlled at every stage of her life by a male relative such as her father in childhood, her husband in youth, her son/s in old age. Manu has categorically stated the women do not deserve" (Padia 64).

The idea of chastity and virtue were conjoined with the subordination and regulation of the sexuality of women by men. This creates a dominant patriarchal structure although some matriarchal customs survive as in the case of Madri and Bhishma has to give gifts to her father in return of her hand for Pandu. This patriarchal structure is also hierarchical and these two paradigms operate both in the public and private sphere (Padia 108).

"Within the patriarchal framework, women acquire chastity not necessarily through fidelity to one man but allowing their sexuality to be regulated by men whether as wives and daughters" (Padia 109). This particular aspect is very much reflected in the context of Hidimbi. She was not considered a part of the Pandava family, in reality, she was. But she was comforted and consoled by stating the control that men have on women wherein women play the role of an obedient wife.

"The duties of a chaste wife are expounded over and over again in *Mahabharata*. As is the usual technique in the epic, different characters are used to say the same thing in different situations in order to lay down the *dharma* or the moral principle" (Padia, 113). It is obvious that *Mahabharata* strengthens the idea of chaste wife which was something imposed on Hidimbi. Interestingly, she was asked to be chaste but the position of "wife" is debatable.

Now, it is important to locate the way in which Hidimbi is looked at which can be interpreted from the following lines:

Women's sexuality is seen as a potentially extremely destructive force in front of which the mightiest men are rendered helpless. Yet, it can be put to great use once it is subordinated and regulated. Hence and women are divided into two classes: the utterly destructive because of their unbridled sexuality and the chaste wives and mothers (Padia 107).

Hidimbi is regarded as a vicious form which will corrupt the system and moral values of Pandavas. She has not given the status of a chaste wife or mother. But, given the status of a discarded object which has not got many references in the *Mahabharata*. Hidimbi has never got a constructive position as far as different versions of *Mahabharata* are concerned.

From time immemorial, the idea that women are an object of pleasure for men exists in society. And this very idea has its root in *Mahabharata* also. "The lovers had not so much as touched, since Hidimba interrupted their first embrace. Now, as she flew through the air with him, their lips sought each other. They kissed until Hidimbi, wild for more than kissing, flew down into a forest that was hardly a place on earth" (Menon, "*The Mahabharata: A Modern Rendering I*" 230).

Hidimbi: Through an Ecofeminist Lens

As substantiated above, unlike other women characters in *Mahabharata*, Hidimbi is exposed to an indigenous marginalisation that Nair tries to bring into the forefront. This indigenous marginalisation, when understood through the framework of Ecofeminism hints at the 'particular' or 'specific' exploitation that Hidimbi faced.

Ecofeminists argue that patriarchal society's values and beliefs have resulted in the oppression of both women and nature. It ignores women's work, knowledge and 'situatedness' (her immediate location in nature, where the relationship with the environment is far more intimate than that of a man's) (Nayar 249).

Herein, Hidimbi and her community (her brother being killed) are within and of the forest. One in such an instance can assume that both Hidimbi as a woman and her space being defined in terms of nature are equally oppressed by male ways of thinking (alleging Hidimbi of being a woman of less status) and actions (abandoning her in the forest).

Vandana Shiva when talking about ecofeminism states that “marginalisation of women and the destruction of biodiversity go hand in hand” (Shiva 164). She in this instance is trying to explicate the common ground of gendered and environment oppression under a capitalist structure. In this research paper, the whole argument is extended to understand the exploitation under patriarchal and Brahmanical structure (being the common ground).

Ecofeminism tries to explain that nature is imaged as a woman whose fundamental duty is to only procreate and nurture. Further, this act of procreation and nurturing are naturalised by patriarchy, negate the cultural and social pressure behind such kind of action. Similarly, Hidimbi is only reduced to the status of procreation. First, she satisfies the demands of Bhima. Second, she bears his son. Third, she becomes this dutiful wife who obeys her husband and lives in the forest in an abandoned state. Fourth, she single-handedly raises her son Ghatotkacha.

A large and growing body of literature on ecofeminism in the West relates to gender and environment mainly in ideological terms. In India however, growing protests against environmental destruction and struggles for survival and subsistence point to the fact that caste, class and gender issues are deeply interlinked (Rao 1).

This is the same that happens in the case of Hidimbi. Her caste becomes her identity and she get exploited on the ground of her gender and caste. The theoretical framework of ecofeminism is used in this paper to substantiate and prove the

research problem. “Woman revolted for the ill-treatment meted to her and her image nature...against the sole aggressor... “man”! Hence the ecofeminism” (Raj, Davidson 3). This particular idea helps in locating the character of Hidimbi in *Mahabharata* as a tribal subject.

