

THE DICTATES OF MYTHS IN HINDU EPICS

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Abstract

I'm a queen. Daughter of king Draupad, Sister of Dhritadyumna, Mistress of the greatest palace on earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins or summoned to court like a dancing girl.'(Divakaruni 190). Myths and the great Indian epics-the Mahabharata and the Ramayana is a perfect recipe for conforming to patriarchal absolutism and ideological hegemony. This paper depicts the dictating nature of the strong myths (representations of men and women) which at the surface look like very extraordinary people but in depth they are a process of something which needs a careful investigation. These myths dictated our pasts and also dominate our present. Their invisibility yet powerful domination and dictation makes them a game of patriarchal wizard wherein the dictator cannot be found and punished but only the tremors of such a dictation can be felt. These myths are gendered and are varied in different versions in different eras. These myths are social constructs depending upon the interpretation of the writer and the culture.

Key-Words: *myths, patriarchal wizardry, dictation, gendering, hegemony, Indian epic, social constructs.*

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Introduction:

The word 'myth' has come from the Greek word 'mythos' which literally means a fable, legend or sagas. The word 'myth' is a story passed down orally from generation to generation that explains religious origin, natural phenomena or supernatural event. Mythology is a collection of myths that concerns with cosmogony and cosmology, shared by a particular society at some particular time in human history. Though these are the lines which explain what myths are, the current narrations of myths do not obey them totally. The myths are invariably seen as something to be followed and imbibed within our bodies. It takes a concrete form through the written scriptures and stories. It then becomes a form of literature. The myths can be manipulated orally because every time we orally recite anything, the same time we change its meaning slowly. It is through the lens of our culture, caste, region and gender that we understand them. Through the feminist view now we understand the dictating nature of these myths. They are like implicit rules and regulations which conspire against us.

The most surprising aspect of Levi-Strauss' attempt to explain,

'The relation between myth and literature is that he does not consider that literature itself is all we have today to preserve the nature of essential, on-going and, therefore, mythic narrative. Given his terms of narrative as language seeking to prove its own necessity, either mythic or not, there would seem to be no clear means of differentiating between myth and literature. The literary imagination, no less than the mythic, is constantly searching for the "third term", or as we more commonly call it, the apt metaphor- "the workable fiction". Art, like myth, seeks to create fictions which intend to be essential, not only at the moment of writing, but because of the writing. Like myth, art is a form of homologous thought, a second-order system.'

The analogy to Levi Strauss' Hegelian dialectic in myth is Barthes' argument for the open-endedness of myth. 'Myth does not "act the things" but "acts their names"; it manipulates only signs, homologues; it is a gesturing with items constantly open to new meaning. The function of myth, then, is to be appropriated. It has no fixity. Nothing is

hidden in myth, but meaning can be distorted by linguistic gestures.' If myth for Levi-Strauss is progress by negation, for Barthes it is progress by intention.

MYTH AND MAGIC

Myths and magic are somewhat a different combination. Magic is the power of apparently influencing events by using mysterious or supernatural forces. The wizard or the magician uses these powers to scare or make people feel insecure or even to make them happy. The first intention of the wizard is to scare the person, get control of him and then make him do what is dictated to him. He also allures us to manipulate us. Myths work on these principles. They create such a surrounding or mirror such an event in which a person feels insecure, scared. They then take over our control and dictate us to follow whatever is dictated. So, who says that magic is not real? Our Indian culture is so embedded into this magic that the individual control over one's life is just like a deviation to the mystic society.

Patriarchy is one such wizardry and a result of myth building. It provided religions with a support to obey their rites and rituals. Indian culture and its varied religions have a firm base in these mythologies. Mythologies such as in the greatest epics of India- Mahabharata and Ramayana can be taken into account. The myths like Rama, Sita, Laxmana, Ravana, Draupadi, Kunti, the five Pandavas (Yudhishtir, Arjuna, Bheem, Nakul, Sahadev), and Duryodhan are some of the major myths that show us varied human nature and create a mysterious surrounding. They are the magicians in the story that make us believe what is not true and build upon the walls of illusion and divert our thinking.

