

Liberating the Voices of Medusa and Shoorpanaka through Feminist Revisionist Mythology

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ABSTRACT

The notion of women empowerment has never lost its relevance even after three waves of feminism. Yet it could be said that we have reached significant milestones in liberating women from their external and internal confinement. We had begun to question the image of women that the phallogocentric structure of society had created and had resorted to bring out the individuality of women. Revisionist Mythology is one such significant feat in women empowerment, where it went to the roots of this image, constructed by the dominant male narrative. It tried to listen to muffled murmurs of the women from the great myths and tried to amplify them. Thereby exposing the tales of subjugation and the brutal overshadowing by the patriarchal social structure. This study will analyse two characters namely Medusa and Shoorpanaka, in order to understand this silencing of female voice and analyse how the revisionist mythologists tried to emancipate the female voice. The study envisages the liberation of the voices of Medusa and Shoorpanaka that is manifested in select works of feminist revisionist mythology. Works of Rachel Blau Duplessis and Poile Sengupta are analysed on common ground of Revisionist Mythology. Thus the study aims to transcend beyond the boundaries to connect the myth-scapes of Greek mythology and Hindu mythology through the commonality of the oppression on women.

Key words: Feminist Revisionist Mythology, Patriarchy, Ecriture feminine, Mythical Subversion, liberation of voices, Returning the male gaze, Breaking the gender stereotypes

INTRODUCTION - FEMINIST REVISIONIST MYTHOLOGY

Re-vision- the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction is for women more than a chapter in history. It is an act of survival.” (Rich, 35)

When the depth of Adrienne Rich words is understood, one can grasp the inevitability of the need to extricate the female voice, that is interred beneath the Phallogocentric narrative of the myths. Revisionist mythology does this extraction by freeing the voice of mythical females and freeing their existence from the androcentric constructs around them. This essentially means, freeing of language and the perception of meaning which privileges the masculine or phallic understanding. Derrida explored this idea of ‘Phallogocentrism’, which is the combination of the words phallogocentrism and logocentrism. This portmanteau term expresses the aforementioned process, where human perception of thoughts operates in binaries, here masculine and feminine. But Patriarchy foregrounded the masculine, suppressing feminine, by having their tongue and mind tied to speak or think in masculine terms. Gynocriticism, Post structural feminism, Ecriture feminine were few new ideas that developed as a result. All of them voicing for a separate framework to look at and create literature from the eyes of women that is freed from male perspective. They encouraged women to write in their own style, developing their own discourse. The need to free women from the shackles of sociocultural and linguistic enslavement was felt like never before and the developments in the realm of theory and critical thought were also conducive for the rise of a new discipline, that is ‘feminist revisionist mythology’.

Comparison of Medusa and Shoorpanaka

The discussions on the lost female characters and their liberation achieved through works of Feminist Revisionist mythology can be the essence of feminist revision of myths. Thus choosing characters from Greco-Roman and Hindu myth-scapes will provide a panoramic view of the female revisionist mythology as a discipline. This juxtaposition of the Greek-roman and the Hindu myths along with their revisions would also give room to finding parallels to arrive at commonality in

‘women experience’ in a patriarchal phallocentric world . In this regard Medusa and Shoorpanaka are chosen as the case study to serve this purpose. Both Medusa and Shoorpanaka are physically mutilated and they are left to bleed, thus becoming the silenced witnesses of oppression. Both of the characters are heavily stereotyped with a vile image that is forced on them and have been regarded as monsters who deserved the mutilation. They have standard female images with whom they are compared and contrasted . This being Athena in the case of Medusa and Sita in the case of Shoorpanaka . Both of their physical violation leads to a sequence of events in the epics. In the meantime the violation they suffered had lost its importance and was reduced to being a mere catalyst of the plot. Their physical violation is justified by the male narrative and this is very much similar to contemporary times. They are outcasts and live in isolation. Most importantly, the injustice done to them is a relevant instance of the phallocentric narrative .These characters question the conventions and the hypocrisy of the system hiding behind the veil of virtues or greater good . In other words , they stand as testimony to the victimization of womankind at the hands of dominant phallocracy . Both the characters are resurrected back by Revisionist mythology and their muffled cries are no longer choked in their throats, but are thunders that strike the grounds of phallocentrism. Therefore the above two characters are taken for research . The character Medusa would be represented by Rachael Blau Duplessis ’s *Medusa* (1980) and the manner of revision of the myth would be studied. As for Shoorpanaka , the play by Poile Sengupta ,*Thus spake Shoorpanakha ,So Said Saguni* (2001), renders an opportunity to re-visit Ramayana from the eyes of the vanquished. This can give a platform to study the feminist revisionist mythology of two diverse myth-scapes in a microcosm and in turn arrive at the macrocosm of subjugated female voice in both of them.

