

Interrogating the Archetypes: A Peep into Rukmini Bhaya Nair's Poetic Credo

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Abstract—Myths are inherited narratives that are believed to be true by a particular cultural or religious group. Carl Jung postulated that myths confer a fascinating aura upon archetypes. Apart from fostering normative behaviors, myths also lay the foundations of our most pivotal beliefs. The efficacy of an argument increases when it is situated in a mythological paradigm and this is often used to obtain social acceptance for certain beliefs and customs. Unlike their precursors, contemporary Indian women poets do not reflect on mythology to draw inspiration but to foreground the dualities inherent in the imposed definitiveness of myths. Today a number of women poets like Suniti Namjoshi, Meena Kandasamy, Chitra Divakaruni make use of mythology in their poems. Their poems do not simply retell the age old myths but use them as an entry point into several pertinent social issues. Rukmini Bhaya Nair deviates from the writing style of other women poets. She takes a step further and explores the roles of myth in constructing collective consciousness and legitimizing practices that may not have a logical explanation or may be oppressive for some sections of the society. In *The Ayodhya Cantos* and *Yellow Hibiscus*, the poet intentionally underplays the dictatorial status of myths. Nair subverts myths across religions by trivializing and recreating them sans their hegemony. The paper aims at analyzing the poetic credo of Nair through which she both defamiliarises and problematizes the credence of myths.

Introduction

Carl Jung propounded that the collective unconscious encompasses 'instincts' and 'archetypes' that impart the symbols like mother, warrior, shadow, lover, the wise old man etc a ubiquitous appeal across cultures. He further averred that human beings, who are compulsive storytellers, create stories about these archetypes in their fantasies or dreams. It is these self-made tales that he called myths. Eminent thinkers like Ronald Barthes and Levis Strauss have made an extensive use of myths in their discussion on truth-untruth and truth production. Myths are value-laden dictums that offer an explication of the genesis of the cosmos and human life, through heroic figures (predominantly males) in larger than life situations. Mythological maxims may have been intended as philosophical or spiritual lessons but with time they became a powerful medium of ideological conditioning. The ambit and efficacy of an argument increases when it is situated in mythology because it is scientifically unverifiable on the one hand and has a collective sanction, on the other. Myths are

strategically used to reinforce social constructions and deceive the members of marginal groups into believing the stereotypes about them as their real identity. For example Eve (woman) was produced from the rib of Adam (man) hence she was born with a subordinate status. Similarly, the Rigveda states that the Brahmins emerged from Brahma's head whereas the Shudras from his feet, tacitly implying the supremacy of one caste over the other. When a myth is woven into literature, it either perpetuates its hegemony or exposes its fallibility. R. Shashidhar aptly investigates that the use of the conjunction "and" in the titles likes 'Buddhism and non-violence' or 'Gandhi and modernity'. He says that the use of "and" is problematic because it makes two disparate entities seem cohesive. Similarly the title, 'myths and contemporary literature' are mutually discordant units. Today, the writers and poets reconstruct myths in literature till "literature bifurcates from myths and comes to its own" [4].

T.S Eliot's literary corpus avidly professes the 'pastness of the past'¹. The employment of numerous myths in his poems is an imploration to the western world to retain a sense of historicity, despite the external chaos. Various mythological references enabled him to gain a perspective on human life and violent cultural and political realities of the public sphere. Contrary to the West, myths have always cherished a place of prominence in India along with their dictatorial status. Myths about Gods disguised as beggars, *Apsaras* who interfered with the mediation of the sages, sagacious conversation among animals etc have always been a part of the Indian folktales. References to mytho-epical characters like Rama, Hanuman, Soorpanakha, Eklavya, Karna, Dritrashtra, Draupadi invoked a specific context and particular set of traits till some writers revisited these myths from a new perspective. Literary texts like Dhramvir Bharti's *Andha Yug*, Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" and Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* etc propose a productive reinterpretation of the Indian myths. These iconoclasts aim at democracy and social justice by negotiating myth "from the point of view of the victims of the discriminatory social order: women, dalits, tribals, ethnic, religious and sexual minorities, etc "[Satchidanandan, ix]. Mythical archetypes have been revitalized and consciously

manoeuvred across genres and poetry is no exception. The shift in the semantics of myths over time is of utmost importance to the poets.

