
Writing Ithihasa: Subversion of Mythical Stereotypes in Select Novels in Indian Literature

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Abstract: *“Ahalya Draupadi Kunti Tara Mandodari tatha Panchakanya smaranityam mahapataka nashaka.” Panchasati or Panchakanya can be mean that one who always remembers these five great women, Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara and Mandodari- is saved from all sins and failures. Myth plays a significant role in shaping the cultural heritage of a society. Myth can be referred to “a traditional story in a pre- literate society, dealing with supernatural beings, ancestors and heroes that serve as types in a primitive view of the world.” Indian society uses myth as a tool to impose their creed or doctrine on women by providing idealized role models for them. For example, Sita in Valmiki's Ramayana is deemed as the epitome of how a female figure should be. She is esteemed for her dedication, self- sacrifice, courage and purity. Sita is glorified because she unquestioningly follows her husband into exile and remains devoted to him.*

This study attempts to bring forth the subversion of mythical stereotypes in Indian literature and how mythology is used by the patriarchy to subordinate women by analyzing four women from Indian literature and mythology - Sita, Mandodari, Gandhari and Draupadi with their counter narratives.

Keywords: *Panchakanya, Myth, Subversion, Sita, Ramayana, Literature, Stereotypes, Women, Patriarchy, Counter Narratives.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Epics are the earliest forms of literature. India is sumptuous with the treasure of literature. India is the land of mythologies, classics and folklores. We have our own unique literary tradition which is oldest in the world. The two famous works of epic literature are *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. These two classics were written in ancient Sanskrit deals with the most prevalent ideals of the human civilizations that has a reflection to the present ideologies of modern times. These two epics bring about the value of truth in life, self – sacrifice, the need for courage, purity of mind etc. These epics are replenished with moral tales, discourses and message to people which are still apropos today.

The term “myth” refers to stories passed from generation to generations. It plays an important role in shaping one’s own culture. Today, Indian society uses myth as a tool to impose their



creed or doctrine on women by providing idealized role models for them. This study attempts to bring forth the subversion of mythical stereotypes in Indian literature and how myth is used by the patriarchal society to subordinate women. In this thesis I tried to highlight four female characters like Sita, Mandodari, Gandhari and Draupadi with their counter narratives.

Context:

Patriarchy, the word itself suggests its meaning. Patriarchal society is a social society or a group where men hold the power or authority over everything in the society. Indian society is a patriarchal one where men dominates over women. It is here in this society where the great epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are written. All these Upanishads, Vedas, classics were written by men not by women. They portray women as pure and loyal to them.

Sita in Valmiki's *Ramayana* is considered as an epitome of how a female figure should be. Sita, the daughter of Bhumi Devi, the wife of Rama, was believed to be an avatar of Goddess Lakshmi. She is glorified in the Indian mythology because she unquestioningly follows her husband in to exile and remains devoted to him.

According to Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Janaka, the king of Mithila, found Sita while ploughing a land as part of a yagna, adopted her as his daughter. She grows as the princess of Mithilapuri. Once while playing with her sisters Urmila, Madhavi and Sruthakeerthi, she unknowingly lifted the Thrayambakam to take a ball went beneath the table where the bow was kept, this incident is the backdrop for Sita Swayamvaram because Janaka wanted a son-in-law who is equally powerful as his daughter.

Even though *Ramayana* is packed with certain instances which suggests that Sita is powerful and courageous, Valmiki brings occasions where the purity of Sita is questioned and exiled. Valmiki focused more on the patriarchal male image of Rama, a brave warrior of Suryavamsha.

Amish Tripathi's *Sita: The Warrior of Mithila* is the retelling of *Ramayana* focusing on Sita where the title signifies, the writer focused on one-character Sita and he portrayed Sita as a warrior princess. The book deals with the epic journey of an adopted child Sita to the Goddess Sita. Sita in Amish's novel undergoes a shift from the stereotypical *sundhar*, *susheel* woman to a great warrior like Rama.

