

**Re-imagining the Mythical: A Study of Gracy's 'Panchali' and Sarah Joseph's 'Jatiguptan and Janakiguptan' and 'Asoka'****Dr. Roopa Philip  
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**Abstract:** Myths have a close relationship with literature. And this is manifest in the way in which myths have influenced literature through narratives, thematic and metaphoric functions. If myths are reflective of the dominant cultural and political values of society, there is evidence of a 'counter system' of tales – folk and literary, that re-interpret mythic narratives to challenge the hegemonic structures of caste, class, race and gender that it propagates. This paper analyses three short stories – 'Asoka' and 'Jatiguptan and Janakiguptan' by Sarah Joseph and 'Panchali' by Gracy as counter narratives. These three stories challenge the patriarchal, capitalist hegemonic structures through the mythic figures of Sita and Draupadi. Through the creative use of ancient mythical narratives these stories project a new and contemporarised image of women and explore their experience of marginalisation and oppression.

**Key words:** re-telling, feminist perspective, women's writing, myths, counter narratives, Sita, Draupadi, Myth and literature

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Most explorations into mythology study these as narratives that are religious and connect it to ritual. Therefore mythology has for a long time fallen within the purview of the anthropologists who have studied them as 'evolutionist' or 'diffusionist' - as primitive tales that are connected to a particular stage of evolution of a society. However, there are other perspectives of myths that have come into vogue. These new visions of myths and what they are take into consideration the continuing relevance of myths and mythical characters in a particular culture or civilisation.

In his essay 'Notes on the Study of Myth', Richard Chase defines myth as "part of the cultural consciousness of a cultural group from whom it emerges. It is not meant to be interpreted literally but has a symbolic function....Myth is a mode of cognition, a system of thought, a way of life...."(44) Therefore myths can be seen as having a symbolic or interpretative function and are not read literally. Often they are a representation of historical, psychological or socio-cultural truths, desires and dreams.

To quote Wallace W Douglas in 'The Meanings of "Myth" in Modern Criticism':

The Mythic is what the French have traditionally referred to as 'merveilleux,' the lost world of dream and disorder and grotesquerie....it also imbeds a "complex of human problems" or carries "one of the archetypes from the collective unconsciousness of mankind" or "the timeless meaning of an individual's psychic life."(119)

Projected on to myths and mythical figures are the cultural norms and values of a society and the group or class or caste or gender that dominates. This view is relevant to Indian Mythology as well. In the introduction to *Indian English Drama: A Study in Myths*, Nand Kumar states that myths are part of human psychology and psychoanalytical approaches to myth studies examine these tales as narrativisation of 'deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submissions, assertions, even practical requirements.'"(6) It is closely related to the cultural ethos of a community or nation.

Literature has a very close relationship with myths. The introduction to *Myth and Literature: Contemporary Theory and Practices* states that "myth forms the matrix out of which

literature emerges both historically and psychologically”(ix) and therefore literature contains evidence of myths at the narrative, thematic and metaphorical levels. Myths and mythic characters often enhance our understanding and interpretation of a literary text.

This paper will analyse three short stories by two contemporary women writers in Malayalam and how they have used Indian Mythology to comment and critique the patriarchal nature of society.

## 2

*Gender Studies: Terms and Debates* defines patriarchy as a ‘social system in which maleness and masculinity are conferred a privileged position of power and authority.’(14-15) In patriarchal society man is the self and centre and woman the other. Within a patriarchal society there is systematic marginalisation of women in the cultural, economic and social realm. It is one of the many structures of oppression in place in a society and works in collusion with other systems of oppression like caste, class and race. Indian culture is patriarchal like most societies across the world. Though there are many female deities in India, this deification on one hand is contrasted with the reality of exploitation, violence and abuse – physical and emotional, of women.

Kavita A Sharma in ‘Exploring the Icons: Sita and Radha’ examines how there is no correlation between a “goddess-centred and female controlled religion” and “high status for women or sexual egalitarianism” in society. “Hindu society for example, is highly patriarchal. Its defining structures relate males to males and women find their place in society by their associations with the men. In the realm of religion, however, women as Devi or Shakti is dominant.” (95)

Two well known mythical women characters in India, who are deified, are Draupadi and Sita. These two figures who figure in the two primary epics of the culture, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, are important, especially in their continuing influence on the imagination of the people –both at the religious and literary. *Ramayana* is ‘adikavya,’ i.e. ‘an epic in the realm of poetics’ while *Mahabharata* is an ‘itihas’, i.e. history. Maybe because of this classificatory difference, there are differences in the characterisation and interpretation or reaction to the two epics. While *Ramayana* has idealised characters, in the form of Rama and Sita, *Mahabharata* lacks the same level of idealisation. However, in the experiences of women characters, whether it is the ‘pativrata’ Sita or the more problematic Draupadi, there is evidence of patriarchal representation.

