Daring to Tell the Tale: A Thematic Analysis of Feminist Retellings of Popular Mythological Narratives

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Abstract

The paper critically examines the radical subversions of three popular mythological narratives, all centered around female protagonists-the good woman, the bad, and the one who could never be the former because of being a woman. Each of these narratives originally act as either tales of caution or as stories glorifying the noble cis male victor's heroism in protecting the weak female and act as mechanisms to rid the society of deviance while perpetuating caste patriarchal norms of the times. Subverting the popular narrative structure, each of these three pieces- ranging from poetry to novel- re-imagine and re-hierarchize not only the female protagonist but also debunks the vilification of many other female characters and question perpetual systems of oppression instead. They turn the narratives from tales of individual blame to questions of larger social processes that allow and facilitate the suppression of all who do not hold power. Taking a look at writing spanning almost a century and focusing on views of authors coming from distinct social, political and gender(ed.) locations, the paper tries to analyze the challenge to the dominant narratives from below through an intersectional feminist point of view. The paper tries to take a fresh look into old myths and critically examine ideas of solidarity, resistance and liberation and the potential they hold in the contemporary context.

Keywords*: Feminist retellings, mythology, literature, caste-patriarchy, agency, intersectionality.*

Introduction

Mythology is perhaps one of the most crucial components of any society's collective memory, imagination and belief. Handed down over generations, they shift and get molded through human history and in turn shift and mold the same. While debates regarding their origin and purpose range from fields of psychology to religion, their ever-pervasive effect hardly leaves scope of questioning.

Presenting a strong backing of moral force and command, these myths often undergo questioning and subsequent retellings. As with most narratives, it is often the voice of the victor - the powerful, that myths of a particular temporal order seem to propagate and hence comes the challenge from below. The challenge twists the story and presents a brand-new, yet-unseen facet of the same old story.

Gender remains one of the most seminal prongs on which these moral dilemmas seem to play out. Intersecting with caste, class, religion and myriad other identities, mythology often serves as a tale of caution, a lingering reminder of the 'expected norm'. This piece moving from Sita to Soorpanakha to Eve, takes a critical look at the radical retellings of the widely known stories of these three characters in the context of the contemporary and analyzes the challenges the authors seem to throw up in the face of multiple systems of oppression.

The One Who Tells

Volga

'Volga'- the famous pseudonym of Telegu author Popuri Lalita Kumari is a household name in feminist circles. Penning the ever popular and acclaimed feminist take on the Ramayana, '*Vimukta'* or *'The Liberation of Sita'*, she has carved a niche for herself in the space of critical feminist writing. The very name 'Volga' has a history, and especially a history of resistance and loss behind it. As T. Vijayakumar (2016) writes the name was originally given to the author's elder sibling by their father, commemorating a soviet woman killed by the Nazis the same day she was born. After the unfortunate and untimely demise of her sister, the author assumed the name in her memory and continues to use it as her pseudonym till date.

She had been engaged in active politics and activism from an early age, starting with active engagement with the Student Federation of India, following which she joined the Revolutionary Writer's Association which was a branch of the Communist Party of India Leninist Marxist. However, as with most grand ideological movements of resistance, the cracks and faults start appearing soon enough and, in this case, the gender blindness and ignorance of the party became a sore point for the author, due to which she decided to take her leave from the space and focus all her energy into trying to propagate feminist vision and ideology amongst readers of Telugu literature and decided to mold her activism through her literary skills.

In an interview she speaks of what drew her to activism initially, away from literature. She says, rather than being a matter of activism taking precedence over literary concerns, it was a matter of devoting herself to a cause which she felt more sorely needed her attention and contribution. She says that while she retained her immense love for literature throughout, she felt there was a huge gap in the representation of women activists, and at least somebody needed to come forward to fill the crucial role. A similar urge and need brought her back to writing as well in 1981 according to her. She did not see any promising writing coming up in Telugu literature which truly captured the feminist ethos and therefore, again decided to take on this heavy task herself. She terms her pre-80s writing career the leftist period and the post-80s, the feminist phase.

