

MYTHS AND CONTEMPORARY RETELLING : AN EXPLORATION OF FEMALE IDENTITY

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Abstract

Bruce Lincoln defines myth as "ideology in narrative form". What kind of ideas would then be disseminated from a myth? Could it perhaps define a code of conduct for an ideal society, ideal man or an ideal woman? What would the attributes be of an ideal man or a woman? In this paper I have tried to look at a few characters from Indian myths and how they are presented in a much evolved form in contemporary retelling. In the light of feminist studies and women's movements, a new train of thought can be traced in contemporary women's writing. Modern women writers are trying to carve out a parallel narrative by mind mapping the heroines of yore. Now the hypothesis that emerges is that if a myth is presenting the good woman vis-à-vis a fallen woman to set an example for society, can there be an "ideal woman"? Or is such an absolute example in itself a myth? Aren't such extreme examples of a heroine and anti-heroine exaggerations? Is such a tenor of thought conducive to harmony within society? This paper examines these and such questions.

The most significant body of myths prevalent in the Indian subcontinent culminate into the Sanskrit Mahakavyas or the epics, namely, The Ramayana and The Mahabharata. They are not only an embodiment of our cultural ideology but an integral part of our existence. Their validity stems from our religious faith and has withstood the test of time to be integrated as a cultural legacy and a code of conduct in our day-to-day life. They are stories of gods and goddesses, valiant heroes and great queens, of impossible feats and extraordinary sacrifices. Indian mythology is perhaps the only one of its kind because of its everyday relevance and can be called a living mythology. These myths have been told and retold either in the oral tradition or have devolved through the generations in the form of scriptures. In the Indian context these stories are both educational and recreational and the retelling goes on thus to impart values pertaining to our culture to forthcoming generations. They are intended to convey subtle facts, rules and maxims to posterity to cast them into the desired behavioural mould. The term ideally used in this case is *sanskari*. Indian society prides itself for its devotion to tradition. Such a legacy of adherence to cultural codes is conveyed by myths.

More than 300 versions of The Ramayana exist with the oldest being the Sanskrit version written by Sage Valmiki. Similarly, The Mahabharata has been available in many versions and the original version is attributed to Sage Vyasa. The wide spectrum of these versions in which the same story refracts depending upon the socio-cultural ethos and the regional nuances have facilitated contemporary retellings. Two celebrated examples came about simultaneously in the year 2008, namely, *Sita Sings the Blues*, an animated film which was written, directed and produced by an American artist Nina Paley, and Chitra Divakurni Banerjee's *The Palace of Illusions*.

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Sita Sings the Blues is an animated film adaptation of The Ramayana which retains most of the original structure of the epic but takes a sympathetic stance for Sita. The director calls it a poignant tale of truth and justice for Sita, the female archetype with the exhortations of equal rights for women. The inspiration for this tale comes from the director's abandonment by her husband and she narrates the contemporary tale of Sita conceived from her own personal experience and modern predicament. *Palace of Illusions*, an adaptation of The Mahabharata, is a story told by Draupadi, the female protagonist who is trying to locate herself in a patriarchal world. Renuka Narayananan in her article in the *Hindustan Times* dated April 13, 2008 critiques the book: So it's really intriguing to find a book that deals differently with Draupadi—not a Manushi article or a Gender Studies tract on 'Mythical Women and Agency', but a proper story, like Vyasa's epic where Draupadi begins.

It appears that there has never been a complete definition of an ideal woman. To substantiate, in a popular Sanskrit quote from the Manusmriti are the following lines:

*Triya charitram, Purushasya bhagyam
Devo na janati, Kuto Manushya?*

It means it is very difficult to gauge the mind and character of a woman and to know the destiny of a man. Even gods do not know of such things and human assessment is of no merit. This ancient code, generated in the Vedic Age, is a statement of a prevailing view that no definition of an ideal woman is complete. This view provides the philosophical justification for periodic revision of the archetype of an ideal woman, and it is in the light of this awareness that the definition of an ideal woman is today under revision. The question that arises in this context is: is this revision also complete or is it wanting?

There might be many modern stories of both Sita and Draupadi, the female archetypes, but to study and compare the concept of a heroine and an anti-heroine this paper takes up two contemporary renditions: *Yajnaseni* by Pratibha Ray, an Oriya author who retells the story of Draupadi, published in 1995 and translated by Pradip Bhattacharya, and *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* (2013) by Kavita Kane. Kane's novel has references of Sita and Draupadi from popular retellings such as Nina Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues*, Namita Gokhale and Malashri Lal's *In Search of Sita: Revisiting Mythology* and Chitra Divakurni Banerjee's *The Palace of Illusions*.

