

Feminism in Indian Mythology with Special Reference to *The Ramayana's Sita* and *The Mahabharata's Draupadi*

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Abstract

Feminist movement through Indian Literature has overtaken the movement lead by feminist activists and feminist campaigners of the radical and societal scenario. Since Brahma had exhausted all powers and material while creating man, Brahma was forced to borrow a number of aspects from other sources in nature, his own creation and created woman. He presented woman to man stating that 'She, The Woman' would serve him life long and she is that creation without whom a man cannot live. This image of woman is carried forward by humanity for centuries both in reality and literature. This statement of Brahma has initiated Feminism and is believed to have carried on to contemporary literature. This image of woman still exists in the minds of Indian society. When we look into Indian Mythology, two greatest epics come to our minds. The great epic Ramayana written by the great Sage Valmiki, where Sita is the female protagonist and Mahabharata, written by Maharishi Veda Vyas where Draupadi is the female protagonist. These two feminine experiences reflect the male egoistic world and the gender division that existed in the prehistoric India. This paper is a humble attempt to highlight this duality of Indian scriptures as shown in Indian mythology.

Keywords: Feminism, Indian Myths, Male Dominance, Indian Scriptures.

Feminist movement through Indian Literature has overtaken the movement lead by feminist activists and feminist campaigners of the radical and societal scenario. Before understanding this movement, it is better to look at feminist literature in India, more intensely so as to grasp the actual meaning and concept of the word 'feminism' in the Indian context since its initiation. An enthralling legend related to the creation of man and woman, goes behind creation of man by Brahma the creator according to Hindu mythology. After creating 'Brahmanda', Brahma the supreme creator believed to have created 'man' first. He later felt that 'The Man' needs a companion or else he would feel lonely and so he created woman as a companion. Since Brahma had exhausted all powers and material while creating man, Brahma was forced to borrow a number of aspects from other sources in nature, his own creation and created woman. He presented woman to man stating that 'She, The Woman' would serve him life long and she is that creation without whom a man cannot live. This image of woman is carried forward by humanity for centuries both in reality and literature. This statement of Brahma has initiated Feminism and is believed to have carried on to contemporary literature. This image of woman still exists in the minds of Indian society. When we look into Indian Mythology, two greatest epics come to our minds. The great epic Ramayana written by the great Sage Valmiki, where Sita is the female protagonist and

Mahabharata, written by Maharishi Veda Vyas where Draupadi is the female protagonist. Feminism did exist even in those days in its budding stage, though it was not termed so. Women during Vedic times were treated as Goddesses or slaves. Either way their feminine feelings were not considered and were made to behave according to the conventions set by the male dominated society. They were not allowed to express their true feelings. When we compare Sita and Draupadi, we observe that both their miseries and affronts are blatant and due to male members of their families. They both have sacrificed for their families and family honor. Women had no identity of their own and whatever identity they had was due to the 'primeval myth' which is social typecasts, and Sita and Dhraupadi represent two entirely different aspects of feminine experience which are poles apart. Sita silently bears the misery and humiliation meted out to her in the name of duty and 'Chastity'. In order to appease the male ego of husband Ram and her father Janak she just bows down and accepts everything that comes her way without any protest, accommodates all harshness of life with her husband without any complaint and finally withdraws herself from this male dominated society when asked to give a chastity test for the second time. Draupadi on the other hand defies every decision imposed on her. She refuses Karna during the 'Swayamvar', she resents when asked to marry all the five Pandavs and reluctantly agrees to marry all the five Pandavs when directed by Kunti, only because the other brothers of Arjun were ready to renounce all worldly pleasures and assume 'Sanyasa'. She protests when dragged by Dushyasan to the court and stripped. She even curses entire Kuru clan for the treatment meted out to her and involves herself in the war by stationing herself in Kurukshetra and is waiting to avenge her humiliation in the court. These two feminine experiences reflect the male egoistic world and the gender division that existed in the prehistoric India.