She talks of her own experience of difference and intersection as her relationship with feminism and feminist literature has deepened. Starting with a view of all women being the same, mirroring Marxism-inspired aspirations of all workers (regardless of other identity markers) to unite, her ideas have gotten more nuanced with caste and sexuality politics coming in over time. Some undertones of this become clear even in the book being discussed here.

Talking of her motivation and process of bringing '*Vimukta'* to fruition she says she had initially started only with one short story describing the encounter between Sita and Soorpanakha to counter the censoring brought on by *Doordarshan*, the next she says was the story of Ahalya which she sees as a miraculous experience since that was completely penned in a trance according to her, something that is beyond any rational explanation even for her. Finishing

these two, she decided to write more around Sita and wrote the other parts of the book. Her intention she says was to focus on the idea of solidarity between women stemming from the broader idea of solidarity of all who are oppressed, again showing a sense of Marxist critique running through her line of thoughts. She tries to portray all the other female characters as Sita's sisters in her words.

Talking of reception, she notes an overwhelmingly positive one with even staunch traditionalists also accepting her work without much clamor and critique because of what she believed to be a balanced approach she has developed in feminism.

Karthik Hebbar

In contrast to Volga's experience the location and experience of the author of the second piece seems to be completely distinct. Karthik Hebbar, the composer of the second text chosen, *'Soorpanakha Navarasa Gadya'* is a Kannada poet, author, theatre practitioner, Carnatic vocalist and much more. They are also a queer rights activist working and writing regarding queer discourse and compositions widely. Additionally, they have also worked in the television and film industry both as a writer and an actor. Coming from a space of clear marginality and oppression, their view seems to be colored by a very different sort of experience than Volga's. First being a male identified body, itself positions them very differently from a female presenting cis woman. However, the aspect of being a queer male again brings in the entire complexity of the cis gendered privilege versus the non-hetero marginalization. It is clear that it is this tension and understanding of other such intersection-ally generated tensions and fractures that fuel all his work, be it music, theatre or literary.

The reception of their work is also almost always colored by the kind of "image" they have portrayed or what has been dominantly seen. Although belonging to a marginalized location in terms of sexuality, their class privileges seem to make them palatable to a section of elite performers in the classical dance and music fields. Therefore, while widely praised and performed by many "Instagram-friendly" artistes within and out of the app, there is also a barrage of hatred that seem to come their way not only from the faceless masses looking to protect their entrenched blind beliefs but also from the traditionally elite groups of these communities hoping to protect the *Sanatan dharma* from the onslaught of filth

and perversion and questioning. The piece chosen was performed by a cis- female presenting heterosexual dancer who again had the necessary number of followers and popularity in the dance field. She is also someone with the image of being a "modern questioning thinking" dancer. Despite this, her performance was critiqued by many not in terms of quality but in the context of even daring to choose a piece as blasphemous as this, something that shakes the core of faith and invites "falsities".

Kabita Sinha

The third author comes from the east and is a prominent feminist author from Bengal. Kabita Sinha comes much before the time of the other two. Nameera Anjum Khan (2023) writes that Sinha was a pioneer in the field of Bengali feminist work. Apart from being an author, she also donned the caps of a novelist and a radio director. She has been recognized as the first feminist poet of Bengali literature and wrote extensively for years under her pen name Sultana Chaudhary, a name delightfully ambiguous in its use of social location and intersecting lines and contexts of power.

Her writing and life both seem to present a streak of rebellion and irreverence for the status quo. Speaking back to established norms, she went on to marry a man of her choice, hence inviting a big rebellion and backlash through her actions which otherwise her cis-gendered female presenting heterosexual normative identity might not have drawn. Her politics did not remain confined just to the personal, she delved deeply into the actual physical political arena with her strong voiced support of the Bangladesh Liberation War, something extremely atypical for women of the times. Like the piece chosen, her life seems to be a mission in rethinking, radicalizing and questioning almost cruelly- incessantly and ruthlessly probing and hitting the myths patriarchy tries to shroud us all in.

