

Re-Vision of Myths in Post-Colonial Indian English Drama as an Avenue for the Empowerment of Women

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Abstract

Literature is one of the devices of articulating culture whereby culture gets recognised through the adaptation of myths. The revision of myths has received unparalleled recognition as a discourse through which identity and relations of power are constructed and negotiated. Myth has been an innate and pivotal part of culture since antiquity. The reliability on ancient myths has been decisive to the level that the progress of a culture in a certain age could be amply sketched through the interpretations of myths. The postcolonial studies share a concern with the creation of novel and more empowering subjectivities for the women who have

traditionally been casted as subaltern. The conformist narrative styles are too firm to challenge structural patterns. Thus the revision of myths is an endeavor to annihilate the misrepresentation of female subjectivity in myths. It also helps to offer fresh connotations to the myths, the meanings of which are shared by the society. Two of the most prominent post-colonial dramatists Girish Karnad, Chandrashekhara Kambar and Arun Mukherjee in their respective plays *Yayati*, *Siri Sampige* and *Mareech, the Legend* have succeeded in demystifying the feminine mystique created in the myths which distorted the concept of the Indian woman as an individual. These plays outline the course of the construction of female subjectivity which has continued right from the beginning of time.

Keywords: Revision, Culture, Discourse, Empowerment, Subjectivities, Girish Karnad, Chandrashekhara Kambar, *Yayati*, *Siri Sampige*, *Mareech, the Legend*

Introduction

Women are over and over again represented by absenteeism or muteness in myths and other histories. Descriptions of women in myths develop out of the male fears and imaginations of the female. Myths are hegemonic discourses which authorises the subjugation of females and their re-vision is an effort to give new meanings to these myths which in turn help in the construction of a new empowered subjectivity of women. Myths are the most dominant tool used by patriarchy to subordinate women. Myths assigns to female a gender identity created on the binary logic. Myths are constructed in such a way that they legitimise certain viewpoints of culture and society. Myths produce, defend and communicate female subjectivity which has continued for a long period of time and is ultimately passed on as being natural. Mythology also contributes towards the process of adaptation. Myths serve the purpose of a tool in the hands of patriarchy, they are often employed for construction of female stereotypes and also myths help in construction of gendered subjectivities. The patriarchal ideology of myth remains hidden due to its defamiliarising capacity. Hence, the

underlying strain of patriarchy under the myths needs to be deciphered. Myths are anticipated to represent the natural relations between men and women but in actual they follow and execute the customs and norms of patriarchy that function accordingly as well as express specific communal structures. Myth as a result attains status of being a naturalised and everlasting truth although it is just a cultural production.

Woman in patriarchy becomes a subject whose subjectivity is interpellated by ideology. Ideology and subjectivity are closely inter-related. An individual subject comes into being only when it comes into contact with ideology. Mythical texts are also among the social discourses like family, schools, religion, media which functions as ideological apparatuses. They direct individual subjects to think and act in a particular manner. So, females are also interpellated by the social discourses to conform to the norms and standards of the society. They are just the subjects of the patriarchal ideology prevailing in the society which conditions them to behave in a certain way and also to further reinforce these values and norms. These institutions transfer ideology not forcefully but as something which is natural to them. According to Louis Althusser, masculinity and femininity are ideologies which are instilled and conceded as if they are natural and necessary. Althusser explains:

...ideology interpellates individuals as subjects...the category of the subject is constitutive of all ideology, but...the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology in so far as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of constituting concrete individuals as subjects. In the interaction of this double constitution exists the functioning of all ideology. Ideology being nothing but its functioning in the material forms of existence of that functioning. (Althusser, 1971, pp. 171)

In society, many myths, folktales and legends have been used to promote, reinforce and very precisely emphasise the subordinate position of females as compared to the males in the society. Betty Friedan (1974) used the term "feminine mystique" to designate the

elevation of the roles of the wife and the mother. It was thought that woman's nature, if or not exquisitely predestined or biologically determined, prerequisites her to pursue accomplishment in passive family life. It denotes the fabricated opinions and notions as regards the Indian woman, resulting out of religion, myths and literature, which penetrated into a patriarchal society and then, into literature. The early Indian English dramatists strengthened and circulated the conformist female images. Women characters abided to the mythic models and archetypes like Sita and Savitri. Conventional women characters governed the early plays written in English. Contemporary revisions of women characters in earlier drama reveal that the dramatists represented not the experiences of women, but what they thought women should feel and experience. However, there has been a change in recent Indian English drama which has seen a more realistic portrayal of women. Post-colonial Indian English drama has proved to be one of the most influential in heralding a new outlook towards the subjectivity of women in our society. The chief practitioners of this drama are Girish Karnad, Chandrashekhar Kambar and Arun Mukherjee whose mythical plays have been studied in the present work.

