

MYTHICAL KANYAS: DISCOVERING POSITIVE WOMEN ROLE MODELS

Deepti Amol Mujumdar

Abstract

Myths, legends, folk tales – all meta-narratives of history, bring up varied interpretations of human experiences. There are many enigmatic characters from the past that never fails to amaze us. Ahalya, Sita, Kunti, Draupadi have been discussed time and over again. There are other equally powerful characters from Indian mythology, who have largely remained invisible. But these women of the past are also a unique combination of the feminine and the feminist aspects. Though they represent the politics of gender that has always been played over the female body, they are the ones who resist the dominant patriarchy and stand defiantly. Tara appears briefly in the Ramayana as the wife of Vali, the king of Kishkindha, and Madhavi, the daughter of King Yayati, the progenitor of the Yadavas and the Kurus, appears three times in the Mahabharata as a character in sub-texts. This paper is an attempt to look Tara and Madhavi, who can be termed as 'kanyas', loosely translated as 'virgins' or 'maidens', who become the 'subject' of their own stories and not just the 'other' – an object of male desires and fears.

Key words: myths, women, kanya (virgin or maiden), role models

ahalyā draupadī Sita tārā mandodarī tathā ।
pañcakanyāḥ smarennityaṃ mahāpātakanāśiniḥ ॥

This Sanskrit shloka is recited every morning, and one can loosely translate this as "remembering or praying to the five virgins (kanyāḥ) every morning, can destroy your greatest sins (mahāpātaka). The pancha kanya – Ahalya, Draupadi, Sita/ Kunti (in another version of the shloka, we have Kunti instead of Sita being listed), Tara and Mandodari – are the five women from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata who are idolized and remembered as symbols of womanhood. However, if we take a look at these texts along with other texts that form the core of Indian mythology, we realise that traditionally, Indian Mythology has tended to serve the purpose of patriarchy, keeping the woman at the bottom and silencing their voice. Their voices as women, as individuals, remain unheard in the clash of the 'titans' in the predominantly male-centric epics. Christine C Keating points out in her essay, Unearthing the Goddess Within, "Words, our primary agent of expression, signify a discourse that has been established by a patriarchic myth. We were given these characters, with their beauty and flaws, by men." However, it makes an interesting study to look at these women, not as goddesses or as someone in an otherworldly form, but rather as real living and breathing women, who have a story to tell but whose silences one often encounters in the epics and their versions in popular imagination. And to do this, one need not have an alternate reading of these texts, but a close reading to discover positive women role models. This paper is an attempt to look at Tara - one of the panchya kanyas, venerated in the shloka mentioned earlier, and Madhavi, a lesser known character. Tara appears briefly in the Ramayana as the wife of Vali, the king of Kishkindha, and Madhavi, the daughter of King Yayati, the progenitor of the Yadavas and the Kurus, appears three times in the Mahabharata as a character in the sub-texts.

Tara and Madhavi can both be termed as 'kanyas', which is not the same as its loose translation – 'virgins' or 'maidens'. Kanyas are strong, powerful women who rise above their assigned roles of mother, daughter, or wife, and are true to themselves. They are detached and in complete control of themselves; there is no self-pity, guilt or shame in the kind of unconventional life that they lead. They sometimes manipulate, they transgress, they pay the price too; but they never sublimate, compromise, adjust, nor do they ever forget their 'dharma' or the path of righteousness. One needs to understand a very interesting difference between a sati and a kanya. A sati is the one who utterly wipes out her own self and lives only in, through, and for her husband, while the kanya's personality blazes forth quite independent of her spouse and her offspring, and she seeks to fulfil herself regardless of social and family norms. We have several mentions of "Tara" in our ancient texts. For instance, in the Puranas (Vishnu and Devi), we have a story of Tara as being the wife of Brihaspati (Jupiter), the Guru of Gods. We are told that, infatuated by her radiance, Chandra, the Lunar God (Moon), abducts her (in some versions, Tara leaves her house on her own). They have a son together who is named Budha (Mercury) and who is an ancestor of the kings of the lunar dynasty (Chandravanshi).

We also have a reference to Tara as the second of the Dasha Mahavidya (Ten Great Wisdom Goddesses), and is a form of Shakti, the tantric form of the goddess. In this form she is the Goddess of Protection. Her abode is the cremation ground. Interestingly, the planet associated with her is Jupiter (Brihaspati!) Tara, though a fierce goddess, is approachable to her devotees due to her maternal instincts. Tara means a star. Just as the star is seen as a beautiful yet perpetually self-combusting thing, so is Tara perceived at core as the absolute, unquenchable hunger that propels all life. The word 'Tara' is derived from its root word in Sanskrit – 'tri'

meaning to cross. Thus Tara means ‘the one who enables living beings to cross the ocean of existence and sufferings.’ (Compassionate)

In Mahayana Buddhism, Tara is a female Bodhisattva, and is known as the ‘mother of liberation’ and represents the virtues of success in work and achievement. In fact, we find the name ‘Tara’ linked to many other goddesses from different cultures – She is the Star Woman of the Cherokees, She is the Goddess of the Druids, the Great hill of the Druids bears her name, her name is linked to Tar who were the wise women of ancient Finland, and is also a favourite goddess of the Tibetan Buddhists.