Also viewing through the lenses of eco feminism by Vandana Siva will throw light on reciprocity, nurturing and cooperation which are common markers in women and nature. For instance, it is evident in *Bhima: Lone Warrior* that Hidimbi was neither brought to the palace of the Pandavas nor was considered as one among the women in *Mahabharata*. She is reduced to that of a victim who has been left with scars on her body and mind. She bears the child of Bhima, notably, the first child in the Pandava’s family but neither Hidimbi nor her son Ghatotkacha is viewed positively, but only seen with disgust. It is apparent that as human exploits nature, Hidimbi, the tribal woman who lived her whole life in the vicinity of the forest is exploited. Thus, Hidimbi’s body becomes the site of struggle.

Curbed power of Bhima

“Bheema looked at her, and his heart went straight out of him and melted into her. She smiled and he wanted to take her in his arms, and lay her down right there beside his mothers and brothers” (Menon, “*The Mahabharata: A Modern Rendering I*” 225). This description helps in analysing the mindset and feelings of Bhima. The description uses the word “wanted to”. So, it means to say that Bhima has the desire to have Hidimbi, but his choice and power is limited to the voice of his mother and brothers. Not only this, abandoning Hidimbi unaided and single-handedly was not a decision he made but fell prey to the stance taken by his family.

Anguish and Anxiety of Hidimbi

“Our destinies lead away from each other because there is much that you still have to do in the world of men. But I am with your child, and we mustn’t part until he is born” (Menon, *“The Mahabharata: A Modern Rendering I”* 231). Hidimbi acknowledges the situation in which she is caught and leave the things to fate. It is not the destiny that rules her life, but the supremacy exercised by Varna system, *Manusmriti* and *Dharmasastra* which are carried out by Pandavas in the context of *Mahabharata*.

Hidimbi’s Son: Ghatotkacha

Ghatotkacha, the son of Hidimbi and Bhima, never got an opportunity to grow in the nurture of his father. He was raised single-handedly by his mother. He was not protracted to the atmosphere of a family. But then, despite all the injustices bequeathed to Ghatotkacha and his mother Hidimbi, he came to help his father in the Kurukshetra war.

Supritika rushes forward to crush Bheema underfoot, but suddenly another elephant looms in his path, with a black and implacable warrior on its neck, whose smooth head shines in the sun: Ghatotkacha come to save his father! Hidimbi’s son fights with maya. At times, Bhagadatta sees him, and at others, he is an eerie mist (Menon, *“The Mahabharata: A Modern Rendering II”*, 205).

Ghatotkacha, the son of Bhima and Hidimbi has never, in reality, exercised the role of a princess or the son of Bhima. But has always been seen under the umbrella of tribalism. He is often referred to as the “tribal son” born to the “tribal woman Hidimbi”. The above quote also clearly demarcates the way in which Ghatotkacha is referred to, “Hidimbi’s son”. It mirrors the idea that Ghatotkacha is often being associated more to Hidimbi and not Bhima.

Frequently, Ghatotkacha is associated with terms such as “rakshasa”, “inhuman” which was initially contributed to

Hidimbi who is Ghatotkacha's mother. "They cannot stand against Bheema and his rakshasa son" (Menon, *"The Mahabharata: A Modern Rendering II"* 206). The fact of Ghatotkacha being an astonishing and strong combatant in the battlefield is acknowledged, but at the same time, stress is given to the term "rakshasa". So, it implicitly means to say that, there is no point in showcasing your skill and talent as after all you are a tribe. So, *Mahabharata* is often guarded with the rigid notion of the Varna system.

"He roars at Ghatotkacha, "You are neither a human nor one of our people. Get down from your chariot, if you dare: let us fight like rakshasas!" (Menon, 397). This is stated by Jatasura, who is in hands with the Kauravas, who plays the opposition of the Pandavas. So, here it is plainly understood that Ghatotkacha who fought extra ordinarily well in the war was humiliated by stating that he does not belong to the community of Kuru clan. So, he faces a constant identity crisis in *Mahabharata*. Bhima fathers Ghatotkacha, but that particular fact is disregarded and he is often exposed to the whims and fancies of others by their impertinent behaviours towards because Ghatotkacha is a tribe.