According to Mridula Garg, there are three images of women in literature one of which is the goddess. The goddess is represented as ‘incorruptible, pure, all merciful and forgiving as in the presentation of Sita in the Ramayana....seen as Shakti, embodiment of power.’(408) Sita is in various parts of the country constructed and projected as an ‘ideal woman and faithful character and often contrasted with less than perfect women characters like Draupadi’. Draupadi, because of her polyandrous and sexual nature poses a challenge to male domination and monogamy making her a more problematic figure. Sita is also a contrast to

Surpanaka in the Ramayana and they can be seen as the two patriarchal stereotypes of femininity in society, with Sita representing the ‘domesticated conjugal love’ and Surpanaka the other – ‘untamed, aggressive and therefore potentially threatening desire.’

While Sita can be considered an archetype in Indian culture, i.e. ‘a source-image the ideal-original-image of woman.’ Draupadi, is somewhere in between Sita and Surpanaka and does not fit in smoothly with this definition of an archetype. But this does not mean that she is any less important as an iconic figure. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan in ‘The Story of Draupadi’s Disrobing: Meanings for our Times’ illustrates how Draupadi and her narrative continue to have relevance in contemporary India especially for codifying women’s experiences:

‘Read as psychobiography (Gayatri Spivak’s term), we have in the Draupadi story a text that serves as resource for operating relations of power. I don’t mean to propose some timeless and unchanging condition of women’s oppression in India based upon the wide contemporary currency of the epic’s narration of Draupadi’s humiliation. On the contrary, it is precisely the potential and the fact of its appropriation by opposite ends of an ideological spectrum – from the patriarchal legitimation of the control of women by inflicting punishment upon them, to claims for Draupadi as a proto-feminist cultural heroine that claim our attention. (332)

Thus both Sita and Draupadi can be seen as mythical symbols with “multiple layers of significance and multiple interpretations within the culture that generated it.” They are both women who have undergone oppression and violence. Sita is abducted for a crime her husband committed and is on returning made to undergo the *agnipariksha* and later exiled Draupadi is shared among the five Pandaves and humiliated in public when she is dragged into court and stripped. Their experience of patriarchal violence and marginalisation might be the reason why they continue to influence contemporary literature, especially by women.

While classical texts like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and most of the ancient mythologies expose and initiate Indians into the dominant cultural ethos, there has been a parallel tradition of ‘tales, customs and beliefs’ that act as a ‘counter-system.’ In ‘Towards a Counter-System: Women’s Tales’ Ramanujan examines women’s tales, comprising of tales told by women and centered around women, as narratives that challenge the established social norms and conventions. According to him, these tales are “creations of women’s fantasy that deny in imagination the restrictions of reality, the constraints of family, custom, even within themselves....the second alternate world speaks of what the first cannot....Such a dialogic response of one tradition to another....parodying, inverting, facing and defacing each other, but making them signify new and even opposite things.” (446-447) Though Ramanujan’s essay refers to folktales, this notion of countering can be applied to literary narratives by women writers as well.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Palace of Illusions*, Ananda Devi’s *Draupadi’s Veil*, Shashi Deshpande’s ‘The Day of the Golden Deer’ and Kumudini’s *Letters from the Palace* are examples of attempts by various women writers to re-interpret and re-imagine the mythical narratives in their works. This subversive quality of women’s narratives, where they use the

mythic to challenge, critique and counter the patriarchal is what is found in the three short stories – ‘Asoka’, ‘Jatiguptan and Janakiguptan’ and ‘Panchali.’

### 3

‘Asoka’ and ‘Jatiguptan and Janakiguptan’ written by Sarah Joseph, a prominent feminist voice in Kerala and ‘Panchali’ by Gracy another contemporary woman writer from Malayalam well known for her stories, can be considered subversive re-tellings of the mythic from a feminist point of view.