Ram wanted to marry a woman in front of whom he would be compelled to bow his head in admiration. (Tripathi 210)

Bina Aggarwal in her poem *Sita Speak* (1985) questions the patriarchal society who forced her to remain calm and silent. The poem begins by judging Janaka for instructing her to be pliable, devoted and obedient to her husband:

Sita, speak your side of the story, We know the other too well.

Your father married you to a prince, Told you to be pliable as the bow

In your husband's hand. (Aggarwal 104) In the next paragraph she asks,

Didn't you note Ram broke the magic bow? They say you- the ideal daughter-

Bowed your head in obedience

As you were sent away (Aggarwal 104)

Here Sita becomes a metaphor, where the broken bow Thrayambakam resembles a broken Sita and her broken power. She questions the ideal image of Rama by pointing out an escapade from *Ramayana*.

The chastity test on the scorching flames The victim twice victimized. Could those flames turn to flowers without searing the soul? (Aggarwal 104)



The poem ends with a goading to Sita, who sacrificed her life and love for her loved ones without uttering a word of remonstrance, Aggarwal asks her to explain her silence:

Sita Speak

You who could lift the magic bow and

Play with one hand, who could command the earth with a word How did they silence you?

(Aggarwal 104)

Sita is not the only one mythical heroine, who is considered as an epitome of female figure stand alone in her passive acceptance or fate. There are many. It's the fate of a woman in the male dominated patriarchal world.

Rama addresses Bharata in Valmiki *Ramayana's* Ayodhya Kanda: Do you keep your womenfolk pacified?

Are they duly protected by you?

I hope you do not repose excessive faith in them and Do not confide your secrets to them. (Valmiki 100.49)

Mandodari, the wife of Ravana, is another typical idealized woman in Indian mythology. She is born as the daughter of Asura Shilpi Mayan and married to Ravana. She is portrayed as an innocent, virtuous woman who is devoted to Ravana and makes herself blind in front of her husband's evil idiosyncrasies. Valmiki in *Ramayana's* Yudha Kanda portrays an episode of Mandodari's lamentation:

Alas! O king! Your delicate and shining face has excellent eye brows and a prominent nose. Its beauty and charm are like that of the moon, the lotus or the sun. the complexion of your face is like that of copper. You wear radiant ear- rings, with radiant crowns at the top. In drinking halls, your eager eyes used to roll with intoxication. You are handsome, wearing many kinds of garlands. Your smile was lovely and your conversation was enchanting. O lord!

However, your face is now no longer as radiant as it used to be. Mangled by Rama's arrows, it is red, with flows of blood. It is smeared with the fat from your shattered heads and rough because of the dust raised by chariots. (Valmiki n.p.)

Mandodari's lamentation shows her deep passion, affection for her husband and also Valmiki's portrayal of Ravana's beauty through the eyes of his wife, how he had given more significance to a male anti- hero rather than the female characters in his work. She loved the one whom the whole world feared to look at. She even advises him to return Sita to Rama and follow the path of virtuousness, but it doesn't reach to his deaf ears.

Manini. J. Anandani's novel *Mandodari: Queen of Lanka* (2018) retells the story of Mandodari, wife of Ravana. The novel depicts her as a perfect wife to an imperfect man who married her with lust and had many wives. Mandodari in *Ramayana* isn't the central character of the classic poem. Manini, through her novel tried to bring about the traumas and miseries of women in literature. Even though she is regarded as the queen of Lanka, she is remarked as someone subtle to men. After Ravana's death, she was remarried to his brother Vibhishana, whom she regarded as a brother.

