

Whispers of the Forgotten: Resurrecting the Feminine Mystique in Myth

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Abstract

In the intricate tapestry of mythology, female figures have often been relegated to roles that either glorify their subservience or demonize their independence. This paper takes a closer look at the interventions by the feminism in exploring the narratives of such mythological figures with a lens on three major dominant works that subvert the existing mythological images of women. Gracy's 'Panchali' retells the story of Draupadi from the *Mahabharata* where the woman is not just a divided piece between the five Pandavas, but a woman wanting to reclaim her agency from the five men who collectively had violated her rights. Volga's tale of 'Reunion' gives an engaging meeting of Sita and Surpanakha from the epic *Ramayana* in an effort to implement the facets of sympathies in victims hence teaching the reader about sisterly bonding apart from their realm roles. In her poem 'Eve Oh Eve', Taslima Nasreen retells the story of Eve and offers a very different perspective – instead of the queen of sin, the first woman is portrayed as the harbinger of emancipated femininity. All of these works in one way or another function as a critical readaptation of the myths distorted by existing patriarchal culture, and as reconstructions of the female subject and her strategies of non-compliance. It will be suggested in this paper that in situating women in the centre of any dissident act of rewriting, such retellings do not simply defuse, counter or eliminate the misogyny and bigotry inherent in the source texts, but also reimagine womanhood in a way that is emancipatory and empowering.

Keywords: Mythological Subversion, Female Agency, Patriarchal Structures, Draupadi, Sita, Retelling.

I

Our social history explores mythology. Despite the fact that mythology is not substantiated by historical evidence, it provides an opportunity to investigate and trace the evolution of a civilization. As a result, the depiction of female figures in mythology provides a window into patriarchal society's restrictive policies. Women's aspirations are subjugated to masculine and dynastic grand narratives, and they lose their voice, agency, and even physical autonomy, pitting women against women in the age-old cliché of good vs bad. The Sati-Savitri model is used in these tales to emphasize what the ideal woman looks like: subservient, sacrificial, and a conduit for the man's destiny. Women who abide by their 'Naari Dharma', endure oppression with silent dignity, and continue to love their spouses despite their circumstances are lauded. Simultaneously, the women, who do not fit within these institutions, are vilified. They are labelled as infidels, tainted women who bring the Dharma down if they exhibit even the tiniest trace of autonomy. What is the distinction between Sita's and Surpanakha's experiences with violence? What makes Sita's abduction unacceptable but Surpanakha's nose-

mincing commendable? Is there a significant difference between these two women? Is this a matter of appropriateness and caste, or something else entirely?

Hindu mythology, of course, has traditionally been entrusted to higher caste males for safekeeping. Written by them, interpreted by them, and commented upon by them, they become even more masculine in their traditions. Feminist retellings become intriguing to look at when this is kept in mind. What happens when we put women back at the heart of these narratives? One would think that they would allow us to look past the misogyny/bigotry and the silencing rampant in the text, and finally look at women in a three-dimensional way, right? Wrong. At the very least, somewhat. The majority of feminist retellings fail to recognize, let alone address, the myths' most problematic elements. So, have things changed? The source of the problem is masculine Hindu mythology. They are primarily heroic exploits accomplished by higher caste men, as well as the grandeur they desired to crown themselves with. Women have a restricted number of positions in our society, most of which are binary stereotypes that do not reflect their courage and fortitude, even when women are at the center of these stories, this holds true.

In "Towards a Counter-System: Women's Tales," AK Ramanujan explores women's tales as narratives that subvert prevailing social norms and traditions. These tales are narrated by women and revolve around women. "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) Even though Ramanujan's work discusses folktales, women writers' literary narratives can also benefit from this countervailing approach.

Several women writers have attempted to reinterpret and reimagine the fabled narratives in their works, such as Kumudini's *Letters from the Palace*, Ananda Devi's *Draupadi's Veil*, Shashi Deshpande's 'The Day of the Golden Deer,' and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Palace of Illusions*. 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 two short stories – 'Panchali', 'Reunion' and the poem 'Eve Oh Eve'.