The Tales Told

Sita

Volga in *'Vimukta'* or *'The Liberation of Sita'*, talks of Sita's liberation, not merely from immediate physical constraints but socio-cultural and emotional ideological ones. The one theme that perhaps emerges most prominently throughout is the narrative and necessity of solidarity, of sisterhood. The

narrative flows through five sections in all, each of the first four narrating Sita's encounter with one unlikely female comrade from the pages of the Ramayana while the last speaks of Rama, the king of Ayodhya and his life without his beloved Sita.

Starting with perhaps the starkest encounter of all, Volga delves into an imagined tale of Sita coming face to face with Soorpanakha, the Lankan royal, the epitome of what not to be. Usually portrayed as someone lying outside the charmed circle (Rubin, 2007) of established morality and norm, she is what Sita is not, she is the despicable 'bad' woman to Sita's venerated 'goodness'. The narrative picks up years after the sensationalized incident of mutilating Soorpanakha has taken place, situated at a time when Sita also is living in Valmiki's ashram at the later stages of her life, the author uses a clever play on the word beauty to elucidate its various shades and intonations.

It starts with Lava and Kusha, Sita's sons' simplistic view of the external beauty of an "ugly" woman tending to a beautiful garden, the woman is question being Soorpanakha as Sita later realizes and to the eyes of the boys not yet old enough to understand the ways of the world but deeply inculcated already with the ideas of standards of feminine beauty and ableism, the "ugliness" becomes an inevitable consequence of her disfigurement. Instead of trying to conjure up feeling of pride in Rama's sense of *dharma* or even pitiable feelings of jealousy towards Soorpanakha, the temptress, Sita is shown to be sympathetic towards her plight from the very beginning. She is shown to have a clear understanding of what was the true motivation towards the unprovoked violence that Soorpanakha had to endure- politics. It was the unbridled need for conquering that led to this mutilation, using the woman as only the pawn in the games of the empire, seeing her disfigurement and lifelong pain as a small sacrifice at the altar of conquest.

Sita seems to be convinced from the very beginning that they were both bound by the thread of not being able to find true love or companionship, Soorpanakha due to her mutilation, Sita due to her abandonment. However, this trope gets completely subverted once she meets her and gets to know how she has indeed found a companion, even despite her disfigurement. Sita coming initially from a consolatory position of how the love or approval of men is useless, stemming from a deep belief that such clear disfigurement can only look "ugly" and

therefore not worthy of love to any man, is left dumbfounded to find the situation to be otherwise. The line of argument then changes from a notion of consolation to a notion of expecting more, expecting a change in the fundamental conceptualization of beauty itself, looking at it as a construct and undoing the widely spread ideas of what "normalcy" looks like.

However, this again does not point to therefore needing the approval of the "right" men in life, it rather as author clarifies through Soorpanakha's voice, points to realizing the futility of wanting approval and comments that only beyond this power imbalanced sense of hierarchical companionship lies the true form of partnership. However, here Volga's attempt at showing the man bowing down to the woman's will, seems problematic and seems to bear resemblance sot certain essentialist ecofeminist arguments. The complete inversion of patriarchy is not the true goal of feminism, it's dismantling is.

The author also introduces here ideas of different sensibilities of perceiving environment- be it natural or material. Perhaps a commentary on Soorpanakha's Lankan roots and the idea of the Savarna man encroaching on the rights of the indigenous, the author presents a sharp contrast between the beauty of the forest and the ugliness of the city. The masculine mechanical city is demonized, and the unadulterated feminine nature exalted. She brings in themes of migration and urbanization deftly into this entire conversation. She speaks of how the children of the forest need to feed into their desire or even necessity to migrate to the city which draws them promising life's basic requirements yet at the same time destroys the forest in its own expansion. Sita tries to impart this knowledge of the divine natural roots even to her children and speaks of no matter where they might end up later in life wandering, they must not forget the beauty of the natural, the garden created by the beautiful woman disfigured by the ugliness of patriarchy.