Chapter XXXIII of Yajur Veda gives an exhaustive description of an ideal wife:

A wife, obedient to her husband, renowned, light footed, eloquent in speech, sympathetic to their parents, attains to happiness when she lives peacefully with her husband, and nicely cooks the food highly efficacious, and grown through rain, conducive to our physical growth, brought daily in use, and relished by our ancestors. (Vyasa 59)

Gandhari in Vyasa's Mahabharata is another female figure who is devoted and sacrificed her life for her husband. Gandhari, daughter of Subala, wife of Dhritarastra, had the prowess to



discern her future, came to know that her future husband is blind, she blindfolds herself. Dhritarastra was born blind, but Gandhari could see. She chose to close her eyes from the world because her husband was blind- brings the notion of 'Pathi Parmeshwar'- husband as God. Her decision is wanted as a symbol of self- sacrifice and an exemplary ideal of a wife's loyalty to her husband.

Githa Hariharan's debut novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* bring about the plight of three women characters with reference to the goddess and heroines of the epics of Indian mythologies. The life of the three women- Devi, Sita and Mayamma- lay bare variant extents of women's oppression. Devi's childhood was stuffed with the stories told by her grandmother which always yoked together with the stories of Gandhari or ultimately reaches to the morals from her life.

Sita says, "Gandhari embraces her destiny- a blind husband-with a self- sacrifice worthy of her royal blood." (Hariharan 29) Gandhari's act to blindfold herself can be seen as a self-sacrifice and admiration for her husband, at the same time can be considered as her rebel against the injustice exhorted on her to marry a blind man like Dhritarastra. Indian mythology points out that she refrains to see what her husband cannot see. Sita's act of sacrificing her veena and life points out to that of Gandhari myth.

Geetha has used the technique of passing- on narration from one character to another brings about the idealization of women by the society. Sita tries to teach Devi the need for self-sacrifice and loyalty in one's life through the character Gandhari from *Mahabharata*. Shetries to make Devi fit in to the role of an idealized woman whom the society expects from her.

Unlike Sita, Mandodhari and Gandhari, Draupadi is not acknowledged as a role model for an ideal woman even though she is devoted to her husbands. Vyasa portrayed Draupadi as an intricate and multifaceted character who does not vacillate to express her assessment or control her anger on the humiliations against her. We all know that the cause of the Mahabharata Yudha and Draupadi's Shapadh. Draupadi, daughter of Drupada was said to be merged from the fire of Putrakameshti yaga, done by the king to be blessed with a child. When she emerged from the fire, a voice from the Agni said that she will bring a change in the future of dharma of Bharathdesh. She was intended to marry the warrior prince Arjuna, but her fate drives her to marry five brothers and she came to known as Panchali.

Mahasweta Devi in her story *Draupadi* (1990) portrays the story of Dopti Mehjen who bear a resemblance to the Draupadi of *Mahabharata*. Devi's Dopti was a Naxalite, who was captured by the military officials and became a victim of male lust. While the mythical Draupadi escapes from the humiliation and gaze by the divine intervention from Lord Krishna. But no miracle happened in the story of Devi where Dhopti was raped, physically wounded and battered by many. She never allowed anyone to cover her body or cover her nudity with a piece of cloth until she reached the tent of Burra Sahib. She was not shame when she defies Senanayak and negate to answer to their questions and said:

You can strip me,

But how can you clothe me again (Devi 104)

Dhopti like Draupadi challenges the values of a male dominated society, exposes her pain, the brutalities done against her and goes beyond the mythical counterpart. The likeness in Draupadi and Dhopti can be seen in their charisma. They do not hesitate to speak what they want to speak, blatantly fight against the humiliation done against them and became a role model for other women.



2. CONCLUSION

These literary texts attempted to question and sabotage the stereotypical images attributed to women in Indian mythology. Amish Tripathi, Bina Aggarwal, Manini J Anandani, Gita Hariharan and Mahasweta Devi through their works *Sita: The Warrior of Mithila*, *Sita Speak*, *Mandodari: Queen of Lanka*, *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *Draupadi* tried to create new scruples among readers by arousing demythification in Indian mythology.

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