

ROLE OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN MYTHOLOGY SYMBOLIZING FEMINISM

Neelima Chaudhari

Assistant Professor ,Government Arts and Commerce College,Fort-Songadh Dist-Tapi

Abstract

Women characters who reflect the values of the eras in which they occurred and were recorded are abundant in Indian mythology. The trend is actually toward submissiveness and submission, despite the fact that some of the female characters exhibit a feminist spark, verve, and rebellion. Few academics and feminists have praised Manusmriti, which is thought to be the standard reference work for codes of behaviour for women, while the majority have disregarded it.

The Ramayana and Mahabharata, two of the most important Hindu epics, were penned by men under the patriarchal system. The Brahmins, a group of men with a stake in maintaining their standing and dominating the female population, are widely thought to have also transmitted and interpreted the epics. According to the laws governing all social levels in the community, women were not permitted to study or hear the scriptures. This provided the men with a great deal of freedom because the women had no opportunity to object to anything that was being spoken. This monopoly allowed the men to mould the mythological characters in any way they wanted. The present paper is an attempt to highlight those female characters in mythology who tried to get identified in a patriarchal, male-dominated society.

Keywords: Mythology, feminism, patriarchy, quest for identity

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mohanty, Ayuta. 2018 *Revisiting the New Woman in Indian Mythology*. The present article focuses on two strong, courageous, aggressive women who appeared in Indian mythology. Even in the past, they had a wide-ranging perspective. When required, they were prepared to challenge and reject the established standards.

Saha, Dr. Birbal. 2023. *Feminism in Society, Art and Literature: An Introspection*. In a broad range, feminists have defined the position of women, their place in society, and the obstacles they encounter. The current paper examines how women are portrayed in society, literature, and the arts by examining their roles and the issues they face.

Mohanty, Ayuta, and Puja Khandelwal. "A New Perspective of Female Mythological Characters: Sita and Surpanakha." India is a patriarchal nation, and this is evident in its epics, where the patriarchal system obscures the female characters. Typically, female characters are portrayed as entities who are voiceless and without choice. They are merely victims who accept their lot in life. But as time has gone on, modern authors have begun to give these female figures new "avatars." Sita and Surpanakha, two such figures from the epic Ramayana, are discussed in this article.

Mohanty, Ayuta. (2018) *Revisiting the New Woman in Indian Mythology*. This paper aims to analyze the portrayal of Uruvi and Draupadi and how they challenge the traditional gender norms prevalent in Indian society. It also explores how these female characters are given agency and how they challenge the patriarchal order. The paper aims to highlight the importance of these strong female characters in mythology and how their portrayal can inspire and empower women in contemporary times.

Parvathy, B. M., and P. G. Student. (Sept 2021) *Feminist Revisionist Mythology and the Lost Voices—A Subversive Analysis of Select Literary Texts*. The paper delves into the limitations and challenges faced by feminist revisionist mythology in terms of giving a voice and agency to once-neglected female characters in epics. Through a critical analysis of select literary texts, the researcher examines the gaps and limitations within the genre of feminist revisionist mythology. The paper also explores the extent to which feminist revisionists have failed to empower and give agency to female characters, particularly in terms of challenging patriarchal norms and gender relations.

Tyagi, Komil. (2019) *Narrative, Norms, and Nation: Exploring the Prospect of 'Sitarajya' through Devdutt Pattanaik's Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*. The paper aims to use Patnaik's retelling of the Ramayana as a lens through which to analyze and critique various cultural and societal phenomena in India. It explores the potential of 'Sita Rajya' as a model of governance and existence, which seems to involve drawing connections between the fictional concept of 'Ram Rajya' and real-world governance and societal norms in India.

The portrayal of female characters who stood against patriarchy Sita:

Maharaja Janaka discovered Sita as he was cultivating the soil. She is referred to as "Bhoomija," the daughter of Earth. She didn't have any kids when Janaka took her in. The king greeted her with gladness, and everyone flocked to her. She is referred to as her father's daughter Janaki, daughter of Janaka, Mythili, daughter of the King of Mithila, or even Vaidehi, daughter of Videha because she was not conceived in a woman's womb or from a woman.

Sita was granted the opportunity to choose her husband thanks to the "Swayamvara" ritual, in which a monarch summons prince of marriageable age and allows the bride to choose her own groom. To select a good match for his heavenly daughter Sita, King Janaka arranges an archery test for the princes present. After seeing Rama once before, Sita fell in love with him and hoped that only he would succeed in the test, satisfying her wish. Sita is married by Rama and then brought to Ayodhya.

