

**BRINGING THE GODS DOWN-TO-EARTH: A STUDY OF UNCONVENTIONAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE GODS IN MYTHOLOGICAL NARRATIVES FOR CHILDREN**

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**Abstract**

*Myths continue to remain entrenched in a nation's psyche amongst the faithful and the believers. In the Indian subcontinent, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, are eminently revered texts, and are believed to be ideal tools for introducing children to the values the nation as a whole holds dear. Retellings of such traditional stories usually represent the gods and goddesses of mythology as stern, grim, austere beings to be treated with unconditional reverence. However, a look at some of the retellings of mythology for children revealed that some narrators opted to represent their gods in unconventional ways, and it is such gods that this paper examines, in particular, their depictions in texts like 'Fun in Devlok' (Devdutt Pattanaik), 'Lord Ganesha's Feast of Laughter', and 'The Puffin Book of Classical Indian Tales for Children' (Meera Uberoi). The paper explores these pleasantly surprising deviations, and argues that depicting the gods through the tropes of humour, and at times romance, does not in any way diminish the stature of the gods. If anything, it renders them eminently likeable and relatable, and 'humanizes' them as it were by bringing them that much closer to the child reader. Mixing the secular and the sacred makes for a refreshing, and dare I say, much needed change in representation.*

**Keywords:** children, gods, goddesses, humour, mythology, representation

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**W**endy Doniger observes that what is paradoxical about myth is that ‘despite sometimes massive evidence that it is, in fact, a lie’, myth is equally something that people believe to be true (16). Whether true or not, the human mind has exercised its freedom to imagine god in its own imagination, and the domain of sacred mythology makes this all too evident. The renowned mythographer, Devadutt Pattanaik, for instance, claims that ambitious people prefer to believe in the idea of an angry god rather than a forgiving one because It does not grant middlemen, a.k.a. clerics, any power. One would rather have an angry God, one who is eager to punish for mistakes and crimes, and who goads people to do battle with the promise of heaven. (“Glamour of Vengeful Gods” para 3)

Pattanaik is of the opinion that radical Islamists are today putting forth an image of god ‘as a vengeful oversensitive impatient being, one who goads his chosen people to purge the world of non-believers with promises of a good afterlife’ (“Glamour of Vengeful Gods” para 5). What Pattanaik’s comments make clear is that the gods have been imagined and re-imagined throughout the history of religion to fulfil our own purposes. Humans, however, must refrain from indulging in the tendency to play god. As Francis McGarry reminds us, only god can take an absolute position; when men do it, they suggest that they are gods, and thus become ‘myth violators’ who create ‘closed’ myths that can destroy us: ‘A closed myth discounts at some point the human condition, the vulnerability of all those involved in its process’ (18). McGarry’s comment suggests that reinterpreting the myths of the past is a necessity, not an option.

When it comes to recounting sacred myths, Christopher Flood argues that it doesn't really matter much whether what is being narrated actually happened or not. Instead, attention must be paid to factors such as 'the selection, framing and interpretation' of the myth (180). This is because, myth is 'word', and because it is word, it is inevitably narrative, a narrative dedicated to the exploits of the gods and spirits (Baumgartner et al 195). This paper examines the representation of the gods in mythological retellings for children, namely those that have go against the grain. In the three texts selected for study, namely, *Lord Ganesh's Feast of Laughter and The Puffin Book of Classic Indian Tales for Children* by Meera Uberoi, and *Fun in Devlok* by Devadutt Pattanaik, it was found that the respective narrators sought to represent/re-present the gods in rather artful ways, recasting the gods in rather unconventional ways.