Yayati

Girish Karnad borrows the myth of Yayati, a character, from *Adi Parva* of the *Mahabharata*, who was struck by the curse of old age as a result of his infidelity. While writing *Yayati*, Karnad has made the required modifications in the original story. Expanding the myth Karnad adapts the plot for the sake of distinctive usage and to re-count the ancient myth with the existent, he has introduced a new character Chitrlekha as the wife of his son Puru, who exposes the complexity of Yayati's character. Also through her medium Karnad addresses different issues that pester man in the postcolonial world. *Yayati*, itself draws a patriarchal structure and brings out the discourse of marriage as a tool in the hands of patriarchy in order to suppress females. One of the most prominent woman character in the

play is Queen Devayani. On the very onset of the play she is represented as a traditional Queen who bears the fancies and passions of her husband. As the play progresses, towards the end there is a sea change and huge development in the character of Devyani. Devayani's act of shredding the sacred marriage thread and throwing away her ornaments is representative of her resolution to put an end to her married life. She confirms her decision by her words: "I have nothing more to do with this lot. I am finished with them . . . I am no kshatriya queen to suffer relatives foisted on me. I am leaving. . . (31)." It is Devayani's confrontation with the orthodoxy that resulted in the curse of Yayati. Her assertion ensued in the subversion of the masculine world created by Yayati.

Karnad in the play makes Sharmishtha a mouthpiece for the awakened and revolutionary women who are not afraid of openly expressing their views about the superiority complex and inflated egos of men and their incapability to relate with the suffering of women. She confronts Yayati and brings out the psyche of males in the patriarchy:

Sharmishtha: You see yourself as awesome and powerful, a figure towering over your vast possessions, a demi-god if not god himself. You are so busy visualizing the grand design of life, you have no sense of the traps and snares waiting in the grass. You have no sense of how illogical suffering can be and therefore how horrible. (25)

Sharmishtha's resilient opinions can be witnessed at many critical instances in the play. She strongly defies Pooru's decision to embrace the curse of his father: "No, no, no, you can't. That is utter stupidity! Pooru, the desire for self-sacrifice is a rank perversion (50)." She also blames Yayati for ending Chitraleka's life: "You destroyed her life. I pleaded with you but you were drunk with your future . . . (67)." She denounces Yayati for the loss he has brought about by his hunger for his youth and power and his reckless decisions: "So here is the foundation of your glorious future, Your Majesty. A woman dead, another gone mad, and

a third in danger of her life (68).” Sharmishtha is the most complex character in the play who voices her opinions against the wrongs done to her, triumphs in challenging the male authority and at the same time, finds her autonomy.

Chitrlekha, is the worst victim in the hands of patriarchy. At the very first place she suffers because of her husband, Puru, who not even for once gave a thought about the feelings and the fate of his newly wedded wife. Just in order to ensure the supreme sacrifice he wanted to make for his father, he very deliberately took the decision of exchanging his youth with the old age of his father. While making this decision he didn't for once thought it necessary to take her opinion in the matter as it would have definitely laid an impact on hers life too. Chitrlekha does not give in to Yayati's alluring of her to accept her husband as an old man without any aversion, and stands tall against the powerful patriarch who happens to be the king on one hand and her father-in-law on the other hand. He leaves no stone unturned in persuading her to accept her husband, in the name of traditions, values, vows taken in the marriage, family reputation etc. When Chitrlekha rejects to give thought to any of his propositions to accept Pooru, he tries to pressurise her and exercise the power of his position as a king to whom the palace belonged to. He threatens her for her disrespectful and irresolute behavior towards her husband with whom she had made sacred vows during their marriage.

