

THE SILENCED VOICES IN THE STORIES OF 'BULBBUL', 'PHILOMELA' AND 'AHALYA': AN ECOFEMINIST STUDY

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Abstract

'Bulbbul' – a web film directed by Anvita Dutt is recently released on Netflix in June'2020. The concept of 'otherness' is one of the primary tools used in establishing the strong pillars of patriarchal society. Women and nature are treated as 'Other' in material as well as in the symbolic world. These concepts get concretized in society through myths. The story of modern 'Bulbbul', 'Philomela' from Greek mythology and the myth of 'Ahalya' from Hindu theology are the narratives of women who are molested by powerful males. The paper deals with a comparative study of three stories which are interconnected and find roots in myths from Greek and Hindu theology. Folklore and myths find a strong connection with Mother Earth which is explained through all three selected stories. Helene Cixous in her essay "Castration or Decapitation" emphasizes on the term 'decapitation' as an act of silencing women voices. Bulbul, Philomela and Ahalya are silenced and the only place where they find refuge is in the forest, i.e. Mother Earth.

Keywords: *Ecofeminism, Gender Studies, Myths, Hindu theology, Web Film, Modern Narrative, Decapitation and Beauty.*

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- Gazala Khan,

"To tell a story is to discover or reveal a secret."- A.K.Ramanujan

Myths have carved its niche in the lives of human beings since time immemorial. The central idea of mythic stories usually revolves around *Mother Earth*. Two elements which make a myth universal in nature are its connection with physical nature and others with the qualities of human nature. Most of the characters are personified in a form which is part of different elements of nature.

What is a myth? Why myths are significant? How myths find an important place in the lives of human beings? These questions are important to discuss for a better understanding of the three stories which are the focus of this paper.

Myths are both fictional and factual. They are subjected to sundry interpretations. They dissipate half-truths and are universal. No matter where a myth originates or is located in a particle setting, it reverberates in the lives of millions in the history of mankind. They were important in ancient times and are still treated with utmost faith in contemporary times. Few examples of contemporary myths are J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, J.R.R Tolkien's *Lord of Rings* series and *The Hobbit*, C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* and stories about superheroes have become part of contemporary mythic world, as most of the characters created in these modern series find its roots in the Greek and Roman mythology. Myths play an important role in consolidating the foundation of religions that are practised by most of us. "Myths are more than mere stories, they serve a more profound purpose in ancient and modern cultures. Myths answer timeless questions and serve as a compass to each generation" (Wood 1). These mythic stories guide, instruct and warn mankind about the ways of life. Common themes of the narrative plot in the myths include birth, death, afterlife, care and protection of nature and about other living organisms, good versus evil, social values, morality, etc. In brief, myths can be defined as "sacred tales that explain the world and man's experience" (2).

The focus of the paper is the three stories based on myths which echo the exploitation of women by patriarchal heads in the male centered hegemonic societies. The stories belong to three different periods. As noted, these are myths which are subjected to miscellaneous interpretations. The story of 'Bulbbul' is located in the modern world set in the Bengal Presidency of 1881. 'Bulbbul' is a web movie released at Netflix in June'2020. The second story is taken from Greek mythology titled 'Philomela'. There are two sources of Philomela's story. One is written by Ovid in his magnum opus *Metamorphoses*, Book VI and the other version is believed to be written by Sophocles, a tragedy titled *Tereus* which is now lost. The third story is of 'Ahalya' narrated in the *Bala Kanda* (The Book of Children) of *Ramayana*, it is the part of Hindu mythology.

The concern over environmental protection is not a new belief which is echoing in the twenty-first century. To meet its necessities and amass wealth humans have harmed nature to a large extent which will cause extreme difficulty for the future generations to come. The perennial war between the majority versus the minority is the cause of concern. Women, nature and other marginalized targets of the society suffer in the unequal world dominated by patriarchs in power. According to the United Nations Environmental Program, which states clearly that both men and women respond and suffer differently when the repercussions are felt due to environmental damages. Women and nature are categorized in the same compartment. The term which defines this relationship between women and nature is ecofeminism. Ecofeminism is a movement and a practice that relates to the oppression of women with the destruction of environment. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* tagged both women and nature as 'Other' whereas men are defined as the absolute.

To quote Professor Mary Mellor, a UK academic,

Ecofeminism is a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women... Ecofeminism brings together elements of the feminist and green movements, while at the same time offering a challenge to both. (Thorpe 5)

Different tropes are used in all three stories where women protagonist have found refuge in the forest, in the womb of nature when oppressed by the patriarchal forces. The notion of empowerment of women looms in all three stories.

'Bulbbul' is a web film directed by Anvita Dutt. The main protagonist is Tripti Dimri as Bulbul, Rahul Bose as Indranil and Mahendra and Avinash Tiwary as Chote Thakur- Staya. The names in the story speak a lot about the story itself. Bulbbul is a Hindi name for the bird called nightingale. Indranil and Mahendra, the twin brothers depicted as two shades of the madness of patriarchy which are the names by which Lord Indra, the one with the thousand eyes is known in Hindu theology. He is notoriously known for his role played in the story of Ahalya. Bulbbul is married as a young child to an elderly man named Indranil. When she grows as a young woman she is physically abused by Indranil who becomes jealous because of her associateship with Indranil's young brother Satya. Later she is sexually harassed and raped by Mahendra, the twin brother of Indranil. Bulbbul dies and resurrects supernaturally. She is metaphorically silenced. She takes revenge by killing Mahendra and also acts as a shield for the women of the village whoever is assaulted by the man of the house. Bulbbul finds refuge in the forest. She is taught as a young girl that, "a girl cannot fly off like a bird". But Bulbbul does. She attacks the patriarchal system, replaces Indranil as the head of the village and looks for the welfare of women as a *Devi*.