II

Consider Gracy's 'Panchali', which won the best Katha prize for the best Malayalam short story of 1998, the story begins with a depiction of what appears to be a typical wedding night for Krishnaa and Phalgunan. The legendary components that give the narrative its meaning are apparent right from the outset, with the names of the two principal protagonists and the story's title. Krishnaa, like Panchali, is a synonym for Draupadi, whereas Phalgunan is another name for Arjunan, the third of the Pandava brothers. He tries to degrade Krishnaa and treats her as a sexual object throughout the vicinity, without even considering her as a human being with blood and flesh. He transforms her into Draupadi and, like the legend, robbed her of her autonomy and identity. He acts as Yudhishtaran the first night, Bhiman the next, Arjunan, Nakulan, and Sahadevan the following, subjecting her to physical and emotional torture while entirely dismissing her feelings and needs. The narrative, told from Krishnaa's

standpoint, depicts the repressive and exploitative nature of the man-woman relationship in a patriarchal society, where it becomes a conflict for dominance and power.

Draupadi is denied agency in the epic; even though she is acquired by Arjuna, she is divided evenly among the five brothers without having a voice in the process. In that way, despite deviating from the patriarchal norm of monogamy that confines women, she remains a voiceless and marginalised character in the epic. She is deprived of her right to choose her spouse and is compelled to conform to the ideal of the devoted and submissive wife. However, because Mahabharata is more of an 'itihās,' she is not idealised, and there is evidence of her discontent with the arrangement. In the narrative, Phalgunan uses the myth to harass Krishnaa. Sexual assault and assertion of his authority as a husband over her are used to punish her for deviating from the norms of a virtuous and chaste wife. If Phalgunan employs the patriarchal legendary storey to deny her agency and control, Krishnaa uses a subversive interpretation of the same tale to retaliate. Draupadi is transformed from a patriarchal figure to one who asserts herself and refuses to be subjected as a result of her deeds. Krishnaa is neither passive nor tolerant of Phalgunan's maltreatment of her. She, unlike her legendary counterpart, is unwilling to forgive her husband's humiliation and finds the strength and means to strike using the same narrative that was used to control her.

Krishnaa is depicted as the polar antithesis of the patriarchal society's ideal woman. The author does not allow her female protagonist to be subservient and subjugated by her husband's will. Krishnaa, at the end of the novel, takes a firm stance against the injustices that have been perpetrated against her. "The only way for a woman, as for a man, to find herself, to know herself as a person, is by creative work of her own" (Friedan 158). A woman is an entity with a set of adjectives not as an individual and usually fits into some predefined brackets. As a result, women have to expect the worst from society and they will end up in a state of victimisation. Normally, victims keep mute and do not make a stand against oppressors, but here the female protagonist, Krishnaa has tried to raise her voice against injustices meted out to her and demolish the archetypal image of woman, thereby creating a space of her own.

III

Similarly, Volga's 'Reunion' narrates the encounter of Sita with Shurpanakha, Sita's perception of her exile and her quest for identity. Though Sita and Shurpanakha are shown as opposites in the canonical *Ramayana*, Sita is the embodiment of purity, dedication, loyalty, and sacrifice. Shurpanakha, the damsel is frequently portrayed negatively, however, she was a character ahead of her time this woman had strong emotions and did not fray away from accepting her attraction towards men, something that was taboo. Sita is good, pure, light, auspicious, and subordinate, whereas Surpanakha is evil, impure, dark, inauspicious, and insubordinate. Sita is the chaste good woman; Surpanakha is the "loose" bad woman. Volga's 'Reunion' depicts an envisioned reunion between these two characters on amicable terms, who discover that their journey in life is analogous to each other's. Sita's deliberations show both characters as historical victims. Women are used as a ploy in battles; it almost looks as if they are the cause of war and the struggle is fought for them, yet there are minimal insights into how they feel.