Chitrlekha stands as the rebellion against the patriarchal set up and the rituals which binds a woman and forces her to accept the result of the impulsive and impetuous decisions taken by the males. She refuses to accept this as her fate. She is a symbol of the present day enlightened women who is aware of her rights in a marriage and fearlessly advocates her rights and doesn't yield in front of the repressive power structures. She is not diffident in making Yayati comprehend his mistake because of which both his son and his daughter-in-law have to suffer. She openly denounces the patriarchal setup which clearly assigns women

just these façades either she is raised to the level of goddess forgoing everything for the sake of her husband and family or if they defy the rules they are disparaged as being negative. However, Chitrlekha as a representative of the modern woman asserts her individuality and fights for her right to love and family- happiness. She courageously argues and directly challenges Yayati to accept her as he has taken Pooru's youth.

In contrast to Pooru, Chitrlekha castoffs the king's power over her. She straightforwardly says: "I will not let my husband back into my bedroom unless he returns a young man" (61). Chitrlekha's bold attitude is revealed in her words to Yayati when he makes an attempt to quiet her with his orders: "Sir! This is my chamber. Only my husband has the right to come in here without my permission. Or to shout out my name when he pleases. I am not aware I have allowed anyone else that freedom (62)". She has revealed her virtues as she prompts Yayati that they were determined to make an alliance with her: "Even apart from my family, because of my accomplishments, because of what I am (62)". Yayati, with his rationale strives to convince her to hold up for a few years so that he can resolve the matters of the state and return Pooru his youth, with a protected future. But Chitrlekha comprehends no purpose in sacrificing for that: "And will Your Majesty also think about how old I shall be by the time that future is attained? . . . I am here, this minute, sir. And I cannot interest myself in your unborn future" (65). She devoid of any hesitance asserts that as Yayati has taken her husband's youth, he should also take his place in her life from whom she would bear the child and successor of the Bharata family. She states that in deciding on Puru as her husband, she took decision just because of his youth and as such he could give her a child. Karnad has succeeded in representing Chitrlekha's character as that of the empowered woman who considers Yayati as the man who is bestowed with masculinity and authority. To satisfy her yearning to have an heir to the Bharata dynasty, she offers herself to Yayati. Yayati is in complete dismay and blames Chitrlekha for fostering such degraded and

forbidden beliefs. Chitralkha scorns off the shocked Yayati: “Oh, Come, sir. These are trite considerations. We have to rise above such trivialities. We have to be superhuman (66)”. Henceforth, the women in Karnad’s mythical plays expresses a pursuit for emancipation and accomplishment of their yearnings. They assert their identity and desire for the fulfilment of their needs. All the women characters in the play, Sharmishtha, Devayani, Chitralkha are thriving, coherent and are noticeably heard in the play. The significance of women empowerment and emancipation is very efficiently portrayed by Karnad in *Yayati*.

Siri Sampige

Chandrashekhara Kambar in his play *Siri Sampige* has used the mythical element of cutting off the Prince into two and placing of these pieces in two different pots for some days. The result of this ritual was the restoration of the Prince from one part and from the other part a Naga, Kalinga, who disappears somewhere into the forest. Kambar has used narcissism myth and the concept of body and soul. In Hindu mythology, Naga is considered to be a symbol of fertility and regenerations. Kambar uses the folktale in the play *Siri Sampige* to portray the plight of the women in the male dominated society which debar the female to satisfy the basic human desires such as the need of love, gratification of sexual desires, outside the marriage. The male dominated patriarchal society never allows any female to build any relationship outside of her conjugal bond whereas there is no such restriction on the males, who can go for any woman even if he is married. The punishment for such infidelity is either death or abandonment but if a woman is betrayed then the rules work in some different fashion and expects the women to accept this decision and not to be affected by it as she is a woman, who is always stereotyped as being all forgiving. This is the stringent norm of the biased society where all the rules whether they be moralistic or physical, all rules and norms are meant just for the women. In this context Sandra Schneiders opines:

Marital fidelity was never absolutely required of men whereas a woman's infidelity was considered an offence against her husband's property rights A husband who had been betrayed by his wife would at least have divorced her if he had not had her executed. A wife who had been betrayed would be expected, nevertheless, to be faithful and loving. (33)

Women have always been the lone sufferers in this dominating and suffocating vicious web of moral values. Even if the husband deliberately refuses to devoid his wife of all these pleasures, even then she can't expect it from someone else. This becomes quite visible in the play when the Prince asks Siri Sampige to prove her chastity and her illicit pregnancy. Not only is this he also adamant at giving her punishment if she is not able to prove her fidelity. He asks the elders whom he had summoned for the trial, "What should be the punishment for a woman who has abandoned her husband, has illicitly joined with another, and has become pregnant? Let the final word be (365)." Here it becomes very clear in the way which males maintain their upper hand in the society by keeping females bound in the name of rules and punishments. Relationship outside marriage is punishable only for the women who is taken to be the offender but if the same is done by any male he is not a subject to punishment. Here the Prince accuses Sampige of abandoning her for some other man but in actual it was him only who had abandoned her for the illusionary lamp maiden whom he had been looking out for night after night. When the carnal and emotional desires of Sampige are not fulfilled by her husband and she finds it in someone else, then it becomes non pardonable sin. He himself had harboured such desires for the lamp maiden and in doing so had always discarded his duties towards her. This is the real face of hypocrisy of the society.

