



RESEARCH ARTICLE

REVISITING GENDER, MYTH AND FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY IN FOREST OF ENCHANTMENT BY DIVAKARUNI

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Manuscript Info

Manuscript History

Received: 27 June 2023

Final Accepted: 31 July 2023

Published: August 2023

Key words:-

Patriarchal Dominance, Female
Subjectivity, Identity, Strength of
Women

Abstract

Myths depict the social decorum, ideology and beliefs of people, moral conduct of human life. Myths are the symbols of the value system that instigates people to follow prescribed moral code. The gender biased dynamics of society did not recognize the value, sacrifice of women characters. The reinterpretation of female subjectivity in mythical literature, folktales is necessary to give a new life to the marginalized class and women characters who became victim of patriarchal dominance of power and greed. This has led a great impact on our society and human life. Divakaruni rises in the spectrum of women diaspora writer unravelling the cultural conflict women face in host land and her narration designates the grandeur of Indian cultural heritage through frequent reference to mythological folktales, characters and giving it a new form to old mythical tales. This paper examines the gender biased perspective of society toward women and how the reinterpretation of the Ramayana from Sita's perspective by Divakaruni brings out the inherent strength of women characters which remained subdued, buried under the carpet of silence in the name of traditional cultural values.

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Introduction:-

Myths depict the social decorum, ideology and beliefs of people, moral conduct of human life. Myths are the symbols of the value system that instigates people to follow prescribed moral code. They are not just an imaginary story but they carry universal truth, hidden under the larger than life picture. India is a land where no child grows up without listening to these mythical stories which describe our grandeur. However, the representation of myth in literature has been partial. This paper brings insight into female world of relations, their representation in mythical literature which had undermined the true valour and explores the deeper predicament of mythical women characters; narrate their struggle for survival which may inspire the generations to follow. The researcher has applied feminist theories and critical theories regarding the representation of myth in literature and presented an analysis of female consciousness, gender biased approach in mythical scriptures and how the reinterpretation of mythical tales by Divakaruni brings out the inherent strength of women.

Modern writers like Amitav Ghosh, Amish Tripathi and Devdutt Pattanaik reinterpret mythological tales to bring out various subdued dimensions of mythical literature to indicate how myths were used as a tool in the hand of patriarchy to legitimize ill treatment to women, or less privileged class. Simon De Beauvoir (1988) points out the

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deep rooted impact of these mythical literature that portrayed man as “superior” and women as “passive”, “Silenced” and “Subdued” characters or as “the second class citizens”. Divakaruni’s purpose is to portray the dignity, potency and vigor of women and to highlight the strength, Shakti and regality of women. Divakaruni’s representation of female characters from the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata* brings out a new perspective to reconsider them as women of strength and resilience.

Making Sita narrator, writer successfully opens up the female world, their complex relations and the patriarchal oppression that always silenced their voices, opinions and feelings. The transition from male dominant patriarchal voice to expression of female subjectivity is done through the change of narrator, from Valmiki to Sita, which provides ample opportunities to reconsider the portrayal of women and their relationship in a new way. Sita becomes the “voice of all” marginalised women who insist her to write their stories,

“Write our story too. For always we’ve been pushed into corners, trivialized, misunderstood, blamed, forgotten—or maligned and used as cautionary tales.” (Divakaruni, 2019).

Sita’s liberal, compassionate and objective analysis and observation, sympathetic insight into feminine characters exhibits the rare virtues of women like compassion, resilience, love and kindness for all and provides a new life to such characters like Urmila, Ahalya, Mandodari, Surpanakha, Kakaiyee, Kaushalya, Sarama etc. HelanCixous emphasizes on necessity of women to express in their language, their thoughts, views in order to resist against exploitation. The fiction captures the complex journey of women, their relationship with other women and how they take a leap to go far above personal greediness, desires and passions to offer comfort to other women as they can relate with their pain and suffering and shift from individual space to dissolve into larger space of ‘universal womanhood’.

Sita feels compassion for the unjust treatment given to Surpanakha to live with a mutilated face for ‘making an honest love proposal’. Sarama, Vibhishan’s wife shows compassion to Sita, supports her even though she lost her son in the war between Ram and Ravan for favouring her. The demon queen Mandodari is presented in a new shade. The complexity of relationship between Mandodari and Sita is made more complex by showing Sita as a ‘long-lost daughter’ of Ravan and Mandodari. Writer’s insight into the psychological turmoil of Mandodari, Trijakta, Sarama, Surpanakha make the story more interesting and pays homage to all minor women characters, enhancing their spirit of strength and endurance in crucial times. All of them were the victim of patriarchal oppression in some or the other way. In the most crucial moments, female relations come to rescue to help Sita rise from her moment of fall, rejection and loneliness.

The silent, forgotten character of Ramayana, Urmila receives her due respect and admiration for her sacrifice of her fourteen youthful years for the sake of her love, Lakshman. The strong bond between Urmila and Sita is emphasized. Sita resoulates with Ahalya as well. She interprets Ahalya’s silence as a strong step to resist against her husband’s unjust treatment. She points out how surprising it is that society expects chastity, honesty, dedication only from women and men are never questioned. By drawing parallel situation between Sita and Ahalya, Divakaruni takes the readers to the depth of woman’s psyche where they hid their wounds of frustration, dejection, and pain received from unjust treatment by society.