Indian women poetry has always offered a counter culture narrative to the central discourse of patriarchy. Toru Dutt, the earliest women poet writing in English borrowed stories from Indian scriptures like Ramayana, Mahabharata, Vishnu-Purana and Bhagvad Purana. However, the poet did not offer a nuanced psychological analysis of the mythological characters. On the contrary, she delineated the Savitri-Satyavan, Rama-Sita and Narsimha-Prahlad episode in a way that her poetic renditions become a close imitation of the original myths. Hence, mythology in the poetry of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu chiefly served the purpose of metaphysical contemplation and spiritual gratification. The lack of a horizontal sweep in their poetry, prompted Eunice De Souza to comment, "Sarojini Naidu's confidently mindless versifying has little to teach to contemporary poets and Toru Dutt did not live long enough to outgrow sentimental pastiche" [1]. Indian women poetry registered resistance against essentialist notions with the works of Kamla Das, Mamta Kalia and Eunice De Souza. The poem "Catholic Mother" by De Souza lays bare the hypocrisy of institutionalized religious morality. Catholicism regards abortion of any kind as a morally illegitimate act. Keeping up with this religious doctrine, the Pillar in the poem who has seven children says, "We're One Big Happy Family/ God Always Provides" [39] while his wife remains silent. Similarly in Hinduism, there is a belief that an absolute marital bliss can be attained by worshipping lord Shiva. Mamta Kalia exposes the uncritical acceptance of such myths by people, in a poem titled "She Worshipped the Shivalinga". Kalia humorously writes, "She worshipped the Shivalinga all her life/ And spurned her husband in bed/...And her husband eloped with her sister in March" [17]. Thus, these women poets adopted an irreverent stance towards mythology in order to criticize the restrictive socio-cultural conventions.

Mythology is as overpowering and commanding, as politics and sometimes, these categories are even interchangeable. For example, a reference to Ayodhya, immediately conjures up the images of Ram, Sita, Dashratha, Kaushalya, Hindu-Muslim feud etc instead of the geographical location or cultural practices of the city. Myths have always been deployed to regulate the behavior and passions of marginalized but spirited sections of the society who are clamoring for equality from centuries. The present phase of Indian women poetry is the period of backlash. Contemporary women poets are aware about the deeply entrenched discrimination that mythical dogmatism promotes. Hence, they not only de-mythify and subvert these religious beliefs but also recreate them from a radical point of view. Contemporary women poets like Suniti Namajoshi, Sujata Bhatt, Meena Kandasamy, Chitra Divakaruni debunk the age old myths in their poems which have been despotic epically for women and the lower castes. In this regard Mithun Bhattacharya observes, "Certain parameters are set, as the

most cherished ones, for women, because, they determine the supposed benchmark for *femininity*. Sometimes they are given elevation in the name of *Sati* or something else. They are glorified, mythified and stereotyped" [2]. Retelling of the mythical tales from a postcolonial-feminist standpoint enables these poets to carve characters who are more human and not simply ideals meant to be emulated. For example, Meena Kandasamy's Sita in the poem "Princess-in-exile" is not a conscientious wife but a woman of free will who makes a conscious decision to abandon Rama. The poet encapsulates her course of action thus:

Scorned, she sought refuge in spirituality,
and was carried by a new-age guru
with saffron clothes and caramel words.
Years later, her husband won her back
but by then, she was adept at walkouts,
she had perfected the vanishing act.

Poetic Credo: An Analysis

A distinguished poet, Rukmini Bhaya Nair, is a Professor of Linguistic and English in the department of Humanities and Social Sciences in IIT Delhi. She has several poetic treatises to her credit, out of which *The Ayodhya Cantos* and *Yellow Hibiscus* have received critical acclaims across the globe. Nair deviates from the writing style of her contemporaries in a number of ways. Firstly, she perceives human life not in isolation but as a process of continuous immersion which is why she does not endorse language and literature as separate entities. Secondly, her poetry encapsulates elements ranging from esoteric language to a discussion on political issues that at some point, epitomized poetry composed by men. In an interview to Manish Chand for *Tehelka*, Nair avows, "I am very resistant to the idea that a woman is somehow a palpitating emotional being limited to describing her feelings. As a result, I have tried deliberately to include forbidden 'unwomanly' qualities such as wit, a sense of humor, intellectual toughness and technical virtuosity within my own writings." Lastly, she is not interested in the historicity of myth like Eliot and others. The mythological meanderings in her poems aim at neither correcting nor criticizing the formidable original tales but at creating a parallel discourse which is equally potent. Other genres like drama and fiction have already received a lot of critical attention in their attempt to rewrite mythology but for a long time, poetry has been excluded from such analyses. The paper seeks to examine, the poetic credo of Rukmini Bhaya Nair and how she defamiliarises and problematizes the credence of myths in the Indian context. To keep the study focused, the overlapping category that mythology and epic create has not been discussed in the paper.

