Chapter 10

Revisioning as Representation:

In/visible Discursive Violence against Women

in Amita Kanekar’s A Spoke in the Wheel

Novelty, in postmodern times, is associated with new versions of the past rather than with visions of the future (Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*). This is probably a major reason for the appeal of Amita Kanekar’s first literary endeavour, *A Spoke in the Wheel*. Critics have appreciated Kanekar’s efforts to dismantle the legends associated with the Buddha’s birth and his subsequent renunciation. They have liked the fact that the author has strived to clear the haze surrounding the Buddha and his era (Krithika). The novel also explores issues of ethics and of socio-economic relationships that are relevant even today, such as the ruler-priest nexus that exploits the common people, the ethical ambivalence of the merchant class, the morality of war, the problems of large-scale displacement and rehabilitation, and so on (Karthik). There are several other issues of importance like the doctrine of *Dhamma*, the system of slavery, the plight of *devadasis*, the nature of national identity and the dynamics of crime and punishment. The novel has, in fact, been called an important contribution to Indian historical fiction (Gaur).

The available readings, however, do not pay attention to the significance, for our society, of Kanekar’s contemporary treatment of a historical period with reference to the violence perpetrated against the minority communities as well as women. The novel, through Upali’s narrative,
studies the devastating effects that Emperor Ashoka’s imperial order had on
the communities of people living in the forests in particular. Ashoka
transformed Dhamma into a political device in order to reinforce his imperial
project. The so-called expansion of ‘civilization’, however, wiped out several
minority/tribal communities. The callous and insidious attempts of Ashoka to
urbanize and subsequently control the culturally different communities as
shown in the novel prefigure similar treatment meted out to the minority castes
and communities in various parts of the world, including India today.

A very significant aspect of this novel is Kanekar’s delineation of
women. These women have received little or no mention in the traditional
accounts of the Buddha’s life. Amita Kanekar, through expert craftsmanship,
manages to strike a balance between exploring the events that led to the
formation and rise of Dhamma (similar to dharma) and exposing the various
nuances of violence directed against women of those times. Gendered violence
in India, as Suma Chitnis observes, is closely linked with “oppressions of
caste, class, community and tribe” (23). Every woman has her own unique
experience of violence reinforced by the traditions and norms of the
community to which she belongs. Kanekar’s novel exposes the range of
violence directed against women and which is rooted in sources like class,
religion and caste.

The novel is a story alternating between two narratives – of the
Buddha and of Upali. One of these is a detailed account of the life of the
Buddha and of the era that he lived in. The parallel narrative is that of the
chronicler Upali, a Buddhist monk living in the time of the Mauryan Emperor
Ashoka, three hundred years after the Buddha's death. The novel also focusses
on the way in which the Buddha’s Dhamma – a spiritual way of life that stressed on the rejection of violence, sensuality and ambition – came to be championed by one of the most violent though ‘benevolent’ autocrats of ancient India. It examines the manner in which violence is built into the existence of the women characters represented in the novel as living in the era of the Buddha as well as of Ashoka.

These characters have not been afforded much space in Kanekar’s fictional-historical double narrative. The author has only provided snippets of the lives of a few women living at the time of the Buddha and during the reign of Ashoka. The destinies of Maya, Tara, Yashodhara, Sutanuka, Nagamunda, Vassabha and Mala along with other nameless women in the novel, however, bear testimony to the oppressed status of women in ancient India. The violence perpetrated on these women is closely related to their class and/or community. The peasant women, the female slaves in royal palaces, the _devadasis_ or temple slaves and even women of the aristocracy lead lives that are marked by violence in different ways. The present chapter examines the manner in which Kanekar’s novel lays bare the violence that targets women of different strata of society. The primary axis of the violence against women in this fictional account of the Buddha’s life is class, but it becomes clear in the course of reading it that religion is also a powerful force influencing the nature of violence that women have to suffer.

Analysis of _A Spoke in the Wheel_ exhibits the overt, subtle and complex violence experienced by different women in their respective communities. For instance, it shows the marginalization and violent suffering of women belonging to the slave and tribal communities and also brings to
light the violence that characterizes the lives of the women living in the royal palaces. Maya and Yashodhara are two such women whose elevated status in society offers them no protection against violence. Both women suffer as much as the slave women do, though in different ways.