The Tara from the Pancha Kanya group, though, is different. But a close study of her character reveals that she possesses all the qualities associated with the forms of these goddesses – beauty, radiance, grace, wisdom, self-confidence, compassion, and a strong maternal instinct.

Much information about Tara is not available in the Ramayana. We know that she is the daughter of the Vanara physician Sushena. However, there is no mention of her mother. But there are two instances which are described in detail, that stand a testimony to her character. Tara is the wife of Vali, the Vanara King of Kishkindha. She is described not only as a beautiful woman but also someone with a strong and rational mind. When Sugreeva comes to challenge Vali the second time, Tara advises Vali thus – “(...) you should think calmly before going out now to meet your brother. I am afraid there is a deep game. (...) Your brother is not such a fool as to challenge you again so soon after the punishment you inflicted on him unless he was assured of help and protection from an invincible ally of tried prowess.” [*Ramayana* by C. Rajagopalachari, Bharatiya Vidya Vhawan, 2001, p. 266] She then tells him of what she has heard from Angad and his spy network about Rama and Lakshman joining forces with Sugreeva. She further tells him that family ties matter more than anything and considering that, Vali should forget the past and forgive Sugreeva. However, anger clouding his intellect, Vali disregards this advice, only to walk towards his death. In some later versions, we have a reference to the fact that Vali disregards Tara’s advice because he thinks she favours Sugreeva more than him. [This has a reference to a story of Tara’s origin in the Puranas. Tara emerged, along with the apsaras, during *Samudramanathan* or the churning of the ocean by the *devas* and *asuras*. Vali received a divine trident and Tara was gifted to Sugreeva for their help to the devas. However, Vali snatched Tara and took her as his own.]

What we need to remember is how this episode reflects not only on Tara’s ability to marshal information but also on her intelligence and foresight. In the chapter titled “Tara’s Grief”, C. Rajagopalachari speaks about how the death of Vali causes panic among the residents of Kishkindha. Tara here sets aside her grief and with a queen-like courage asks them to set aside their fears. She says, “Your lives are not in danger; you will only have a different ruler; that’s all.” [p. 283].

When she sees Vali being fatally wounded, Tara weeps and says to him, “ I offered you good advice but you foolishly rebuked me.” Even in the state of grief, she is able to distinguish between the right and wrong. Vali, nearing his death, tells Sugreeva to be kind to Tara, who was not only a blameless and affectionate wife, but also a very wise and far-sighted counsellor. He further tells him never to disregard her advice on any matter as she was skilled in assessing any situation and deciding what action should be taken.

Facing Rama, Tara, her face devoid of any anger for the killer of her husband, demands that Rama kill her too, since she has lost the purpose of her life. It’s a traditional belief that Tara was a *dnyani*, a knower of reality. Though full of hatred at first, she recognises the divinity of Rama and her anger vanishes. In Krittibas’ Bengali *Ramayana*, Tara curses Rama to be slain by Vali in his next birth. (This curse materialises when Krishna is killed by a hunter – Vali in his next life.) In some regional versions, Tara curses Rama that though he loves his wife very much, he would not be able to enjoy Sita’s company for long. Tara’s behaviour here (it’s not a charade but a reflection of her strong personality) elicits Rama’s assurance that Sugreeva will protect her and her son’s right to the throne. She then remains in Sugreeva’s court as his advisor. Later versions of the *Ramayana* refer to Tara having married Sugreeva. (It was perfectly acceptable for the widow of the elder brother to marry the younger brother in some communities.)

The second incidence occurs when Lakshman storms into the inner apartments of Kishkindha, to admonish Sugriva who has reneged on his promise to track down Sita and is lost in the sensual pleasures with his wife Ruma. It is Tara who steps forward to meet the wrath of Lakshman. She tells Lakshman, “After enduring for a long time poverty and persecution, Sugreeva is enjoying the pleasures and the prosperity you have secured for him. (...) The highsouled who know the foibles and imperfections of our common nature should temper their censure with compassion.” When Lakshman still abuses Sugreeva, Tara fearlessly intervenes, pointing out that the rebuke is unjustified and tells him that Sugreeva has already made all the efforts to gather an army. Once again, as when tendering advice to Vali, Tara displays knowledge of the world and skills in speech.