Divakaruni wants to stimulate the conscience of readers towards the state and treatment of women in our societies. Sita’s dream where she sees all women with forked, or rejected in love despite their loyalty and sincerity towards love. Surpanakha was rejected and humiliated by Ram and Lakshman. Ahalya was turned to stone, Mandodari could not stop Ravan to walk on the path of destruction, Sita banished from Ayodhya—all these women strive for love and receive harsh punishment, rejection and suffer from loneliness and hurt by their love despite of being loyal and devoted to them. They were questioned, criticized, humiliated and rejected. The purpose of rewriting Ramayan from Sita’s perspective is to awaken the spirit of “strength, endurance and independence” in women to help them overcome their weaknesses. All these women teach Sita the lesson of endurance. They tell her, “Endure as wedo. Endure your challenges.” (Divakaruni, 2019)

Sita here becomes model example for all modern independent single mother. Sita faced her challenges bravely, never uttered a word of contempt against her husband, society and brought up her kids-Love and Kush with help of Valmiki and Sarama in the best possible manner without poisoning the mind of her children against her father. She teaches her sons to be humble and kind to poor and needy, be brave to face challenges and an expert in Astra but

above all maintain humanity in all condition. She teaches them that to balance between 'Love for family' and 'Duty for Nation' is possible.

With her Lucid style, Divakaruni is able to recreate the ancient world. Her ability and sensibility to depict the female consciousness, the pain and struggle of every woman connects women across the world to the same shore of ground. The characterisation of Sita here inspires millions of women to stay strong, fight for their dignity and not to compromise in situation or take unnecessary favour or to give up. She narrates and focuses in detail Sita's captivity in Ravan's Lanka rather than depicting the War sequences between Ram and Ravan. During narration of her events, she infuses her voice, opinion and rhetorical questions about nature of love, the condition of women make readers reconsider the events, characters in a new light.

Sita and other female characters are not presented as silent, meek and wretched but as strong characters who stood up bravely against the traditional norms and society. Their stories of valour, courage are never recognized. Writer does not pour words of bitter criticism for Ram for the banishment of Sita rather she presents both characters from empathetic humanitarian perspective. The fiction explores the complexity of love relationship and several remarks of writer point out the nature of love. In the preface, writer says, "it's a book on meditation on love". (Divakaruni 2019).

Divakaruni shows how the condition of women has not changed since ancient times as women are left with no option. The cultural tactics, social customs, moral values have restricted women to think freely, speak freely and act freely. Sita is presented as a "mother-healer" who heals people with the plants and herbs soothe their heart and feel compassion for all. Sita rises above personal biases, connects with all women. Towards the end of the fiction, Sita develops universal consciousness of womanhood and strongly fights for the cause of women to put their self-dignity in highest position and never compromise with the dignity of the soul.

Sita here takes up a strong stand for all women, discards Ram's tempting offer to reunite with him and declares firmly, "No more of this. For the sake of my daughters in the centuries to come, I must now stand up against this unjust action you asking of me" (Divakaruni, 2019). She is aware of her role as a queen. Sita chooses to sacrifice her life than to follow heartless traditions. Thus, Sita rises higher in self-esteem amongst readers and implicate a strong message for all women "to use their heads and heart" in order to decipher between when "they need to compromise" and when "they must not". (Divakaruni 357) Sita follows traditional model of submissive wife and obedient daughter yet she stands out for women at large.

The purpose of rewriting Ramayan from Sita's perspective is to awaken the spirit of "strength, endurance and independence" in women to help them overcome their weaknesses, cross the boundary of time and space and become globally relevant for all time. Divakaruni has balanced well the character of Ram and Sita. They have been presented as perfect companion to each other, the replica of the ideal pair of Lord Vishnu with Goddess Laxmi who perfectly rule the world. Both of them together represent the perfect balance between masculine and feminine power.

"As a womanist gesture, Sitayan looks beyond good and evil, subverts binaries, deconstructs paradigms of judgement, and creates a common ground where all kinds of people can peacefully co-exist" (Taskeen, 2019).

Conclusion:-

By reinterpreting the *Mahabharat* and the *Ramayan* from feminine perspective, she makes it more relatable to contemporary situation and subdued characters derive a new life and new meaning through her reinterpretation. She beautifully captures the inner realm of feminine consciousness of all women who can relate to one another on the basis of compassion and sharing of quest for identity and search for love. Her reinterpretation of feminine anguish, silence and emotions leads readers to reinterpret even negative characters in a different light which sets her as a writer who stands poles apart. Divakaruni wants women to rise to the level of dignity and believe in themselves. Divakaruni highlights the strength of women that lies within every woman. Her fiction points out the important lessons of love and mistakes that people commit in love that causes destruction. This is how the book is relatable to all. Her interpretation of women characters from empathetic view points out the inherent strength dignity of character and she imparts a strong message to live with dignity. Men and women can be equal companion for one another, becoming strength and support for one another rather than becoming competitors. The fiction imparts a greater message, "to balance between love and duty". (Divakaruni, 2019)

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