Mythicising Women who make a Choice:
A Prerogative of the Indian Collective Unconscious to Demarcate Modesty and Right Conduct for Women

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I. Introduction: Indian Myths And Central Archetypes

Myth has been variously defined, understood and interpreted in numerous texts including the Encyclopaedia Britannica which describes it as a sacred narrative or a traditional story typically involving supernatural characters endorsed by priests or people with religious authority. India has had a long tradition of myths and some central archetypes. Central amongst its myths are the fight between good and evil or dharma and adharma manifested in the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata, the quest myth again seen in the epics, the myth of exile and renouncement which manifests itself frequently in the major epics (the agyatvaas of the Pandavas, the vanvaas in Ramayana) and also the minor stories: in Savitri's voluntary exile with her husband Satyavan in the story of Savitri Satyavan, the forced exile of Nala and Damayanti, the flood myth and the fire myth.

One of the objectives of myths has been understood to teach model behaviour and talk about ideal experiences. However there seems to be another ulterior purpose too: to preserve and reinforce the socio-cultural aspect of the male-female dichotomy and ensure the uninterrupted and undisturbed running of the patriarchal setup if one were to consider the recurring female archetype of the chaste and the virtuous women in Indian mythology. Although there is anthropological evidence that tells us that some prehistoric primitive societies were matrilineal and matriarchal, they are lost in time and it is difficult to understand what is exactly matriarchal in today's context since its meaning and implications are heavily contextualised in the light of 'patriarchal'. We do have matrilineal societies even today but they are not in essence matriarchal; at their best they are egalitarian.

II. Female Archetypes in Indian Mythology

A. Goddess Figures

In order to substantiate what has been said so far, let's take a look at some of the prominent women in Indian mythology and the roles they play: Gayatri, the personification of the

most potent of all mantras is the feminine form of gayatra a sanskrit word meaning a song or a hymn thus presupposing and following the existence of a male counterpart. The Vedas and the Puranas, both glorify Adity as the cosmic mother who is also called devamatri with more than seven to eight sons including Mitra, Aryaman, Bhaga, Varuna, Daksha and Amsa apart from being the mother of the great god Indra and thus attaining the stature of the mother of kings. The prominent goddesses Saraswati, Parvati, Lakshmi and Prithvi are first and foremost wives of the prominent Gods Brahma, Mahesh and Vishnu respectively and only then divinities in their own right and finally Shakti, the supreme figure among female divinities or the Universal Mother.

B. Archetype of Chastity in Indian Mythology

From goddesses to humans, we see the enduring female archetype of the female complementing the aura and the existence of the male; though this is not true conversely. In humans, this archetype, with her functional and derived existence, is further endowed with attributes that project her as the chaste, sacrificing, singularly devoted, extraordinarily beautiful wife who will go to the ends of the earth and endure perils, humiliation and even trial by fire for the sake of her husband. The retelling of the mythic tales in different religious and mythological texts or the epics has always ensured that these qualities in a woman be given paramount importance.

III. Recurring Archetypes of Chastity

A. Sita

Sita is the ultimate symbol of a chaste woman. But as Wendy Doniger says, 'in the Valmiki text there is evidence that Sita is sexually vulnerable' (1999: 12). She desires Marica, the asura, disguised as the golden deer, and falls prey to his fatal attraction and lusts for him. She sends first Rama and then Laxmana to capture Marica and her vulnerability increases when she is unable to recognize the difference between Marica and Rama's cry for help. Her assertion in first demanding Marica and then her choice of stepping out of the laxmanrekha (the line that is drawn by a male who acts as her protector and marks her confinement to protect her modesty) lead to her subsequent abduction and captivity. This could be read as the consequences a woman has to face if she dares to step out of her predefined confines or is weak enough to fall prey to an external source of attraction. Sita is eventually rescued; nevertheless she has to endure much and face the trial by fire or agnipareeksha before she's taken back by her husband.

Sita is glorified and worshipped to this day for her eternal faithfulness and her lasting devotion to her husband. This quality or aspect of her overrides the other mortal and

'lesser' qualities which make her more human. Clearly, the fact that she is renounced by her divine husband which eventually leads to a voluntary dissolution of her being is conveniently omitted in many texts. The Mahabharat, the Harivamsa and the Vishnu Purana leave out Sita's ordeal and therefore her image crystallizes in our collective unconscious as the ideal woman who lives on: a dutybound woman who keeps her family together. Sita enters our households as a deity with her husband Rama and brother-in-law Laxmana by her side and the devoted Hanuman at her feet, the virtuous mistress of any Indian household who keeps the family together and is benevolent towards those who serve her.

Her final act of giving up her physical being is read as the great sacrifice of a virtuous woman who ceases to 'be' for a greater good and gives up her claims in the interest of the state. Her silence is read as ready acceptance of what is dealt out to her, not mute resistance. Interestingly the part of the Ramayana in which these incidents occur is known as the Uttar Kand which was added much later to the original epic.