Generally, as with Greek mythology, the narratives of Hindu mythology are also replete with instances of the gods indulging in a range of vices: lust, pride, anger, theft, and envy to name a few. Subterfuge appears to be the forte of the gods, and they are not above using lies and deceit to get what they want, even if it is another man's wife. Consider how the gods fight over the exquisitely beautiful Uruvashi, the apsara that Narayana created to show Indra what real beauty was. And because they miss her after she is a happily married woman, they send their Gandharvas to trick her husband into flouting the three conditions she had laid down before their marriage. Urvashi returns to heaven furious with her husband, and the heart-broken Puruvasa is left pining for his beloved wife (Uberoi *The Puffin Book of Classic Indian Tales for Children* 66-70). Readers are expected to concur with the view that the gods deserve to maintain their superior status because they are after all, gods, and not demons or asuras, who are always made out to be creatures of unbridled evil. The reader is expected to adopt a moral framework that judges characters, not on the basis of *what* they do, irrespective of whether they are gods, heroes, or villains, but on the basis of *who* happens to perform the said action such that if the gods or the heroes do it, it's acceptable, even admirable, but if their enemies do it, it's unforgiveable.

When narrators attempt to instill a sense of unmitigated reverence towards the gods by putting them on a pedestal as it were, they run the risk of driving them further away from readers, making them even more remote and inaccessible. It was to guard against this possibility that some narrators perhaps decided to opt for a change of image. In *Lord Ganesha's Feast of Laughter*, the narrator takes pains to represent her gods, particularly Shiva and Ganesha, in a rather unconventional manner, so as to bring them closer to the reader. Shiva, renowned for his wrath, is here very much a genial family man, an indulgent husband and father. He even has a sense of humour, and repeated references to his barely hidden smiles or laughter considerably tone down his fear-inducing persona - 'Shiva smiled a knowing smile...' (12); 'Shiva glanced at his little son Ganesha and a smile crinkled his eyes' (18); 'Shiva's lips twitched' (22); 'Shiva looked at his hassled fellow gods with an apologetic smile' (53); 'Shiva tried to stay angry but a smile tugged at his lips' (63). His interactions with Parvati are especially endearing. This how he reacts to her indignant protests when she questions him about why his ardent devotee is miserably poor: 'What more can I give him?' he asked with a glimmer of a smile. He knew his Parvati well' (84). And when 'his Parvati' argues with him some more, he merely laughs 'as her eyes flashed' (85). After having restored Ganesha's head, he is found 'gazing fondly' at his wife and son, and thanking his stars for having successfully mollified his wife. Here is a god who is endearingly human, and refreshingly different in his representation as a man who revels in his role as husband and father. Overall, Shiva comes across as a 'cool guy' instead of as a fearsome God, especially since references to his famous temper are kept to a minimum.

Shiva's son, Ganesha the protagonist, is also represented as a happy-go-lucky god, mischievous and always ready for fun. Whether it is leading the boastful god Kubera to believe that he will eat him up just as he had eaten all his food, vessels, and jewels so as to teach him a lesson, or giving Ved Vyasa a bad case of writer's block for forgetting to pray to him before beginning to write, Ganesha is eternally game for fun and frolic, and is always found 'chuckling with glee' (41), grinning, or smiling naughty smiles. Represented as a trickster, constantly seeking ways to outwit others, and indulging in harmless games of one

up-manship, Uberoi's Ganesha is an eminently likeable god, even if he flies into a rage on rare occasions.

The representation of Shiva and Ganesha as genial souls always ready to see the funny side of things is largely effected through linguistic means. The 'slangy' discourse they use considerably lessens the distance between these revered gods of mythology and the ordinary reader of today. And so, when Shiva orders his attendants saying, 'And make it snappy' (Uberoi *Lord Ganesha's Feast* 5); or when he sighs, 'Whew! That was a close call' (5); or when Ganesha admonishes his mount, the rat, with the words, 'Not a good idea, you know, to kidnap gods. Now up you get' (10), this casual, informal, 'lingo' makes them appear eminently relatable. In fact, most of the dialogues between the characters in the book are rendered in this kind of informal language, as this exchange between Sage Vyasa and Ganesha ably illustrates:

"Damn!" muttered Vyasa under his breath.

But the little god didn't have big ears for nothing. "Tut!Tut! Not a seemly word for a sage," he said with a pious smile.

Vyasa scowled. "How do I worm my way out of this?" he thought, his mind racing. Then a slow smile curved his lips. "Alright, I'll recite without a pause, provided you understand everything I say before you put pen to palm-leaf," he said and sat back with a smug smile.