Sita is Rama's devoted wife; Rama was exiled for 14 years by his stepmother Kikeyi. She is not upset with Kaikeyi or Rama because they obeyed her directions like a good son and did not question Kaikeyi's choice. In a previous Yuga, when compassion and righteousness were in authority, Sita was born. Despite being a princess by birth and living in luxury, she willingly gave them all up and accompanied Rama into the woods without complaining. She traversed the wilderness in bare feet for miles, demonstrating her stamina.

Ravana fell in love with Sita while she was in "Swayamvara," but he was unable to win her over since he failed the bow-stringing test. He discovered that Sita was in the woods with Rama and Lakshmana through Soorpanaka, and he was able to take her using trickery. Throughout her time in Lanka, Sita forbade Ravana from touching her at any time. She was never once even tempted to go there and spend the night in luxury to get away from the difficulties of living in the woods. She had entire faith in Rama and their relationship, and she knew he would come to her aid. After being saved, she was had to take a chastity test, which she passed.

Later, when she was the queen of Ayodhya and a local questioned her virginity because she had spent so much time in Ravana's Palace, Rama sent his pregnant bride into exile a second time. She was abandoned there for Lakshmana to discover in the forest. Sita gave birth to Lava and Kush when she arrived at the ashram of Maharishi Valmiki. With the help of the rishi, she raised her children alone and taught them martial techniques like archery. They were powerful young men who defeated both their uncle Lakshmana and their father Rama. When they met, Rama asked Sita to retake the virginity test.

Sita is a strong woman while being portrayed as timid and submissive. She accompanied Rama not out of necessity but rather out of a desire to be with her husband since it was the obligation of a wife to be by her husband's side in good times and bad. Sita never presented herself as the victim of the circumstance; instead, she fearlessly and joyfully handled all the challenges of living in the jungle without voicing a grumble. She consistently showed her moral courage while in Lanka by refusing to give in to Ravana's pressure. She declined to choose the simple route when Hanuman tried to take her with him, preferring instead to have Rama save her because that would be the appropriate thing to do. She refused to take the test when she was originally requested to prove her virginity because she felt pushed to by society, but she was confident in her chastity and knew she would pass the test. She was first devastated when her husband left her, but she overcame it to raise her twin kids, turn them into responsible adults, and make them real heirs to Raghuvansh. She objected when asked to take the chastity test once more and made the decision to leave this realm and return to her native Earth. As a result, it is clear that despite first appearing to be meek, Sita is actually a strong Indian woman who knows when to call it quits and refuses to be humiliated.

Surpanakha:

She is frequently referred to as the Helen of Lanka and is thought to have started the war that led to the fall of the Lankan monarchy. The transformation of the innocent Meenakshi into the fierce Surpanakha, who submits to no one, is highlighted in Kane's version. She is misunderstood and despised for her unbreakable character and is more a victim than a victimizer. In addition to controlling gender roles, patriarchy also establishes what is and is not acceptable in a given culture. 'Good' and 'evil,' 'uncultured' and 'cultured,' 'moral' and 'immoral,' concepts. Characters like Surpanakha become rakshasis who don't fit into the patriarchal structure when they don't follow the accepted norms. Ravana, Kumbhakarna, and Surpanakha are the "bad" and "uncultured," respectively, if Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana stand in for the "good" and "cultured." In this setting, revisionist narratives are essential for looking past the boundaries and emphasizing the flexibility of spaces. The sole story of Surpanakha we have, if placed within the standard conformist narratives of the Epic, is the incident that led to her mutilation when she approached Ram and Lakshmana. Her mutilation is justified on the grounds that it was a punishment for adultery. She fills the roles of the "bad," "uncivilized," and "other." As a member of the Asura Clan, she is marginalized because of her race. Thirdly, she is othered for her sexual prowess and impulses, which contrast her with the ideal woman. Second, she is othered because she is a woman in the gender space. Kavita Kane puts Surpanakha center stage and gives her a chance to be heard by portraying her as unapologetic, knowledgeable, passionate, and adventurous. Her transformation from the naive Menakshi to the vengeful Surpanakha is wrought with unrelenting anguish, fury, and misery. She experienced rejection as a child from her mother, the man she loved most abandoning her, three powerful brothers who were destined for success overshadowing and overwhelming her, and the agony of losing her husband, kid, and everyone she

loved in her pursuit for vengeance. Her ongoing transformation into Surpanakha is a kind of retribution for the abuse and misery she constantly encounters. Meenakshi, who was emotional and timid, died after her brother killed her beloved lamb, which led to the deaths of the people she loved and gave birth to the savage and untamed Surpanakha. Kane highlights the idea that the dichotomies that define "good" and "bad" are insufficient and that a person can possess both qualities by exhibiting the embodiment of the innocent and the wild in a single human. The representation of every woman, from Sita to Surpanakha, contrasts with the conventional narrative. Mandodari and Sita appear to be tenacious, whereas Surpanakha is a disobedient character. Despite being obedient and devoted, they aren't afraid to oppose their husband when necessary. Ravan is a defeated man, and only Mandodariis are willing to help him, despite the fact that men are perceived as strong and powerful when they lose their kids and loved ones. Kane establishes this further by portraying the co-dependence between men and women, "The men needed their women, and often they did not know it." (Kane 246).