It is also interesting to note that there is a parallel myth of the shadow Sita or the illusory Sita in Adhyatma Ramayan who goes into the fire and is reborn as Draupadi with a potentially sexual future. (Doniger, p.13.)

In the section entitled 'Sita's Former Life', Doniger mentions a beautiful maiden named Vedavati who was granted the wish to marry Vishnu in her next life. "She went into the mountains to meditate but was attacked by Ravana who attempted to rape her. She being a good woman paralysed him with her angry gaze. He became unable to move his hands and feet." Then by the power of yoga, this woman dies and was reborn as Sita. Some texts claim that Ravana actually raped her as a consequence of which she cursed him and renounced her life. (p.13)

B. Ahilya

Next, we have the instance of Ahilya, the epitome of impeccable beauty and youth married to the old ascetic Gautam Rishi. The allure of the unknown in the form of the celestial god Indra is hard to resist and she finds herself succumbing to his advances despite seeing through his disguise. The Brahmanas(a) (9th to 6th centuries BCE) are the earliest scriptures to hint at her relationship with Indra. In the Skanda Purana, "Ahalya smells Indra's celestial fragrance" (pp. 96–7, 321–2). In Kamban's 12th-century Tamil adaptation of the Ramayana, the Ramavataram, narrates that Ahilya realises that her lover is an imposter but continues to enjoy the dalliance. The Kathasaritasagara (11th century CE) is also one of the few texts that mirrors the Bala

Kanda's Ahilya and says that Ahilya makes a conscious choice of copulating with Indra. (Ramanujan 1991, pp. 28-32).

Punishment awaits her and she is turned to stone by her husband. Ahilya has to pay the price for stepping out of the confines of wedlock.

Later retellings however mythicise her and make her the symbol of the eternally chaste. She is silenced, petrified and thus objectified by a male (by the curse of Gautam Rishi, her husband) and can be redeemed ironically only through the divine touch of another male. Like Sita, she too is symbolically set free by the same male rescuer, Rama. Again, in the retellings of her tale, the qualities that are eternalized and make her memorable and a part of the Indian collective unconscious are her patience, her ready resignation to the punishment given to her by her enraged husband and her years of passivity and penance and ultimate redemption at the hands of Rama.

Ahilya is a passive receptacle of these actions and turn of events. She is only active and when she unites with Indra. However, this choice of hers is best left undiscussed. It is interesting to note that although the Bala Kanda mentions that Ahilya consciously commits adultery(Bhattacharya March-April 2004, pp.4-7), the Uttar Kanda of the Ramayana and the Puranas (compiled between the 4th and 16th centuries CE) '…absolve her of all guilt and declare her a passive victim who falls prey to Indra's passion and manipulation.' (Ray, 2007. pp. 25-6). To acquit her further and in order to emphasise her objectified and pure status the Uttar Kanda recasts the tale as Ahilya's rape by Indra. (Doniger, 1999. pp. 89-90, 321-2). Subsequent retellings of her story glorify her as a woman epitomizing chastity so much so that she is the first amongst the five virgins or panchakanya to be worshipped by orthodox Hindus. (Bhattacharya, March-April 2004. pp. 4-7).

C. Sati

In the section The Shadow Sati, Doniger (p.17) discusses the story of Sati disguised as Sita who meets Rama to test him. Rama sees through her disguise. However, Sati comes back and lies to her husband Shiva, the consequences of which she has to

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Footnote:

a. Rambhadracharya 2006, p. 36: (mahâbhâgâC – decompose it as mahâ abhâgâm, she is an extremely unfortunate lady – mahat abhâgaC yasyâ% sâ, whose misfortune is very extreme ...") Rambhadracharya (Swami) (30 March 2006) (in Hindi). Ahalyoddhâra [The Liberation of Ahalya]. Jagadguru Rambhadracharya Handicapped University.

suffer later when Shiva renounces her and promises to himself: 'I will not touch Sati in the body she wears now.' There are parallels in the way these model mythological heroes or gods Shiva and Rama treat their wives. Both renounce their wives because they refuse to conform to societal rules which clearly govern individual choices. Rama wants to be the model king in order to set an example for his subjects whereas Shiva believes that if he treats Sati as his wife 'the faith that he follows will be lost.' However, popular retellings of these incidents do not emphasize these instances of male condescension and mythicise and glorify Sati and Sita as faithful wives who made mountainous sacrifices for the reputation and honour of their husbands while projecting Shiva and Rama as supremely devoted husbands.

D. Draupadi

Chastity seems like an overrated virtue and one can almost sense a preoccupation with preserving the chastity of women, or more obsessively labeling them as chaste in Vedic society. 'The Mahabharata contains instances of various kinds of kinship structure and various styles of marriage', reflects Indrani Singh Rai in her article entitled 'Mahashweta Devi's Draupadi: a discourse of the Dispossessed' (p.101). 'It is Draupadi who provides the only example of polyandry, not a common system of marriage in India.' However, it is said that on every occasion that Draupadi unites with one of the Pandavas, she passes through fire to regain her virginity for the next Pandava (Pattanaik, 2010. p.115). The definite hierarchy of the mind over the body is unmistakable. The body needs to undergo a purification process regardless of the mental association with another man. So, despite being married to five men Draupadi epitomizes purity as she is able to regain her virginity every time she puts her body to the test.