MYTH AND EPICS

THE RAMAYANA

In Mahabharata and Ramayana it seems that women are the beginners and the Enders of the fights between two kingdoms and families. Thus the problem arises with a woman and has to end on her, in a way she has to suffer to bring it to an end. But the truth is that the egos of men and their quest to have control over women peddle these epics to revolve around hegemonic appropriation of sexuality. Thus there are many distinctions one can make like sexuality bias, purity and impurity, individual and relative, passive and active, subordinate and central, freedom and restriction, civilised and uncivilised, good and bad, wife and the other so on and so forth...

The range of myths relating to the identity of men and women in the classical literature of India focuses primarily on husband- wife relationship. The woman is always related to a man and has no individual identity of her whereas a man in the form of a husband is an individual entity, bread winner, the protector and conqueror of the kingdoms and the

epitome of a 'sanskari beta' and the 'hero' of the tale. In the same tale, 'the woman' is a marginalized, subordinate object who is either very fragile or very bold. The aim of the 'hero' is to control her fragility or boldness and to train her to be a perfect wife who sacrifices, suffers and is submissive. She cannot have her demands fulfilled because she is a woman and needs to be 'pativrata'-who suffices all the demands of her husband and sacrifices her wishes for him. If she demands just like Sita desired a beautiful deer, someone will take advantage of her, abduct her, rape her or exploit her. This is particularly relevant to the formulation of the feminine identity in India where the 'good woman' is synonymous with a good wife also reflected in myths like Savitri- Satyavan, Nala and Damyanti.

Over the centuries important aspects were added to the story. It is the Valmiki Ramayana that borrowed Ravana myth from the Chinese translation of the Jataka and is dated to AD 251, works upon the Rama old Rama ballad to create a major epic that gives significance to masculine heroism, valour and honour in the person of Rama and on feminine self sacrifice, virtue, fidelity and the chastity in the person of Sita. The newly emerged Sita was potent to exhibit two notions

- i) That women are the property of men and
- ii) The sexual fidelity for women is life's major virtue.

The Valmiki Ramayana resulted in the story hinging upon three crucial incidents, each of which expresses stereotypical denigration of the female.

- 1) The Kaikeyi's demands that Rama be exiled,
- 2) Surpankha's approaching to Rama, her refusal at his hands and the and following the disfiguring injury by Laxmana and
- 3) Sita's demand for the deer and her accusations on Laxmana to leave her alone in the hermitage, leading to her abduction by Ravana.

It also offers an illustration on the whimsical nature of women which is supposed to be the reason for life's problems. It also shows negative images of women by suggesting that women who display ambition or initiative, such as Kaikeyi and Surpankha, are both evil and disgusting. Women from Vanaras and Rakhshasa are independent and strong. Therefore they don't have stricter codes of sexualities.

The Sita myth is carved so thoughtfully that she dictates all the qualities of a perfect wife. The voice is hers but the words are of the society- the men. This is not just true for women but also for men where the Rama myth has explicitly laid down the rules of masculinity wherein a 'man' is only the one who has to earn, protect his family, be fearless, and control his wife and a decision maker of everything. If the definitions of masculinity and

femininity are undermined by the behaviour of flesh and blood body, perhaps the definitions are wrong, not the men and women.

The episode of Surpankha is totally contradictory with the Sita myth but the end is the same. Her love and attraction for Rama led to the cutting of nose. An example to be given from the contemporary cinema is of 'Lipstick Under My Burkha' which relates to 4 women and their sexual desires. The film goes on to show explicitly the sexuality of women. This film stirred many gender conflicts which dragged religion in it too. It censored many parts of the film which clearly show a pathetic condition of our society to not to accept women's sexuality or speak about it in public. They say such films provoke women to satisfy their desires which are unnatural but the fact is everybody has desires, men can express it but women 'should not'.

