



Myths, Feminism and Modern Contemplation: A Study

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Abstract:

This study explores the representation of mythical figures through a feminist lens, focusing on how the concept of 'Yakshasis' or she-monsters has contributed to contemporary understandings of self-identity. It examines the ways in which these figures challenge traditional narratives, offering a feminist perspective on the construction of individual identity. It examines both the positive and negative portrayals of mythical Yakshasis, focusing on the depiction and re-imagining of she-demon figures in the Indian subcontinent. It offers a comparative analysis of Yakshasi representations through phallocentric historical and postmodern perspectives. This study draws upon Puranic texts and key Indian epics, including the Ramayana and Mahabharata, to explore these themes. The major objectives of the paper are: to critically analyse the falseness of metanarrative which concretizes any construction, and to reconstruct those images which are dull in senses. The paper includes methodology of materialist, feminist, and micro historical based analysis. The degree of presentation recommends trying to change the perspective and interpretation of feminine versions of feminine gender, especially mythical 'she' characters that are inculcated in deep inner conscious or subconscious mind. The paper highlights the concept of incredulity towards metanarrative by taking the references of 'she' mythical figures in the area of gender studies. It presents certain analogies between mythical she-monsters and today's feminist thinking in a wholesome way. Both, feminist and mythical representation had shared concerns in nature, nurture and productivity. Empowering women by taking monster figures as metaphors is key to the theme of the paper.

Keywords: Women empowerment, myth and feminism, mythical representation, Yakshasis or she-monster, postmodernity.

Introduction:

Mythology has had deep connection with the cultural values, shaping perspective to judge characters based on certain preconceptual projection. Mythical stories often play a significant role in understanding the values, beliefs and historical events of the past. Mythology on the Indian subcontinent has played a major role in shaping our Indian history. Pauranic or Vedic texts (Adhikari,2020; Adhikari et al., 2024) served as a driven force to carry out societal perspectives in every aspect. Acting as an instructive guide to social

norms the mythology represents the culture with various social concerns like greed, fratricide (Emerson,1965; Caldwell,1973), incest (O’Flaherty,1982; Monaghan, 2014; Shulman, 2014; Balter, 2016),patriarchal regime (Bennett, 2006; Brandmaier, 2015). Pierik, 2022) and many more. We have found archetypal characters mainly the feminine with strict boundaries and rigid projection. Mythical stories often articulate societal norms and gender roles, serving as both mirrors and creators of cultural realities. In each and every culture repression of women is pivotal everywhere. In today’s scenario, feminist scholars have challenged these patriarchal mythological anecdotes, and reinterpret them as a tool of resistance and transformation to establish feminine power against male oppression. In this modern era the revision of Indian mythology like Ramayana(Shastri, 1952) or Mahabharata(Ganguli, 1983-1986) presented the historical viewpoint of patriarchal society and also the emergence of feminism at that point of time through undefined non- archetypal female characters, mainly the she-demons.

Objectives:

- To present mythical Yashashis or she-demons from feminist perspective.
- To highlight the feminist version of non-archetypal mythical figures
- To present the similarities between mythical characters with modern feminism.
- To show the falseness of metanarratives.

Methodology:

The paper employs historical, feminist analytical study on mythical she demons in correlation with the modern concept of feminism.

Mythical figures subverting gender norms:

Much before today’s modern era, Indian mythology like *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata* gives the historical view on the concept of undefined feminism. Myths often portray archetypal figures whose characteristics inform societal perceptions of gender. Looking at the world’s history, the concept of feminism (Humm,1990;Nicholson,2010; Pruitt,2022; Soken-Huberty, 2022) with its first wave was started around the 18th or 19th century with the Women’s Right Convention in Seneca Fall, New York. This led to establishing the new way of looking Women beyond the boundaries.

The modern concept of Feminism gave the perception to see the projection of women in various literature including mythology and history. It gives a new direction for women emancipation from every phase of subjugation. Many feminist writers including Indian and foreign like Mary Wollstonecraft (Wollstonecraft, 1792) or Rashsundari Devi (Devi, 1879)the very first feminist writers establish the path of ‘her’ raising voice. It is very true that modern feminist writers played a very significant role in shaping women’s rights and to help to resist lack of opportunities and domination. In today’s postmodern world India mythological figures mainly the non-archetypal anticipate with the concept of women emancipation. We find Kali, the slayer of demons. Although being a goddess she is represented as a demonic figure.

Every past writing has been written in male oriented perspective. For instance, Sakuntala in Kalidas’*Abhijñānaśākuntalam*(Ryder, 1912), agony and deception merely has to suffered by a woman not by any man.Women who often tried to go beyond the rules of male constructiveness always meant to be punishable in the name of destiny.She-demons (Ryder, 1912 or Yakshashis are the part of this male oriented creation where certain figures who tried to go beyond the set rules are often portrayed as the unfit image for

the society. By portraying some feminine characters as unfit, it contributes to boost the patriarchal society, running in a smooth way without any objection or competition.