Before we set out to locate the anti-heroine characterisation in the texts let us inquire into what is intended by the word "archetype". The online *Merriam Webster Dictionary* describes it as "an original pattern or model of which all things of the same type are representations or copies." Character in literature and other narrative works becomes a subtext to such a model. A character who stands as a representative of a certain class or group then becomes a type. Contemporary retellings ensure through characterisation that the archetype retains its powerful rendition and is not reduced to a stereotype.

In order to substantiate the above claim, we begin with the example of Draupadi as an archetype. In traditional storytelling she features as a Kritiya, that is, someone who brings doom to her clan. She is the fire-born princess of Panchal, unsolicited right from birth. Nobody names their daughter Draupadi for having married five men, she disqualifies to be a model for others. Her long tresses have made popular the belief, '*Ati keshi pati naasha*'; i.e. "A woman with long hair brings destruction for her husband." Her beauty, her long tresses and her intellect, which would otherwise be desirable traits, bring Draupadi unprecedented ruin. There are

other issues that remain unstated; for instance, with five husbands who is she really devoted to? Is Draupadi responsible for the greatest and gruesome 18-day-long war at Kurukshetra? Traditional portraiture constantly oscillates in its depiction of Draupadi between Devi and Dasi. Hence Draupadi is reduced to a stereotype who is unacknowledged and indiscernible in the beginning of the tale and later misinterpreted and blamed for politics much larger than her. Even in her ascent upon heaven she is left behind while a dog accompanies Yudhishtira. She has no voice in the most seminal aspects of life, yet defines the traditional and cultural boundaries of a patriarchal world. She is born out of fire—a symbol of sacrifice (and of destruction?). Sita also undergoes the testimony of fire but she is over obedient and eternally suffering. Draupadi is a rebel and a militant expressing her opinion at her swayamvara thus committing the greatest folly of expressing desire. Her marriage to five men make her worse than a *swarini*—a wanton woman who gives her body to four men. She is labelled a *kulta*—a whore.

Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* and Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* create a parallel narrative. Instead of the impersonal third person they give their stories an autobiographical structure. Both these novels are in the first person. *Yajnaseni* begins in the epistolary mode with Krishna a (one of the many names of Draupadi) narrating the story of her life in a letter to her Sakha Krishna and the remaining pages are coloured with the pourings of her heart. In Kane's book it is Uruvi, Karna's wife, who tells the same story from her vantage point and creates a lateral view of Draupadi.

Yajnaseni begins with a very vivid description of Draupadi's ethereal beauty. Her beauty is not symmetrical with the traditional ideas of Indian parameters of physical excellence. She is not fair to begin with. Chitra Divakurni Banerjee's version describes her complexion likewise and mentions how Draupadi is trained into the art of seduction to overcome the lacuna of fair skin. In *Yajnaseni* Draupadi describes herself thus:

People said of me—exquisitely beautiful! Amazing! Complexion like the petals of the blue lotus! Thick hair like the waves of the ocean, and large entrancing blue lotus-like eyes radiant with intelligence! Like an image sculpted by the world's greatest sculptor, with unblemished beauty of face and matching loveliness of figure. Tall, well-formed breasts, narrow waist, plantain-stalk-like rounded firm thighs, fingers and toes like champak petals, palms and soles like red lotuses, pearl-like teeth, a smile that shamed even lightning, moon-like nails. The lotus-fragrance of the body deluded even bees. The serpentine loveliness of my hair would imprison even the breeze into stillness. Poets described my beauty as depriving even sages of their senses. (*Yajnaseni* 7)

The entire description is an assertion of Draupadi's independent bent of mind. She is not apologetic of her beauty. She takes pride in her nubile sexuality and intelligent mind. She is the woman who writes poetry. She discusses dharma with Yudhishtira, cooks delicious food for Bhim, recites poetry for Arjun, tends to pets with Nakul and is the quiet companion to the philosophical Sahdev. What Ray's retelling contrives to do is, in effective strokes add the dimensions of an ideal woman to Draupadi's character.

In Chitra Divakurni Banerjee's *The Palace of Illusions* Draupadi calls herself the offspring of Vengeance or the Unexpected One. Her Dhai Ma or the governess calls her instead the Girl Who Wasn't Invited. From her very birth begins her struggle for a sense of belonging and anchor. She makes sure that she claws her way into her Father's heart and in her alliance with her brother she gets a preferential treatment and an education.