Maya, the Buddha’s mother, has received little mention in her son’s several biographies because she is said to have died during childbirth. Some of the folklore surrounding the Buddha’s birth claims that Maya died in bliss, extremely pleased with the treasure she had bequeathed to the world (Kanekar 8). Kanekar’s novel, on the other hand, puts a different spin on the event of Siddartha’s birth. It tells the reader that Maya was forty years old when she delivered her son. Before that she had gone through three traumatic miscarriages in order to fulfill her husband Shudhodhan’s desire to beget a male heir (8). Shudhodhan, a tradition-bound Hindu king, was no exception to the people of his community who were driven by a desire to have a male heir. Maya’s place in her husband’s eyes, however, came down a notch or two after she had served his purpose. She was kept away from her son whom she had taken pains to bring into the world because she was ill when she conceived him and ill when he was born. The priests did not allow the new-born to be brought near her. As a result, she died alone in her bed-chamber while her husband performed holy ceremonies in celebration of the birth of his son (9). Shudhodhan sacrificed hundreds of cows to mark his son’s birth. In fact, Maya’s fate was not unlike that of those sacrificed animals. Her life too was put at stake to advance the Shakya leader’s dynasty. The myths, as the novelist wryly notes, surrounding the Buddha’s life, however, would have everyone believe that Maya entered Heaven as a complete woman for she had died a
married woman and become the mother to a son. “Some rajas even blessed their own daughters that they might enjoy Maya’s good fortune. The daughters kept their own counsel” (23).

Yashodhara, Siddarth’s wife, is a silent/silenced woman in the novel. She was betrothed to Siddarth at a young age. Both families had their own reasons for the betrothal. Yashodhara’s father wanted the favour of the royal family of the Shakayas and saw his daughter as a means to get it. Siddarth’s father believed that only marriage could cure his son of his weird spiritual ways and get him to accept the responsibility of being the future Chief of the Shakya dynasty. Yashodhara had to wait for several years before Siddarth agreed to marry her. She was past her marriageable age and had to suffer the taunts of her community. She, however, was not allowed to voice her protests because that would have been against her father’s wishes (206). “The only explanation was that he remained the future chief. This definitely made all the difference to her father, who remained unmoved by all criticism of his daughter’s age” (205). A few years after his marriage, Siddarth left her one night and went away in search of what has come to be known as the Enlightenment. Siddarth was probably able to find contentment and peace in his own Dhamma but the same can surely not be said about his wife who never got a chance to accompany him on his quest. After Siddarth’s departure, Yashodhara is said to have stayed at her in-laws house and remained faithful to her living husband’s memory. The anguish of Maya and Yashodhara has not been voiced or written in any account of the Buddha’s quest. Their silence is precisely what Kanekar brings into speech in her novel when she hints at their enormous suffering.
The genesis of Buddhism has been conventionally associated with Siddarth’s acute sensitivity towards the plight of the lower social classes. The atrocities suffered by the slave communities as witnessed by Siddarth changed his view of life. It is said that Siddarth was born near a grove called Chaitya Bhoomi which was the place where the tribal worshipped the goddess of Lumbini. Shudhodhan, considering the circumstances of his son’s birth, believed that the latter was under the curse of the ‘she-devil’ whom the slaves worshipped (13). Siddarth’s compassion towards the slaves, however, had nothing to do with the influence of the goddess of Lumbini. It was cultivated in Siddarth by his nurse-maid and mentor, Tara. It is significant that the representation of Tara as the young Siddarth’s spiritual mentor in Kanekar’s fictional narrative problematizes the conventional perception that he (as the Buddha) was a religious patriarch who doubted women’s competence for work in the Sangha, the organizational body of the religion he had founded.

Siddarth was placed in Tara’s care soon after his mother died. Tara was, in fact, responsible for inculcating in him some of the ideals that later proved to be a crucial part of the Dhamma propounded by him. Siddarth was so devoted to her that he even referred to her as his mother in his father’s presence. Tara was not an ignorant woman as most people usually believed the slaves to be. She had a questioning and philosophical bent of mind and she taught Siddarth several things about life, death and the fate of the human soul. She claimed that this lore was passed on to her by her community as part of its tradition. The Brahmin teachers who tutored Siddarth were very impressed by Siddarth’s knowledge of philosophy but they scoffed at his ideas when they
came to know that they were given to him by a woman who was, to make matters worse, also a slave (110).