The next woman Sita comes in contact with is another woman of "disgrace" in the epic- Ahalya. Here the author deals with a very sensitive side of autonomy for women, autonomy over own sexuality and sexual choices. Branded as a woman of immense beauty but lack of 'character' by men and privileged women, Ahalya becomes at the same moment an unfortunate yet tarnished woman, unable to escape the cunning disastrous plan of Indra. The rage of her husband is

justified as the reasonable wrath of the 'owner' of the property- the woman. The timely feminist twist that Volga brings in here is the questioning not only of the husband or Indra's intent, but Ahalya's own. By raising the question of whether she was only an unknowing victim or a woman who made a choice by her own volition, she questions the entire trope of the good chaste helpless woman all at once. The question of pollution constantly hounding a woman's agentic sexual choices is highlighted. She also questions the entire idea of "turned into a stone" due to the husband's rejection, Ahalya portrays this as the popular perception, a myth people have told themselves to ensure a sound sleep at night with their fragile morals still intact.

In the third chapter Sita interacts with Renuka Devi, a woman of tremendous talents and also disgrace, she is the mother of the famous Parasurama, half hacked to death by her own son upon the father's wishes. Volga brings up the question of caste, endogamy and chastity in this section adeptly. By pointing to an analogy very similar to Leela Dube's famous Brass and Earthen pot analogy describing the precariousness of women's sexual purity and chastity and how easy it becomes to lose the coveted status in a hetero patriarchal society, while similar demands are never made of men. Renuka Devi describes how the mere act of looking at another man drove her husband to command her death upon her son who forgetting all his bonds of attachments with the mother without hesitation moves to kill her and fulfil his duty to the father. The author brings in the interrelation of Brahminism and patriarchy and how the two systems of oppression enforce each other and how no matter what the socio-emotional bond, the structural powers always win out at the end. The identity of the patriarchal figure always gets pre-eminence over the mother's role.

The fourth chapter brings the discourse closer to home with Sita having an exchange with her own sister Urmila, the left behind wife of Lakshmana. The narrative here moves even closer to the question the author has been trying to address throughout- the question of autonomy, autonomy over the self. Urmila speaks of her silent search for truth within herself which people like with Ahalya's fate believe to have been mere "sleep". She speaks of how she reclaimed power over herself and asks Sita also to do the same. She says "*Assert your right over yourself. Give up your power over others. Then you will belong*

to yourself. You will be yourself. It's not easy to remain ourselves- trust me, Akka!" (Volga, 2016, p-78).

In the final chapter Volga takes the stance of men also being victims of same structures. Rather than showing individuals as perpetrators, she tries to make the system responsible. By showing a broken Rama devoid of the love of his beloved yet deeply entangled in his sense of duty and obligations to the *Arya Dharma* and the throne and the "liberated" Sita, who has inculcated all the radical ideas and questioning introduced by the other female characters. Rama details the process of socialization through which the ideas of dharma, duty towards community, caste, state, nation are inculcated and how they bind people in their vicious grasp until nothing is left of the human but the dharma, duty and sacrifice. He talks of how it was all pre-planned, how the attack on Soorpanakha was a clever ploy to get Ravana to retaliate so that wars could be fought, and kingdoms could be expanded all the while keeping *dharma* firmly on one's side. Sita becomes the tool of his liberation since she provides him with the two heirs who turn his stone-like heart back to human.

Volga brings subtle nuances of patriarchy throughout, starting with Sita's portrayal as the ever-anxious woman brings her down to a mortal plane unlike the all-knowing goddess she is usually portrayed to be in popular understanding. The fine sense of male-protector emerging for the children she has, also shows the wife-mother-property vision given to Indian women. Rama's constant possessiveness and expectation of undying devotion and his own wish to serve as the lord-protector over not only the realm but her, shows the archetypical male figure emerging. Her attempt at keeping Rama himself away from the eye of scrutiny while might be praised for shifting focus to structure than person, also seems like an attempt to appease sentimentalities of perhaps the devout.

Soorpanakha

Karthik Hebbar's Soorpanakha is a woman of agency. Coming from a background of Carnatic music and Bharatanatyam dance the author speaks of trying to turn around the male gaze present in most of these compositions and particularly in *Navarasa Gadhya* as where either *hasyam* or *beebhatsyam* becomes the domain of Soorpanakha's portrayal. Either Rama roars in laughter looking at her mutilated face or people shrivel away in disgust looking at it, both

giving her the role of the woman to be ridiculed or be disgusted by. This piece making Soorpanakha the protagonist, explores all the *rasas* from her eyes.

