

Towards a ‘Vedic Feminine Renaissance’

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Abstract

The sense of justice and equity towards women is considered among the best indicators that reflect the socio-cultural development of a civilisation. The position and status of women, as reflected in literature naturally serves as a test to gauge the sensibilities and cultivation of each associated age. It is matter of general agreement that the feminine ideals of womanhood during the early Vedic age remain exalted and exemplary. The Vedic narratives elevate the ephemeral spirit of womanhood, which progressively lost its sheen in successive stages.

While the contemporary feminine polemics consistently unravel unacknowledged theories, generic in nature, we are lacking in such an orientation which targets specifics of local, regional and traditional culture. Feminists in India are no exception, and have largely adopted the theories of Feminism emanating from the discourse of the West. The Indian Vedic repository contains instances which testify the epitome of womanhood at its best. However, the Indian ethos of feminism imbedded firmly in the Vedic roots remain largely inaccessible in the contemporary feminist theory. The need for adapting ‘global feminism’ to the ‘classical Indian taste’ remains an unobserved concern.

This paper explores the possibilities inherent in the study of classical mythic literature

and their potential for stimulating ‘local theories’ of feminism in India through a study of selected feminine ideals present in the early Vedic narratives. Can study of ancient Vedic literature inspire a reawakening in Indian feminism, just as the study of classical Greek literature did for the West during Renaissance in Europe - is a question, this paper seeks to address.

Keywords: Feminism, Feminist ideals in Vedic literature, Indian theory on Feminism

Feminine polemics consistently unravel unhackneyed theories which chiefly target the feminine identity in visibly tangible spheres like the socio-economic and ethic dimensions. Theories which delve further still, probe into the intangible, the invisible yet powerful aspects such as the emotive and psychological.

However, developing an understanding of the collective feminine, intrinsically involves, perceiving her most deeply, in the character and spirit for which she stands as a symbol – the spirit of imagination, illusion and curiosity. The mythic narratives about women reveal and simultaneously capture the ephemeral perception of the spirit of womanhood.

The Imaginative Spirit of a woman has always faced trials and reprisal against the powerful masculine force of Reason. She has been guarded and kept in check, as if for the fear, that letting her loose would result in an unfortunate calamity. There are mythic warning bells attached in several narratives which are often suggestive of the naïve conduct of women and the associated misfortunes of men - Eve for the fall of Adam and the Mankind, Helen of Troy for the fall of Troy, Queen Guinevere for the fall of King Arthur of Camelot and Bai Suzhen for the predicament of Xu Xian, as well as her own.

Many of these parallel narratives, spread in several cultures narrate the common story of the ‘Heroine with a Thousand Faces’ – where she guided by her innocent spirit of curiosity, imagination and fantasy is lead into exploring the mysterious unconscious, a realm

where she falls into a trap and gets helplessly stuck becoming a prototype ‘damsel in distress’, shut gloomily in a situation, from where she can only be retrieved by the act of valour of an adept knight.

The forbidden statutory warnings embedded in mythic narratives offer a plausible explanation for the “keep her in check” attitude of the patriarchal foundations of thought. The oppression of women can be so construed as a social reality with its origins in the modes of thought. But, both the repression of thought and the oppression as a physical reality, lead to an inevitable revolt, sooner or later and it is no surprise that feminists demand justice from the society today.

Though all narratives are not insensitive and all women need not be feminists. The mythic narrative of the archetypal journey into the forbidden territory of the wild, vile unconscious driven by naïve feminine curiosity has been woven collectively into the fabric of myths all over the world. The well-known German fairy tale ‘Snow White and Seven Dwarfs’ presents the prototype journey of the innocent and beautiful Snow White in the most compassionate light. The pacific legend of Moana made popular by the Disney movie remake, applauds the young Moana who undertakes the prototype journey and resurfaces back victorious. Almost all fairy tales witness the victorious knight saving his beloved, the vulnerable epitome of innocence and beauty and always end on a happy note with the cliché – “and they lived happily ever after.”

In this context, it is intriguing that the Indian mythic narratives, in general, have been most kind and sympathetic towards the spirit of womanhood. In the Indian epic *Ramayana*, Sita sends her husband in pursuit of the ‘golden deer’ a symbol of ‘*maya*’ or illusion, she crosses the forbidden threshold of the ‘*lakshman-rekha*’ and sets out on a journey of the forbidden unconscious, dutifully responding to a call from the ‘animus’ after hearing her husband cry out for help. Being as vulnerable as the beautiful innocence herself,

she is inescapably trapped by the demon king Ravana until her husband and the great warrior Lord Ram, an embodiment of conscious energy, reason and grace, undertakes the journey himself and sets her free.

