

# DEPICTION OF WOMEN IN ANCIENT SCRIPTURES AND MYTHOLOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF PRESERVING THE GREAT INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM

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## **Abstract**

*The centuries old Indian scriptural documentaries have depicted Indian patriarchal society that largely took responsibility of deciding the fate of a woman. The classic Hindu Dharmasastras of which the Manusmirti is the best known, defines the duties of women as follows: "By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house. In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent." (qtd. in Bolich, Crossdressing in Context 281).*

*The various Indian epics and narratives have emphasized on the phallocentric society which largely promotes feminine virtues such as submission, restraint, chastity etc, with the mythical mainstream literature that has largely projected a feminine character that epitomize virtuous and idealistic qualities unlike dark characters like Hidimba, Surpanakha or Ahalya. In Ramayana, Sita's character is uniquely judged in relation to the idealistic expectations of Rama and the subjects of Ayodhya. The image of these virtuous mythological female characters is adored and they are referred to as "Devi", "Mata" etc. In the contemporary scenario, the gender politics become apparent in terms of the treatment meted out to a woman is radically different if they fail to conform to the idealistic expectations from the society. This paper endeavours to reconstruct the repressed and silenced expressions of feminine characters subdued in the popular Indian myths that fail to challenge the patriarchal dogmas. With changing literary genres, the revisionist myth-making proposes unconventional perspectives that are bereft of stereotypical gender archetypes.*

**Keywords:** patriarchy, feminist writings, gender studies, silenced voices, IKS etc

Simone de Beauvoir's statement "One is not born, but becomes a woman" has been an unswerving reference point by scholars of gender studies to highlight the sex-gender distinction to arrive at a suitable solution towards the grappling issues imposed by the patriarchal society. Set within the grand Indian ethos, the mainstream Indian epics and narratives have emphasized on feminine virtues of submission, self-control, purity, while justifying, upholding the male dominated law. So also, the scriptures the centuries old Indian scriptural documentaries have depicted Indian patriarchal society that largely took responsibility of deciding the fate of a woman. The classic Hindu Dharmasastras of which the Manusmirti is the best known, defines the duties of women as follows: "By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house. In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent." (Qtd. in Bolich, Crossdressing in Context 281).

Since the antiquity, the popular Indian narratives have reflected lack of tolerance towards unconventional female typecasts such as Hidimba, Urvashi, Manthara, Kaikayi and have popularly represented them as indignant, unglorified characters. This paper endeavours to unravel the lesser-known marginalized tales of female characters, that are open for debate with prominent theoretical tenets in gender studies. With a focus to develop unbiased, open-minded approach in the context of promoting Indian Knowledge System--(IKS), the myths in discussion are of Bahuchara mata, --with the persistent theme of castration. Next is the legend of Ahalya —the wife of the sage Gautama, who was turned to stone; had to undergo a painful penance on grounds of lacking chastity who is redeemed by lord Rama Also the infamous tale in Ramayana where "Laxmana Mutilates Surpanakha", are narratives in examination aimed to shed light on the apathic attitudes towards unconventional female characters in the ancient Indian culture.

The tale of Bahuchara *mata* is a folklore from Gujrat. The saga involves Bahuchara mata who is forced into an unconsummated marriage and on discovering her husband having intimate relationship with other men sets her fuming. In the rage of fury, she castrates the genitals of her husband to take revenge and attains the status of a goddess. The tale when analysed through modern lenses, depict the plight of Bahuchara as an innocent

victim of a treacherous act of infidelity. Her sad tale accentuates the besmirched reality of relationships where women forced into an unconsummated nuptial face betrayal and fall victims to the rigid norms of society.

In another version, the myth titled as “*Bahuchara Cuts her Breasts*” departs from the cliched theme of a submissive, conventional feminine substituted for violent retaliation, as she reconstructs the symbol of breasts and makes them into terrible instruments of vengeance against those who treat her through unfair means. The tale as details are as follows:

Bahuchara and her two sisters were on their way to a fair when a marauder called Bapiya attacked their caravan. To escape rape and abduction, the sisters killed themselves. Bahuchara cut her breasts. As she bled to death, she cursed Bapiya that he would become impotent. When Bapiya begged for mercy, Bahuchara said he would be forgiven only if he put on women’s clothes, and worshipped her as a goddess (*Goddess in India* 135).

The various mythical interpretations can be explored from a feminist seminary, that positions Beauvoir’s (1953) following argument: A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man. In actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity (xv).

