

Chapter 2: Trial by fire, social death: Necropolitics and feminist counter-narratives of Sita, Draupadi and Ahalya

Dr Ashique Rashul¹, Nilofar Yasmin²

¹Department of English, Haringhata Mahavidyalaya, University of Kalyani, WB, India.

²Department of English, Sripat Singh College, University of Kalyani, WB, India.

ORCID IDs: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-9527-8824>, <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-8813-3613>

Abstract: This paper will explore two ancient Indian texts, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, using the lenses of necropolitics (Achille Mbembe), bare life (Giorgio Agamben), and social death (Orlando Patterson), with the goal of demonstrating that the systems of Ayodhya and Hastinapura operate as states of exception, utilizing their sovereign authority to create and maintain female "living deaths," or women who have been reduced to nothing more than biologically living, yet socially dead. Through an examination of specific events that demonstrate biopolitical control over women—Sita's fire trial (*Agnipariksha*) and banishment, Draupadi's stripping at dice (Vastraharan), and Ahalya's transformation into a stone—it will be demonstrated that the female body has become a location for maintaining the purity of a family's lineage and upholding the dharma of the state through the use of systematic violence and the elimination of all legal protections.

The paper also discusses how recent retellings of the epics from the feminist perspectives of authors such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Volga, Pratibha Ray, and Kavita Kane provide counter-narratives, which repositioned sites of trauma and suffering — the forest, the stone, and the gaming hall — as locations of resistance and agency and "the solidarity of the discarded." These works shift the focus from the male protagonists of the original stories to the female subjects, and through this shift, the authors reclaim narrative voice as a means of resurrecting the voices of those who have been transformed into the "living deads" and challenge the dominant ideal woman paradigm. Finally, the paper will connect the epic structures of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* to contemporary socio-political conditions in India, specifically the violence of the castes system and the biopolitics of the COVID-19 pandemic, to assert that the language of feminist revisionist myth-making is essential to resist contemporary necropolitical regimes.

Keywords: Necropolitics, Bare Life, Social Death, Counter-Narratives, COVID-19, Living deaths.