The piece starts with a portrayal of Soorpanakha as something similar to what she was shown to be by Volga at her later stage, one attuned to the natural environment around her. She follows the sound of birds, matches the elephant's gait and only at the inching of a friendly bird goes ahead to see the figures of the Northern foreigners who have come into her land and thus experiences *adbhuta rasa*. She sees Rama and Lakshmana, the *Kaushalya Suta* and his brother both with lotus eyes and long arms, full of grace and masculine poise. The simple act of gazing in amazement at a male figure turns around the typical patriarchal trope of the male gaze.

Moving on to *shringara*, this subversive trope continues with her describing the physical beauty of Rama and Lakshamana, showing her attraction as completely hinged on their physical beauty and that also not just of one appointed suitable male prospect but two foreign ones. Next comes *bhayanaka* rasa where the young woman is shown to undergo a dilemma traditional of love, to say it out loud or not to. But here there is an added element of comparing the two social locations. She knows the perception northerners have of her people, they are the ones termed *Rakshashis* or demonesses, cunning people with loose morals. She expects *tiraskar* or disdain and humiliation at the hands of her hopeful lover and therefore feels *bhaya*.

Coming to *hasyam*, the one usually associated with her humiliation and Rama's triumphant mocking laughter, here in an attempt to become more palatable to these new strangers, she decides to dress up like the pretty woman they have brought with her, placing the flower contently on her head like that woman she goes to see her own reflection in the stream. What she sees rather than happiness gives her amusement, like seeing oneself as a caricature, something she was indulging in as play acting and thus she laughs. This laughter while being still directed at herself and her appearance is not malicious, is not humiliating, but rather a moment of self-discovery and self-assertion.

The next rasa *veera* turns the usually submissive woman into the brave one. Rather than the typical portrayals of heroism in terms of valor in war, here the act of bravado comes from love instead of violence. Here heroism is in

Soorpanakha's unabashed acceptance and declaration of her love and her desire for sexual union with Rama and Lakshmana. She even goes far enough to portray the typical features of the benevolent protector-warrior and asks him not to be afraid and to trust her and give in. Upon learning of her marriage, she looks at Sita with slight disdain and moves on to approach Lakshmana, subverting the idea of the monogamous *pativrata*, solely devoted to one man's service all her life.

Seeing Sita as well she tries to calmly approach her when her nose and ear are chopped off by the great Lakshmana and the blood the poet describes flows out in a way, colouring even the skies and clouds dark red. This is where *raudra* or rage comes in, as bright as her blood, she questions the motives of the perpetrators. What crime had she committed, what trickery had she employed that she was dealt this fate, she points a trembling finger at the princes of Ayodhya and curses them all.

For *karuna* or compassion, she tearfully narrates her plight to her brother Ravana who initially while shocked into averting his eyes, end with gently placing his hand on her head when hearing her sob and tell how an act of declaring love invited such terrible unprovoked violence upon her. Then comes the part which most quintessentially becomes her, disgust. Here very interestingly, the disgust is still directed at herself only but not her physical self. She begins by questioning what her fault even was and then she seems to find the answer within. The fault was to ever feel anything akin to love for men with egos as fragile as these. She understands that she was being punished for not being the demure dainty woman she was expected to be. The agency of even speaking of her feelings was not granted to her. She feels disgust at her naivety, her stupidness to ever believe anything resembling a union could come out of this.

Finally, the piece ends with s*hanta rasa* or peace, one perhaps least likely to be ever associated with a 'demoness'. Here Soorpanakha is shown to go back to her roots, in the forest she realizes all that was there earlier is still present, the sunlight, birds, breeze do not see a difference in her outer appearance. They all treat her the same. She finds acceptance and peace within herself thus.

