

Rewriting Mythology: an Analysis of C.S. Laxmi's *Forest*

Rina Rajbanshi

Research Scholar

Department of English

Pondicherry University

Pondicherry

Abstract: The modern trend of using myth in literature is not a mere ornamental but a reason to entail some political pronouncement by writers. According to some theoreticians myth is political and it has always been used to propagate political agendas. Indian Dharmasastras present code of conducts for Indian women which have been imposed by mythology. According to Indian mythology and dharmasastras Sita, Savitri who follow 'pativrata' dharma are the symbol of perfect women. Contemporary writers revisit and rewrite canonical myths. This paper analyses C.S.Lakshmi's *Forest* and explores how writers revisit and question myths and by making a new myth, how they are providing a new identity and voice to the women characters.

Keywords: rewriting mythology, issues of women, political agendas

Myth is the 'sine qua non' of Indian society. In every sphere of human life, in every ritual myth is a part of Indian society. As Namita Gokhale says,

“Mythology in India is not just an academic or a historical subject. It is a vital and living topic of contemporary relevance. The complex social, political and religious attitudes of 'modern' India can not be understood without an understanding of our myths and their impact on the collective faith of the people” (p-xiv).

Indian mythology which is basically based on Hindu mythology is not monolithic, “it is a range of diverse traditions, developed by different sects, people and philosophical school, in different regions and at different times” and “are taken to have deeper, often symbolic, meaning”(web). Some scholars such as Bronislaw Malinowski, Roland Barthes, and Levi Strauss contend the symbolic meaning of myth and the function of myth. Bronislaw Malinowski, a Polish anthropologist who starts a school of functionalism in social anthropology theorizes myth as a 'charter' which provides rules and regulation through a certain kinds of symbols and stories and therefore maintains the social order. According to Roland Barthes myth is a form of 'speech' with secondary meaning. For him myths are 'historically produced and conditioned', 'myths are always political' and the 'result of specific power structures in a certain society in a certain time' (web). Through all these scholars and theoretician's analyses it is quite clear that myth has been used to fulfil political agendas. In India dharmasastras present certain code of conducts for Indian women which have been imposed by mythology. The mythical character Sita from Ramayana is the ultimate symbol of perfect Hindu woman who follows her husband and maintains her 'pativrata' dharma. This old belief system can't explain modern day situation. A shift is required which questions the “traditional hierarchies that keep many people and ideas at the bottom or margins of society” (Thomas Jay Oord). This paper analyses how myth has been altered by new myths by giving an altogether different story for the modern women.

Many Indian women writers such as Shashi Deshpande, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Pratibha Ray, Amrita Pritam, Ajit Cour, Mahasweta Devi appropriate and redefine myth to project 'female self-exploration'. Many women scholar have examined the gendered aspect of the two epics. The feminist historian, Uma Chakravarti contends that Ramayana accentuates female fidelity and chastity and over the centuries it plays a crucial part in shaping the female identity. Chakravarti argues,

“to create a major epic with the emphasis on masculine heroism, valour and honour in the person of Rama and of feminine self-sacrifice, virtue, fidelity and chastity in the person of Sita... [T]he text was a potent instrument for propagating the twin notions that women are the property of men and that sexual fidelity for women was life’s major virtue” (Chakravarti,1983, 71).

Writers revisit and question these myths and by making a new myth, they are providing a new identity and voice to these women characters. C. S.Lakshmi, also called Ambai, is a noted Tamil feminist writer who uses her creativity to create a dialogue which questions the canon and gives an alternative picture where women discover their selfhood. As Paula Richman says Lakshmi is “passionately interested in women’s lives and experiences, the space and manages their lives, their support system, and their sustaining dreams. But most of her stories also concern the quest for self-realization and liberation”.

C.S.Lakshmi’s *Forest*, a novella, translated from Tamil by Lakshmi Holmstrom renders around two different time period of two women characters: Sita and Chenthiru. The story starts with Chenthiru who decides to leave everything behind- her home, her husband, the city and wants to spend some time in the forest till she finds peace in her life and understands her inner ‘self’. She chooses to stay amidst nature. Her husband tries to argue with her that though he wants his wife as partner in his many-branched business, like a queen beside the king, but since other business partners do not want her, he can’t do anything about it. And for this reason her husband doesn’t see any logic to go to forest, leaving everything behind as if she has been banished. While staying in the forest she meets an old man who plays vinai who helps her to understand what she seeks for. She learns from him the importance of ‘being in tune’ with oneself. She explains her situation that she cannot breathe in Mumbai. The old man explains if she understands herself, if she is in full harmony with her mind then ‘Mumbai can follow you here. And the forest too can go with you to Mumbai’.