The character of Tara highlights the fact that tribal women enjoyed more freedom as members of their communities than as slaves in the royal household. Tara’s community worships a goddess and regards her as the creator as well as destroyer of the world. The image of woman in that community is that of a being who is made in the image of the goddess as a powerful protector of the tribes. Tara also possesses a streak of culture which suggests her connection with the matrilineal societies of old. She reminds Siddartha of the strong-willed goddesses that she worships (130). She is certainly more eloquent amongst the men of her community than the royal mistresses are in front of their husbands. She wants a peaceful life for herself and her community but realizes that it would never be possible, for she and her people are treated as slaves (130).

Tribal men and women enslaved by aristocratic rulers were treated like animals in those times. The men from such communities were generally murdered or kept as peasants. Women were raped, made to be the royal concubines or were kept as servants in the royal households. Many skirmishes took place between the aristocrats and the slave communities due to the latter’s attempts to escape from forced slavery. Mostly, it was women from both sides who had to bear the brunt of the violence that ensued. Mala, for instance, is an eleven year-old girl who is raped by a young drunken aristocrat and his friends (131). In retaliation, the slaves ambush and rape several women of the Shakya aristocracy (139). The Shakyas then unleash terror against the slaves and kill hundreds of them trying to escape into the forest as
well as several others who work in the royal household. Tara, too, is caught in this bloody warfare and is brutally put to death as a punishment for revolt. Her being a slave seals her fate and brings her life to a gruesome end (141).

The author has woven into the fabric of the novel several other instances also of the exploitation and victimization of the low-born women. Women from poor families are bought and sold like cattle among the aristocrats. Nagamunda is a beautiful but low-born woman who is used as an object of bribe in the Shakya rulers’ political game. She is kept as a concubine in the royal household of Mahanaman – a Shakyan aristocrat and a close friend of Shudhodhan – and is ultimately sent away to work in the royal kitchen when she begins to age and lose her feminine charm (208). Vassabha, who is the daughter of Nagamunda and Mahanaman, is used as a pawn by her own father who wants to teach a lesson to his enemy called Pasenadi. She is married off in the guise of a Shakyan princess to Pasenadi (339). Mahanaman never reestablishes his relationship with his daughter and son-in-law for he considers them to be of low-blood because Vassabha is his child from his concubine Nagamunda. Later he commits suicide when his low-born grandson sets foot in his house and, in Mahanaman’s eyes, defiles its purity (395-397).

The double standards and hypocrisy of the ruling class are made starkly evident here. The arrogance they feel on the account of their elevated status in society prompts them to sate themselves with the body of any woman they want. Religion, significantly, allows these men to cast off these unfortunate women by simply declaring that they are of low birth.

Religion, in fact, is seen to add to the violence perpetrated against women of poor and marginalized communities. An example of it is provided
in the novel by the *devadasis*. They are mostly women of lower classes who have been dedicated to a temple in the name of a god and goddess. They are supposed to live a life of chastity in worship of the deity. In the novel, however, an ugly aspect of the reality of this practice is exposed: in a conversation with his disciple, Upali mentions that the *devadasis* are mere prostitutes who serve the royal men. Their status in society is that of beautiful dancers, entertainers and servants to the ruling class. In a significant insight, Siddarth likens an aristocratic woman to a *devadasi* for he believes that both are rich and powerful men’s beautiful and dolled-up, albeit unwilling, puppets (193).