How Ghatotkacha meets his end and the happiness that arises in Pandavas because of Ghatotkacha's death is an important area to scrutinise which lends meaning to the marginalisation faced by Hidimbi and her son in the *Mahabharata*. Ghatotkacha was sent by Krishna to face Karna in the battlefield was not an oblivious decision. But it was a well-planned, pre-intended resolution made by Krishna using his tactics and diplomacy. This is very evidently reflected in the works penned down by M T Vasudevan Nair and also Ramesh Menon which are respectively as follows:

Krishna asked, 'Where is Ghatotkacha?' I said, 'From what I know, he is destroying Ashvathama's army.' Krishna stood up and said to Yudhishtira, 'Let Ghatotkacha go to the front line and

confront Karna. Send soldiers immediately with the order (Nair, 310).

‘Why do you grieve?’ he asked. ‘Karna used the lance he had kept as last resort against Arjuna on Ghatotkacha. Don’t you understand? Arjuna escaped – so this is a time for celebration, not lamentation, in the Pandava camp.’ I do not know whether Krishna noticed me standing in the shadows, beyond the glow of the fire. I walked out quietly. As I stood outside, I heard Krishna’s voice again: ‘We must celebrate. Where are the magadhas and the rhythm players? And those foolish soota paean singers?’ I could not make out what Yudhishtira said in reply. Krishna said again, ‘He may have been Bhima’s son, but was a forest – dweller, with the nature of a demon. An enemy of sacrificial rituals and Brahmins. Someday we would have had to kill him. On both counts, it is convenient for us that he died.’ I heard him laugh. It was nothing that I said to him, you are our only hope and sent him to face Karna’ (Nair 312-313).

Arjuna turns on Krishna in anguish. “My Lord! Am I dreaming, or are you pleased Ghatotkacha is dead? Bheema’s son has died, what makes you so happy?” Krishna takes Arjuna by his shoulders. “This is the happiest day of my life! I don’t celebrate Ghatotkacha’s death, but the manner in which he died.” “What do you mean?” “The war is won! Don’t you see, Arjuna, Ghatotkacha’s life was the price of victory: and I swear he will not have died in vain. Now Yudhishtira will surely sit upon the throne of earth.” “Whatever, do you mean, Krishna? I don’t understand a word you are saying.” “It is so plain! Now Karna is dead. The only man I feared of the enemy. You still don’t see? The Shakti, Arjuna: he could use it only once, and he has. If you knew how many sleepless nights I have spent thinking Karna with his Shakti, perhaps you would understand my relief. Arjuna, Ghatotkacha has died in your place and I don’t fear anymore” (Menon, *“The Mahabharata: A Modern Rendering II”* 405).

“Since the war began, he has been with us. You saw how he fought, how bravely, how carelessly of his own life. And not for the kingdom, or any desire for it: if he was alive and we won, he would only have gone back to his jungles. Power and kingdom meant nothing to him. He came to fight just out of love; and he, who least deserved to die, has been sacrificed to this gruesome war” (Menon, “*The Mahabharata: A Modern Rendering II*” 408).

From the above descriptions, it is crystal clear that Krishna who was an immense supporter of the Pandavas, moreover, an important figure as far as Hinduism is concerned, is the one who did send Ghatotkacha to the vicious circle of jeopardy with the complete awareness and knowledge of the danger. Krishna had two plans: First, to save Arjuna from the hands of Karna. Second, killing Ghatotkacha. Taking the first plan into consideration, saving one life at the cost of another’s life is justified by Krishna by stating that Ghatotkacha is a tribe. The idea that killing tribes is not a sin as they are inhuman is something which is consistently preached in the *Mahabharata*. The other plan which Krishna executed was the murder of Ghatotkacha. As stated above, Krishna can’t stand a situation where Ghatotkacha, a tribe sitting in the throne. The aversion that Krishna had towards the tribal community because of his strong advocacy of the Varna system is reflected in the above accounts.

“To be a Dalit in a caste-ridden society is a curse and to be an illegitimate within the Dalit community is to be doubly cursed. Dalits are “outcasts” to the society but a “half-cast” of an “outcast” is much less than being a human. It is the record of “the woes of the son of a whore” (Limbale 9). This was the very state which Ghatotkacha faced.

Atrocities towards Tribes

The so-called upper caste characters in *Mahabharata* illustrates cold-hearted action towards tribes which is clearly demonstrated throughout the length and breadth of the narration. Killing is not

justifiable, but it becomes justified when an upper caste person kills a lower caste person. It gets more validated when it is the tribal community which falls prey to the explorations of the Varna system. The cost-unconscious behaviours of Kunti and Yudhishtira evidently stands out in the following description:

All twelve Brahmins and their assistants left after receiving gifts. As the remains of the sacrificial offerings were first smelt and then gathered to be taken to the kitchen, we heard beggars calling from outside – a tribal woman and her five sons. Mother looked at them for a while, then said, 'Give them as much food as they want.' Purochana's manner made it clear that he did not like the idea of a tribal woman entering the house with her children... Mother lowered her voice, 'Spies will come here to look for our dead bodies tomorrow and they will find six skeletons. What made a mother with five sons come here seeking alms? You have the blessing of you forefathers!' Mother looked at the woman of the forest and her sons and smiled and went in. We were stunned. We heard all of them singing loudly in the outer hall. I was distressed. Yudhishtira noticed this and said, 'They' re just tribals, after all. You needn't think of it as a sin' (Nair 95-96).