Thus Tara, an almost invisible character in the *Ramayana*, comes through as a fine statesperson, a skilful orator, a compassionate person, an astute politician, and a mother who knows how to ensure the rights of her son, while continuing to have a say in the governance of the state. Thus Tara, though briefly mentioned, definitely is not the one to remain in the shadows of a powerful husband but emerges as a strong individual with a mind of her own.

The story of Madhavi, the daughter of King Yayati, appears in the *Udyoga Parva* of the *Mahabharata* (119-122) and is incidental, not integrated in the epic. It raises many questions about the position of women in ancient society (which was guided by its own set of values and norms). This story can be read from sociological, psychological, feminist or other perspectives. Well-known writer Bhishma Sahni's play *Madhavi* revolves around this story. The story begins with a young sage Galava wanting to give 'guru dakshina' to Sage Vishwamitra. Vishwamitra refuses to accept anything, but Galava is adamant. Vishwamitra is annoyed and finally asks for eight hundred white steeds of good pedigree; white as the rays of the radiant moon, and every one of it having one ear black in hue.

Galava set out immediately to search such horses but couldn't find any. Finally, with the help of his friend Suparna, he reached the court of the mighty King Yayati. Yayati, who had fallen on bad times, was not in a position to help him. But since he couldn't reject a needy person, he offered his beautiful daughter Madhavi as a gift and suggested that by setting her as price, Galava could secure the horses of his required specifications, from any king/s who owned. Yayati added that Madhavi was capable of promoting every virtue and her beauty was so striking that any king would gladly give up his kingdom, if it were needed, to be with her even for a short while. Galava first approached Haryasva, of Ikshvaku race, famed for his valour, wealth and a large army, who ruled at Ayodhya. Galava offered Madhavi in marriage to the childless king in return of 800 steeds. The king too was smitten by her beauty. But Haryasva had only 200 steeds. He proposed that he be allowed to beget one son upon Madhavi in return of the horses. Galava did not know how to react. Madhavi then intervened and told Galava about a boon she had received from a sage that she would regain her virginity each time after childbirth. She suggested that Galava accept the offer and allow Haryasva to beget a son. After a year, Galava could collect her and offer her to another King and the next, till he is able to obtain the requisite number of horses and free himself from the debt of guru-dakshina.

Galava, though surprised by this detached suggestion by Madhavi, accepts it as it seems a workable agreement. So Madhavi stays with Haryasva for a year and bears him a beautiful son Vasumanasa who grows up to be one of the wealthiest and greatest of the benefactors among all the kings. With her boon, Madhavi restores her virginity and leaving behind the new-born baby, she readies herself to be taken away by Galava.

Galava then takes her to Divodasa, the King of Kashi, who had heard Madhavi's story and about her extraordinary beauty. He too had 200 steeds and accepted the proposal similar to the one made to Haryasva. Madhavi lives with Divodasa till a son is born to her. He is named Pratardana, who later becomes a celebrated hero. Madhavi, once again, regaining her virginity, leaves her second son with his father and returns with Galava. Next, Galava takes Madhavi to King Ushinara of Bhojanagari who also has two hundred of such horses. He hands them over to Galava and lives with Madhavi till a son named Sibi is born. Sibi later becomes renowned as the upholder of truth and justice. Madhavi turns a virgin once again.

Now Galava is able to gather 600 steeds and he soon realises that there are no more such horses on the face of the earth! So finally he takes the 600 horses to Vishwamitra and requests him to accept Madhavi in place of the remaining horses and absolve him of the Guru-dakshina.

Vishwamitra is elated and accepts the offer gladly. Madhavi bears Vishwamitra a son named Ashtaka who later gains fame as the king who performed grand Ashva-medha yajnas. After sometime, Vishwamitra retreats into the forest. He hands over the six hundred horses to his son Ashtaka; and , sends Madhavi back to her father Yayati. Over a period of time, Yayati arranges a Swayamvar for Madhavi as many suitors, including the three kings whom she bore sons, are eager to marry her. However, Madhavi is no longer interested in marriage or child-bearing and decides to retire into the forest. She then spends her time as a hermit, in the wilderness, free from all bondages.

Now this story of Madhavi can be criticized in current times as being insensitive to a woman, disrespectful towards her feelings, negating her individuality, depriving her of any inner space or desire, and denying her any agency over her life. Her commodification angers us, her tragedy – ending up neither as a wife nor a mother, in spite of having lived with four men and having bore four sons – saddens us.