One of the most substantial achievements of this short tale is that it promotes the concept of 'sisterhood', which is far less well-known than the more well-known concept of 'brotherhood'. Volga's portrayal of women is a departure from the ludicrous concept that women are envious and resentful of other women. Sita meets Surpanakha and immediately empathises with her, comparing her difficulties, such as the trial by fire, to those of others. Surpanakha is described by Volga in such a way that one cannot help but be awed. A woman from a demon tribe who works under her brother's commands learns to appreciate herself for who she is. Surpanakha's face, which had been scarred by Lakshmana, led her to understand that a woman may love in many ways than one, including via her artistic works, her connection to nature, and just realising her value as a full human. Surpanakha was satisfied despite being lonely in the physical world because of profound self-realisation. This topic of meditation, a spiritual connection women discover within themselves after being humiliated and evicted by males in their lives, runs through the work, and words cannot express how brilliantly Volga has represented all of their journeys.

One of the reasons Volga created this work was to make the Ramayana relevant in a contemporary setting when women have expressly begun to reject intellectual and physical enslavement in order to adhere to mythological notions of femininity. She is aware that for generations, upper castes have utilised epics like the Ramayana to enslave women. Furthermore, women serving as battlegrounds for men's conflicts is a recurring theme in many of our major mythical legends. Men battling to safeguard their women, waging battles in the name of 'restoring their wife's honour', then putting them through trials to show their allegiance, is still a reality in many forms today. Sita was a well-educated woman who, according to mythology, could readily raise a bow that no one else could. However, an epitome of perfection, the daughter of Mother Earth, still reduced to her job as a wife, spent an eternity in her husband's service only to discover that she could never be happy in the mortal world. She dedicated her life to raising their sons after her husband abandoned her, only to hear them extol their father's heroism and nobility and forsake her to live with him. All of these events, according to Volga, finally assisted Sita in liberating herself from everything she had experienced in the mortal realm. It's also crucial to recognise that a woman's liberty isn't limited to her separation from the material world. While spirituality is vital, a feminist understanding can also encompass a woman's existence being secure and full of satisfaction, regardless of her circumstances, in a culture that isolates her for being 'unchaste'.

IV

Furthermore, Taslima Nasreen's 'Eve Oh Eve', is a reversal of the original myth. Taslima Nasrin explores issues of female subjugation and liberation as she wonders why Eve waited so long to eat the forbidden fruit. Once Eve has eaten the forbidden fruit, Nasrin praises her and outlines all the benefits that have resulted from her decision. Women's roles in modern society has developed throughout time, but their fate has been set long before. This statement is best illustrated by the story of Eve's creation.

A woman is usually placed on a lower pedestal than a male, whether in religious theologies or Christian iconographies. Religious texts had a significant part in determining what women should and should not do. Eve becomes the prototype, a template that shapes subsequent products and gives stature to all women. She is reconstituted as the first rebel, the first

feminist. Eve becomes the foundation of women and gender relations and resists the hierarchy of power and her act is rebellion. She is reconstructed as someone who leads mankind to knowledge. The world we experience is a consequence of Eve's actions.

Woman is the 'other' in every arena where patriarchy reigns: she is ostracized, and her identity is questioned. Throughout the years, patriarchal society's pressures and the attitude of so-called social women have resulted in the formation of this 'other'. Even if we live in a post-feminist period and the majority of people feel we have achieved equality, the basic truth is completely absurd and oppressive. Men and women are nurtured rather than born feminine or masculine, and gender is only a social construct. The cultural construction of the 'other' begins during infancy, for instance, when we provide boys and girls with gender-specific toys, we instill a sense of otherness. Women are stereotyped as weak, futile, docile, emotional, nurturing, and subservient, whereas males are strong, clever, logical, protective, powerful, and determined. This treatment of women in the home and society leads to the erosion of their identity, with women consigned to the role of simple objects. As a result, they are denied equal access to leadership and decision-making, as well as pay parity for the same position. According to Betty Friedan, "In the feminine mystique, there is no other way for a woman to dream of creation or of the future. There is no other way she can even dream about herself, except as her children's mother, her husband's wife".

The authors have depicted female protagonists who are oppressed in a patriarchal society, not just by males, but also by society's xenophobic attitudes. The women suffer from identity crises and marginalization. Before obtaining freedom and independence, the female characters go through a journey of self-awareness and struggle against oppressive conventions. The characters respond to their marginalized conditions and positions by thinking, acting, executing, and concretizing their goals for a refined lifestyle.

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