Rukmini Bhaya Nair in *Poetry in a Time of Terror* argues that in the contemporary times, "Family, workplace, education

and economy self-evidently constitute those binding forces which keep a woman from exploring the contours of her own 'body language' so to speak" [35]. These 'binding forces' are actually the traits such as subservience, self-negation and obedience that are desired in women in a patriarchal society. These expectations are directly or indirectly influenced by mythological characters like Sita and Savitri. Since the dawn of civilization, women readily accepted the pre-conceived behavioral framework that society had constructed for them. Later, a number of feminist texts by women acted as aesthetic-activist mediums to recondition a woman's identity. It is imperative to negotiate with myths in order to trace the progression in the contours (both social and cultural) of female identity. The epigraph of *The Ayodhya Cantos* itself sets the tone of the mock-heroic epic. The poet quotes Yajnavalkya from Brihandaranyaka Upanishad, "na vaa are patyuh kaamaaya patih priyo bhavati" (It is not for the sake of a husband that a husband is beloved). Nair in *The Ayodhya Cantos* envisions the monkey-god Hanuman as a tea stall owner at the crossroads in Ayodhya, Sita as a young girl named Sitara and Vishnu (later reborn as Rama in Ayodhya) as a cosmic goon cum politician. Mythological characters are not simply literary representations of natural forces but the product of culture which makes them. For example, 'The Hanuman Kanda' oscillates between Ram and Mahatma Gandhi. By mingling mythology with chaos of the present times, the poet provides a coherent picture of the nation. Hanuman who is traditionally regarded a staunch devotee of Ram has a moment of apprehension as "He doesn't know if Vishnu can be trusted any more/ All those tall stories about Ram Rajya, he has heard/ Before" [21]. He is a so disgruntled with the exaggerated magnificence of the *RamRajya* that his patience begins to collapse. At that point, he desperately yearns to be interfered so much so that ironically, "A Bajrang-Dal stray would do, muttering the Hanuman Chalisa, Misquoting the Gita" [23]. Ayodhya as described by the poet offers a stark contrast to the glorified picture of the city chronicled by Tulsi Das in *Ramacharitamanas*. Tulsi Das's description of the Sarayu river as "*Bahey suhavan trividh sameera/ Bhai Sarayu ati nirmal neera.*" is parodied by Nair as, "The sacred Sarayu flows just nearby/ But drinking water's in short supply" [26]. The 'Sita Kanda' is juxtaposed with the gruesome episode of the Partition. The sonnet titled "White", narrates the abduction of Sita. When Sita is raped, the "creation's guardian" [26] Vishnu, an incarnation of *maryada-puroshattam*² Ram presides over the scene as a passive onlooker. "Sita is alone. Clamour and fetid darkness. Chalo Hanuman Bhaai!/No answer. The peanuts spill from her helpless grip. Channi pulled/ ... Rudra Vishnu, bringer of tears, watches Sita's plight" [29]. Thus, the poet shatters the illusion of Ram being an epitome of compassion and righteousness.

In Hindu mythology, the iconography and cult of goddess Kali associates her with the destruction of evil. Hindus also argue that the nude monstrosity of Kali makes her appear as a

carnal goddess but in reality she practiced celibacy and renunciation. Nair in the poem "Kali" portrays the goddess as an ordinary woman who is exhausted of eliminating evil and longs for a union not with Shiva but with a mortal. The poet encapsulates Kali's resentment at being glorified all the time thus:

A goddess chews on myth
As other women might on *paan*
Red juices stain her mouth...
Kali desires a mortal, whose day
Begins with her, ends at nightfall
In her arms, a man who will die
Without her, whose love is fallible
But secure, she wants to be held
Like a warm creature, not a fable. [22]

In another poem titled "Flame", Nair reprimands Prometheus as a "towering fool", "blithering ass" and "nincompoop" for purloining fire from heaven. She says, "We always took fire dead seriously/ Using it to test involvement, chastity" [31]. These lines are a humorous critique of the *Agnipareeksha*³ conducted by Rama to assuage his ethical dilemma about the virtue of his wife. Even when Sita's chastity was proven, Rama exhibited a stoic spirit of sacrifice and abandoned his pregnant wife. The poem concludes as, "He a male God, you only a friendly giant/ Prometheus, it takes a woman to be defiant" [31]. Another poem "Gomata" by Nair is a scathing attack on today's attendant politics coalescing around the animal. In the Hindu mythology, cow is considered as a perennial source of sustainability. The Hindus zealously guard the cow also because it is believed to take one across the dreaded Vaitarni⁴ river. The poet, however depicts the real living condition of the cow as "though you march with the herd, you are alone/though you are sacred, you are not beloved / thirsting your nose into city garbage/ unembarrassed, a fly-blown beggar" [81].

Nair imitates the run-on graphemic poetic style of the Sanskrit poet-philosopher Sankara in her poem "Genderole". The Hindu mythology states that moksha or salvation from the birth-rebirth cycle (*samsara*) can be attained by the renunciation of materialistic passions and corporeal urges. Sankaracharya in the much revered poem "BhajGovindam" regards women as "fleeting splendor" who dissuade men from the path of salvation. Nair addresses Sankara in an indicting tone as a misogynist and states, "My worst fear is Sankar that had I indeed been you/ I might not after all have conceived anything new" [18]. The impositions laid on women are neither culture nor religion specific. Gender partiality is not peculiar to only Hinduism. Prophet Muhammad said that if a Muslim prays to the Allah in congregation, he would receive twenty seven times more *sawab* (reward) than the usual case.