One of the characters in Upali’s narrative is Sutanuka, a *devadasi* living during Emperor Ashoka’s reign. Her mother was gifted away to a temple by her village folk. Sutanuka’s life, therefore, is expected to follow in the footsteps of her mother’s fate. And, indeed, she is happily resigned to her fate for she believes that she is leading a much better life than do the ordinary slave-women, or “poor creatures” as she likes to call them (151). Her belief that she is content with her life turns out to be misconceived when she falls in love with a sculptor called Devadina. She is not allowed to marry him, for she is regarded as a servant of God. Hence, she breaks off with her lover and chooses to continue to serve God in public and rich men in private. As is obvious in her case, religion adds a whole new dimension to the violence perpetrated against women in society. The plight of the *devadasis* reinforces the fact that religion masks as well as advocates violence against women. It highlights the fact that, contrary to popular notions, religion offers no refuge to women in distress. Rather, it may even contribute to their distress.
Nayana, on the other hand, is the mystery woman in the novel. The only information given about her is that she, like Upali, is an inmate of a small monastery in Maheshwar. Then one day she mysteriously disappears. Upali’s last sighting of Nayana is near a brothel. This suggests that Nayana has probably turned, or has been forced to turn, to prostitution. Nayana’s journey from a monastery to a brothel, not elaborated in the narrative, is shrouded in silence. Her treatment in the novel, thus, brings about a new perception of violence inflicted on women: in the constant re-churning of myths and legends, women like Nayana have been wiped off the slate of history. Kanekar highlights the subjection of women to discursive violence through such invisibility, silence and prejudiced representation. The silencing of these women results from treating their existence as if it were a trifling matter. Characters like Maya, Yashodhara, Nagamunda and Nayana thus foreground the fact that depriving these women of the right to speech is part of the unequally waged power struggle between the sexes. If these women had been allowed to tell their own stories, history might have been different. To an extent, Kanekar’s novel is an attempt to rewrite history and do justice to the victims of silence. In this attempt, the technique of fictionalization in Kanekar’s hands works two ways: on the one hand, historical facts can be treated more malleably; on the other hand, the fictional element concealed in history can be exposed.

Seen in this light, the narrative of Yashodhara in particular appears to be an attempt to throw a spanner in the moving wheel of the Buddha’s narrative. Kanekar’s narrative serves as a reality check for it provides the reader a de-glorified account of the Buddha’s life. Yashodhara’s grief has
never been articulated in the stories told about the Buddha. In this novel also, Yashodhara has been represented more as a beautiful mannequin than as a flesh-and-blood woman, but the reader is made critically aware of its unnaturalness. Her silence in front of her husband, thus, is as palpable as the voluble conversations between Tara and Siddarth. Her silence seems to have become articulate: the reader has only to remember the novel’s specific emphases on Maya and Yashodhara’s relative invisibility and shame in the foregoing pages. Yashodhara remains half-hidden behind the veil of silence, but Kanekar shows her not only half-hidden as she is but also the veil of silence that hides her.

The treatment of women in the novel thus produces a new perception of the violence against them. The novel exposes the multi-faceted violence that permeates the various strata of society and runs throughout history as far as one can see. And it is an overt as well as subtle violence. Though class emerges as the primary contributor to gender-based violence, it intermingles with caste and is further supported by religion. The author’s vision comprehends the two extremes of the hierarchical order of society – the ruling aristocracy and the slave communities. Maya and Yashodhara are women of the aristocracy whose elevated status ironically contributes to the trivialization of their brutal experiences of violence. The oppression that both women suffer is aided and abetted as well as concealed by the high class and caste to which they belong. Maya’s status as a Shakyan queen cannot protect her against the unrelenting demands that every patriarchal society makes on women. She is treated as a breeding machine by her husband and her death during childbirth is glorified as an honour because she has died as a mother to a son.
Yashodhara, too, is used by her father for the fulfillment of his own ambitions. Her protests would have been detrimental to the achievement of his ambitions; so he forces her to stay behind the walls of silence. Her silent suffering is regarded as quiet consent and as such is considered to be a prerequisite to the Buddha’s Enlightenment. Kanekar suggests that if the entire experience of Siddarth’s quest is re-written from Yashodhara’s point of view, it would dispel several of the glorifying myths that have grown around the Buddha’s life.

