

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN LITERATURE

Edited by Dr Satyawan Mane

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Women in Indian Mythology: A Feminist Lens

Swati Bhattacharya

Abstract:

Mythology or a compilation of myth often becomes a part of a popular culture. The use of such literary texts is often to make people aware of the cultural heritage and common practices in form of stories. These stories are often converted into teachings for the masses. Indian Mythology starts from the Rig Vedic period but it gained popularity with the texts from Mahabharata and Ramayana. These tales are even a compulsory part of illiterate Indians, and the most popular folklore across all languages. The projection of women in these texts is extremely powerful but essentially domestic and these texts have very subjugating tales for women.

However, these texts have always tried to set a benchmark of 'perfect' and associated a code of

conduct for reaching and remaining perfect. In the said code the women are the sufferers, strict keepers of self- dignity (as proposed by the texts), docile and loyal wives, part of family politics, polyandrous by compulsion. The men on the other hand are marshal, chivalrous, out on the battlefield, politicians and polygamous by wish. This dichotomy is still ruling strong even in twenty-first century, creating massive hindrances to the struggle of independence for fifty percent of population of this country.

‘Sometimes a women’s life tells the story of a nation’- this is a very commonly used proverb being used to define the cultural construct of any nation. As was emphasized by Altekar, who emphasized saying “one of the best ways to understand the spirit of a civilization and to appreciate its excellence and realize its limitations is to study the history of the position and status of women in it”. This is not untrue for India, whereas more relevant than many nations as even in twenty-first century most part of it still lives in the glorified versions of the mythological characters created in the mythological texts of India. This paper seeks to introspect into the value-judgments provided by the mythological literature of India and the value judgments still associated with it, which is impacting the society at a great level. The construction of a ‘perfect’ male or a ‘perfect’ female was insightfully written in these texts in a manner leading to create parameters which were thought to be ideal to build a perfect society. This however was transitional in case of India.

The early Vedic or Rig Vedic period had the projection of women as very respectable and dignified in their assessment. Despite the existence of a preference for sons, daughters were always accepted and treated well in early Vedic India, where the “girls’

education passes through the stages of *Upanayana* and *Brahmacharya* leading to the marital state. Women of the early Vedic period enjoyed absolute economic freedom. They engaged in professions for increasing health and well-being, as well as in teaching professions as *acharyas* in Rig Vedic society. Women enjoyed freedom of speech and expression of choice. Although sons were preferred a girl child was welcomed too.

However in the later Vedic period, mythologies were revolutionized with the introduction of famous texts which were Ramayana by Valmiki and Mahabharata by Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa. The introduction of benchmarks for masses on terms of 'Karma' and 'Dharma' acted as the demo code of conduct for both men and women. This was also marking the beginning of the bench mark of an ideal Indian women and their so called downfall from the Rig-Vedic period. The creation of stalwart characters like Sita and Dhraupadi setting an oceanic revolution in mythology and idolization of docile obedient women characterized an era flamboyantly accepted across the entire country. India came across an era where literature was created and popularized by priests and worshipped so that the society abides by these characters. Not only Indian women but the binaries of caste/class were also superficially constructed by these texts and women were characterized with the 'Dharma' of upholding these traditions so far.

Mythology with a dictionary meaning means a collection of myths, especially one belonging to a particular religious or cultural tradition. Thapar contends events concerning the more remote periods often take the form of a myth. Myth is in a sense prototype history since it is a selection of ideas composed in narrative form for the purpose of giving

significance to an important past. The gender construction that it achieved through dominant myth of Indian womanhood may well be read as formula for class/caste hegemony of modern India. The way the notion of the Indian woman become embroiled in the general reproduction of the Nation state, that emerged out of years of colonial domination was a complex process and her recasting took place through many confrontations. The 'myth' thus renders women as the beast-of-burden-in-chief of the class society of the Nation State. The quotidian life of an average woman in a Third World country like India is a hard struggle in which she negotiates a thorny terrain. All around her are forces, not merely of surveillance but of patriarchal rituals of pleasures and desire that try to keep her precariously poised on a razor's edge. Based on the ancient Indian manuscripts and texts: the Védas; the Great Epics, the Rámáyana and the Mahâbhârata; the Buddhist texts; the Smritis; the Purânas; and the Dharmauâstras; this study has made an attempt to assess women's roles and positions in ancient Indian civilization. Following the chronology of the ancient period in Indian history, the study has been confined to four distinct periods: the Early Vedic or Rig Vedic period (1500 BC-1000 BC), the Epic or Later Vedic period (1000 BC-600 BC), the Jainism and Buddhism period (600 BC-200 BC) and the age of Dharmauâstras, Mánusmriti (200 BC-647 AD). Although the ancient Indian texts have focused on women's visibility in this regard, historians, while reconstructing the past, have created certain spaces for women that exist merely within definite parameters, although the myth was embedded and the cultural investment in Indian womanhood, in her voluntary abstinence and purity was made into a national myth during the Nationalist