‘Asoka’ is a subversive re-telling of the *agnipariksha* scene from the *Ramayana*. If the *Ramayana* is the story of Rama then Sarah Joseph’s narrative focuses on Sita and makes her the speaking voice. The story lends itself to an eco-feminist reading of Sita and the battle between Ravana and Rama.

Eco-feminism emerged in the 1970s with the intersection of feminist and environmental theories and activism and is founded on the belief that all forms and structures of oppression are connected. ‘Ecological-feminism is the position that there are important connections between how one treats women, people of colour and the underclass on one hand and how treats the nonhuman natural environment on the other. Therefore, exploitation of nature is connected to patriarchal oppression of women.

By metaphorically linking war ravaged Lanka with Sita, the story attempts to illustrate the oppression and violence that the two are subject to. The story begins by relating Sita’s weather beaten body to war ravaged Lanka:

Seetha lowered her eyes and gazed at her body. Body! Earth-shattered in assault by the cold, the rain, the sun, rapacious looks, devastating evil-eye! Face. Neck. Breasts. Navel. Waist. Legs. Feet. The scars of terrible trial. The scab of tears. Outrage, festering. Tresses fallen in the soil, tangled and knotted, dragged in the dust. Nails grown long, ragged. Skin peeling off in scales. (26)

In the above description, it is not possible to distinguish the description of Sita’s body and from that of Lanka or the land. The land and she are united in their experience of violence and oppression. The story is replete with images of nature, especially of nature that has been ravaged and destroyed- “The sea lay silent, its dark calm throbbing. The sun fell into it drop by drop like a melted clot of blood dripping. (29) Nature in the story mirrors Sita’s experience and emotional state.

The connection between Lanka and Sita serves two purposes. On one hand, it lends the story an eco-feminist perspective by illustrating the idea that nature or Earth experiences the tyranny of hegemonic structures along with women. It also serves to lend a cosmic significance to the ordeal that Sita was to be subject to – the *agnipariksha*. The references to “vultures’ cries, like laments, the fire in her eyes that burn the hands of the maidens transforms her into mother nature and puts her in contrast to Rama. In the story, Rama, who is referred to only as the ‘Victor,’ represents modern man.

Like the war-ravaged Lanka, Sita also experiences patriarchal violence when she is subject to the test of her chastity – “Lanka is the land hurled down by the Victor. Seetha and Lanka are one.” (31) If the *Ramayana* is silent about Sita and how she felt about the *agnipariksha*, here in this story, there is no such restraint. Sarah Joseph’s Sita burns with anger at the injustice she is subject to:

From this moment, his arms will sow not the quivers of pleasure on earth. Never will his kiss make its sinews throb; never will it kindle wild fragrances in the throbbing. From now, all that remained to be remembered were the slivers of rock, the harsh words he threw in the daylight, before the entire world. Only the shudders of this moment in which the body enters the raging fire as raw flesh. (33)

This signals the end of the love story of Rama and Sita. They are now not lovers or partners, but victor and vanquished, oppressor and oppressed.

In contrast to this version of Sita, there are references to Sita in an earlier more pastoral time:

Seeta was then at Mithila. Little legs, rounded and fair were stomping about with little golden anklets tinkling...All the fields bore rich harvests. Bountiful rain and abundant sunshine sported above them. The springtime was one of plenty. The mellow ripeness of fruit was unsullied by worms. The streams ran full, pressing against the land. There were placid valleys for the birds to sing full-throated, for the kid-goats to graze in peace..... (32)

In fact Ravana, referred to as the ‘Vanquished’ in the story, is portrayed more sympathetically because he and Sita have both suffered atrocities at the hand of Rama. While Sita is undergoing the *agnipariksha*, elsewhere in the story, Mandodari is shown guarding Ravana’s funeral pyre. Therefore, the fire connects Ravana and Sita – they are both cleansed and rejuvenated by it (like earth). They become kindred spirits in their experience of destruction and violence.

Therefore, through the narrativisation of a specific incident from the *Ramayana*, the story explores modern society and its attitude and treatment of nature and women. The story becomes an indictment of modern industrial society and the exploitative nature of capitalist society where everything becomes a commodity including the earth. What matters in such a society is monetary gain regardless of the cost. While Rama becomes a metaphor for contemporary society that is both capitalist and patriarchal, Sita stands for women and nature that are exploited and subjugated by it.