A very clear streak of rebellion and insight can be observed in Siri Sampige who completely discards Kalinga by saying, "My body is not a commodity, Kalinga. For you that child may be an extension of your pride in yourself, but for me it is a wound you have given

me (371).” Thus we can say that Sampige has been impregnated by Kalinga but she still refuses to give him any right over her. In the patriarchal society, otherwise impregnating women is considered to be a tool in order to make a woman submit in the front of males. But Samige defies this norm very vigilantly. Siri Sampige also stands as the epitome of the present day woman who refuses to succumb under the tyrannical social structures which try to bind women within the constraints of morals and old values. She is very well aware of what she has done and doesn't shy away from justifying herself on the logical grounds and thus in this way gives more to the emancipation of women. She in a very elaborative way gives an explanation of what the Prince says was her immorality and infidelity. She is not scared of voicing her innermost thoughts and therefore she becomes the mouthpiece of contemporary women are well aware of their needs whether they be physical, mental or emotional. When the Prince accused Sampige of being immoral and cheating upon him and the elders, she very confidently defies all his accusations and voices all the tyrannies she had to face after her marriage to the Prince, who in the search of an illusion completely had completely abandoned her with all her needs unfulfilled. She says:

SAMPIGE: That is your ill fortune. My immorality started, my lord, when you forgot the body and began craving for the god, and slipped away from our bed. I who was lying on the bed, counting the rafters in the roof and sighing, never noticed when you slipped away. I searched for you, but wherever I searched, in the place garden, or in the words you spoke, you were not to be found. In the end you saw the god by taking handfuls of water from the pond. I too took a handful of water, and there was a god in my handful too, but if he turned out not to be the same god as yours is it my fault?
(374)

Thus, we can say how Sampige gives voice to all her feelings, to the longing of being loved and taken care of, her need of physical as well as emotional and intellectual intimacy

which are not immoral wishes but happens to be the basic human necessities. The Prince himself was also looking out for the same in some other person who happened to be his illusion but he was never questioned for that by his wife Sampige, but when the same happens with her and she is looking out for love in someone else then why everything changed and she has been put on trials and being referred as being immoral. Thus Sampige slaps a very important and apt question on the hegemonic patriarchal society. In *Siri Sampige*, the Queen Mother, Siri Sampige and Kamala are all shown to be emphatic and self-willed. This comes out when the Queen Mother commands the Prince to marry Siri Sampige. Again it becomes quite visible when she doubts the Prince's assertion that he is not the father of Siri Sampige's child. She is not also blind to the faults of her son and attempts to take remedial action. Siri Sampige too surrenders to King Kalinga progresses, readily and without any anxiety and celebrates her sexuality. Kamala is also presented as the one who chooses her husband between Awali and Jawali and demands explanations for Jawli's ignorance of her. She also aggressively deliberates her problems with her husband and tries to change his mind. She instantaneously acts upon her dream of the family god who had advised a way to beget a child. All these instances indicates that Kambara has represented women as resilient characters who are not ready to step down.

Conclusion

The post-colonial playwrights go back to the myths and folk tales to use them as a spectacle for their vision of society. Many issues such as the manifestation of corporal aspect and yearnings in a relationship, the issue of imperfection, sexual politics, stereotyping of women etc. have also been given a liberal treatment. The traditional moral codes recognised by our society have also been brought out and have been introspected in a completely different way. They have neither been praised nor been condemned them, but they have highlighted the consequences of firm codes enforced by the society. These plays deals with

the very complex concern of feminine subjectivity for which the motivation arises from ancient myths and from oral tradition of folk lore. These plays are an interpretation of the location and standing of women in our society. They re-count the passage of the construction of female subjectivity which has continued right from the beginning of time. These plays deliver very appropriate commentary on our patriarchal society.

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