The Indian narrative makes one contemplate that a man’s masculinity and sexual preferences are never discussed at the time of his wedding. The man, as asserted by Beauvoir, will continue to enjoy his honoured or the ‘absolute’ position, akin to the predicament of Bahuchara mata. Thus, myths act as a potent tool to revolt against clandestine sexually-deviant men who make women unsuspecting victims of circumstances; where in the hypocritical conservative traditional dogmas force non-conformative-gender individuals to forcefully marry due to societal pressure. Moreover, the couple who is in such a forged relationship experiences a lot of psychological anguish and societal pressure. The tale of Bahuchara mata is not a very popular Indian folklore as it aptly questions the role of social traditions, establishing male-hegemony over female and expects women to be the ‘Other’ a silent sufferer whose voice is stifled in the name of morality.

The account of Bahuchara truly captures a powerful and complex notion of the dominant structures in gender relations — of the subordinated women dominated by men and the marginalized masculinities, dominated by the masculine ideal. For feminists, in scriptures and myths, the mythical feminine characters are often described as an object of reverence of worship venerated on a sacred altar. In reality, the female has to face a contrasting grim reality with hardly any respect from the orthodox members.

The next tale deliberated upon with patriarchal view point, is the relegated anecdote of ‘Ahalya—the wife of Sage Gautama’. Researchers revisit the iconic figures like Ahalya as bold and outspoken as portrayed in traditional folklores. In Indian mythology, Indra, the King of the Gods is depicted gloriously as a philanderer. Ahalya, the wife of the sage Gautama is seduced by Indra, when he comes metamorphosed as her husband. When the two get caught in the act, Ahalya is turned into a stone. The narrative when analysed within the patriarchal framework reflects the feminine character who is pawned and controlled by the phallogocentric writers of the bygone era. In some version of the myths, Ahalya was believed to be married to the much older Gautama. While the curse varies from text to text, almost all versions describe Rama as the eventual agent of her liberation and redemption (*Book of Ram* 46). As per the modern critics, will Ahalya not have unfulfilled human desires? (edited by Ketu H. Katrak, Anita Ratnam, 137). The story in question can be investigated through a feminist perspective. Men are controlled by the phallus and the power assigned to it, making them superior and their women inferior. In Ahalya’s narrative, the power struggle and authority are heavily voiced and put to question as the struggle between the genders becomes evident—Indra the man with phallic power, and the powerless woman—Ahalya.

In Ahalya’s tale, Cornell’s ‘Hegemonic Masculinity’ (2005), argument gains a credibility in revisionist mythmaking. Cornell argued about the dominant social position of men, and the subordinate social position of women, being the result of patriarchal ideologies. The concept of hegemony, as applied by Cornell to masculinity can be rendered useful in understanding the hierarchal relations between men and women. His notion underlies the dominant social position of men, and the subordinate social position of women and further, the idea of a hierarchy of masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity was distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities . . . . It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men (833). The employment of elements of Cornell’s hegemonic masculinity, the theory of cultural hegemony. Despite being a virtuous character, Ahalya has makes her position

subordinate to the masculine characters—Indra, Gautama who epitomize dominating social structures from masculine idealized grid.

For some writers, Ahalya is the timeless woman who resorts to her inner desires a direct contrast to her ascetic husband, who did not live up to her carnal desire. Even to this day, the Indian patriarchal society always condemns Ahalya as a morally wrong woman. In addition, radical writers are of the opinion that in the male-controlled world, Ahalya essentially embodies the essence of idealized femininity, and their act of suffering is justified due to their gender or evil karmic past. Some critics feel that Ahalya was made vulnerable due to her acceptance of gender norms; she ungrudgingly accepted the curse while acknowledging her need for punishment. It reflects the punitive consequences for departing from the time-honored role of femininity. In the context of gender treatment, *Ramayana* contains compendium of series of types of punishments as Devdutt Pattanaik informs that the epic as well as scriptures emphasize on feminine virtuous qualities of restraint, obedience, and upholding the law at any cost for the sake of social order. In literature and mythical representations, the women figures have not been given enough attention or depicted as positive women. Patriarchal societies have always depicted these women as ‘dark women’s passions’ –their desires being thwarted.

