

Sara Joseph's *Ramayana Stories*: Muted Voice of the Gendered Subalterns

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Abstract: *The narration in mythology is the outcome of a patriarchal culture and hence reflects its values, systems and beliefs. The hierarchy prevailed in the hegemonic power structure created subalterns also, among which include women characters. The modern retellings open alternate views and perceptions to the readers and reveal that the mythological world is not an egalitarian society. Sara Joseph in the story "Black Holes" retells the events that happened soon after the aborted coronation of Ayodhya. The manipulation, treachery, greed, dishonesty and the hunger for power of the royals came to the fore as the narration is unfolded from Manthara's perspective. In the retelling Manthara becomes far more adorable than the ideal and virtuous characters of the great epic and her intolerable experiences as narrated in the story earns her the sympathy and support which she conspicuously lacks in the narrative of the great epic. Patriarchal, racial, cultural and gender hegemony are the pivotal themes in the story "Mother Clan". Though repressed, tortured and brutalized to a greater extent than any other woman in mythology, Soorpanakha never succumbed herself to her miseries. The story transforms the woman from an ugly, lecherous demoness to a pretty feminine creature following the instincts of nature. The binaries of 'nature-culture' dichotomies are evident in the story as she is identified with 'nature' and the attack on her is an affront on it by 'culture'. Sara Joseph's Soorpanakha is the embodiment of feminine power who enjoys gender justice and equality in her race. These retellings on Manthara and Soorpanakha portray an alternate representation of a world where gender justice prevails.*

Key Words: *Retellings, patriarchal hegemony, gendered subalterns, egalitarian society, gender justice, equality*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Hindu mythological narratives provide great vistas of knowledge and experience for life. But the most noteworthy and striking feature of all these narratives is that they are from a male perspective in a society which is exclusively patriarchal. The narration in mythology is the outcome of a patriarchal culture and hence reflects its values, systems and beliefs. Diverse kinds of discrimination and injustice prevailed there, especially racial and gender discrimination and inequality. The hierarchy prevailed in the hegemonic power structure created subalterns also, among which include women characters who are always treated as the 'Other'. It is the absence of gender justice which created situations that lead to insurmountable crisis like the fall of nations and the end of dynasties.

Re-mythification in Retellings

The modern retellings narrate the events from the perspective of the characters who are sidelined or marginalized-the subalterns of mythology. These retellings open alternate views and perceptions to the readers and reveal that the mythological world is not an egalitarian society. The alternate representations of the retellings heightened the lack of this egalitarian view in the mythologies. The heroines, who remain as shadowy figures in the patriarchal discourses transform themselves in the retellings as real-life characters with a powerful voice and distinct individuality. Till now their voices were either subdued, muted or silenced as they are the subalterns. One of the foremost figures of radical feminism, Adrienne Rich, defines patriarchy as:

the power of the fathers: a familial- social, ideological, political system in which men- by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male. The power of the fathers has been difficult to grasp because it permeates everything, even the language in which we try to describe it. It is diffuse and concrete; symbolic and

literal; universal, and expressed with local variations which obscure its universality (*Of Woman Born* 56).

Sara Joseph provides a feministic retelling to the Ramayana myths in her *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala* which was translated into English by Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan. Though she dealt with the ubiquitous heroine herself in one of the stories in this collection, her main focus is on those who are underprivileged not only by their gender but by the intersection of innumerable contributing factors which conspire against them to ensure their subalternity.

Manthara is one of the minor characters of the epic tale *Ramayana*, but she is portrayed in the mythology as the evil instigator, the hunch-backed perpetrator of all the turn of events that followed after king Dasarath's decision regarding his successor. Sara Joseph in the story "Black Holes" retells the events that happened soon after the aborted coronation of Ayodhya. The narrator traverses through the mind of Manthara who is in an attempt to escape from Ayodhya to save herself from the royal spies who are searching her throughout the kingdom. But the manipulation, treachery, greed, dishonesty and the hunger for power of the royals came to the fore as the narration is unfolded from Manthara's perspective.

She considered those who reside on the fringes as far more principled and trustworthy than those who occupy the Centre. As an underdog it is easy to find a scapegoat in her so that they can save several faces. In the power struggle between the royals, she is just a pawn who is targeted for being loyally executing the task assigned to her by her master. The assault on her made easy by her subaltern status and her gender. But she is not ready to yield; as she is a feminist who decided to build her life from its scratches as she reaches Kekaya. Besides, she feels that she needs to be rewarded as what she has done is according to the interests of her master, though it has failed in its execution. She is an empowered woman as compared to the women of the royals, as with all her limitations, she carried out her decisions, even if it is to escape from the prying eyes of the spies of Ayodhya. As the hunchbacked ugly hag opens up her heart, while she attempts to escape from an Ayodhya of conflicting interests, struggles and dishonesty of which she is a victim, many idols shatter.

She is only an instrument, a loyal servant appointed by King Aswapathi of Kekaya to inform him the matter, if anything happens against the interests of his daughter, Kaikeyi. Manthara had only affection and tenderness towards young Rama. The whole palace along with the nation pointed an accusing finger towards her for what happened; just because of her gender and her position in the social hierarchy. She is vulnerable and therefore it is easy to victimize and to find fault with her. But she is not ready to succumb to the hypocrisies of the royals' as she realized that though she is a subaltern she has more integrity compared to them. She is not shattered or broken in spite of the bruises and wounds on her body and her mind. She has decided to reach Kekaya and to demand her rights or rather her compensation for a decent living with her family. This feministic spirit in Manthara coupled with her faith and trust in herself, and her contempt for the intrigues of the privileged transforms her to an admirable woman in spite of her physical deformities and her doubly marginalized status. In the retelling Manthara becomes far more adorable than the ideal and virtuous characters of the great epic and her intolerable experiences as narrated in the story earns her the sympathy and support which she conspicuously lacks in the narrative of the great epic.