However, Sita is never once blamed in the narrative, nor is her act of innocence mixed or marked with disobedience, disgrace or misfortune, and rather those who doubted her character in the narrative and put her to the test of '*agni*' or fire are the ones severely condemned. She is portrayed in the most compassionate manner, obediently following her inherent nature and dutifully fulfilling the role destined to her. She is upheld as a model of utmost virtue, for all women to learn from and imbibe.

The narrative is considered as having two endings – the more usual one - where Lord Ram rules alone after being separated from his wife, with the hint of his eternal quest in search of her; and the one rarer to beget – where he is united happily with her. Even when Ram rules alone, he constantly pines for his wife and keeps a statue of Sita made in gold as a constant reminder of his companion.

The Hindu tradition venerates Sita as a goddess, and she is placed along with Lord Ram in Hindu temples reflecting in all ripeness that - Sita and Ram, Imagination and Reason, Yin and Yang, Women and Men – all complete and complement each other just as the Earth and Sky. The mellow maturity of the Indian myth and culture truly holds in its heart the most protective and sacred love for the spirit of womanhood.

Literature is a reflection of society and likewise the feminine ideals embedded in the Indian myths must be a reflection of the value system of the contemporary ancient Indian society. The profound understanding embedded in mythic thought and cultural tradition is reflected in the present-day deeds and actions in a very limited manner. However, the historical narratives of early Vedic culture point towards the observance and execution of these ideals in actual practice.

Several instances from the early Vedic literature indicates a general sense of veneration and respect towards women. While the later Vedic and ancient Indian societies adopted a shielding attitude towards women, filled with the sentiment that a woman is in need of protection, and was to be kept in care of by a male member of her family, at every successive stage of her life – by her father, husband, or son; the early Vedic period was markedly different.

The early Vedic age did not discourage women with scholarly tastes from pursuing abstruse subjects like philosophy, theology and considered the birth of an erudite daughter better than a son. (Altekar, 6). The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* mentions a ritual for ensuring the birth of a scholarly daughter. Such a daughter was the pride of her family with scholarly young women like Gargi, Maitreyi, Sulabha and Prachiteyi serving as testimonials - they are remembered even today and educational institutions such as Gargi College and Maitreyi College in the South Campus of Delhi University, stand as memorials to the fact .

Gargi was a young lady philosopher who had famously put to test the distinguished male philosopher Yajnavalkya, saying –“Just as an experienced archer would get ready to attack his enemy with two piercing arrows kept at hand, so I assail you with two test questions.” Yajnavalkya had declined to answer the questions and had thus failed the test. Yajnavalkya’s wife Maitreyi, was an eminent philosopher and pioneer, who had joined an intellectual philosophical movement rising as reaction against the Vedic sacrificial religion. There is substantial evidence which indicates that women seers studied and revealed the Vedic knowledge to others. For instance, the 126th hymn of the first book of the *Rig Veda* was composed by a Vedic woman seer Romasha; and the 179th hymn of the same book was composed by Lopamudra, wife of the reverent sage Agastya.

The education among females is believed to have been a widespread phenomenon and even women who were to get married received education. The women scholars were

bifurcated into two categories depending upon their educational objective and acumen. The first category comprised the *Brahmavadinis* who sought to attain very high standards of scholarship and became lifetime scholars delving into subjects like philosophy. The second category comprised of the *Sadyodvahas* who continued their education until marriage and were taught at a lower proficiency level.

Further, the number of ladies enrolling for the first category would have been by no means scanty as evident from the fact that a specific term '*kasakritsnas*' was coined specifically to refer to lady scholars undertaking to study the complex philosophy of '*Purvamimansa*'. The majority of the woman who were married householders were also included in the daily rituals of offering Vedic prayers, and were acknowledged as the significant better halves or the '*ardhangini*', who were bestowed equal status in rituals, as illustrated in various texts such as the *Ramayana* where Sita offers her daily prayers.

The evidence of women having a right to choose their husbands through the ceremony of '*swayamvar*' in which the prospective suitors displayed martial prowess is best illustrated in the Indian epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* where Sita and Draupadi select their husband after their outstanding display of martial skills.

Daughters were regarded an embodiment of the goddess of fortune who brought wealth, prosperity and good luck to their family. In *Ramayana*, unmarried girls were chosen, being preferred over aristocrats and military generals, to welcome and perform '*abhishek*' of Lord Rama on his return to Ayodhya after the long exile. The tradition of referring to young girls as goddess Lakshmi is prevalent, even today. They are worshipped as an embodiment of *Shakti* during the Navaratri festival, even now and the act of a father of giving away his daughter in marriage or the '*kanya-daan*' is regarded as one of the most meritorious deeds to this day. The women were exalted as mother Earth herself, whose bounty nourishes and sustains her family and her happiness and well-being brought welfare and prosperity, this

spirit is best reflected in the following lines of *Manusmriti*:

Women must be honoured and adorned by their fathers, brothers, husbands, and brothers-in-law, who desire their own welfare. Where women are honoured, there the gods are pleased; but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields rewards. Where the female relations live in grief, the family soon wholly perishes; but that family where they are not unhappy ever prospers. The houses on which female relations, not being duly honoured, pronounce a curse, perish completely, as if destroyed by magic. Hence men who seek (their own) welfare, should always honour women on holidays and festivals with (gifts of) ornaments, clothes and (dainty) food. (Manu Smriti III.55-59)

The collective feminine identity secures a revered place in Indian legends and mytho- sphere and had been put into practice in the ancient Indian routine. This philosophy of life gradually got transformed into the Hindu religion and the sacred space reserved for women, even though belittled to a large extent has not been thoroughly wiped out and continues to be a subtle part of a living tradition exhibits in different ways.

In temples, the Hindu gods except the celibate gods are seldom worshipped without their divine consorts – Lord Rama is worshipped along with his wife goddess Sita, Lord Krishna is worshiped along with his divine consort Radha and the divine Shivalinga is worshipped along with the feminine part of the *linga*, the *Devi bhaag*. The ritualistic worship by householders is usually considered incomplete unless performed by husband and wife together. Majority of Indian women continue to use the bridal accessories such as the *mangal-sutra* and *sindoor*, unconsciously preserving and continuing a tradition handed down to them since the very dawn of civilisation.

The endearing affection for the spirit of womanhood is not limited in scope to the sphere of mythology and antiquity, as in case of many other ancient cultures. But is rather a

living, breathing presence in India, bestowing her a distinctive feminine identity.

However, when we speak of women empowerment today, we chiefly draw upon the theories of feminism, which are generic in nature. While the compliance by the prevailing theories of dominion supported by the interplay of power -relations is as natural as the pace of time. However, a blind adherence to the same without a corresponding ethnocentric modification in turn may lead to an inaccurate projection of the Indian feminine sensibility, which has a distinctive flavour of its own.

To illustrate , the post-modern tendency of scrutinizing the bygone historic discourse as male dominated one; and subverting it from a feminine or a sub-altern perspective, has become a wide spread phenomenon. The degree of the so-called male dominion varies in narratives of different cultures. The degree of such dominance in the ancient Indian discourse seems to hold a much lesser oppressive potential and displays a much greater accommodative resilience.

The mythic discourse at several instances presents a stronger female protagonist. In a popular legend Savitri persuades Yama, the Lord of Death to bring her husband Satyavaan back to life, a boon almost impossible to beget, and also gets restored his lost glory and kingdom. The virtues of her character as well as her persistence, intelligence and skills at rhetoric have bestowed her an enduring iconic status.

The women characters like Kunti and Draupadi in the epic Mahabharata are by no standard meek overpowered women, and have a resplendent personality of their own. Even though the narrative appears to be male dominated account of a great war, the metaphysical reading acknowledges Draupadi as the dynamic power behind the five elemental representatives, i.e her five husbands, the Pandavas. Their union is sacred, more spiritual than real and therefore beyond petty whiffs of polyandry and its likes. Likewise, Kunti seems to enjoy the upper hand in matrimony, while her husband is cursed with sickness, she

manages to appease the most difficult to please sage Dhurvasa and saves the honour of her father and husband and begets divine sons by conjuring gods. In the well-known Vedic love story, it is Urvashi the celestial *apsara*, who is a more perfect divine being and who becomes the centre of the discourse, being pursued painstakingly by her valiant lover Pururava and not otherwise.

The nuances of the early Indian mythic narratives shine in their inimitable lustre and at times seem to shake the post-modern equation of the oppressor and the oppressed. For such forsaken equations of imbalance emerge only out of situations which are in void of mutual appreciation. The Indian mythic narrative is the grand fabric interwoven with love and adoration for the universal contraries – will and luck, nature and nurture, men and women.

The scrutiny of these myths from a post-modern feminist lens should be done with due regard to the natural proclivity of the Indian myth towards the feminine collective. However, this is not always the case. For instance, the retellings of Ramayana, seeking inspiration from post-modernism, are bent towards re-narrating Ramayana from the perspective of Sita. They tend towards portraying her somewhat like a victim of the society, in whom our own contemporary ‘Sitas’ can find a friend. The possibility of Sita being a strong, devoted and dutiful person, following the archetypal journey of the ‘heroine’ is

conveniently ruled out. Had Sita been at the end of the oppressed, a so-projected victim, would she be proclaimed a goddess, a model for women to follow?

Thus, more harm than good would accrue through the mindless application of the internationally acclaimed generic theories of feminism, without an adaptation in cognizance of the local and ethnic dimensions. The gaps in generic theory of Feminism in the context of Indian culture, therefore should undergo a cultural screening and adaptation to match the native sensibilities of Indian tradition. The prospect of renaissance in Indian feministic sensibility through the study of classical literature presents the vision for unveiling a local league of global thought.

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