The story of Philomela is narrated in Book VI of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Tereus, the King of Thrace marries Procne of Athens. Procne has a beautiful younger sister named Philomela. Procne misses her beloved sister and requests Tereus to bring Philomela to their place. When Tereus sees Philomela for the first time as a young girl he lusts for her and on their way back to Thrace, he raped her. On realizing Philomela may tell Procne about the misdeed, he cuts out her tongue and imprisons her in a forest. Philomela is also silenced as Bulbbul is in the former story. Philomela weaves a tapestry to tell her sister about the sexual abuse and her state of being. Procne on receiving the tapestry is fumed in anger, she frees Philomela. Both sisters decide to take revenge by killing Tereus beloved son Itys. They serve Itys's flesh mixed in Tereus' food as his dinner. When Tereus realizes Philomela and Procne have killed his son, he is filled with anger and runs after

the sisters to kill them. But supernaturally all three are turned into different birds. Philomela as a nightingale, Procne as a swallow and Tereus as a hoopoe. Ultimately, they found refuge in the forest.

The story of Ahalya is narrated in *Ramayana*. Ahalya is a Sanskrit term meaning “the one with no ugliness”. Indra, the leader of the Devas is the god of rain and thunderstorm. In Vedas, Indra is known as Sakra. Sakra is a Sanskrit word meaning ‘mighty’ or ‘powerful’. In Buddhist cosmology, Sakra or Sakka in Pali is the ruler of Trayastrimsa Heaven. He is long-lived but mortal. When one Sakra dies, his place is taken by another deity who becomes the new Sakra. In the contemporary world, we witness everyday oppression of women by the patriarchy in power that is men who dominate women by sexually harassing or physically oppressing her. One man replaces the other and it is a woman who is victimized.

The mythological episode of Ahalya and Indra is a story of lust and finally of deliverance. Lord Brahma creates Ahalya- the one who possess the highest virtues. She is married to a sage Maharishi Gautama. Indra, the king of gods was enamoured by the beauty of Ahalya and lusts for her. Indra descends to Earth in the form of Ahalya’s husband and attains his purpose by seducing her. When Ahalya sees Indra in the form of Maharishi Gautama, she instantly figures out that it is not her husband but Indra. Vanity becomes Ahalya’s bane. The real Maharishi Gautama cursed his wife.

Fie on you, Ahalya! Your vanity led you into committing such a grave error. May you lose the form you are so proud of and subsist only on air. Surviving in such a manner, may you become invisible to the world, meriting no more importance than an ordinary rock, for ages to come. Not unless Vishnu himself decides to set foot in this ashrama may you be redeemed. (Thakur 2)

Then Maharishi Gautama curses Indra, “You be covered by that which you seek” (2). He is instantly covered with a thousand *yonis*. The marks all over his body are later converted into a thousand eyes- known as *Sahasraksa / Sahasraksha* after he repents. Years later, Lord Rama sets foot in the hermitage and then Ahalya is finally redeemed. In this mythological narrative, the woman protagonist Ahalya is also silenced and turned into a stone. Also, in the web film ‘Bulbbul’, the images of Indra, Ahalya and Maharishi

Gautama flashes for a few seconds to create a comparative pedestal for the modern avatars who harasses Bulbbul.

The recurring trope of silence, women as victim, men as mighty and powerful and refuge in the forest are common in all three stories. Bulbbul, Philomela and Ahalya are metaphorically silenced. Helene Cixous in her essay "Castration or Decapitation" refers to the idea of decapitation of women, how they are beheaded or metaphorically silenced in the world of patriarchal hegemonic forces. The freedom to speak is taken away from women forever. Cixous narrates a Chinese story where women are silenced and ostracized so that they can follow the programmed disciplinary order created and planned by the men in the position of power. Helene Cixous stated women are always deprived of speaking. She has to follow the absolute law created by men.

Bulbbul hovers on the branches of the forest, Philomela sings in the forest about her ordeals in the forest and Ahalya is turned into a stone in a hermitage which is situated in midst of a forest. They are supernaturally part of the world of nature and of 'Mother Earth'. In the end, in Bulbbul's story, the forest is set on fire mistakenly by Satya and it is believed by Dr Sudip that Bulbbul, Badi Thakurain also dies in the fire. But she resurrects again like a phoenix and is seen haunting Indranil who finally returns to the village after years of living away from his native house.

The ordeals a woman has to undergo under the oppression of the man and the destruction of the environment are the cause of concern for mankind. Different myths since time immemorial have tried to warn and instruct human beings about the repercussions of devastating acts of victimizing both women and nature which will ultimately destroy the whole mankind. These myths have worked as mirror to the mankind and the society.

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