period. If in the pantheon of Indian icons, there were a few powerful and empowered feminine 'Shaktis' like Durga and Kali, there are hundreds of androcentric and paternalist iconic figures having sole sovereign sway. Hence the psycho-socio-politico-economic - cultural history of India teems with figuration of women as the one playing second fiddle to her lord/master. What we can fail to ignore is the way the patriarchal myth used the concept of 'Shakti' prevalent in the actual mythology of Hindu religion, to establish its regime of caste, class and gender oppression. Far from bringing the 'resolution' of the woman question the Indian Nationalists opened up the 'myth' of Indian womanhood as a terrain of renewed contestation. One of the ironies of that contestation was the 'myth of power' that the other myths plugged into.

If we look into the mythology from a gendered lens a lot of forced contradiction flares before its audience. The creation of 'mothers' 'wives' 'daughters' or 'Apsaras' are duly glorified and criticized following a standard code, which was frivolously created setting the picture of an 'ideal' society. Subsequently a standard pattern of bane and curse is also created, which is delivered by the Gods from time to time assessing the conduct of these characters. In Mahabharata, Kunti is a glorified mother who gives up on being a mother to a child who was not born out of her wed-lock and subsequently runs her family with a perfect grip. She subjects her all five sons to get married to a single woman and fits into the shoes of a perfect mother-in-law who can have an absolute dominance over her daughter-in law. Kuntz also disowns her son who was born before her marriage. So in a single character the woman and mother-hood has been gripped perfectly setting numerous codes

for the society. On one hand she is the perfect mother to the five sons with special powers vested by God, on the other hand she is still the perfect woman denying her love to the son born out of wed-lock. Kunti acts strong even when her son 'Karna' faces trouble and opposition from her own brothers. Dhraupadi, who had been named as Panchali or Laxmi is a strong polyandrous character of Mahabharata, who was lost by his husband as the bait, over a game of dice. But she protected herself and never got disrobed as she was protected by her male friend, Krishna and who lamented all her life loving a man out of her fiver husband who was Karna. Dhraupadi was a character of a kind, who was strong in places where she had to prove her merit and her character again was a pet of patriarchy that had to give in to strong male prejudices which existed in the society. Dhraupadi was born out of fire but she was so peculiarly subjected to patriarchal grip that she was automatically turned a 'virgin' when she had to come back to each of the brothers. Such a character which had been glorified at so many levels was deeply under-rooted in the grips of patriarchy. While Dhraupadi was forced into polyandry all her five husbands chose to be polygamous. All these characters were created and popularized as powerful in family circles with minimally important in politics/ battlefields. These political circles across the society were dominated by men setting the precedence of domestication of women. The political dichotomy ruling India even today and creating the 'private' and 'public' realms where India was made to believe that women are meant for taking care of husbands and children whereas men were out in the battlefield and integral parts of politics. This was glorified to an extent that Indian women even today find and

worships the literary characters of domesticated women. Savitri was such a character, who was fated to lose her husband and embrace widowhood. She fought against her fate and revived her dead husband after pleasing the God and is still considered the most 'pious' woman of Indian era. The practice of burning oneself on the pyre of dead husband was also tagged as 'pious' popularizing the taboo that Indian women has little or no existence outside the lives of their husband. India still blesses their daughters to be 'Sati-Savitri' indicating that as long as she lives she 'keeps' her husband alive. Gandhari is another woman character in Mahabharata who was fated to marry a blind king and hence she embraced the same for herself and tied her eyes to blind-fold herself as long as she lived. Ambika, Ambalika , who were created as a part of polygamous tribe of Mahabharata, so was Arjun who fantasized Urvashi and also remarried multiple times, Hidimbi who married Bhim and even though Bhim was in love with Dhraupadi, Hidimbi lived in the love of Bhim, raising his son.