The Questions Of Shoorpanaka:

Should they be viewed as tragic rather than evil? does their story continue today as injustices against those who not form the majority, those outside the norm? As we attempt to secure ourselves in our deeply troubled world, it seems to me that we must closely question ourselves about our received sense of history and myth. (Sengupta, 242)

These questions raised by Poile Sengupta in her work actually motivates to probe in further on the tales of these silenced characters. Thus we look the play *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha , So Said Saguni* , which was first staged in 2001 and later published in her collection of plays *Women centre stage-the dramatist and the play* in 2010 . In this play Poile Sengupta give the center stage to two of the epic characters vanquished at the hands of the mainstream conventions in the name of Dharma or justice. They are Shoorpanakha of the epic Ramayana and Saguni of the epic Mahabharata . The two characters of the play are introduced merely as man and woman without specific identity. The man and woman are seen to gradually converse with each other about the common man-woman stereotypes that is prevalent in Indian scenario. They are later represented as Saguni and Shoorpanaka who begin to speak in their own identity and not as man and woman. Shoorpanaka is seen to first narrate the injustice committed against her and she begins to voice the questions which she could not ask previously.

Shoorpanaka narrates how she fell in love with Ram at first sight in a setting filled with greenery and Nature. This the first time she speaks about her feelings without patriarchy painting them in the red shade of lust. She explains how her feeling is not momentary bodily passion . She re-enacts her actions with the divine brothers Ram and Lakshman , explaining how she had spoken and how they refused to see her for herself, to the listener who is Saguni. She challenges the conventions on the sexual expression of a female and the construct that women of noble birth should not speak unabashedly about sexual union. One who blatantly speaks about it is immediately branded as a slut or whore . Shoorpanaka questions the enforced sexual repression on women and the alienation of the female body by thrusting it with a sacred status. She exposes the phallocracy that chains the female body, thereby preventing women from taking up their space and voicing out their questions.

WOMAN:She wasn't beautiful in the ideal way.So ?

MAN :Their stinking race superiority

WOMAN:She did not behave like a well-bred woman . So ?

MAN :They came all the way south carrying their arrogance like a blood thirsty sword. WOMAN:She showed of her breasts and thrust her hips . So ? ...

MAN :They violated a defenseless women

WOMAN:They hacked off her breast . (Sengupta , 277)

Shoorpanaka does not stop with that, she criticizes patriarchal the family structure that creates the basis for women to be limited within the roof of Men. She is merely tossed between one patriarch that is her father, to another patriarch that is her husband. She is always named as the possession of somebody- a wife of someone , a mother of someone and dies as someone else. She never realises that she can be herself , just her quintessential self. Shoorpanaka questions the construct that deems certain emotions as womanly and develop a stereotype out it . Sita is clearly developed as a touchstone or a point of comparison in all the accounts about Shoorpanaka . Sita is portrayed as the noble woman which the male narrative

envisages and advocates as the ideal . A noble woman is an embodiment of sacrifice. She can never ask but rather accept what is given graciously. She would not care for her sexual pleasures other than satisfying her husband. She is cocooned in benevolent sexism and feels grateful for the protection. This plight of Sita is comparatively miserable than Shoorpanaka in the way she was totally neglected and repeated the male narrative like a parrot. Shoorpanaka questioned this construct and was scorned for it. Shoorpanaka's questions clearly makes the conforming phallocentric mind uncomfortable. It urges to think in terms of female voice that has been suppressed for centuries . She gives out a clarion call to all women and encourages them to assert their identity . Shoorpanaka speaks as the representative of all the vanquished women, who were silenced by eons of the phallocentric subjugation. Thus we looked at Shoorpanaka's journey to liberation through Poile Sengupta's play and would therefore proceed towards the character of Medusa.

The Transformation of Medusa:

“Because the poetry involves gaining strength through the unconscious and because the unconscious, that other limitless country, is the place where the repressed manage to survive: woman , or as Hoffmann would say fairies. (Cixous, 880)

As Helene Cixous says in her work , *Laugh of the Medusa* , the poem on Medusa by Rachael Blau DuPlessis can be called as the expression of this unconscious mind. It breaks the representationalist style that Cixous called as male writing and frees the unconscious which speaks in images and symbols without direct representation. In this regard , DuPlessis writing can be called as the female writing , that is free of masculine structure and representation. The writing styles such ‘Stream of consciousness’ of Virginia Woolf , are often associated with female writing , as it is the involuntary flow of ideas in the form of images from the the sub-conscious mind. Thus DuPlessis uses the juxtaposition of various images to narrate a tale on suppression of the female voice . The poet expressed how the female voice is struck down, manipulated by the oppressive masculine force and maimed without an individuality . This voice is not even a cohesive speech, but shower of images one after other, each describing the brute force of masculinity. Therefore we could say that the aim of DuPlessis was to portray this muffled female voice and later liberate it . Thus DuPlessis chooses Medusa to be the persona behind this repressed voice, as she was silenced by the dominant phallocracy. This is seen in the absence of specific male character or Perseus in the poem, but the usage of a more general ‘He’ which is collective connotation.