An equally ill-judged character in the great mythological narrative with its several versions is Soorpanakha. Patriarchal, racial, cultural and gender hegemony are the pivotal themes in the story "Mother Clan". Though repressed, tortured and brutalized to a greater extent than any other woman in mythology, Soorpanakha never succumbed herself to her miseries.

Sandra Bartky states: In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgement. Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other. (*Femininity and Domination* 72)

She has endured intolerable pain and humiliation that a woman, or any human being, can endure. Her life has turned into a barren sterile promontory and those who are responsible for it are hailed as heroes. The story unfolds through the thought processes of a Soorpanakha who has lost the meaning of her existence. She is thirsting for revenge as fire burns in her heart. She is the sister of the unvanquished Ravana and in her race a woman is not considered as inferior to man, though both differ in their duties and practices. She is not familiar with a culture which considers violence to a woman as a heroic deed and blaming the victim for the same

In Sara Joseph's story Soorpanakha is the embodiment of motherhood and a celebration of the feminine spirit. Her dark body, her ample breasts, her swirling skirt and her swinging anklets all proclaim her femininity as she danced in the forest with wild ecstasy. The women of her clan identify their life with the rhythm of nature and they exult in it. There is nothing inappropriate for a woman of her clan to express her desire for a man and to approach him for its

fulfilment. If there is any unwillingness or inability for the man to fulfil it there is only a polite decline on his part. Though considered inferior in race and gender compared to the cultural norms of the civilized patriarchal society, their clan also have their customs and practices which could not conform to the much-celebrated civilized society. It is indeed this cultural difference that made Soorpanakha, an object of ridicule for both the strangers, the men who are alien to her culture, in “Mother Clan”.

That was once a forest—a black-green forest—where my handsome, golden son sat and prayed. They came, cut and scattered the trees and cleared the forest. They killed my loved one too. They even threw away the idol of Siva he had so humbly worshipped. Over that, they built their hut of leaves (“Mother Clan” 122).

She felt that her femininity has suffered a major setback due to the violent attack by the two men, who posed as heroes who guard justice. Her breasts along with her nose were cut off by these men and thus they disfigured her. They consider a woman’s breasts as a source of nurturing, providing milk to generations and it is a source of feminine power. Cutting away those breasts symbolizes the removal of all the feminine maternal emotions.

It can only be seen as the attempt of the colonisers to root out the nourishment of the subjugated, and their essential feminine characters; thus, injecting their own culture and their manner of nurturing and nourishment instead. It can also be viewed as an attempt to establish the stamp of the patriarchal culture of the civilized world in their rhythm of life which was very much in tune with nature. The names of the men are not mentioned in the story, though they could be identified as Rama and Lakshmana of the epic. Soorpanakha through the retelling becomes one with *Prakriti* and the men who are alien to their culture were there to destroy it. The story transforms the woman from an ugly, lecherous demoness to a pretty feminine creature following the instincts of nature. The binaries of ‘nature-culture’ dichotomies are evident in the story as she is identified with ‘nature’ and the attack on her is an affront on it by ‘culture’.

Soorpanakha lives in tune with nature and she is not aware of the cultural norms of the sophisticated society. But to those men who are alien to this culture she is promiscuous and hence she is open to ridicule and humiliation. It is a method to control female sexuality by the oppressive patriarchal authority which always wants to restrain the powers of the feminine. In Sara Joseph’s story it assumes the proportion of not only the conflict between two cultures, but also an attempt on the part of the colonial powers to impose their culture as superior, and the method they adopted is to root out the source of nourishment of the indigenous. This explanation gains ground as it is not only Soorpanakha who is maimed by the cutting off her breasts, but also Ayomukhi, the powerful guardian of the weapons at Dandaka. Establishing the authority over the women of a race is to demoralize the powers of that race which the colonialists skillfully execute. Sara Joseph’s Soorpanakha is the embodiment of feminine power who enjoys gender justice and equality in her race compared to these aspects in the society of the sophisticated upper class. Simone De Beauvoir opines:

Thus, humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him: she is not regarded as an autonomous being...The body of man makes sense in itself quite apart from that of woman, whereas the latter seems waiting in significance by itself... Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man. And she is simply what man decrees: thus she is called “the sex”, by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex – absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute – she is the Other (*The Second Sex* 16)

These stories present the idyllic realm of the subaltern women who has their own worth as an individual in their communities. This feministic consciousness of the individual worth of women, though conspicuously absent in the upper-class society, is due to the patriarchal hegemony which is prevalent in these societies. Women of these subaltern societies, contrary to the existing beliefs and theories of feministic discourses, enjoy a much better status and liberty of life. The status of women is not double marginalization, but a position of privilege. As these modern retellings present the narrative from the perspective of the subalterns there is a ‘demythification’ of these mythological tales which resulted in a ‘remythification’.

2. CONCLUSION:

Hegemonic upper-class is always privileged according to the norms of patriarchal discourses. But even in that world of elitism women are marginalized and hence subaltern women are doubly marginalized according to it. But the retellings on Manthara and Soorpanakha portray an alternate representation of a world where gender justice prevails. The misogynistic tendencies of an androcentric system are obviously evident in the mythological narratives, not even as a subtext. The parochialism of the patriarchal norms obliterates the attempt to portray the mythological world as an



egalitarian realm. The modern retellings on Hindu mythology which are prolific in the recent years have a significant role in highlighting this disparity of the mythological world.

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