Ramayana was following the same narrative of glorifying a 'Sita', whose life is no less than a live show of misery. India even today worships a Sita and trains her daughters to be like her. Popularizing the genre of 'Pativrata' (devoted solely to the husband); Sita goes to live in the woods embracing her husbands' fate. The entire text is situated around her serving her husband and being abducted and when she comes back she has to walk through a fire path to prove her fidelity. Even after this Ram is tagged as the 'lord' and 'Site' the glorified ideal wife, setting the benchmark of 'ideal' and domesticated private woman that India desired through its mythological texts. A Ravana, portrayed as a Rakshasha did take care of Site even after abducting

her, he even worshipped her as a mother and a woman, but this is not given any relevance in this society. Lakshman, who was the ideal brother to lord Ram also cuts off the nose of Surpanakha, the woman in disguise is considered a 'God'. This dichotomy ruled the central characters, proving the conduct of right and wrong in the society. Centered around this family circles were created the female characters of Ramayana, Kaikayei, Mandari, Damayanti all playing strong roles in family politics and completely kept away from war-fare or social life. Such tagged domestication has such strongly being reflected via literature that women had believed that they are not meant for outside politics, they are meant for family intricacies and accept whatever their husbands are fated for. Men are throughout projected as protectors for women, this was emphasized when Sita was kept in the woods in a hut and Lakshman and Ram would go hunting keeping her surrounded with a line which no one could cross and enter. Such sense of social insecurity and confinement is not even an uncommon thing today. Crafting men as chivalrous and protectors and drafting women as docile and submissive and incapable was the main and effective story telling both for Ramayana and Mahabharata.

The professions like dancers or beautiful women as entertainers are also projected in a negative line throughout the mythological texts. The crafting of the 'Devdasis', was itself very derogatory in nature. The term 'Devdasi' mean, serving the Dev/lord. These women were shown to be living in temples and dancing to allure and serve the male Gods. The 'Apsaras' were the beautiful women living in the 'Swarga'/ divine land and they were projected as often being used to distract the meditating 'rishis'/ Sadhaks (priests) from attaining what they wanted.

Arjuna from Mahabharata was also attracted to one such Apsara, named Urvashi and had a son with her. However, Urvashi left him as she was not meant for a family life in the mortal world. This projection of such women in the light of using their beauty and dance to allure men had always been shown in a negative light. These women were never shown to live a normal family life, therefore implying that these are abnormal and bad profession for women and those who engage themselves in this profession are eventually meant to live a parallel life.

Indian Womanhood is essentially a collection of multi-layered collection of myths. These myths have generously constructed the modern age, today's women and the subsequent formation of dogmas, superstitions, religious faiths with the derivation of 'Do's' and 'Don'ts'. The role of women and constructing their existence around the stereotypes of reproduction which was rendered as a 'natural' process, deliberately constructed to dominate that section of population was also a product of myths/mythology. In effectively reproducing the social hierarchy, the myth of Indian womanhood has naturalized not merely gender oppression, but has encoded the program for caste and class oppression as well. India is the land to worship 'Shakti' in form of a female but at the same time it sets the stereotype and the code of conduct of right and wrong for its women. The entire sphere of domestication and public-private divide that this world is thriving to fight has been imposed on half of its population a lot by its mythological literature. The early Rig-Vedic period was not the texts to create the judgments, but the later texts which were massively popularized did degrade its women. Strangely enough the women were called powerful, but the women were only

powerful in the family circles and not in the outside world. Krishna, who is considered the Lord of all eras was also shown in a polygamous relationship and stealing away Rukmini, who he married. The myths and reality as agreed by Ronald Barthes do not play a conflicting conjecture but act in mutual dependence when it comes to Indian women. The systems of knowledge, belief, institutions, and socio-economic formations born out of historical encounters have contributed to this complexity. The binaries that are deployed in explaining the position of Indian women have been the ideological enclave of exploitation. The Indian women have transfixed themselves an essentialist notion of 'purity' that was used to define 'Indian-ness'. This, in its turn, opens out to other stereotypes of gender construction that had been hitherto used by feminist critics to explain marginalization and devaluation of women globally as well as locally. accordingly this can also be understood that the constructed mythical womanhood was constructed to serve the patriarchy in both global and local manifestations. The myth of Indian womanhood was also interpellated by colonizers and the orient was romanticized as a mysterious land, where Indian womanhood stood as the emblem of downtrodden society. The way the personal laws were constructed, it depicted only the brutal claws of Indian or Hindu orthodoxy. This orthodoxy had been popularized by many other mythological texts, by the names of 'Panchali' or tales being read out during pujas/worship. A Laxmi is a docile woman, loyal to the husband and hence the symbol of wealth and prosperity in the family. According to Ashapura Devi, 'women have always been misled by this imposed ideal of womanhood. Be it her gentle manners and natural tenderness or

lack of physical strength, she has always found herself hidden behind a mist of illusions, fenced in on all sides and forced away from the real world into seclusion of a helpless and dispossessed life. Denied of her own ontology/anatomy, being and becoming, she is at best a shadow, an image of domestic doulus, a prisoner of comfortable concentration camp, in other words the house. It is the unfair system that fostered the absurd notion- that she has no place in the world of work outside her home. Man is the maker of that world, and woman's duty is to make him a home'.

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