Ganesha chuckled. "Ve-e-ry nice. Neatly turned the tables on me. And now I suppose you'll speak in riddles whenever you need time to compose a verse." (Uberoi *Lord Ganesha's Feast* 44)

This kind of witty banter between the Vyasa and Ganesha, lends comic overtones to the narration, and is representative of the style that Uberoi adopts throughout the book in the dialogues as well as in the third-person narration in which she blends a down-to-earth, unpretentious narrative tone with a droll, tongue-in-cheek sense of humor.

The lighthearted, comic effect of her narration is the direct result of a disruption of expectations. Where readers would have expected to find the gods depicted as the solemn figures we think they are, expressing themselves in the kind of language we believe they speak in, we find them indulging in antics ranging from the mildly amusing to the downright hilarious. One wouldn't normally expect to hear gods utter sentences like 'You have me there' (Uberoi *Lord Ganesha's Feast* 57), 'But you're so easy to bait, I can't resist', 'Fire away', or 'Don't take all day about it' (85). Attributing such wry, crisp, laconic language to the gods might seem somewhat bizarre but only because it confounds our ideas of what gods are like. The two frames of reference, the sacred and the secular, the serious and the funny, are brought into direct collision with each other, and when the revered gods deliver their dialogues with an uncharacteristic comic irreverence, the narratives become infused with an invigorating sense of comic irony and humour, the natural, very welcome outcome of such incongruity. Young readers might well appreciate the reinvention of the gods as 'cool' guys - down-to-earth, unpretentious, relaxed and easy-going, a welcome change from the usual depictions of gods as more solemn, sedate, mirthless, or dour people. The delightfully charming and adorable portrayals of Shiva, Ganesha and Parvati in Uberoi's book not only makes for a refreshing change, it also shows that it is possible to find and effectively deploy new ways of representing the gods to enhance their appeal. The use of humour in the construction of the sacred does not in any way belittle the gods, if anything, it makes readers like them that much more for being regular old, fun guys one can actually relate to given that they act and even speak so much like us. After all, as Paul McDonald tells us, there is a consensus about the fact that humour is an exclusively human activity, that only humans have the requisite cognitive capability to create humour, and that humans developed the ability to appreciate incongruity, an integral element of humour, nearly 50,000 years ago (12).

Lord Krishna has always been a popular god, and his many facets, whether that of the mischievous butter-stealing child, the flautist surrounded by a group of swooning, enchanted maidens, or the more serious guru dispensing his philosophical wisdom in his

later years, have intrigued people the world over. In *The Puffin Book of Classic Indian Tales for Children*, Uberoi crafts her Krishna as quite the romantic. In “Krishna and Rukmini”, she describes how he spirits Rukmini away, on her wedding day no less, in broad daylight, under the collective noses of her friends and family. This Lochinvar-esque representation of Krishna is eminently delightful. Krishna as the daring, dashing hero who sweeps away his beloved with flourish and ease, cocking a snook at her family and prospective husband, is more a knight-in-shining-armor than a divine deity. He even utters rather tender, filmy dialogues such as ‘Now that I know she cares, nothing will stop me from carrying her away – not the Emperor, not his army, not her brother’ (48). Needless to say, the brave knight needs no assistance from any quarters, and refuses his brother’s offer to help, uttering a cocky line such as, ‘A good fight before breakfast does wonders for the appetite’ (51). Throughout the rendition of this episode, Krishna is described as smiling or laughing, a sign of his genial nature as also of his supreme confidence in being able to ‘steal’ the bride of the day, and make her his own.

While Krishna in “Krishna and Rukmini” is cast an amorous beau, willing to go all out for his lady love, and a daredevil to boot, a romantic slant is also given to the depiction of Shiva in “Shiva and Sati”, though in a vastly tragic context, that of Sati’s death by self-immolation. After Shiva gets Sati’s father killed for having caused her death, and then restores him to life (though with a goat’s head), he suddenly spots her dead body. What follows is a moving, rather heart-wrenching description of his grief on seeing the lifeless body of his wife:

A devastating grief, deeper and vaster than the ocean, engulfed Shiva as he stooped and picked up the body of his beloved. An agonizing cry tore out of his lips and, clutching the body, he ran into the mountains. His demented cries woke up sleeping volcanoes, caused rivers to tear out their banks, and mountain peaks to totter and explode. (Uberoi *The Puffin Book* 87-88)

