

FEMINIST, FEMININE AND FEMALE REPRESENTED IN THE DEVI PURANA

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Abstract

Feminist movement and its growing influence in the west from the 18th century onwards showed its impact on all spheres. It began to reflect in politics, policy making, economics and all humanities. The thought leaders of feminist movement however were erudite, educated members of the intellectual elite class and hence it comes as no surprise that its earliest reflections are found in literary criticism. Leading critics like Simone De Beauvoir paved the way for many women in the west who began to analyze female representation through literature and other forms of the media. It is popularly believed that serious impact of these movements was felt on the eastern hemisphere only in the post-colonial period. While modern feminism may seem like a novelty in the third world countries, one must look at ancient cultures like India and especially its literature. Indian literature is replete in quality and quantity of female characters over the ages. This all-encompassing 'she' spirit and women of varied strengths might baffle even the most contemporary sensibilities that have existed over the past millennia. However, the most notable among a collection of these ancient stories is the Devi Bhagavatam Purana which essentially studies femininity in temporal as well as metaphysical forms. This study looks at the feminist literary frameworks of feminine, feminist and female as it reflects in the Devi Purana.

Keywords: Epic literature, Devi Purana, Feminist, Feminine & Female.

INTRODUCTION

The expanse of understanding of the world 'female' and all its conjugations grew in the feminist literary criticism over the course of feminist movement. Many western theorists, predominantly women, felt the need to distinguish the scope and meanings of the forms of femininity as it appeared in the public discourse. 'Female', 'Feminist' and 'Feminine' were three primary subtypes identified by literary critic Toril Moi. Moi distinguishes the three as such: 'female' is understood in biological terms. The word is limited to describe a person who has ova and bears children or has capacity for child bearing. 'Feminine' connotes to the one who has qualities that are characterised by women and 'feminist' is the one who believes in social, political and economic equality of all sexes. (Moi). This biological, social and psychological demarcation is hallmark of feminist criticism which also learnt to study women characters in texts from these lenses. The formal organization and approach of western feminism was introduced to India in colonial period but it took ground in the post-colonial era. While we see western educated individuals and academics trying to study Indian literature through this lens, often a broader expanse of all these forms of femininity in ancient Indian literature is overlooked. India is an enduring social, cultural and literary entity bound in its Vedic roots and enriched by additions of various other religions, cultures and peoples that became a part of the Indian sub-continent since. This unique attribute of being the only oldest living civilization becomes more special due to the enduring ancient literature that continues to influence social and cultural lives of Indians till date. The Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Puranas have an ever-increasing appeal. There is no doubt that predominant ancient Indian literature including the puranas and the epics was written by men and that there is a strong patriarchal undertone to all of it. However, it is also true that some of the richest and most well crafted female characters have also been composed by these men. It is notable that despite their rich portrayal of women, they seem to at times lack a deeper insight into a woman's heart and soul and this reflects in various ways in the texts. However, a notable ancient exception to it would be the Devi Purana. The modern concepts of female, feminine and the feminist are studied with reference to Devi Purana and some chosen characters.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To study select narratives from the Devi Purana to explore femininity.
- To critically analyze female, feminine and feminist representations in the Devi Purana.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Systematic Research design has been used for the purpose of this study. The portrayal of Ahalya, Satyavati and Shakuntala as reflected in Devi Purana while cross referencing it with the Ramayana and the Mahabharata has been analyzed. Content Analysis of textual materials has been conducted using the feminist literary theory of the Female, Feminine and Feminist by Toril Moi.

Femininity and the Devi Purana:

Vedic and post Vedic Indian society was primarily patriarchal. We can see this patriarchy through ancient socio-political and literary discourses. However, one of the greatest insights into the period comes from stories replete in ancient India and loved across the sub-continent till date. Most celebrated among these are the epics Ramayana, Mahabharata and the 18 primary puranas. There are over a hundred big and small puranas that have been identified over time however 18 of them are considered to be major puranas. Almost all of this literature has been composed by men. We can see the male gaze and male psyche in the articulation and the expressions in the text. While these are authors of immense creative strengths, they seem to sometimes lack the female gaze and hence fall short of writing a rational reaction of a female character (rational to a female mind) during key events, or fail to provide a rationale for a reaction that has been stated in the text. One of the notable exceptions to the same is the Devi Purana. Shrimad Devi Bhagavatam also popularly known as the Devi Purana contains eighteen thousand verses and is believed to be composed by Veda Vyasa (the author of the Mahabharata and the Bhagavata Purana). A suta (bard/storyteller) named Saumya narrates this purana. Saumya explains that Veda Vyasa expounded this purana to his son Shuka in his presence and that is how Saumya also learnt it. (S. Vijnananda). Over the course of his narration Saumya tells stories of how the core energy in all animate objects in feminine and explains how and why feminine energy is at the root and the cause of life itself. The abstract metaphysical aspects of femininity are explained over the course of the narration with the use of temporal realities and examples. The Devi purana becomes a fascinating study especially for those who have known the stories from Ramayana and Mahabharat in-depth because Devi Purana provides great details and rationale of the female characters in this text. The reading of Devi purana in conjunction with the epics makes one understand the women protagonists from the epics in a greater detail. Following is an analysis of the characters of Ahalya, Satyavati and Shakuntala as it appears in the Devi Purana in conjunction with the story in the epics.