Like in case of Volga, Hebbar here focuses on the idea of the woman's agency. Just as Sita reflecting on her experiences comes to a point of self-discovery, so

does Soorpanakha, only here through a conversation with her own self rather than others. While Sita is the perfectly molded 'good woman' who is isolated in her journey mostly due to her strict socialization and therefore the counsel of others helps her sustain and survive, in case of Soorpanakha, her disfigurement takes away all those she had for counsel and forces her to face herself. In both cases solidarity becomes central, whether to oneself or to others in similar conditions, the oppressed find strength within. The male exalted model is constantly inverted, either in Volga's traditional feminist way of taking the blame completely away from the person to the structure or in Hebbar's more recent and pointed way of blaming the institution while also holding the actual actors accountable for being complicit to the power structure in place for their selfish gains.

Eve

While Volga's Sita or Hebbar'sSoorpanakha speak back to men and specific communities and through that question the order and structures established, Kabita Sinha's Eve, the quintessential woman of all contradictions, speaks back directly to God, the assumed source of patriarchy for all societies. The voice of the poet becomes clear and resounding through Eve's speech in *'Ishwarke Eve' (Eve Speaks to God)*.

Eve is the woman lying somewhere between Sita and Soorpanakha, neither is she the pristine innocent *dharma* retaining noble woman nor is she the cunning temptress, the bad woman. She lies somewhere ambiguous in her innocence and inability to control her base urges. She does harm without meaning to, but still does the harm which then the righteous man needs to bear the brunt of.

Here the poet flips this narrative to bring out Eve's perspective where she takes up agency again and talks of her experiential view. She becomes the "*First rebel against God"*, as sinful and as magnanimous as the devil himself. Instead of admitting sin or fault she says she got to know the richness of life after biting into the forbidden fruit- the fact that black and white, rise and fall allare two sides of the same thing, life. She says she was the first to see clearly through the facade God has so deftly woven.

Instead of shying away from the fact of having bitten into the forbidden fruit, she turns it around as the first claim on *true knowledge, the first step away from ignorance*. She was the first to contain God's duality of modesty and immodesty in her own physical self and through the tribulations of these had created the first human child. She claims herself akin to God, capable of creation and privy to all knowledge he has.

She openly sounds her defiance as she counters the entire notion of paradise and calls the aspiration of pleasure alone as mere delusion. It's a golden shackle that must be broken to experience life to its fullest- through all its layers of joy, grief, pain, anger. She claims autonomy and marks herself different from the blind meek Adam whom God could turn into his little puppet. Calling herself the first rebel on earth- the first free woman she calls God her beloved slave, one still stuck in the rut of glorifying paradise. Rather than penance she proudly calls the banishment her boon which led her to realize how life with all its myriad hues is not only as good but better in a million ways than the unidimensional pleasure of paradise.

What All Three Tell

All the three texts speak of women characters traditionally portrayed in very different sense, but all stripped off of agency and autonomy in traditional narratives. Be it the ideal "good" woman Sita or the "bad" woman Soorpanakha or the "naive" sinner Eve, they are all pivotal to their stories but still passive, all required but as a facilitator for others, men. Here these women find voices to change and retell their own story, shifting the typical assumptions formed on the basis of acceptable ideas of femininity which tend to justify male atrocities, here the women vociferously challenge the entrenched norms and take up the mic themselves.

While Sita's story focuses on the questioning if the social systems in place through a long winding tale of solidarity with other oppressed, Soorpanakha comes to that point through a long dialogue within while Eve seems to have been through her fair share tribulations and arrived at a point of open rebellion. What becomes clear through all their narratives is the questioning of interwoven intersecting lines of oppression, be it Arya dharma caste and patriarchy or

sexuality sin and penance. The women in loud strong and resounding voices ask *Why?*

Interrogating these questions through writings picked across a time period of almost a century, the perpetuation of the re-told narratives from the viewpoint of caste-patriarchal seems to point to an unfortunate continuation of oppressive ideologies in popular mythology. The backlash that most of these texts received is testament to the same. However, the efforts being made to overcome such essentialized ideas of "good" and "bad', "right and "wrong" have become more visible with challenges emerging from the marginal ever more frequently. Doing so, they not only re-imagine tales of the past but critically contribute to the ongoing discourse around gender, gendered lives and intersections of power and identities that create, bind and break us.

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