Devadutt Pattanaik also changes track when it comes to the representation of the gods in *Fun in Devlok*, opting to present them in a down-to-earth avatar, and literally so, considering that almost all the gods come down from their heavenly abodes to interact with the mortals on earth. Lord Krishna, shown waiting at the Mumbai airport for his flight to Guwhati, dressed in a yellow T-shirt and faded blue jeans no less, makes for a striking change in image. Not just his trendy clothes, even his behavior is rather atypical of a god. Not just children, even adult readers, are bound to take an immediate liking to this unconventional Krishna who 'would always be a child, enjoying butter, enjoying the company of people, enjoying planes and airports' (22). In "Shiva Plays Dumb Charades", the formidable Lord Shiva decides to join a group of children as they play the popular game, Dumb Charades. Shiva himself admits, 'I love playing games. I love presenting puzzles and expect my devotees to solve them' (63). Indra, the king of the gods, is here a petulant, childish creature, at his wits end worrying that someone will steal his celestial gifts or his throne. Goddess Saraswati is found loitering near a school, waiting to take on Mrs. Sivakami, the teacher, for making learning inordinately boring and mechanical for her students. Kama and Yama are found bickering endlessly, taking digs at each other as they vie for the child protagonist's attention. And the fierce and menacing Goddess Kali admits to having difficulty in managing her hair, and wants to know how she can tame her unruly locks so as to appear less intimidating to people. In *Fun in Devlok*, the child self rather than the adult self is centralized by virtue of being configured within the narrative itself. The book privileges the child's perspective, for a change, and the gods, when viewed from the perspective of the fictional children are revealed as flawed beings, much the same as humans. In "Indra Find Happiness", it is Harsha, the child protagonist, who is able to see what the real problem with Indra, the king of the gods, is: 'Harsha realized Indra had a fantastic imagination. The god kept imagining problems and threats all day. This kept him unhappy all the time'(124). Here, child and god meet each other half-way: sometimes the child enters the world of the gods while at other times the gods enter the ordinary, everyday world of the child. In "Kama vs Yama", Jayashree the child protagonist, meets the



two gods, each of whom compete to discredit the other. Having heard both the incessantly bickering gods out, Jayashree finally decides that that she would like to have the best of both worlds, the world of fun and of work; in other words, she would like to like both Kama and Yama instead of only one and not the other.

All of these representations endear the gods by 'humanising' them, showing them capable of human emotions such as love, anguish and grief just like ordinary mortals. And the gods with a penchant for mischief, and blessed with a sense of humour, are even more irresistible. The very titles of the two books, *Lord Ganesha's Feast of Laughter* and *Fun in Devlok*, foreground the trope of humour, but we can look beyond the use of humour as a strategy to enhance the appeal of the books for child readers. While the use of humour in mythological narratives comes as a surprise, the representation of the gods in somewhat unorthodox avatars does much to alter the usual perception of the gods as stern, steely deities to be worshipped from a distance. These gods may not stay put in their heavenly abodes, granting boons or dispensing curses on hapless mortals at their mercy, but while reinventing the gods in such startling ways might defy our expectations of how the gods speak, behave, think and feel, such unconventional representations do not dent their image as venerable beings in any way; on the contrary, such portrayals could effect a much-needed change in perception that just might enable readers, especially children, redefine their relationship with the divine. In a paper dedicated to arguing that god has a sense of humour, Rik Peels claims that the notion has important consequences for our perception of god, and could also redefine how we pray and worship. Though Peels' arguments are focused on the god of Christianity, the implications could hold true for all other gods as well.

While elucidating on the identification fallacy, the tendency where readers, young ones in particular, are encouraged to identify with the protagonists of literary texts. Maria Nikolajeva claims that representations of characters who are repulsive can prevent and subvert identification as much as representations of characters as perfect (205). In

resisting the temptation to represent the gods as perfect, faultless, flawless beings, narrators greatly enhance the likeability quotient of the gods, to the advantage of the reader, and, of course, the gods themselves.

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