Chapter 8 of the book is titled "Sorceress," referring to a sorceress, sent to Draupadi to train her. Such a mention never occurs in the original epic. This fictitious character is sent to train Draupadi perhaps in a bit of sorcery to cast a spell upon her suitors. Draupadi was taught contradictions: to adorn and at the same time to be ordinary, to lie through her teeth and to tell the truth. She is taught the art of seduction.

Draupadi is taught to use her beauty to her advantage but she is also an intelligent and wise woman. Her beauty is complimented by her wisdom but it makes men resentful towards her. In *Yajnaseni* when Dushasan drags her into the courtroom Shakuni says to Karna:

The greatest offence a woman commits is to try to be learned. It is because she became wise and scholarly that her condition is thus! If she had grovelled at our feet and begged, perhaps she might have escaped such a gross insult. Just as knowledge and power enhance a man's attraction, similarly, ignorance and helplessness increase the charm of a woman. However, Draupadi, strengthened by pride in her learning and wisdom, is like a burning tongue of flame. Can anyone have pity on her? (Ray 238)

Modern insight into the woman's plight is pretty evident. An intelligent woman is far from desirable. Any woman who is endowed with intellect and thinking prowess is a threat to patriarchy. The outrage she faces in the court is perpetrated by her own brothers-in-law in front of her valiant husbands who sit quietly through the act. All her cries for empathy and justice fall upon deaf ears. Aren't the passive men, be it her husbands or the elderly forefathers, as worthy of incrimination as the perpetrators?

Let us now analyse Kunti as another stock character undergoing a similar kind of ignominy. Kunti is married to Pandu who is cursed and can never consummate his marriage. The whole world hence calls her a whore when she becomes the mother of the Pandavas. Duryodhana never allows her son the right to the throne on account of their illegitimacy. It is only at her husband's behest that she follows the custom of *Niyoga*—the practice of offering of one's body to another man with the husband's consent. In Kunti's own words to Uruvi:

Oh, yes, it happens. It happens in most royal families though it's kept as the best-known family secret.... It happened with me and before me, with the two queens of King Vichitravirya, who was an impotent husband—Ambika and Ambalika... they had to offer themselves to Sage Vyasa, under the orders of the queen mother Satyawati... Sage Vyasa, her illegitimate son, whom she had conceived through Sage Parashara. (Kane 155)

Niyoga as prescribed by the scriptures is allowed only with three men. A woman offering herself for the fourth time is a wanton woman and labelled a *swarini* and *kulta* is a woman who accepts as many as five men. Ironically, the Puranas give instances of women such as Jatila who marries seven times for upholding dharma. Hence the rules of patriarchy devise dharma too which seems like an arbitrary code. This arbitrariness of the code becomes evident only in the contemporary version that is rewritten from a woman's perspective.

Uruvi, Karna's wife, is a non-conformist too. She is brought up by a liberal father who allows her to break free of norms while it is her mother who insists upon conventions. Uruvi refuses to be hidden away as is intended of girls from good families. She sings and dances with her male cousins, rides horses with the Pandava's and the Kauravas, and climbs trees with Bhima and Vikarna. She is charmingly obstinate and

rejects all her suitors. In her *swamyara* rather than choosing Arjuna as her husband, she makes the astonishing choice of marrying Karna who is an outcast. It is the instance of a Pratiloma marriage—a woman of an upper caste marrying a man of a lower caste. Such a subversion of rules and roles brings to light a new emerging consciousness.

Myths, religion and patriarchy have contrived to keep the image of woman as devi alive. A devi is someone like Sita who undergoes immense suffering and sacrifice and yet remains dignified in her silence. Gandhari in such a likeness has been painted as a woman who makes a tremendous sacrifice. Feminist perspective affords another side to this choice. As in *The Palace of Illusions* Dhairya Ma tells Draupadi that perhaps Gandhari blindfolds herself as an act of disgust and protest. Kavita Kane also narrates a similar incident relating to Gandhari's life that indicate her marriage as an incident of fear and not choice:

Bhishm Pitamaha's intentions had been noble. Realising that Prince Dhritarashtra had lost out on his throne because of his blindness, the grand uncle decided to compensate by marrying off the older prince early hoping that the first child would be the heir to the Kuru crown. That was why he had hurried King Subala of Gandhar and forced him to give his daughter, the beautiful Gandhari, in marriage to prince Dhritarashtra. (Kane 89)

Draupadi, Kunti, Uruvi and Gandhari are thus established as archetypes in normative storytelling. They are instances of women who have suffered greatly. Draupadi changes the course of history and Uruvi, Kunti and Gandhari play their part even though their roles are hardly one made out of conscious choice. How are these women anti-heroines then? They indeed exhibit character and behaviour contrary to the traditional heroine. But is this divergence significant enough to establish the extrapolation?