In the section entitled 'Myths', Simon de Beauvoir in her book 'The second sex' reveals the flawed notions of femininity in the 'eternal feminine' mythology as compared to the reality. In reality such notions have unwelcomed influences upon women which negates the entire notion behind eternal femininity. These myths are responsible for projecting the life of every woman divided between her rights as a subject and the demands of Otherness. She lives with a binary between her vocation as a human and her 'destiny' as a female. Women, who refuse to be passive, elegant, and silent, are called defective, unattractive, and unfeminine. They are 'not real women,' and they are punished for prioritizing their humanity before their femininity. The problem, de Beauvoir argues that a woman is not an individual, but she is imprisoned in the complex mythology.

RELATION WITH CONTEMPORARY LIFE:

Amish on Sita and Ramayana

Amish, the very popular contemporary fiction mythology writer, portray the same character with different perspectives. One of such great books is Sita: The Warrior of Mithila which sketches Sita as skilled warrior and chosen avatar of Vishnu, Rama is five years younger than Sita and Sita as female protagonist with zero emphasis on her conventional 'beauty'. Over the time, Sita was portrayed as a meek and coy good woman of patriarchy but Amish has been revolving around the lesser known Adbhuta Ramayana, a version of the Ramayana attributed to sage Valmiki for this book. It attempts to explore Sita more and casually subvert the gender roles. In 3400 BC, 'when Sita's name is suggested as an avatar of Vishnu, her gender is never discussed as a point of concern'.

The story also walks on the similar lines of same human tendencies like for example, Rama allows a criminal guilty of gang rape and murder to be released from incarceration because he's a juvenile, the perspective towards Vaishya's by the society which is similar to

our capitalist society. Thus the narratives change but the human tendencies clinging upon such mythologies are very difficult to change.

THE MAHABHARATA

Another major epic of ancient Indian literature is the Mahabharata. The peculiar thing of this epic is that along with many dynamic male myths, the women are more complex and more interesting than the stereotypes in the Ramayana. Kunti and Draupadi are strong women who have many sides to their personality. Further, the women in this epic are neither chaste nor passive. Kunti conceives sons outside her marriage through Surya, Yama, Vayu and Indra, and, in the early part of the Mahabharata legend, the lineage prolongs itself largely through some form of the system levirate. It may however be noted that while levirate was acceptable, illegitimacy was not, so that Kunti had to abandon Karna after he is born since he was conceived before she had acquired a legal husband.

The Draupadi legend is also significant because it contrasts sharply with the image of fidelity to a single male, which became the most dominant aspect of the idealization of women in the classical tradition. The story of Draupadi implies that fraternal polyandry was acceptable in the society. Constant referring to her multiple husbands, she was many a times disrespected and harassed by labelling her as a prostitute that adds more pathos to this tragic events, Draupadi had to quietly endure the ignominy. Yet, the respect that Draupadi commands can never be mitigated. She is a heroine who is unpredictable, steadily determined and who could also possess the austerity of a traditional Hindu wife. Many see 'Draupadi as an early feminist because of her fearlessness in confronting those who harmed her or her family'. These figures of women are glowing examples of boldness, courage, action, vigour, anger and strength.

Also the creation of these myths is not in totality that mean they do not dictate clearly the stereotypical behaviours what they are supposed to as compared to Sita. Also another point to be taken into account is these myths are a symbol of courage, vigour, assertiveness and strength but such qualities are not stereotyped and dictated to Indian women, this is one of the reason why Indian and typically Hindu women trapped into the shackles of patriarchy and subjugation. Draupadi comes into the forefront with Arjuna winning her hand in marriage and bringing her home with him till that time Kunti had dominated in the narrative line as the central female interest and as a strongly matriarchal figure. Thereafter, in the epic with the sabhaparva, Pradip Bhattacharya in his Panchkanya: Women of substance, notes that there is also a 'sudden decline in the status of women itself' (Bhattacharya 67-83). This degradation starts with her silently accepting the unique, singular stance as the common wife of five brothers, in spite of the grave protests voiced by her father and brother against this multiple husbanding. Though the story culminates into a

woman being chaste or not, they are humiliated. Though these women are strong they are highlighted less in the Indian culture because Indian women do not relate to them.