Ahalya: Ahalya is a character from Ramayana but her story is fairly small and controversial. The story as told in the Valmiki Ramayana states that Ahalya was created by Lord Bramha the creator and was married to Gautama rishi. One day instead of heading for his morning rituals as usual, Gautama rishi returned to the ashrama midway and had coitus with Ahalya. Upon the completion of the act, Ahilya said "O King of Gods, leave, my husband shall return soon and discover us thus". It was indeed Indra the king of Gods who had arrived disguised as Gautama and wooed Ahalya. Ahalya however was not fooled, but had coitus with Indra anyway. Upon being discovered by Gautama rishi, both Indra and Ahalya were cursed. Ahalya was cursed to be turned into stone and would be revived when touched by Rama the seventh incarnation of Vishnu. (B. Debroy). The text provides no insight into this shocking choice of Ahalya's. However, the Devi Purana fleshes out Ahalya's background in great detail which helps one understand the rationale of her choice. Lord Bramha created Ahalya, the most beautiful woman in the universe to spite Menaka the most beautiful celestial nymph. She was then handed over to Gautama rishi to be raised. The ascetic raised her as his own and handed her over to Bramha upon coming of age. Impressed by his control and detachment Bramha then gave her in marriage to the same Gautama rishi. He was more interested in penance and meditation and lonely Ahalya in height of her prime let her curiosity and want of a lover led her willingly into the arms of King of Gods Indra who believed that the most beautiful woman in the universe should rightfully belong to him. However unsure of Ahalya's reaction, he arrived in form of her husband with intention of duping her into having sexual relations. Post coitus he was as alarmed as Gautama to know that Ahalya knew his true identity all along. She urged the King of Gods to leave before the arrival of her husband. However Gautama rishi arrived and realized what must have transpired. He cursed both Indra and Ahalya. While Indra trembled with fear and apologized, Ahalya remained mute and accepted her punishment but she did not apologize or express any remorse. Ahalya is portrayed, neither as the villain nor the victim; merely a daring woman making choices that may have dire consequences and she is ready to face them.

Satyavati: Satyavati is a character from the Mahabharata but she is in-fact the mother of the Veda Vyasa (Krishna Dvaipayana) himself. She was the daughter of the chief of the fisher folk and later married King Shantanu of Hastinapura. She had two sons from this marriage namely Chitrangada and Vichitravirya. Devavrata Bhishma was her step-son. Satyavati and her connection to Veda Vyasa is revealed in the Mahabharata when Satyavati upon losing her son Vichitravirya asks Bhishma to keep relations with Vichitravirya's wives Ambalika and Ambika under the practice of 'niyoga'. In ancient times, if a man (especially of the kshatriya clan) was unable to father children, then his wife could have coitus with an ascetic, or her brother-in-law, or any person from good lineage with the blessing of her husband and/or parent-in-law until such time that she bore a male child to continue the family line. Bhishma having taken the vow of celibacy