If we apply principles of Hermeneutics (understanding the text by placing it in the context of its time, studying the cultural and social forces that might have shaped the work), then can we have a different reading of the story? What emerges from the story then, is an honest intent of all the major characters – Galava's to fulfill his obligation to his guru, Yayati's to help Galava, Madhavi's to fulfill her filial duty to save her father from disgrace that makes her go with Galava and suggest her being traded in exchange of horses.

The Kings too, do not consider their act as heinous, nor do they lose their respect for Madhavi (they approach Yayati as Madhavi's suitors later). Madhavi's sons too accept their parentage, and they too are respected in the society not on the basis of their birth, but because of their virtues. Later in the story, after Yayati dies, he is denied an entry to heaven, since he has lost all his merit (*punya*). When Madhavi comes to know of this, she approaches Yayati and offers help. She then approaches her four sons and asks them to give a quarter of their

merit each, to Yayati and help him ascend to heaven. They refuse to help as they are angered by the way Yayati has treated her. But finally they agree, and bow down before her with respect.

Madhavi's story makes us question the beliefs about motherhood and mothering too. Giving birth and nourishing new life is a function bestowed by nature on a woman. But in the course of civilisation, this very function has been undervalued, taken for granted, and has come to tie a woman down, exclude her from public sphere, therefore, authority. Madhavi chooses to detach herself from her sons and move on, for she realises that her duty lies somewhere else. Does it make her any less a mother or even a woman? Some may look at this as tragic because she is deprived of an essential aspect of womanhood. (We equate womanhood with motherhood, don't we?) But there may be a few who see no reason for her unhappiness because they look at it as a kind of liberation that women have been searching for. (Think of the guilt that a career-oriented woman experiences or is made to experience at every walk of her life.)

The story may seem to be a tale of Galava or Yayati – men who had fixed notions of duty, honour and pride; a story set in a masculine world of action wherein Madhavi (blessed with the ability of regaining her youth and virginity and a promise that she would be mother to glorious sons) is a mere pawn – an asset to men who can control her and use her at their will. But it is her act of walking out on all these men, denying anyone a satisfaction of controlling her, that becomes a defining moment in the story. Madhavi, in fact, emerges to be a dignified character, making choices while staying on the path of righteousness, well aware of her duties. Even when she chooses to go to the forest, there is no self-pity or disgust or regret. It is her ability to remain detached and 'unsullied' that stands out. She is strong enough to sublimate her ego, she can sustain her independent identity, earn respect of all, can do everything out of her sense of duty (no force) and can remain true to herself, to her nature. Dr. M. Esther Harding, in *Women's Mysteries* (pg. 103), while talking about the Mesopotamian and Greek Virgin Goddesses, has an interesting point to make about the *virgin* [or *kanya*]. He says, "She is what she is because that is what she is. The woman who is virgin, **one-in-herself**, does what she does—not because of any desire to please, not to be liked, or to be approved, even by herself; not because of any desire to gain power over another to catch his interest or love, but because what she does is true...she is not influenced by the considerations that make the non-virgin woman, whether married or not, trim her sails and adapt herself to expediency dependent on what other people think. Her actions may, indeed, be unconventional."

In fact, if we analyse the story closely, we realise that the kind of liberty Madhavi enjoyed and her choices, make her a woman way ahead of her times. It's a kind of freedom that women today have to struggle to achieve. C.G. Jung, while discussing the phenomenon of the maiden (or the virgin) describes her "as not altogether human in the usual sense; she is either of unknown or peculiar origin, or she looks strange or undergoes strange experiences." [C.G. Jung: *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Routledge, p. 28-29.] He further states that the maiden represents the Anima archetype in man in whose realm the categories of good and bad do not exist: "bodily life as well as psychic life have the impudence to get along much better without conventional morality, and they often remain the healthier for it." [p. 31] So long as a woman is content to be just a man's woman, she is devoid of individuality, and acts as a willing vessel for masculine projections. On the other hand, the maiden uses the anima of man to gain her natural ends (what Bernard Shaw calls the *Life Force*). Amply do we see in the cases of these maidens that, "The anima lives beyond all categories, and can therefore dispense with blame as well as with praise." The anima is characterised not just by this zest for life, but also by "a secret knowledge, a hidden wisdom... something like a hidden purpose, a superior knowledge of life's laws" [p. 31]. This, we see, matches the description of the *kanyas* in the Indian context.

Thus, the point is that one need not apply a 'feminist' lens all the time to look back at the past and criticise it for being unfair to women. What is needed, is a close reading of the text to find out the symbols for women empowerment, which are there in the ancient texts, but which we have failed to identify due to centuries of misinterpretations or plain oversight, and reclaim them as symbols of feminine strength and role models for women.

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