IV. The Mythicising Ritual

It is evident that the feminine body is the site of exploitation and needs to be punished and put to trial for any kind of offence. Thus we see Vedavati giving up her physical being after being violated by Ravana, Sita facing the agnipariksha or walking through fire, Draupadi emerging from the fire (she was born of fire) and purifying herself by passing through fire time and again, the sinning or the sinned against Ahilya's body being turned to stone, Shiva expressing his inability to love Sati in the 'body' she 'now wears'. Once the body has undergone the trial and suffered, the ritual of purification is complete and the woman attains a glorified status and is subsequently mythicised.

Where physical suffering determines the glorified status of some women there are

others who are first mythicised and then glorified by being compellingly associated with the divine. For instance, we have Kunti whose children are born out of wedlock through union with other men but though Kunti is human, the boon she is blessed with (for rendering 'services' to Rishi Durvasa) is divine and the men she unites with are celestial. Thus acquitted, Kunti is a part of mainstream society and royal politics. Radha, a married village, woman is universally and eternally accepted as the consort of Krishna for her association with divinity himself. For the same reason, Rukmini's elopement too, is not immoral.

Menaka has a child out of wedlock and so does Shakuntala her daughter but as Menaka is a nymph and Shakuntala is only half human, their deeds have divine sanction and are justified. In fact, there are accounts of other celestial nymphs too, who freely engage in lovemaking and copulation, and don't have to suffer any consequences for their actions. There is an instance of Urvashi the celestial nymph approaching Arjuna the Pandava prince and proposing physical union with him. Arjuna turns down this proposal as Urvashi has been the wife of his ancestor Pururava and this will amount to incest as she is a mother figure to him. An enraged Urvashi curses Arjuna with the loss of his manhood. (p170). Clearly nymphs are separate from humans, and their values and moral codes differ. Hence these women needn't suffer the consequences of their liberal moves and actions as they are already distanced from mainstream society.

Some women are glorified for their indulgence while others are punished. Probably the community they belong to plays a role in demarcating them, and determines the criticism or the judgement they might receive for their conduct. Looking at the social order, it is apparent that rishi patnis suffer extreme admonishment possibly because of the demand to lead idealized lifestyles and exemplary lives as wives of ascetics. Their male counterparts on the other hand, like the rishis Vishwamitra or Durvasa, needn't be as stringent or as austere. The offence could be as trivial as rishipatni Renuka's voyeuristic indulgence in the gandharva Chitrartha or graver like Ahilya's promiscuity. Regardless of the gravity or the extent of the 'sin', the punishment is extreme. Renuka is slain at the behest of her husband Jamadagni who directs their own son Parshuram to behead her, and Ahilya is turned to stone, an inanimate, rigid, feelingless thing symbolically objectified and petrified.

The females who belong to the community of mortals like Kunti, Draupadi, Radha and Rukmini are separated by a metaphysical distance from common women folk. Their experiences are idealized because of their compelling and convincing association with the divine. Moral behaviour is at times loosely imposed and flexible. The

immaculate Sita and the sexually potent Draupadi, are both epitomized; the trivial 'sinners' Sati and Renuka and the grave 'sinner' Ahilya are both chastised; the sinned aginst Vedavati has to perish. Is it possible that Shakuntala, Menaka, Kunti, Radha, Rukmini and Draupadi are acquitted because they have the dual sanction of the male and the divine in their choices or acts?

V. Conclusion

In his dissertation in progress on the creation of myths and their patterns of thought, Stefan Stennud tell us how archetypes function like 'symbolic keys' by unlocking experiences, rituals and beliefs stored in our collective unconscious (as Jung called it) or in Freudian terms our 'Archaic heritage' (Psychoanalysis of Myth: Freud and Jung's theories on myth and its origin). Archetypes are responsible for creating myths, religions, ideologies and philosophies, and Mythology comes to be looked upon as a projection of our collective unconscious.

India has had a long and ancient tradition of glorifying and mythicising its women and endowing them with divine attributes so that they symbolise something vastly larger than life and incredibly supreme. What we see is an extremely complex depiction of women and chastity as it is understood and projected in Indian mythology which doesn't set any common moral ground or ideal code of conduct when seen as isolated cases. What strings these women together is their mythicised and therefore, metaphysically aloof status. Or is it that the Indian woman's predicament is that whenever she displays the power to choose and step out of the predefined outline that a patriarchal society has drawn for her, she is either mythicised and turned into a supernatural being or glorified and put on a pedestal so that there remains a separateness or a distance between her and the multitudes of her gender. How important is it that she remains a distant figure who can be revered for her decisions and actions with unquestioning faith or read about and marveled at but never followed as a role model as this could result in destabilizing the arrangement of our society?

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