Draupadi:

Because she arose from her brother from fire while Dhruvad performed Yagna to produce a son who might exact revenge for his humiliation by Dronacharya, Draupadi is known to be the daughter of fire and not a woman. Even though Draupadi, unlike Sita, was not born in a womb, as an adult she came out of fire and was made out of hatred. She was made specifically to ruin her family. Through a "Swayamvara" that her father orchestrated, Draupadi was also married. Karna was not permitted to take the archery test that all the princes gathering for the "Swayamvara" were required to do since Draupadi refused to marry him. Despite marrying the guy, she adored, Arjun, she was unhappy. She was compelled by the circumstances to accept the five Pandavas as her husbands. No brothers were allowed to marry anybody else at that time, and even if they did, they were not allowed to bring them to Hastinapur. Since Bhim already owned Hidimba. When Arjun set out on a mission to get divine astras (weapons), he married three different women. Draupadi was never fully the property of any one man who cherished her. Everything was an illusion when they constructed Indraprastha's maya mahal (Palace of Illusions). Draupadi criticizes Duryodhan by referring to him as the blind father's blind kid after he fell into a water pit out of confusion. Duryodhan was enraged by the insult and eager to take control of Indraprastha. The Pandavas was invited to a dice game that the Kauravas had prepared. Yudhishtira lost all of his possessions and lost the dice game he played with his wife and brothers. In anticipation of this occasion, Duryodhan requested that his brother bring Draupadi, but she resisted. She was stripped and humiliated in front of the judge. Krishna, her buddy and partner, saved her chastity. Both her husband and the Kuru clan's elders infuriated Draupadi. She claimed that it was obtained dishonestly. She even publicly said that a woman is not her husband's property to bet on her in games of chance. She questioned each elder present, asking them why they had allowed this to occur in their midst. The entire Kuru clan was cursed by her. She signed an oath promising not to comb her hair and to only do so after bathing in Dushyasan's blood and using his jawbone as a comb. Like Sita, Draupadi also left her husband and sons with Krishna and went into exile. Draupadi was unable to raise her boys properly, unlike Sita who did so. Draupadi assumed the identity of Sairandri, the queen's maid, during the last year of their exile, which was to be a year of Agnatha Vasa, or anonymity. She was troubled to love him because Kichaka, the queen's brother, was constantly attracted to her attractiveness. He once made an attempt to pursue her, and when Draupadi hurried to the king for assistance, Kichaka pursued her and ridiculed her in front of Yudhishtira in the court. The King admitted his weakness and made no moves. She was enraged with both the King and Yudhishtira. She ultimately made the decision to murder him in order to stop this issue. He was slain by her, the Pandava conspirators, and Bhim. Draupadi was combing her hair during the Kurukshetra War, waiting for the fulfilment of her long-awaited wish to murder Dushyasa.

She is regarded as one of the Shrestha naris of the period, similar to Sita. Draupadi never put up with injustice and always stood her ground and voiced her disapproval. She did not readily consent to marry the five Pandavas. Only when Krishna persuaded her that it was in fulfilment of her wish from her former birth—in which she prayed to Lord Shiv for a husband who was Righteous, Powerful, Valiant, Handsome, and Loving—did she agree to do so. Shiv told the woman that he couldn't find all the attributes she desired in one person, so he would give her five husbands, each of whom would have a different quality. Since Sita belonged to the Tretayuga tribe, her feminist expression was restrained. Draupadi is a member of the Dwapara Yuga and is more assertive in expressing her feminism-related thoughts and ideas. Because of Sita's beauty, Ravana kidnapped her, which sparked the Rama-Ravana War. Draupadi was also a factor in the dice game that led to her being stripped in court, and Bhima promised to exact revenge. She was primarily responsible for the Pandava and Kaurava conflict in Kurukshetra. Both of these women experienced a variety of hardships and tragedies. Both women were ultimately successful after overcoming all of their challenges.

CONCLUSION

The history of mythological literature is vast and explored to some extent. But it is full of major characters whether male or female. With time researchers have made much effort to give voice to those characters who

have never spoken in the rich mythology of India. The researcher has made an attempt to discuss three of the female characters who tried to search for their own identity in the patriarchal system of society.

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