SITA:

Sita was found while Maharaja Janaka was ploughing the earth. She is known as the daughter of earth or 'Bhumija'. She was adopted by Janakawho was childless. She was happily welcomed by the king and was loved by everyone. Since she was not born from a womb or a woman, role of her mother is insignificant and she is known as her father's daughter Janaki, daughter of Janaka or Mythili the daughter of King of Mithila or even Vaidehi daughter of Videha (another name for King Janaka).

Sita was given an opportunity to choose her husband through 'Swayamvara', a ritual where a king invites princes of marriageable age and allows the bride to choose her own groom. King Janaka wanted a suitable groom for his divine daughter Sita, so he organizes a test in archery for the princes present there. Sita who had a glimpse of Rama earlier was in love with him and prayed that only he passes the test and her wish was fulfilled. Sita is married to Rama and is brought to Ayodhya.

Rama was sent on exile by his step mother Kikeyi for fourteen years and Sita accompanies him like a dutiful wife. She neither is angry with Kikeyi nor with Rama for not protesting Kaikeyi's decision but silently obeying her as a loyal son. Sita was born a Yuga earlier where righteousness prevailed and tolerance was strong. Though she is born a princess and lead a life of luxury she readily gave up all of them and accompanied Rama to the forest without any complaint. She proved her endurance when she walked miles barefoot through the forest.

Ravana who fell in love Sita during 'Swayamvara' couldn't obtain her since he failed the test of stringing the bow. He learnt through Soorpanakathat Sita with Rama and Lakshmana was in the forest and succeeded in abducting her by deceit. Throughout her stay in Lanka Sita did not let Ravana touch her. She never once was tempted to stay there in luxury away from the difficulties of forest life. She had full confidence in Rama and their love and was sure that he would come and rescue her. After she was rescued she was made to undergo a chastity test which she passed.

Later as the queen of Ayodhya when a citizen suspected her chastity because she was in Ravana's Palace for a long time, Rama sent his pregnant wife on exile for a second time. Lakshmana was asked to

abandon her in the forest. Sita managed to reach Maharishi Valmiki's ashram and gave birth to twin boys Lava and Kush. With the help of the rishi she brought up her children single handedly and trained them in archery and other fields of war. They grew up to be brave boys who managed to defeat Lakshmana their uncle and even their father Rama. When he met her again Rama wanted Sita to undergo Chastity test again, and this time she withdraws herself from this world and goes with her mother earth.

Though Sita is portrayed as docile and submissive, she is a strong woman. She accompanied Rama not because she had no choice but she wanted to be with her husband as that was the duty of a wife, to be with her husband in happiness or in sorrow. Sita never showed herself as a victim of the situation, but bravely and happily faced all the problems of forest life without any complaint. When in Lanka she never once gave in to Ravana's persuasion and displayed her moral strength. When Hanuman came to take her with him she refused to take the easy way out but wanted Rama to rescue her because that would be the right thing to do. When she was asked to prove her chastity for the first time she did not give the test because she was forced by the society but had confidence in her chastity and was sure that she would pass the test. When her husband abandoned her she was desolate in the beginning but managed to overcome her grief and bring up her twin sons and make them good citizens and true heirs to Raghuvansh. When asked to give the chastity test again she protested and decided to withdraw herself from this world and went with her mother Earth. So we see that though Sita appeared to have been submissive she has proved to be a tough Indian Woman who knew when to put a full stop to her endurance and say no humiliation.

DRAUPADI:

Draupadi was also not born of a woman but is known to be the daughter of fire, because she emerged from along with her brother from fire while Dhrupad performed Yagna to obtain a son who could avenge his humiliation by Dronacharya. Though Draupadi like Sita was not born of a womb, she emerged out of fire as an adult, and she was created out of hatred. She was created to destroy family. Draupadi was also married through 'Swayamvara' organized by her father. Draupadi refused to marry Karna and so did not allow him to take the test of archery which all the princes gathered for the 'Swayamvara' had to undergo. Though she married Arjun the man she loved she was not happy. The circumstances forced her to accept all the five pandavs as her husbands. The condition imposed then was that none of the brothers would take other wives, and even if they did they would not bring them to Hastinapur. Bhim already had Hidimba. Arjun married three other women when he went out on a quest to acquire divine astras (weapons). Draupadi never belonged entirely to one man who loved her. When they built Indraprasta a mayamahal (Palace of Illusions), everything was an illusion. Duryodhan was confused and fell into a water pit and Draupadi insults him by calling him the blind son of a blind father. Duryodhan wanted to avenge this insult and was greedy to acquire the Indraprasta. The Kauravas organized a game of dice and invited the Pandavs. Yudhishtira lost all his wealth and wagered his wife and brothers in the game of dice and lost. Duryodhan who was waiting for this moment asked his brother to bring Draupadi, who refused to come. She was dragged to the court and humiliated and was striped. Her chastity was saved by Krishna her friend and companion. Draupadi was angry with her husband and all the elders of the Kuru clan. She said that it was won deceitfully. She even went out to say that a wife is not her husband's possession for him to wager her in gambling. She questioned all the elders present there as to why they let this happen in their presence. She cursed the entire Kuru clan. She took an oath saying that she would not comb her hair and would do so only when she bathe's in Dushyasan's blood and comb with his Jaw bone.

Like Sita Draupadi too went on an exile, with her husbands, leaving her sons with Krishna. Unlike Sita who brought up her sons, Draupadi couldn't be a proper mother. During the last year of their

exile they were to live a year of Agnatha Vasa, a year of anonymity, Draupadi disguised herself as Sairandri a maid to the queen.

Kichaka the queen's brother was always after her beauty and was troubling her to love him. He once tried to run after her and when Draupadi ran to the king to help her, Kichaka went after and insulted her in the court in the presence of Yudhishtira. The King expressed his helplessness and refused to take action. She was angry with the King and even with Yudhishtira. She finally decided to put an end to this problem by killing him. She along with the Pandava's plotted and Bhim killed him.

During the Kurukshetra war Draupadi was waiting for her long awaited wish of killing Dushasana and then combing her hair and was happy when it was accomplished.

Like Sita she is also considered as one of the Shrestha naris of the time. Draupadi never accepted any injustice and always put her foot down and protested. She did not agree to marry the five Pandav's easily. She agreed to do so only when Krishna convinced her that this is because of the wish of her previous birth where she asked lord Shiv to grant her a husband who was Righteous, Powerful, Valiant, Handsome and a loving. Shiv expressed his inability find all the qualities in one human being so he would grant her with five husbands each possessing one of the qualities she wished for. Sita belonged to Tretayuga so her way of expressing feministic qualities was mild. Draupadi belongs to Dwapara Yuga and she is more aggressive in ascertaining her feministic feelings and emotions. Sita's beauty was the cause for Ravana to abduct her and that lead to the War between Rama and Ravana. Draupadi was also a reason for the game of dice following which she was stripped in the court and Bhima vowed to avenge this. She was the main cause for the Kurukshetra war between Pandavas and Kauravas. Both these women went through a hoard of predicaments and atrocities committed on them. Both the women managed to overcome all their troubles and remain victorious in the end.

India has a plethora of literature and it is all written in twenty-two languages and as many dialects. All Indian literature is similar and expresses similar emotions during a particular period. This article proves that literature has been inspired by women and their emotions. Feminine theme existed since mythology though it was not termed so. Women have gone against the system during all times but the numbers were less then and more so now. Indian literature has a wide range of themes; from an illiterate orthodox woman to a politician who is capable of changing the country.

CONCLUSION:

To conclude, it can be said that patriarchy and male chauvinism still exists and so does the modern liberated woman who is proficient in all the fields where man had a monopoly earlier. The study of the Epics to determine the status of women in society as an absolute authoritative source of history, is, in fact, a faulty approach. Although stories do represent society and social norms, nevertheless, the idea that there always is room for fiction, creative license and in this case, even manipulation of facts for didactic purposes or just to assert a certain point of view over others, should not be ignored.

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