

**DEMYTHIFYING GODDESSES: READING MS. MILITANCY
BY MEENA KANDASAMY**

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Abstract

The functionalist theory of Myth by Brownislaw Malinowski, purports that religious myths emerge in order to reinforce social order of a culture, giving validation to the power structures, by attributing prestige to the tradition and 'tracing it back to a higher better, more supernatural reality of initial events' (qtd. in Dundes149). Taking inspiration from Anne Sexton's revisionist retelling of Grimm Brothers' fairytales in Transformations and Carol Ann Duffy's telling of the female side of the story in The World's Wife, Meena Kandasamy retells the Hindu and Tamil myths from feminist perspective in her second anthology of poems Ms. Militancy. Aware of the revolutionary potential of such retelling, she endeavors to 'lay claim to religious space' and 'seek a share in story telling' in order to reclaim the goddesses as women from the 'sterilized patriarchy approved story' (Kandasamy), thereby redressing the imbalance pertaining to gender roles in our society. In the light of the arguments presented above , the paper intends to critically engage with selected poems by Meena Kandasamy published in Ms. Militancy (2010) to explicate the representation of myths as codified beliefs that have the Janus potentiality of both 'constricting and liberating gender paradigms' (Doniger 273).

Key words: *mythology and literature, gender, religion and literature, literature of the underrepresented, re-writing myths*

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Taking inspiration from Anne Sexton's revisionist retelling of Grimm Brothers' fairytales in *Transformations* and Carol Ann Duffy's telling of the female side of the story in *The World's Wife*, Meena Kandasamy, who is an emerging poet, novelist, translator and social activist, known for her extremely polemical writing against caste and gender oppression, retells the Hindu and Tamil myths from feminist perspective in her second anthology of poems *Ms. Militancy*. Aware of the revolutionary potential of such retelling, she endeavors to 'lay claim to religious space' and 'seek a share in story telling' in order to reclaim the goddesses as women from the 'sterilized patriarchy approved story' (Kandasamy). In an interview with Kavya Rajagopalan, Meena Kandasamy contends that 'Sita is often portrayed as the obedient Hindu wife, but I find it inspiring that she is one of the first women who dare to step across, strike up a conversation with a stranger. All our myths lend to multiple readings, and my task as a poet and as a feminist, is to offer some of these alternative possible readings.' In the light of the arguments presented above, the paper intends to critically engage with selected poems by Meena Kandasamy published in *Ms. Militancy* (2010) to explicate the representation of myths as codified beliefs that have the Janus potentiality of both 'constricting and liberating gender paradigms; both sustaining and challenging bipolar concepts of gender' (Doniger 273).

Unlike monotheistic religions such as Christianity and Islam, that profess Godhead as male or metasexual, Hindu pantheon is replete with enumerable goddesses venerated as counterparts of the male deities. In Hinduism the divinity or the *Brahman* manifests itself in both male and female form. Hinduism even has the cult of *Shaktas* the worshipers of goddess and the word for goddess is *shakti* which means power. This fact is often used by Hindu chauvinists to romanticize and justify the high status accorded to women in Hinduism. Yet the abundance of female deities does not translate into empowerment or an egalitarian status for women in Hindu society, which is predominantly patriarchal and treats women hierarchically inferior to men. The following lines from Kandasamy's poem "Nailed" can be read as an exposition of, what Wendy Doniger calls the 'Clytemnestra Syndrome'; 'the more intrinsically powerful, and hence dangerous, goddesses are perceived to be, the more intrinsically powerful, and hence dangerous human women are perceived to be, and hence greater the need to keep human woman far away from the actual use of any power in the world' (Doniger 280).

Men are afraid of any woman who makes poetry and dangerous portents. Unable to predict when, for what, and for whom she will open her mouth, unable to stitch up her lips, they silence her.

.....
She was black and bloodthirsty, so even Kali found herself shut inside her shrine.

They were relatively low-risk, so most women were locked up at home. (37)

Usha Menon and Richard A. Shweder in their essay, "Power in its Place: is the Great Goddess of Hinduism a Feminist?" argue that rather than offering defiance, the theological interpretations of goddesses as mythic models for Hindu women serve to preserve and perpetuate male supremacist culture. They explicate the nature of *shakti* as 'self-restraint' and not the ability to dominate. To support their argument, they examine interpretations of the fearful and iconic image of Kali trampling over Shiva with her tongue hanging out, by high caste Hindu Orissans. Most high caste men and women interviewed interpreted the icon depicting reverential gesture of 'respectful restraint' by Kali before Shiva; a display of 'shame' for unknowingly stepping on her husband, in the course of mad rampage and a fit of rage after the destruction of demon *Mahishasura*.