Sita becomes the focal point in the narrative, another digression from the *Ramayana* where Rama is the point of focus. Since the story unfolds from Sita’s perspective, the readers are called to sympathise with the injustice she is subject to, while Rama becomes harsh, cold and unfeeling. He is transformed into the ruthless capitalist exploiting nature for commercial or monetary gains.

The other story ‘Jatiguptan and Janakiguptan’ also puts forth a similar vision. The crucial point of difference between the two being, while ‘Asoka’ subverts the mythical narrative by narrating the events from Sita’s point of view, this story evolves as two disturbing nightmares

that Jatiguptan (who is the Rama figure) has. In the first dream, he dreams that he is wandering around naked in the jungle with only his weapons (bow and arrow) to cover his modesty. The leopard and bird he encounters become metaphors for Nature— while he is described as an ‘obscene sight,’ the leopard is unashamed and powerful. Janakiguptan (Janaki is a synonym for Sita) questions the relevance of carrying arms in a forest in the story, like in the *Ramayana*, when she says, “this craze for arms will make you constipated during the age of kali.” (36) The second dream alludes to the Mahabharata and the destruction of the Kurukshetra war. In this nightmare he witnesses burning tents and the blood stained cloth of his menstruating wife. Both the dreams become metaphors of the destructive power of war and conflict and the effect it has on Nature, represented by the menstruating Sita. But in both stories, Sita in the end is rejuvenated, expressing an optimistic belief that earth and nature has the power to cleanse and resurrect itself despite the violence done to it. However, there is no such respite for Jatiguptan, who continues to find no relief from his oppressive constipation at the end of the story.

We live in a world where conflict and violence are often glorified and narrativised through the rhetoric of courage, patriotism and honour. These two stories give us a different perspective of war by highlighting its destructive and bloody side, and the women characters become the mouth piece of this counter narrative. Whether through Janakiguptan who asks:

Husband don't you see these woods?  
The gentle ascetics live. Here.  
Their Kindred and their children.  
Play with the Marotti seeds, not guns.  
Look at the trees, they burst.  
With bunches of fruit, green and ripe.  
The yams are plentiful.  
Don't you see the forest in full bloom?  
The gentle animals. The birds flying calm and serene.  
Lotus blossoms thrive in every pond.  
The mountain-springs that fall and scatter in delight....

In such a place – fur whaa ya need all the sticks and swords? Ar ya crazy? (36-37)

Or through the maid servant he encounters in the second dream and her question, “Weren't th' l'l kids all clobbered t' death so tha five rottin' old wrinklies c'd live?” (40)

The mythic Sita is seen as the daughter of the earth and here in these stories she posits a criticism of the destruction and loss of life caused by urban, industrial man's greed. In many folktales, especially those that have originated in tribal communities, Sita is portrayed a child of the forest - like them. A similar idea is put forth in these two stories where Sita advocates a pastoral tribal existence over the industrialised, exploitative relationship between man and nature in modern society. Kerala is also familiar with tribal movements and agitations (some of them ongoing) and these stories in a way sympathise with the displacement that they face when their lands are taken over. Jatiguptan, in the forest with arms can be seen as representative of the state that forcibly takes over their land and delegitimises them.

The self-destructive aspect of this violence is alluded to in the story as Jatiguptan's severe constipation – he is unable to relieve himself and this could be a manifestation of nature's revenge where his body rebels against his actions and turns on itself, much like what man is doing when he treats the environment as a mere commodity. The masculine, represented by Jatiguptan and the Victor in the two stories, stands for the destructive, exploitative and violent way of life, while the feminine, through Sita and Janakiguptan represent a counter view that challenges and warns against such a way of existence. Janakiguptan, becomes the voice of reason and wisdom as well as a metaphor for nature or the environment.

Gracy's 'Panchali' is set in contemporary time, unlike the other two stories, and begins as a description of what seems like a normal wedding night of the couple Krishnaa and Phalgunan. The mythic elements that lend the story its significance is present from the beginning itself – with the names of the two primary characters and the title of the story. Krishnaa interestingly is a synonym for Draupadi as is Panchali, while Phalgunan is another name for Arjunan, the third of the Pandava brothers.