Parallel to this story the writer presents the story of Sita whom Rama banishes when she is pregnant. Distressed Sita blurts Laxmana that it has become Rama’s main duty to doubt people’s purity, “to put them constantly to the test” (p-148). Sita suggests Laxmana to inform Rama that she is with his child “otherwise, there will be preparations for yet another ordeal by fire. There are some whose minds can not travel in a straight line” (P-149). She remembers the time when the war with Ravana ended, she was brought in front of everyone “like an exhibit in front of the crowd” (p-164). Rama told her that the battle

had been fought, not to save her but to defend his honour and that she was free to go anywhere with whomever she chose: Lakshmana, Bharata, Vibhishana, Sugriva. After that she had to prove his chastity through fire. Rama's trust on people is so low that when he heard some rumour from common people he banished Sita. Most of her lives she spent in forest. She raised her two kids all alone. And at the end when Rama comes to take Sita and his children back to Ayodha, she refuses to go back with him and decides to stay in the forest. She tells him that "her journey lay in a different direction" (p-173). She wants to take "a journey that would be long, that would go very deep", "somewhere beneath the earth, somewhere so deep that nobody could reach her" (p-176). She wants to take a lone journey into the forest where she doesn't have to go through any ordeal to prove anything. She doesn't need anyone anymore. She wants her own space now, wants to explore the world and the Mother Nature. She wants to understand the value of her existence in this world. Far deep into the forest she is thrilled by the beauty as well as the reality of the nature. She witnesses the delighted sight of baby elephants running alongside the herd, the horrifying picture of deer-eating tigers, the shimmering green leaves when the sun rays fall upon them. She meets a tapasvi who is living a life of austerity and playing the vinai in his small hut. The tapasvi informs her that he is none other than Ravana whose life has been spared from Rama after the request of one of Ravana's bodyguard. A tired, old Ravana has been waiting to meet Sita for so long. Sita tells him that she is a tired, old woman and asks him why he still carries infatuation for her. Ravana explains: "it is then that a woman needs a friend. To support her when she is distressed by her changing body. To serve her. To encourage her. To stand at a distance and give her hope" (p-177). While requested by Sita on teaching her vinai, Ravana agrees by saying "I did battle for you once, and lost. Would I deny you music?" and then adds "Don't think of it as an ordinary musical instrument. Think of it as your life, and play on it" (p-177).

Through the ages the portrayal of Sita in the Ramayana is the role model for all the women in India. Women are expected to follow the Valmiki's Sita. As Namita Gokhale says,

"Sita has been there, in the mass consciousness of our subcontinent, for very long now. She has been there since the beginning of our timeless history, in the different versions and recensions of the Ramayana, written or recited, and never forgotten. She lives on in all the Sitapurs and Sitamarhis of the nation, in the

Janakpurs and Ramgarhs and Rampurs. She has been seen on celluloid, and on television; she has been elected to Parliament from vadodara, in the person of Deepika Chikhalia, the actress who played her role in Ramanand Sagar's television serial titled *Ramayana*. She is there in song, in poetry, in the tears that Indian women have been shedding through generations as they tread the 'lakshmana rekhas' that barricade their lives, as they are consumed by the flames of the penitential 'agni pareekshas' that their families regularly subject them to" (Namita Gokhale, p-xiv)