Men and women in the temple town of Bhubneshwar say that the goddess was morally justified in her murderous rampage because the male gods had betrayed her, sending her in to do battle with the buffalo demon, Mahishasur, without telling her that the boon the demon had received from Brahma protected him from every living being but a naked female and that to kill him, she would have to strip. But they also say she became calm, regained her composure, not because of anything Shiva did but because of a sense of her duty as a wife to Shiva, and as a mother to the world. (163-164)

Kamala Ganesh reads the disparity expressed in the text / legend and icon; considers it absurd and calls it an 'example of trying to make a consort out of Kali' (82); an attempt to domesticate the autonomous, powerful, dangerous and destructive goddess.

Maithreyi Krishnaraj in the introduction to the book *Motherhood in India: Glorification without Empowerment?* (2010) points out that motherhood though glorified; *matrika* being venerated in Indian sub-continent, from the great tradition of cult of *Ma Durga* to the little tradition of *gram devta*, exalted for the regenerative and nurturing qualities; the lived experience of motherhood for women continues to be oppressive. To elaborate upon the paradox, it would be worth mentioning that in multiple instances in *Mahabharata*, as evident in the unforgettable tale of *Madhavi* or that of *Amba* and *Ambalika*, motherhood is often thrust coercively upon unwilling women. Sukumari Bhattacharjee in the essay "Motherhood in Ancient India," offers valuable insight into the inverse relationship

between apotheosis of motherhood and diminutive position of women in society through explication given by Manu, in which women are compared to soil; merely a conduit for bearing the seed whereas men are valorized as the provider of seeds and attributed with the generative power in the process of procreation.

By the seventh century BC, the Aryans had become an agricultural people and theirs was an agriculturist way of looking at life. This led to a positively male chauvinistic view of parenthood: the woman was the field, and the man sowed the seed in her. As both the land and seed belonged to the man in this predominantly patriarchal society, the son belonged to the father. Manu is quite brutally explicit about it, 'of the seed and the womb, the seed is superior. All creatures of life assume the qualities of the seed.' The qualities of the womb are never shared by the seed. (57)

The view espoused by Manu has become so entrenched in the socio-cultural ethos that though the mother's role in childbirth supersedes that of the father (for instance in parturition or rearing of infant); she lacks the social and epistemic significance. Her womb is considered only an incubator for the child, whereas it is from the father that the child bequeaths its identity, tradition, property and even the virtue of being legitimate. The mother is revered only as mother of sons. The common assumption being that a son takes after his father; begetting a son is a matter of pride for the father. Enlisting things like 'green mangoes clay cloying chalk / citrus soap crusty coal raw rice / crushed ice cubes crayon ash / powdered glass pickled garlic / salt sieved rain scented soil' (*Militancy* 18), the poem "Eating dirt", opens with an allusion to *Davaki*, the mother of *Krishna*, picturing the whimsical cravings she may have had during her pregnancy; dreaming of things she could not have in *Kamsa's* imprisonment. Built upon the trope of geophagy common in children and pregnant women, the poem retells the popular tale of *Krishna* eating dirt and being caught by mother *Yasoda* but Kandasamy disrupts the patrilineal ideology by identifying a trait in infant *Kishna*, which he inherits from his mother; endowing the figure of mother with epistemic significance as the trait turns out to be an identity marker.

a son was born, he was fed
and learnt to feed
soon he was caught eating mud
a son taking after his mother
a son inheriting her tongue. (18)

The functionalist theory of Myth by Brownislaw Malinowski, purports that religious myths emerge in order to reinforce social order of a culture, giving validation to the power structures, by attributing prestige to the tradition and 'tracing it back to a higher better, more supernatural reality of initial events' (qtd. in Dundes149). Kandasamy exhibits an understanding of the fact that myths codify beliefs and engender the roles that are

considered appropriate for each member of the society; that they have the Janus potentiality of both 'constricting and liberating gender paradigms, both sustaining and challenging bipolar concepts of gender' (Doniger 273). For instance Kandasamy uses the myth of *Draupadi* and her disrobing, fashioning a narrative disrupting male supremacist cultural discourse regarding 'shame' and 'nakedness,' coded as debasement, in the poem "Big Brother: An epic in eighteen episodes." She relocates the *Mahabharata* to Las Vegas;

Sin City, with its slot machines.
 This gaming guy lost all to loaded dice-
 His brothers, his bonds, his villa, his wife.
 His sanity- untouched by poker dons-
 Slipped when he saw his lady leave for work:
 A high heeled item, a stripper queen. (15)

By totally occluding the debate around 'Draupadi's question read as sign of her agency' or of her 'salvation through cosmic justice mediated by Krishna's interception'; upon which scholars have spilled much ink giving numerous interpretations, Kandasamy ironically deploys the semiotics of disrobing to create a disconcerting counter-effect, resonant of Mahashweta Devi's character Dopdi Mehjen. As Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan in her seminal essay, "The story of Draupadi's Disrobing: Meanings for Our Times" purports:

Dopdi does not let her nakedness shame her, her torture, intimidate her, or her rape diminish her. But this refusal is not to be read as transcendence of suffering, or even simply heroism. It is instead simultaneously deliberate refusal of a shared sign-system (the meanings assigned to nakedness, and rape: shame, fear, loss)... (353)

Kandasamy's *Draupadi* as a 'stripper queen'; a cynosure of public gaze offers an affront to masculinity, problematizing the notion of 'honour' of the men/clan/community associated with the body of women and the notion of 'modesty' ascribed to her clothes. Her autonomous act of shedding clothes becomes synonymous with rejection of these phallogocentric significations. Her willing transgression from the private to the public arena also undermines the ideology of 'separate spheres,' whereby private domain is incidental to 'respectable' and public concomitant to 'non-respectable,' as textual scholars of *Mahabharata* opine, 'it is not so much the disrobing as the forced entry into public space that Draupadi returns to later (in her recurrent allusion to time), as the source of her shame' (Rajan 336). In the same vein her poem "Firewalkers" invokes the goddess Mari, an incarnate form of *Draupadi* in describing the fire walking ritual called *Thimthi* (variants of the name include *Theemidhi* and *Theemithi*). The goddess in the poem as a fearful feminine principle is resonant of Kali; imbued with anger and capable of violence; an avenging woman; she rejects victimization. Kandasamy uses what Wendy Doniger explains, the 'multivocality of myths' as a narrative i.e. 'ability to express simultaneously a number of different voices, different points of view,' to project alternative models of womanhood.

Myth continues to speak with this forked tongue to the present day. . . . This is what allows a myth, more than any form of narrative, to be shared by a group of people (who have various points of view). For a myth is a neutral structure that allows paradoxical meanings to be held in a charged tension, that remain transparent to a variety of constructions of meaning. (272)

Likewise, in "Six-Hours of Chastity", the poet renders an alternative reading of the myth of *Nalayani*, Rishi *Maudgalya's* devoted wife who is considered the epitome of chastity. According to the myth leprosy ridden *Maudgalya* commands his wife to take him to his chosen prostitute. So the ever obedient wife bundles up the decrepit body of her husband in a big basket and exhibiting unflinching devotion, carries him on her head to the house of the prostitute, midst the disdainful snigger of the bystanders. Kandasamy imagines the events that unfold as *Nalayani* waits for her husband outside the house of the prostitute. She plays along when '[s]omeone who saunters in mistakes the devout / [w]ife to be mistress of guilt, a woman of night.' She spends the night indulging in sexual fervor with strangers; with '[s]ix men, one for every hour of night' (*Militancy* 49). The implication being, she doesn't wait for her husband to grant 'the boon'. Exhibiting agency, she manipulates the situation to overcome the circumstances and enjoys sexual gratification, thereby averting the fate of being born as 'Draupadi'.

Ranjit Haskote interprets the poems in *Ms. Militancy* as a 'series of self- dramatization . . . [of] subversive mythic exemplars . . . [and] heterodox woman saint-poets from the Bhakti teaching lineage.' I extrapolate this impersonation as the performance of the 'gender acts' with the subversive potential of 'drag'; where by the poet persona assumes subjectivities, miming as well as displacing the conventions and cultural norms. In the introduction to *Ms. Militancy*, rather cheekily titled "Should you take offence," Kandasamy proclaims the motivation to her enterprise thus:

You are the repressed Ram from whom I run away repeatedly. You are Indra busy causing bloodshed. You are Brahma fucking up my fates. You are Manu robbing me of my right to live and learn and choose. You are sage Gautama turning your wife to stone. You are Adi Sankara driving me to death. . . . You are the conscience of this Hindu society That is why I am Mira, Andal, and Akka Mahadevi all at once, spreading myself out like a feast, inviting gods to enter my womb. I am also Karraikal Ammaiyar, suspected of infidelity for being ravishingly beautiful. Like each of these women, I have to write poetry to be heard, I have to turn insane to be alive. . . My Maariamma bays for blood. My Kali kills. My Draupadi strips. My Sita climbs on to a stranger's lap. All my women militate. (8)

To conclude, it can be said that, since in myth as a meta-language, the plane of meaning is not limited to the literal words on the page and myth as a second-order connotative

language allows universal meanings to emerge, so it is potent in deconstruction of stereotypes because it allows transformation of existing meanings into new ones. Thus by re-writing about the mythical women and goddesses, Kandasamy undercuts the authority of theological interpretations by the Brahmanical priests and wrests the monopoly from goddess-inspired *Hindutva* feminism by projecting alternate images. Given the ubiquitous presence of goddesses in the multiple realms of life in India, she even deploys them as symbolic resources to come to terms with her interiority as a 'subject' embedded within the phallogocentric symbolic order.

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