Sita is perhaps the most celebrated among traditional heroines. She is revered as an ideal wife, but new critical opinion indicate the lack of choice in the decisions of her own life. Her *agni pariksha*, for instance, is never an option for her but an act to fulfill her husband's expectations. Sita is called 'the Ideal Woman' and Ram 'the Ideal Man' and yet the ideal woman is exiled in a progressed state of pregnancy to the Dandaka forest. It seems that even the *agni-pariksha* cannot uphold her chastity in the face of societal pressure. Rama is Maryada Purushottam and yet societal ownership means more to him than filial duty. Contemporary literature attempts to revisit this ancient mythology and look at Sita from a fresh perspective. For example, Nina Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues*, Namita Gokhale and Malashri Lal's *In Search of Sita* revisit mythology to debate Sita's birth, her days of exile, her abduction, the fire test, Sita's renunciation by Ram and the birth of her sons.

How different is Draupadi, the anti-heroine, from Sita, the traditional heroine? Ray's *Yajnaseni* draws several parallels. She is born out of fire and hence meant as an oblation for the sake of dharma. Sita and Draupadi hence establish a sisterhood over 'Stree-Dharma'. Sita, Kunti and Draupadi are royal princesses and yet exile and servitude remain their lot. Sita's abduction and Draupadi's outrage are profound examples of shame in the annals of history and war ensues in order to avenge the wrong and instil the cause of righteousness. Then how is Sita upheld as blameless for the destruction of Lanka? Why is Draupadi culpable for the ruin of the entire Kuru clan? Kunti's, Draupadi's and Uruvi's husbands have several wives and yet the allowance that patriarchs make for men are not made for women.

Thus contemporary retellings of myths have questioned the polarised view of a woman. They have tried to render a more humanised version of women where virtues and vices are featured accurately in a person's being irrespective of gender. Women writers have questioned the 'Devi' and 'Dasi' roles accorded to women. They have, to a great extent, analysed female identity in their exegeses.

Contemporary storytelling is however an outcome of feminist critique that has extended the metaphor of myth. Stories are now fraught with gender politics. Political assumptions have always been an instrument of male hegemony that deny women not only equality but also choice. The feminist movement brought about identity politics. Initially it began with a victimized identity where special cultural and ideological groups asserted a collective struggle for rights, status and privilege. Feminism like any other progressive social movement was impacted by identity politics. Thus identity politics has diverged into difference or essential feminism and victim feminism. Difference feminism looks at the unique identity of women as a group. It celebrates the unique identity attributed to a woman due to her female characteristics. Difference feminism allows to vent out anger upon atrocities of men and male hegemony without the loss of femininity. These two versions of identity exploration, whether that of woman as a victim or woman as an empowered entity, features distinctively in modern retelling. But the question that it raises is that though retellings shed light on a woman's plight, it does distance from vision an egalitarian society, even though it sets out to do just that.

Identity politics in education is divisive. Such instruction runs the risk of dividing students into various demographic levels. Regardless of its merit that it prompts lateral thought and self-awareness, it divides people rather than integrating them. Women have a right to self-esteem and self-determination, but they also have obligations to society. Selfhood and self-esteem should not become ends unto themselves. If they do, then they become a handicap by making women turn inwards and be a captive of gendered roles. A new dialogue must emerge in the quest of feminist politics which is inclusive and thoughtful. This must also be incorporated into instruction and gender sensitization.

In the Indian context gender disparities are indeed debilitating factors in the progress of the nation. Emancipation and empowerment are problematic ideas and far from realisation. The Devi has been given a humanised version in contemporary accounts and that is perhaps far more real than the ideal and hence more acceptable. Education becomes a contextual process with a number of inputs. It should promote lateral and democratic thought and at the same time contribute to bringing about tolerance in spite of difference. Hence educational institutions must strive to preserve singularity of thought and yet integrate students to find common cause on the path to evolution.

Works Cited

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