The incalculable attacks on the tribes are featured in *Mahabharata*. Hidimbi and her son Ghatotkacha is just the counted victims which stand for the prejudiced, irrational and unreasonable subjugations faced by the entire community of tribe whose dispossessed conditions are often over and done.

Hidimbi Outside of Varna System

It is important to talk about the varna system which helps in locating the position of Hidimbi. Four Varnas, namely, Brahmanas (Priests, Teachers, and Intellectuals), Kshatriyas (Warriors, Police, and Administrators), Vaishyas (Farmers, Merchants, and Business People) and Shudras (Artisans and Workers) are the ideal ones and are accepted. The four varnas are said to have emerged from Brahma: The Brahmins from his head, the Kshatriyas from his arms, the Vaishyas from his thighs and the Shudras from his feet. The others who are excluded from

these four have no space, not even below the feet and the same implies to the societal construction. The hegemony created by the chaturvarna system does not give any space to the Dalits and tribes. This excluded category is known as the Panchvarna, who were not part of the society. Hidimbi is a sufferer of this constructed social strata.

CONCLUSION

This paper takes *Bhima: The Lone Warrior* by M T Vasudevan Nair as the primary text to explore the segregation and subjugation confronted by Hidimbi, a tribal woman. This exploration is done through critical reading, understanding of the primary text which is a re-telling of the ancient Indian epic *Mahabharata*. Interestingly, this text discloses its chapters through the voice of Bhima which can shed effective light on the character of Hidimbi as she is the wife of Bhima. The paper examines the suppression, subjugation, and exploitation faced by Hidimbi and points to the fact that Hidimbi faced isolation for the sole reason of being a tribal woman.

Hidimbi's marginalisation has very much particularity to her space. Spatially, she is set in a forest, closely associated with nature. Her very own existence in her space gets threatened when Pandavas colonise the forest at the time of their exile. Not only did the Pandavas stay in the forest, but exploited each and every resource available to them in the forest. For instance, it was Hidimbi who was regular food provider for the Pandavas. Not only she was exploited for their means of living, but they also detached her from all the possible spaces that she could occupy within and outside of the forest. Her brother Hidimba was killed by Bhima, which cut all her traces to her community. Though she was rooted in the forest all through, she had none to hold onto. Her supplies both in terms of the resource and people were always limited as she belongs to the tribal community.

An ecofeminist reading carried out in the paper embraces the idea of Hidimbi's oppression equated with the oppression of nature. With this close interconnection, the paper raises certain feminists concerns which the patriarchy negates through its narrativising strategy of absence and silence. Ecofeminism is the study of both women and ecology, the former looking at women's questions and the latter addressing the interwoven relationship between human groups and their physical and social environment. In Hidimbi's case, the former and the latter are problematised in the dominant narratives of *Mahabharata*. On the other hand, Nair's version lends space to understand these politics.

The relevance of this paper in this contemporary society can be questioned which can be reasoned out by stating that *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, the ancient Indian epics have influenced and still occupies a significant role in the lives of Hindus. The customs, social construct, tradition and decision making to some extent is drawn from these books. These books serve as a moral guide and it still holds relevance in the present society. The idea articulated back in the epic years have not diminished from the thinking, attitude, and behaviour of millions and therefore, I chose this to analyse Hidimbi who has not acquired any kind of reputed position in the text of *Mahabharata*.

The Indian Constitution is democratic, but the society is not so which is very much evidently seen in the case of Hidimbi who being a human does not even get valued as a human because the caste system plays in the society very rigidly. The graded inequality still prevails firmly in all spheres of life. To bring things into the light, this paper focus on the segregation and subjugation of Hidimbi drawing reference from *Bhima: The Lone Warrior*. The paper traces Hidimbi's suffering as an individual's suffering and as an entire community's suffering shedding light on the loss of one's dignity, both mentally and physically.

Therefore, this research suggests, Hidimbi faces suppression and subjugation on the ground that she is a tribal woman, unlike the repression faced by other women characters in the text.

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