Equality among gender demands competition. For the preservation of phallogocentric society such competition and equality often get eroded by the masculine gender. Postmodernist writer, Jean-François Lyotard (Lyotard, 1984) talked about the collapse of metanarrative where such demonic representation gets reinterpreted in certain positive aspects rather than the unfit image as presented in the original works. The binary representations of gender in mythological narratives frequently project gender in binary terms, associating masculinity with power, logic, and action, while femininity is tied up with emotion, fertility, and passivity. It is supposed that women should not be arbitrary. Weakness with male surviving nature is the key concept prepared by the patriarchy for the women. Gerda Lerner (Lerner, 1986) argued that male dominance over women is not “natural” or biological, but the product of a historical development begun in the second millennium B.C. in the Ancient Near East. As patriarchy as a system of organizing society was established historically, she contends, it can also be ended by the historical process. Such dichotomies are also very evident in mythology, across cultures, including the Hindu mythical figures of Sita in the *Ramayana*, which idealizes female chastity and devotion, reinforcing patriarchal expectations. Whereas, Surpanakha (Chaudhury, 2024), the other non-archetypal figures in *Ramayana* represented as the demonic character who doesn't follow the rigid rules of patriarchy, having the courage to confer her desires and sentiments in the open without any concealed boundary.

According to the Puranic texts (Padmalochana, & Ilkal, 2016), Brahma created man first and then woman as his companion with whom man felt complete. However, the regime was misguided by the patriarchal society. Looking through the modern critical lens, mythological Yakshasis were the major self-dependent force who were projected in a major negative sense. Having the power to control their own life, making their own possible decisions, these figures are often portrayed as the antagonist and harmful creature for mankind. Their integrity and choice of remaining self-saturated express the inner ambitious sentiments and reluctance to the patriarchal marriage system. For many contemporary feminist writers the mythological image of she demons projects the feminist viewpoint against male oppression in society.

She demons and patriarchy:

The life of Hidimba confesses the fragile and rotten system of male dominated society. In order to have a happy and successful marital life one needs to be an archetypal ‘good’ woman, all round self-serving to man throughout her life long. The reinterpretation of Hidimba could be analysed in *Ghatotkach and Hidimba: A Dialogue* where Biswas (n.d.), despite being a Dalit activist he poignantly unconcealed the feminist version of Yakshashi Hidimba (Majumdar, 2018). who is neither weak nor less worthy than any man including the Bhim, the Pandavas. However, the agony of punishment, and abandonment has also the trivial incidents which led women to be subservient to man. *Mahabharata* never projected Bhim as treacherous while Hidimba is often characterized as an unfit partner for Bhim despite having all the essential qualities she was never considered as the first legal wife of Bhim throughout the narrative. Postmodern writers question these nuanced events and reinterpret them in different ways unlike the way it is narrated in the original text. The modern feminist writers use these mythical non-archetypal figures to represent the protest and struggle of the marginalised subalterns against the dominant ideology of male power politics. Such reinterpretation gave agency to those figures who were projected in not good manners.

The grand narratives often showed demons as marginalised ones consequently giving an expression of today's subaltern (Spivak, 1988) position of women. The way Yakshashi Tadaka fought for her husband or Kali against the demons minutely enunciates the aesthetic state of women's power. It has been said that most of the Yakshasis were cursed by the Rishis who were men. Feminist writers often raise questions upon the

false power of male hegemony for deciding the right and wrong decision-making for women. Additionally, the non-depicted narration of women sages in mythology too questions upon the hierarchical gender binary system. Mythology often shows male aggrandizement by keeping women figures into the world of negligence and ignorance. It points out the contradictory image of angelic versus demonic version of women within the society. Feminist theorists like Adrienne Rich (Kaushal,2005) or Hélène Cixous (Cixous et al. 1976) argued for the reclamation of mythological narratives to empower women. Reimagining myths can catalyse social change by challenging traditional gender roles and fostering inclusivity. Modern storytelling mediums, such as digital platforms and social media, enable diverse communities to reinterpret myths, amplifying marginalized voices and perspectives. The reinterpretation of myths through feminist lenses has profound implications for contemporary society. It challenges deep-seated patriarchal ideologies, inspiring a rethinking of gender roles and power structures.

Archetypal versus non- archetypal:

Despite the fact that feminism was not termed at that time, Vedic period consists of those characters who are parallelly connected to today's modern feminism. Draupadi is one of those figures. Apart from she demons, merely Draupadi carries the elements of feminism where she voices up for her own self standing against the patriarchal norms of the society. Despite having multiple husbands she has the self-respect of her own. Unlike archetypal figures like Sita, Draupadi never succumbed to any male oriented decision.