Krishnaa who in her adolescence, has carried on love affairs with five young men simultaneously is exploited and humiliated by her husband every night by his desire to avenge this 'transgression' of hers. And he does this by making her into a Draupadi and like in the myth depriving her of a voice. On the first night he behaves like Yudhishtaran, the next night like Bhiman, then like Arjunan, Nakulan and Sahadevan, in process, he submits her to physical and emotional torture, completely disregarding her wish and feelings.

The story narrated from Krishnaa's perspective illustrates the oppressive and exploitative nature of man-woman relationship in patriarchal society where it becomes a tussle for control and hegemony:

Krishnaa gasped, her heart missing a beat. With a smile that was hardly his alone, Phalgunan rose and held Krishnaa close to him. In a voice that she could scarce recognise, he said, "I was just remembering Krishnaa, what a rasika you were. You called the five of us Pandavas, loving each one of us equally, without a difference!" She knew then that a calamity stood waiting, with huge gaping jaws, to swallow her whole life. (112)

Draupadi in the epic is denied agency – though she is won by Arjuna, she is shared equally by all five brothers without being given a say in the matter. In that sense, though she deviates from the strict patriarchal code of monogamy that govern women, she is still a silenced and marginalised figure in the epic narrative. She is denied agency in choosing her husband and forced to fall in line with the idea of the dutiful and obedient wife. However, since *Mahabharata* is more of an 'itihās,' she is not idealised and there are indications of her rebelliousness and dissatisfaction with this arrangement.

In the story, the myth is used by Phalgunan to oppress and render Krishnaa powerless. Her deviation from the norms of a good and chaste woman is punished by sexual abuse and assertion of his power as a husband over her. However, if Phalgunan uses the patriarchal mythic narrative to deny her agency and control, Krishnaa finds a means of retaliation



through the subversive reading of the same myth. She transforms, through her actions, Draupadi from a patriarchal character to one who asserts her self and refuses to subject. Krishnaa is not docile and accepting of her mistreatment at Phalgunan's hands: "As he was getting ready, Krishnaa's hate-filled eyes stabbed the back of his neck like a mutinous sword" (115)

Unlike her mythic counterpart, she is not willing to forgive the humiliation she was subject to by her husband and she finds the strength and means to retaliate using the same narrative that was used to subjugate her:

The door swung wide open even as he knocked. Krishnaa stood there, her hair dishevelled and her face soaked in sweat. The big kumkumam pottu on her forehead had spread, glowing like a funeral pyre. Almost singed, he peeped inside with trepidation. His eyes were blinded by a luminous pitambaram-yellow light that flooded the room. Trembling he asked, "Krishnaa, who is inside?" Krishnaa burst out laughing. "It's true that Panchali had five husbands. But in her time of need not one of them supported her. Someone else was required for that. If you don't know who that is, I suggest you go read the puranas first." (115)

In a surrealistic ending to the story, Gracy's Krishnaa transforms herself into the mythic Panchali and uses the myth to challenge and counter the patriarchal discourse of marriage that attempts to deny her agency. She refuses to be oppressed and silenced. This is what characterises the women in all stories. 'Asoka' and 'Jatiguptan and Janakiguptan' use mythic characters and setting to comment on the contemporary world, while 'Panchali' uses the mythic as a metaphor for contemporary women's oppression, illustrating through this the power of the mythic to oppress as well as liberate.

Krishnaa, Sita and Janakiguptan refuse to be silenced and docile in their experience of patriarchal violence. In both 'Asoka' and 'Panchali,' the rebellious nature of the women characters is described through fire imagery – While the Sita's eyes are likened to burning coals, Krishna's pottu is described as fiery. Through their actions, these women characters counter and critique patriarchal discourse.

The authors creatively use mythic narratives to comment on and critique contemporary society and write their selves and experiences through the use of myths as narrative (like in 'Asoka' and 'Jatiguptan and Janakiguptan') or metaphor (like in 'Panchali'). By re-interpreting the myths from a woman centric position, they attempt to erase the silences and empower the women characters. Janakiguptan and Krishnaa speak and act out and refuse to be subjugated while Sita complies but not without resistance. In contrast the male characters, the Victor, Jatipugtan and Phalgunan represent hegemonic structures of oppression that the women characters need to overcome in order to establish their agency. Therefore, it can be concluded that all three stories use ancient mythical narratives creatively to project a new and contemporarised image of women and explore their experience of marginalisation and oppression.

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