Thus, the ancient epic maintains its status as a culturally foundational text which, apart from philosophical/spiritual values, educational and religious instruction, contains and perpetuates ideas and ideals of ethical obligation (dharma), social norms and gender roles. (Yakkaldevi, 2014)

In the works of Mahashweta Devi; one of the stories in her book 'After Kurukshetra', titled Kunti and the Nishadin, brings in the narratives of women marginalized owing to caste and class locations. The story retells the House of Lac incident in Mahabharata where a conspiracy was hatched to kill Kunti and the five Pandavas by inviting them to a house of lac and setting it afire while they would sleep but on getting a whiff of the conspiracy, Kunti invites a servant woman and her five sons to the house, inebriates them and when the house is burnt, the unnamed woman and her sons are killed while the perpetrators believe that it is Kunti and her sons who are dead. In Mahashweta Devi's retelling, Kunti is in the forest when the Nishadin or the tribal woman appears and reminds her of the injustice done to her following which Kunti is engulfed by the flames that surround her. In the traditional account, Kunti is unaware of this sin and 'unconsciously' wanted to kill the tribal woman and her sons for the 'greater good' and Mahashweta Devi, through this and other stories challenges popular notions of greater good and sheds light on the women from marginalized communities. (Devi, 2010)

This shows the disparity between men and women in the mythologies. These myths are adorned by us and forced upon the majority. They become the criteria to distinguish among the groups of women and men, taking no account of their individual personalities. As humans we can celebrate freedom now becomes an illusion. Everybody is striving to live a life with dignity and our constitution also promotes it. Understanding its depth and necessity we need to come out of the clutches of myths. Process of hegemony through controlling sexuality is in to protect caste divisions.

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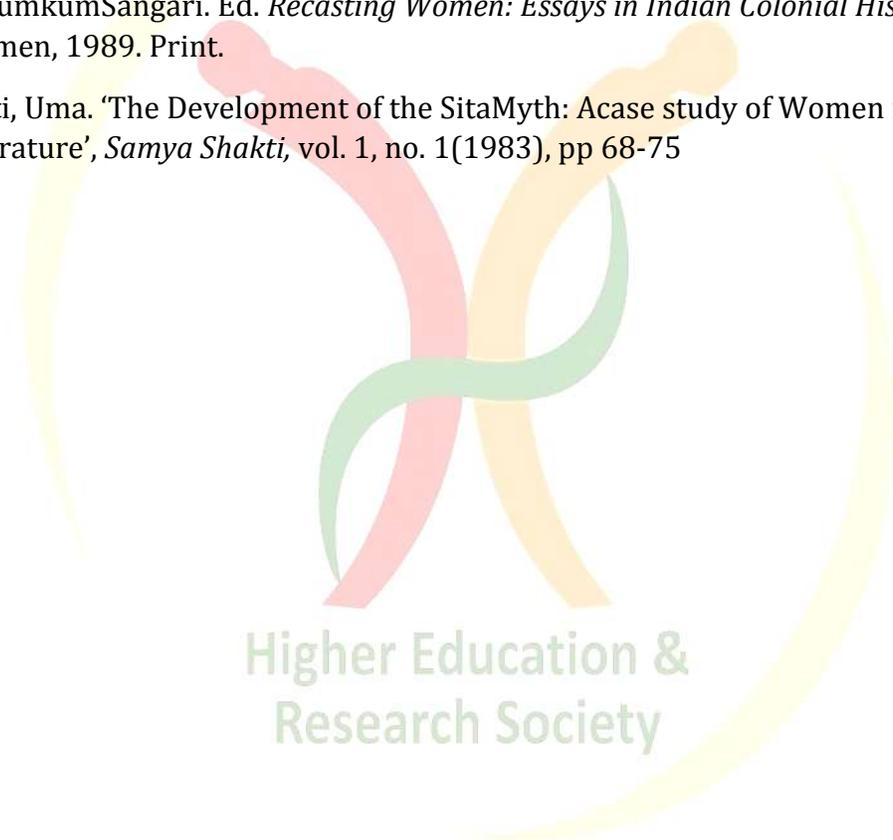
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