At the same time, he ordained that women's entry in the mosque should not be prohibited. Despite this *hadith*⁵, intermingling of men and women in the mosque is not encouraged. The reason is similar to that offered by Sankaracharya i.e. the presence of women distract the men from praying. In the poem "Quarter", Nair dwells on this religious duality in the following lines:

Perfect single breasted dome
 And four minaret phalluses, which
 Woman is more adored, and more
 Restricted? This is Allah's door
 Salma knows she cannot enter
 Woman within concealing burka
 Ignorant of Koran and Kaaba
 Many prohibitions bind her. [14]

Shalagrama or Saligram is worshipped in the form of a fossilized oval shell in Hindu households. The presence of Shalagrama in the house is believed to enhance health, prosperity and spirituality. According to the myth, Lord Vishnu had to destroy Sati Brindha's sati dhrama in order to kill the demon Jalandhar. Sati Brindha cursed Vishnu to take the form of a stone thus Vishnu became Shalagram. Shalagram is not purchased but passed from one generation to the other. Thus, the shell is handled meticulously. It is also believed that a crack in the stone can incur the wrath of God. In the poem "Shalagram", Nair critiques this "screed of sentiment" by trivializing the inordinate importance attached to an inanimate shell. She says "You can't expect me to—/ Well, what am I supposed/ To do—cry at its being/ Cracked, like you? Hell!" (163).

"Gargi's Silence" is one of the most compelling poems written by Nair. Gargi was the daughter of Vachaknu and the pupil of sage Yagnavalkya. She was very proficient in the Upanishads and Vedas. She extensively debated with her male counterparts on philosophical and spiritual matters. It is also believed that she had even awakened her *kundalini* (internal spiritual energy). Nair despises the role models of Sita and Anusuya, especially when the Vedic literature has unconstrained and intellectual women like Gargi. The title of the poem is delusional as it may lead a reader into thinking that the poem dwells on the patriarchal silencing of the subject. However, as the poem progresses, Gargi is shown asking a number of questions to Yagnavalkya, on metaphysics and tabooed topics like physical desires of women. When the exasperated ascetic finally urges, "Stop, Gargi! Stop! If you ask so much/ Your head will fall off— or mine. I am not ashamed/To admit my wisdom has limits" [146] then Gargi smiles and becomes silent. The deliberate subversion of myths by Nair facilitates an interrogation of our basic belief systems and structures.

Conclusion

According to Alan Swingewood, myths play a determining role as they "eliminate the historical basis of institutions and processes and create within popular consciousness an acceptance of the inevitable facts of class inequality or power" [119]. Mythology can be regarded as a cultural aid that has a potential to maintain the status quo. While, mythological texts can represent reality, there is also a risk of stereotypical yoking of mythical and real. Poetry has survived the devouring onslaught of other popular genres and emerged as a vehicle of social and political reform. Indian English women poetry especially is burgeoning domain today. Rukmini Bhaya Nair contests mythological beliefs that promote gender and caste subalternity. She examines the complexities and dualities inherent in myths and tries to establish a new relationship between the myths and the contemporary socio-political condition. Nair does not simply subvert the myths but reconceptualises them by embedding them in events like Partition (1947), demolition of the Babri mosque in (1992) etc. The poet intends to approach mythical paradigms from multiple perspectives that are beyond binary oppositions in order to achieve equality for everyone in both the personal and public spaces.

End Notes

1. In the essay "Tradition and Individual Talent", T.S Eliot professes the incorporation of historical sense from the works of the past in the present works. He believes that a poet/writer cannot exist independently. Hence, an awareness of the past in the present work is important to shape his literary corpus.
2. The epithet 'maryada puroshattam' was given to Lord Rama because he always followed the *dharma marg*a (righteous path). He was believed to be an ideal son and a pragmatic king.
3. After her return to Ayodhya, Sita had to take an ordeal of fire in order to prove her chastity to Rama. Although she appeared unscathed from the pyre proving her faithfulness to her husband, she spurned him for doubting her.
4. Though the versions may vary, the Garuda Purana mentions that in between the human world/earth and infernal regions, there flows a river full of blood, slime and mucus. The people who haven't committed any sins in their lives are crossed over to the other side on the back of a cow. While the sinful souls are dragged through the river by Yama, the God of death.
5. A collection of sayings by Prophet Muhammad which is one of the major sources of guidance to the Muslims apart from the Quran.

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