refused to do so. At this point Satyavati revealed to him that she had given birth to the great ascetic Veda Vyasa (who is hence both half-brother of Vichitravirya as well as an ascetic). Accordingly, Vyasa was summoned to have coitus with both daughters-in-law. Satyavati further revealed that Vyasa was born to Satyavati through sage Parashara, before her marriage to King Shantanu. Due to the brilliance of the sage; Vyasa attained adulthood immediately upon birth, and decided to become a tapasvi in his father's footsteps. Vyasa promised his mother that he would immediately answer her summons if she ever felt the need to see him. (B. Debroy, The Mahabharata 1). The Devi Purana yet again gives greater details of the circumstances of Vyasa's birth. An apsara, Adrika, cursed to be a fish, swallowed the semen of the king Uparichara Vasu of Chedi. When Adrika in fish form was caught by fishermen and cut open, they discovered twins; a boy and a girl. They took the children to the king who kept the male child and gave the female child to the chief of fishermen. This female child born from the fish's womb was named Satyavati. Satyavati was bright and intelligent however a fish like stench came off her body and hence chose to remain aloof. She was also known as 'Matsyagandha; due to this stench. She used to ferry a boat on the river as a young girl. Once rishi Parashara asked her to row him to the other bank. When the boat was well on its way, he was suddenly overcome with desire and grabbed Satyavati's hand. Startled by his overtures she reasoned with him. The devi purana states her intelligent arguments in detail. She tried to resist the rishi by reminding him that he was a great souled rishi while she was merely a fisher girl. This had no impact. She then told him that they were travelling in day light and hence visible to all. Any vigorous activity would surely topple them over in the river considering that her boat was quite small. She was unmarried and hence a virgin, copulating with her would impact the rishi in no way, but her future prospects would be bleak. She then stated that a tapasvi's semen would never go waste and he would surely impregnate her, how was she to take care of a child alone and face the ridicule of society? She also reminded him of the fish like stench that came off her. Pleased by her presence of mind and intelligent argument, the rishi created deep fog so that they would not be visible to others, he stopped the boat on an island in middle of the river. He gave her the boons that she would retain her virginity even after coitus and child birth, that the child conceived by them would be born immediately and become an adult immediately upon birth thus not strapping her down with the task of raising a child alone. He also promised to replace her fishlike smell with an attractive scent that would carry over the distance of a yojana. Upon hearing of the boons, Satyavati gave in to the rishi's demand for coitus. All came to be as he had promised and Veda Vyasa was born to her. All three (Parashara, Satyavati and Veda Vyasa or as he one named Krishna Dwaipayana; the dark one born on an island) went their separate ways. Vyasa intending to become as ascetic like his father promised Satyavati to return to her side as soon as she summoned him. (S. Vijnananda). Satyavati kept this a secret till she called Vyasa with the intention of Niyoga with her two daughters-in-law. A little after the birth of Vyasa, the king Shantanu of Hastinapur while on a hunt encounter a captivating scent. He followed it for a yojana and discovered Satyavati now also known as Yojanagandha instead of Matsyagandha. He fell in love with her and desired her hand in marriage. The conditions put by her father ultimately led to the famed episode of Prince Devavrata taking the terrible vow of celibacy and renunciation of the throne so as to please his father; thus, earning the name Bhishma. Shakuntala: the story of Shakuntala is stated in the Mahabharata. Abandoned by both her parents Vishvamitra and Menaka, she was discovered in forest among Shakunta birds by rishi Kanva. As she was in care of the birds, she was named Shakuntala. Shakuntala was raised in the hermitage of rishi Kanva. One day King Dushyanta stumbled upon the hermitage while on a hunt and saw Shakuntala. He fell in love with her dazzling beauty and warm hospitality and asked for her hand. Shakuntala told him of her parentage and also that her care taker and guardian rishi Kanva was not in the hermitage at that point. Dushyanta and Shakuntala had gandharva vivah (a marriage in which the bride and groom accept each other as partners with only God as witness and not wait for the coterie of wedding guests or approval of parents and family). They consummated their marriage and Dushyanta left Shakuntala with his ring and a promise to return for her and their unborn child soon. 8 years later upon seeing no sign of Dushyanta's return, Kanva rishi took Shakuntala and her son Bharata to Dushyanta. Dushyanta however refused to remember who Shakuntala was and insulted her in open court. Shakuntala decided to leave with her son but a celestial voice spoke from the skies and reminded the King of his Gandharva vivaha and also assured him that this was indeed his son and successor. The king then accepted both Shakuntala and Bharata. (B. Debroy, The Mahabharata I). While the Devi purana does not deviate or add much to Shakuntala's story, it surely fleshes out some of the prominent characteristics of Shakuntala. According to the Devi Purana, when Dushyanta stumbled upon Shakuntala, fell in love and asked for her hand, she told him frankly about being born out of a marital union to rishi Vishvamitra and the celestial dancer Menaka. She also informed him that though her guardian was away she was capable of making a decision of who to marry. However, she would need a promise from Dushyant that she would be his queen and that only their son would be his successor. Upon receiving both these promises, she and Dushyanta got married as per the gandharva vivah rights. She took a grown Bharata to Dushyanta's assembly and reminded the king of their marriage, the promise he had made, showed him the ring as proof and presented their son. Dushyanta however refused to recognize and stated that he was well aware of how women like her liked to dupe men and that he had never married her and he was not the father of Bharata. While being thus insulted in an open assembly, Shakuntala maintained her cool and reminded the king yet again about the circumstances of their marriage. The king retorted by saying that herself being a child born out of wedlock he could well imagine what her true nature