Non archetypal figures possess a kind of agency that provide them a way of understanding, living their life in their own way. Women possessing agency were never ever supported by the masculine power. The clash of power politics between non-archetypal women and men is a key aspect in mythology. Women who were against the stereotypical system are always projected as ugly, harmful and fallen in nature. The Yakshashis are those figures who imbibe such orthodox qualities, categorised as unfit women within the society. Millet (1970) in her Sexual Politics states how literature reflects patriarchal construction, creating hierarchy based on sexual orientation. The personal becomes the political. She poignantly argues how female oppression is a political and cultural construction.

Falseness of metanarratives:

The concept of the “falseness of metanarratives” is closely tied to postmodern philosophy, particularly the ideas of thinkers like Jean-François Lyotard (Lyotard, 1984). A metanarrative, or grand narrative, refers to overarching, all-encompassing stories or explanations that claim to explain and legitimize knowledge, history, culture, and society in a totalizing way. These metanarratives often present themselves as universal truths that apply across all times and places. Classic examples include religious narratives, Enlightenment rationalism, Marxism, and modernist progress.

Postmodern thinkers argue that these grand narratives are inherently problematic because they oversimplify, exclude, and marginalize diverse perspectives. Lyotard (1979), in his work *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), famously declared that we are living in an era where “the grand narratives” no longer hold sway—people are sceptical of the idea that any one story can explain all of human experience or history.

The “falseness” of metanarratives is not necessarily about a direct contradiction or falsehood, but rather the recognition that these grand narratives often suppress complexity, diversity, and the multiplicity of human experiences. Postmodernism challenges the idea that there can be a single, objective truth that applies to everyone and everything. Instead, it advocates for a plurality of smaller, localized narratives that reflect the diversity and complexity of human life.

The first wave of the feminist movement (Pruitt, 2022) is usually tied to the first formal Women's Rights Convention that was held in 1848.

Feminism and postmodernism:

Postmodern feminism offers multiple perspectives to look one thing in different angles. Mythical non archetypal figures are such examples where re- interpretation necessarily involved those angles which are not or never being discovered. Drawing parallel connection does not induct the perspective to represent today's feminist view as demonic rather it aims to show the atypical figures as feminist which society at that time denied to accept. The way Elaine Showalter (Showalter, 2012) or Judith Butler (Butler, 1990a, 1990b) the modern feminist resists the idea of women's beauty and their limitations to domestic sphere is reminiscent to the mythological figures of the Yakshasis or she- demons who are atypically shown in historic mythology.

The act of sexual identity and its intimacy often highlighted through mythical figures like Sakuntala or Hidimba in *Mahabharata*. Therefore, confer the idea of modernity at that time despite of living in phallocentric society. According to the radical feminist Showalter (2012), marriage is an organised way of colonization that radically found in mythological atypical figures mainly the Yakshasis. The she- demons not merely resisted and fought against the powerful authority but also rejected the typical system of being marriage, serving men physically and mentally, denying to vow the lifelong slave of their men. They never succumbed and subjugated by the patriarchal regime. Ibsen (Ibsen, 1908), the modern feminist writers articulated the right and importance of true self identity of women which gives them path to self-foundation. It is crucial to build own empire in order to lead and control own destiny in male orthodox society where women in veil often projected as good, weak and nutritious in nature. Archetypal women often used as a reliable reproductive machine whose mere task is to uphold the upcoming generation, feeding and being subservient to male chauvinism which need to be changed.

Conclusions:

The idea of mythology feminist perspective not just an attempt to elaborate the concept of mythical feminism but to empower today's womanhood from the fullness of the patriarchal stereotypes in terms of beauty, attitude and serving behaviour. Henrik Ibsen in *The Doll's House*(Ibsen, 1965)prominently shows how much significant self-identity becomes for a woman to first have an own identity mark and then to have other relationship in the name of daughter, wife and mother. Mythical Non archetypal figures show the path of self-discover. The critical analysis excavated the feminist ideology found in the mythologies. From the very first wave of feminism started in twentieth century to till the new fourth wave of feminism: from radically to pseudo each and every characteristic is critically found in the non-archetypal mythical figures. Feminism has different branches: Black Feminism, Marxist Feminism, Eco Feminism. Feminism in mythology could one of these. In words of Lyotard (1984), the feministic version of she demons does not concretize rather liquified the preconceptual representation of women, categorising them good versus fallen or angel verses demonic. In general, mythical non-archetypal female figures embody the qualities and essential elements of feminism that are often lacking in archetypal female figures.

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