To which he held the meanings up
a silver quick shield slick shimmer
Showing which is object ,
which subject,
the discourse faceted. (DuPlessis ,35)

The poet describes how ‘she’ cannot see beyond what ‘he’ can see . According to the poet, ‘He’ is the one who names things and makes meaning, while ‘she’ is left half spoken and forgotten . He poses a constant threat and monitors her like an dominant vigilante who has her reins in his hand . This is expressed by the image of a man sharpening his knife on a whetstone and posing a threatening stance to her. One of the intriguing details of DuPlessis narration is the way she uses images or symbols to portray the meaning. This is more prominent in the third part, where she describes rape or mutilation through an image of ripping a tree apart by slicing through it . It is almost surreal when she projects this stroke of sword by Perseus , to extend and slice even the sky and earth into two. It denotes the blinding pain that a woman undergoes during the physical abuse and rape. The sentences she used are incomplete and discontinuous , thus representing the working of sub-conscious minds. Even beheading of Medusa is described in two lines , one describing a howling sound and other describing the stroke of sword. The following parts of the poem describe the stealing the eyes of Graeae, three elderly nymphs who shared one eye and one tooth among them. Perseus took their eyes by force to find the lair of Medusa. The poet combines the three sisters into a single image of a Mother. The poet thus alludes to the deprivation of free speech to women, when Medusa laments over the theft of their tooth and eye. Thus the ‘individual’ becomes a testimony to the ‘collective’, when the Graeae sisters re denoted as Mother and the ‘collective’ becomes an individual when the ‘knife bearers’ denotes Perseus. The seventh and eighth parts of this poem alludes to birth of the voice of women . Medusa calls to the seeds of voice, ushering them to sprout and take root in the ground . The poet uses the earthly image of germination of seed to denote the liberation of female voice, buried beneath the masculine one. This can also allude that Earth as Mother , the life giver provides the womankind with the voice which are like seeds buried deep . The stolen eye has now returned with a new sight that is free and the voice is now bolder one , indicating the liberation of speech and perception . This voice gradually becomes a thundering howl that reverberates through the vocal cords and propels an echo around her.

The seeds of voice now spread their roots, breaking through the rock of constructs around women. They are now liberated and firmly grounded. The ending stanza is the pinnacle of the artistry of DupLessis, where she combines the images of serpentine head of Medusa and the whole community of womankind. The ten thousand serpents on Medusa's head blared with their mouths open and each one represents the woman who voice is liberated . Medusa now stands tall before readers

,resurrected with her own voice and sight .She is not a single individual but a collective representation of all the liberated female voices . The sentences which were broken in the previous parts are cohesive now and this indicates that the repressed images in the sub-conscious have taken a form and have become a liberated female voice. Medusa has risen beyond her monstrous image to speak for herself.

CONCLUSION

Analysing the past representations of both Shoorpanaka and Medusa, we could arrive at certain conclusions. The link that connects both Medusa and Shoorpanaka is the physical mutilation and the attempt to justify it , by blaming them as unchaste . Medusa was mutilated by Perseus and his actions were justified by deeming her as a monster. Shoorpanaka was violated by Ram and Lakshman and in turn this was justified by portraying her as an immoral seductress. They gain spot light not for their self but as the negative polarity to establish the righteousness of Ram in case of Shoorpanaka and as a mere tool for Perseus to gain power in case of Medusa. Thus we can establish that both the characters were wronged by the masculine narrative by failing to give them significance of their own and therefore they need to be given an opportunity to speak out for themselves. Thus the journey of Medusa and Shoorpanaka and the ultimate liberation of their selves through the revisionist mythology, had been traced in this study. The manner in which genres of drama and poem had provided them the space for expression and aided them in this cause, had also been analysed in the due course .The revised myth thus stands as a beacon to the troubled contemporary times with man-woman conflicts . The final destination would be the way in which these revised myths expose the shortcomings and inhibitions prevailing in the society to embrace the liberation of femininity.The cases of Shoorpanaka and Medusa point out several common aspects in the subjugation of women like objectification of female body, emphasis on chastity and loss of ideological autonomy. Each of these aspects poses a larger problem that in turn hinders the woman from being liberated. Looking at these aspects would help us to break the dichotomy of myth and reality, thereby making us realise that we are making myths as we live and communicate. What happened to Medusa and Shoorpanaka is not a shelved tale but a current reality. When such mental and physical violations happen to women,they are forcefully silenced like these mythical characters in the name of dignity and pride. Just like these mythical characters who found their voice , women need to discover their individuality and speak for themselves. Gone are times when men spoke for women. It is now the time for men and women to create a world where they can coexist with mutual respect.

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