This is the time to rethink about it and rewrite the epic. The writer takes the charge and rewrites the story of Sitas, giving the space for self-realization and self-control. What is needed is the "recognition of how women are different and how they too need a more just order. The postmodernist project of 'difference' is what the women writers would like to play upon and make the 'other' realize its significance" (Bhargava, 2). Sita rewrites her own story; Valmiki's portrayal of Sita is not sufficient and just. She says "In the ages to come, there will be many Ramayanas. Many Ramas. Many Sitas" (p-149). When asked by Valmiki whether the epic he has written is sufficient. She replies "you were a poet of the king's court. You created history. But I experienced it. I absorbed into myself all manner of experiences. My language is different" (p-149). For modern women Valmiki's Sita cannot be the role model. Today's women understand their rights and they demand their own space in the society. Laxmi's women characters realize and fight for what they deserve. They are not passive. This is visible even in the small characters for example when Minabai's granddaughter was deserted by her husband, she was four months pregnant. And when the baby boy was born the husband claimed the child. Rukminibai didn't support this rather she questioned the husband, "the vessel is ours and the milk is ours. Just because the man gave a drop of buttermilk to turn the milk into curd, can we be expected to hand over the whole pot of curd to him" (p-171). Changes come into one's life only when one takes care of her life on her own instead of admitting to someone else. The question of empowerment is very important issue in feminism. As Meena Kelkar and Deepti Gangavane contend that the issue of empowerment "is conceptually interconnected with the concepts of identity and freedom. Unless and until the possibility of having a stable identity and freedom is assumed, all deliberations regarding empowerment become redundant" (p-19).

In this story, the musical instrument rudravina is compared to Sita's life, Ravana tells her to think of it as her life and "play on it". She no longer wants to be under anyone's control. When Ravana lifts the Rudravina and stretches it out towards Sita. She declares, "leave it there on the ground" and later explains that "it is my life, isn't it? A life that many hands have tossed about, like a ball. Now let me take hold of it; take it into my hands" (p-178). On the other hand Chenthiru after serving as a dutiful wife to her husband feels tiresome when she is cast away from the partnership in his business because of the other people. She wants to go away to a forest leaving behind everything. She wants to know what she wants for herself. She has been living for her family and her husband. It is always the woman who sacrifices everything and follows her husband. But Chenthiru, instead of surrendering herself to her husband, she decides to take leave from everything and surrenders herself to the mother-forest. Her husband shows surprise at her decision. He says it is not appropriate for a woman to leave her husband and go somewhere alone when even:

"In epic times, a woman only went to the forest meekly accompanying her husband. It was the epic men who went on their own, to hunt or to destroy demons. As for women, they could only be in the position of Sita, accompanying Rama who assented immediately when his father ordered him into exile in the forest...it was most appropriate for a woman to be a rishi-patni, spouse of a sage, journeying along with her husband. If she did go there on her own, it could only be as the seductive Menaka, putting an end to a sage's meditation...For a woman, the forest is a means of punishment. To send her there is to cast her aside and make her destitute" (p-147).

According to Manusmriti, the famous dharmasastra, before marriage a woman should be under custody of her father, after marriage under her husband and after the death of her husband she should be under custody of her son. In no circumstance she should be alone because women are not capable of staying alone (web). All the sacred texts are based on some ideology and the mythical stories of Indian epics have been used to propagate this ideology and to oppress certain group of society. Beauvoir says "one is not born a woman but becomes so" which contends that the concept and image of woman is a cultural construction through various archetypes and myths through the ages. There are biological differences that divide into men and women and each has a different function to perform, but to "pronounce one inferior or superior is a stereotype that pollutes and corrupts the

psychology of society. It is the add-on of cultural norms to this biological categorization that becomes subversive and results in gender discrimination” (Bhargava, 2).

It is clear in the story that there is not much difference between Chenthiru and Sita. The writer gives space to both these two women to think about themselves, where they develop self-realization at the end and learn to control their bodies, minds and their lives. While rewriting or appropriating the canonical works, the women writers must fill the empty space so that the reader get a chance to understand what has been given and what is omitted, “just like understanding the emptiness that women live with. Everything said must contain all that has not been said, and truth must come out at least by reflection or implication or by exploitation of the symbolic configurations of language” (Bhargava, 4). C.S.Lakshmi through her creative writing uses myth for the gender pronouncement and succeeds in filling up the emptiness. In this story she entails the story of the “other” by reinterpreting or shifting the centre myth. As Hazel E Barnes believes:

“Those who work in the fields of literature, Philosophy and psychology make use of myth... because the writer, sensing that in these stories are found those condensations of human meanings which represent our cultural insights, wants to reinterpret these for his own time so as to show what he thinks these fundamental truths to be”(Web)

This paradigm of shifts helps Lakshmi to deviate from telling ‘his-story’ to give ‘her-story’, and creates ‘Sita’s ayanam’(p-149).

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