Tara, on the other hand, belongs to a low social class and her lack of an honourable position in society makes her the victim of a different kind of violence. Her tribal community has never happily accommodated itself to the new lifestyle, ideas and economy brought about by Ashoka’s imperial order and the attendant urbanization. Her people have never been ready to dispense with their religious beliefs and practices in order to be a part of the new socio-economic order. The upper class and castes treat all that is culturally different as necessarily inferior. They have thus branded the tribal communities as inferior and savage communities. The novel shows the tribal people being forcibly turned into slaves by the ruling class. Belonging to the lowest rung of the social ladder as well as being the economically weaker class makes these people vulnerable to exploitation at the hands of the ruling class. And religion aggravates this violence as the religious institutions are controlled primarily by men of the ruling class and castes.

A study of *A Spoke in the Wheel* shows that it is incorrect to assume that patriarchy is the sole source of women’s oppression in society. In fact, oppression is always multi-dimensional. Patriarchal violence against women is itself co-determined by the factors of caste, class and religion. Kanekar’s
novel exposes this nexus between gender, caste, class and religion. The interplay between the aforementioned factors results in the eruption of violence that plagued women of antiquity and plagues those living in the present times. Kanekar’s representation of the oppression of women living during ancient times mirrors, thus, the violence perpetrated against Indian women today. The women represented in the novel belong to different classes, castes and religious communities; nonetheless, their destinies are interlinked on account of the violence they experience.

A fictional narrative is inextricably bound to the social, historical and cultural context in which it is created. A writer belongs to a social group, shares a collective memory with it, and often deals in her fictional works with a past that is pregnant with meaning and still impinges on the present. As Andreas Huyssen has suggested, the present critical memory cultures – with their emphases on human rights, minority and gender issues as well as reassessment of various national and international pasts – go a long way to provide an impetus for the writing of history in a new key (“Present Pasts”). The globalization of memory discourses in contemporary India has, in fact, also resulted in the rescue and revival of the pasts of the socially subordinate groups. Most revisionist histories today represent the subaltern groups as the subjects of history. Kanekar’s version of the Buddha’s life is a considered attempt to reconstruct the past in terms of contemporary social, political and cultural discourses. This becomes evident through the representation of the tribal communities during the era of the Buddha as well as in the reign of Ashoka. The humiliation and victimization experienced by these communities at the hands of superior classes/castes is something that has been going on
throughout the centuries. Even the advent of the Dhamma movement was not able to instill tolerance and love in the heart of people for these so-called socially inferior classes. People belonging to the minority groups are still being exploited, manipulated and victimized by the urban upper class/castes.

At the same time, as Huysen notes, we need to recognize that mythic pasts have been regularly mobilized in order to support aggressively chauvinist or fundamental politics (“Present Pasts”). Myths, in fact, exert a lot of influence on the manner in which a woman is viewed as well as treated in India. Indian myths have mostly painted woman as a subservient, traditional, home-bound and essentially silent other. The numerous accounts of the Buddha’s life, for instance, show him as a larger-than-life figure whose destiny is shaped by a number of significant events that take place in his life. None of these accounts, however, includes women in the events that prove to be a turning point in Siddarth’s life. There has been no account of the lives of his mother or his wife in the popular myths. Maya and Yashodhara have conventionally been treated as non-entities in the numerous representations of the Buddha. Kanekar’s mobilization of the past, thus, can be viewed as a progressive and emancipatory endeavour, for she manages to lend a voice to the suffering of those women from the past who have remained submerged in the silences of history and myth.

_A Spoke in the Wheel_ is, in a way, a revision of the stories of the Buddha and Ashoka. The silences inscribed in the past are made articulate through the author’s delineation of characters like Tara, Maya, Yashodhara and Sutanuka and through the depiction of events supported by critical commentary. The suffering endured by Maya to give her husband his progeny,
the familial and marital woes of Yashodhara, the gruesome killing of the slave Tara, the sexual exploitation of Nagamunda, all these hint at the vein of violence that runs through the novel. Kanekar tries to bring justice to the memory of these unfortunate women who have been studiously ignored and ruthlessly sidelined in the myths surrounding the Buddha and Ashoka. By foregrounding the suffering these women endured, the author tries to lift the shroud of silence off these women. Kanekar’s novel, thus, serves a dual purpose through its representation of the women characters. Firstly, it articulates the violence that lies embedded in the silences of women consigned to the oblivion of the past. Secondly, it highlights the multi-axial nature of gendered violence that has continued to afflict Indian women through the centuries.