and intentions would be. Here there is a marked shift in the calm that Shakuntala has exuded till this point. Shakuntala promptly informed the king that though born out of wedlock she was the daughter of an ascetic and a celestial being and hence superior to him in birth. She also told him that she was more than capable of raising Bharata as she had done over the years and that he was brought here as a favour and as her duty to the otherwise heirless king. She turned to leave with her son while also reminding the king that whatever his reservations about her might be, this was not appropriate conduct with a woman in any assembly. At this juncture the akashvani assured the king that he had indeed married Shakuntala and Bharata was their son. The stunned assembly was addressed by Dushyanta who stated that he had recognized Shakuntala immediately and had merely staged this drama so that there was no doubt left in minds of his subjects about his queen or heir. Shakuntala accepted the king's explanation and his apology for his behaviour with her and reunited with him. (Thapar)

A cross referencing of stories between the epics and the Devi purana reveal that while the epics contain the story, Devi purana provides the context and builds the narrative. One can see that women's stories mentioned in the devi purana are not stereotypical representations of women who are voiceless, meek, powerless, ignorant and heavily dependent on their male counterparts. It is apparent that the women have had to navigate their way in a man's world, however they have done it with abilities that can be seen as unique to female natures. To analyse the texts from Toril Moi's theory; 'female' which is a biological construct is seen with all three characters. Though the circumstances of their birth are extraordinary they are definitely physiologically of the female sex. All three bore children and all three have had one or multiple men pursue them with lustful intentions. The attraction of their physical form is made apparent in these accounts. All three have navigated their way in the world of men, however we see them withhold their femininity and thereby find unusual solutions and perspectives. 'Feminine' pertains to the psychological aspects of being a woman. Ahalya's curiosity and desire for the body of a man who is not her husband finds base in the Devi purana. Created by Brahma deva, raised by Gautama and then being married to the same Gautama means that Ahalya has known only two men in her life. The man who was perceived by her as a father figure and guardian was suddenly to be seen as husband. Emotional and mental ramifications of such overnight re-alignments are huge. It therefore comes as no surprise that Ahalya chooses to act upon her curiosity and copulate with Indra. Her lack of sense of shame or guilt may also be indicative of the same. Satyavati's mental and emotional turmoil upon being seized by a lustful man while on a boat is equally daunting. Satyavati however retains her calm and tries to rationally argue her way out of such a union, however when it seems to fail, she optimizes that awkward circumstance in her favour. She does not give in to panic, tears or victimhood but with calculated genius of an opportunist makes the situation favourable. Shakuntala's sense of confidence and her assertion of the same with Dushyanta reflect her deep knowledge and acceptance of self. Shakuntala and the complete independence she has marked out for herself make her stand out even among the other legendary female characters. Finally, 'feminist'; a seeker of socio-political, economic equality of genders is also apparent in case of all three women. Ahalya asserts her right to fulfill her sexual curiosity by taking more than one partner as her contemporary men were known to do. She is shown aware of the consequences of her actions when she urges Indra to leave before the arrival of her husband, but neither does that stop her from committing the act, nor inform Indra beforehand that she is already aware that he is not her husband but is in fact the king of Gods. The duper becomes the duped. Satyavati turns an unfavourable sexual advance into a transaction that runs in her favour. She retains her virginity, gains an illustrious son who she did not have to raise, gains the intoxicating scent and keeps this incidence a secret from the world till such time as she chooses to reveal it. Satyavati's interactions with Parashara and later Shantanu show that while she may not initiate a relationship with a man, she surely knows how to make it favourable for her. In this sense, Satyavati turns circumstances of possible victimhood into highly successful negotiations each time. Shakuntala in her confident and self-assured way is not afraid to assert the rights of herself and her son to King Dushyanta. However, she also reminds him that she does not seek these rights out of compulsion, she is still capable of raising the child by herself. She is complete in herself and is not looking for wholesomeness from the men in her life. Satyavati and Shakuntala have also been portrayed as women who are deeply involved in social and political aspects of the kingdoms of which they are queens. They are rulers, decision makers and hard bargainers. While these qualities may have been glossed over in the source text the Devi purana brings them out in great detail.

CONCLUSION

The Devi Purana is a celebration of femininity. It highlights all such qualities that are today defined as the ones of strong, independent and empowered women. The devi purana also consistently reminds its readers that all infinite energy that runs in the universe and forms the cosmos is feminine and hence worshipping the divinity in women is an essential for birth, maintenance and survival of any society. Devi Purana is hence the most ancient and enduring feminist text of all times.

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