A general study points out that the patriarchal society through the medium of Indian classical literature and myths promotes the conventional image of feminine divine. In *Ramayana*, Ravana’s sister Surpanakha –her identity is analyzed through a very deplorable perspective. In *Asura: the Tale of the Vanquished*, Anant Neelkantan proposes ancient narratives with a realistic tinge through Ravana’s perspective. Ravana essentially belongs to the dark-skinned Dravidian lineage and in a similar manner, most mainstream writers of popular culture have depicted Soorpanakha as “dark and ugliest creature”. Furthermore, there are certain misinterpretations that invariably portray Surpanakha as a lustful demoness. In the contemporary scenario, the post-modernist feminist writings attempt to study Surpanakha-episode with a logical interpretation. Sources and scholars have revisited the interpreted the episode through a different view point. Some scholars are of opinion that the brothers Ram and Lakshman, who were the chivalrous protector of women, have lowered Surpanakha’s dignity for her unrequited love, accompanied by disgrace and brutal vengeance. On the other hand, the advocates of patriarchy agree that Surpanakha as an immoral adulteress deserved the chastisement for her willful ways. Thus, the tale is symbolic of the fact that akin to the episode of Surpanakha or Draupadi—women’s bodies become the turf on which wars are waged. The mythic narratives of chastity get entangled with stories of shame and honour from the present and women are left alone to endure trauma.

Today, the post-modernist feminist writings attempt to study the patriarchal power narratives with theoretical tenets. Beauvoir in her seminal work maintains that women have been relegated to the status of –the second sex and reduced to being objects for men since the dawn of history. She has asserted that the woman has been constructed as the man’s ‘Other’ and that as such she is denied the right to her own subjectivity. Beauvoir associates the position of man as an ‘absolute’ and women as the ‘Other’. In the myth dynamics, Lord Rama is the *uttampurusha* an embodiment of an ‘absolute idealistic’ man in all roles. Contrarywise, Surpanakha’s role is drastically reduced to as ‘other’ relegated to fringes. Her role as a woman depicted in the Indian orthodox attitude towards such women has been branded as potentially dangerous for members in the society. The myth also attempts to expose hypocritical patriarchal ideology, similar to Beauvoir’s view, which puts women like Surpanakha in an inferior position through male controlled acts. The persistent patriarchal dogmas especially in the Indian tradition, have in turn, forced many women internalize their subordinate position.

In the far-reaching context of implementation of NEP2020 policy that has curated ancient Indian subjects with a prime focus on Indian Knowledge System--(IKS), has set up a challenging role for the academicians. There have been endeavors by the board of studies to represent the exclusiveness of the rich ancient Indian past with unbiased approaches. Emphasizing on the divine feminine from mainstream Indian Goddesses—Laxmi, Durga, Kali, Parvati, there has been an attempt to correlate the conservation with a crucial role of modern-day women in promoting ‘Indian myths & festivals with symbolic relevance’ vital for conserving values. Likewise, the IKS syllabus curated by this researcher also attempts to provide glimpses into the tapestry of ‘Traditional mythology -contrasts & biases in real life situations, ‘Revisionist mythmaking & modern interpretation of Indian myths’, ‘Debate on depiction of ancient women as subservient ones in Indian myths’ etc have been gaining momentum in creating awareness with deliberations on the need to eliminate obsolete and conservative orthodox approaches and embrace all-inclusiveness with a shift from ‘His’story to the probability of exploring Her-story with fresh innovative insights the youth can gain from significant learning experience.

The IKS curriculum has also scope to promote equality via citation of several legendary tales. A striking example of equality in androgynous role is Lord Shiva as *Ardhnariswhar*. Shiva is a half woman God. In the famous Tandava form; the dancing Shiva can symbolize a more aggressive masculine form, distinguishing it

from the more enchanting feminine form. Similarly, Shiva's *Ardhanari* form denotes the left side as material world, while the right side represents the spiritual world. With an aim to depict equality, popular tales of Goddess Parvati metamorphosing into Kali spreads across a powerful message of women empowerment. It is when even the most potent Gods are unable to kill the demons, they have to seek the help of their counterpart Goddesses to tame the demons.

On a holistic note, the IKS curriculum with myriad mythological feminine archetypes through the medium of Indian Mythology plays a vital role in addressing the subdued role of female characters that were depicted in unfair light. The curriculum offers a broad scope for an unbiased process with debatable perspectives on gender roles, sexual norms, and female identities portrayals in the past. As an academic community, an attempt has to be made to reclaim and rewrite the stories of female-centric narratives that challenge the traditional patriarchal constructions that silenced women voices. Consequently, 'Her-story' or womanhood can be re-invented from old stories that affirm the existence and experiences of the suppressed voices of women. The IKS should attempt to include positive representations of women so that it can bring about concrete material change in mindset of youth in Indian society as a value-added national asset.

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