Dissent and Articulation: Women's Voices in the *Kathāsaritsāgara*

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Abstract

One of the significant problems pertaining to women as agents of history is the deliberate silencing of their voices by the dominant patriarchal order. This voicelessness reduces them to being an 'inarticulate' persona, subsequently making them largely invisible in the historical records. The search for women's voices, therefore, is a means of empowerment that represents a vital aspect of feminist theory and practices since the 1960s. Notwithstanding the rigorous attempts to silence them, there are instances of several exemplary women in the past who articulated against the biased societal set-up and gendered prejudices. The historical literary traditions of the Indian subcontinent are replete with references to such dissenting voices of women speaking for themselves against the patriarchal hegemony. These records of women are left hidden or neglected for a very long time, as history itself has always been male-centric, with the task of transmission and interpretation vested in men. Nevertheless, it is high time now that such voices be heard and recognized. This article thus seeks to bring out such women's voices of dissent and articulation from Somadeva's Kathāsaritsāgara, an eleventh-century text of Kashmir.

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When we look back into the past of humankind and their societies, what we expect to witness is the lived experiences of the people during the concerned time. But such reconstruction, when it comes to women's experience, however, has never been adequate (Keohane, Rosaldo and Gelpi 1981: vii). The experiences of women were never explained by themselves; rather, it was done necessarily by men; this is again why women's experiences were rarely a concern for focus for theoretical consciousness. The society and social relationships being a binary structure of 'power and powerlessness', the voices of powerless/subservient women have always remained submissive or deliberately silenced by the powerful/dominant male. It is vividly evident in men-centric literatures and mythologies. Here, mention may be made of the infamous Gārgī-Yajñavalkya debate referred to in the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*, where Gārgī recurrently poses some intense questions to Yajñavalkya. Finally, when he could not answer these never-ending questions, he warned Gārgī to stop questioning. He says, "Do not, O Gārgī, push your inquiry too far, lest your head should fall off" (The Brhadaranyaka Upanishad 1950: 493). Thus, it is such silencing of women's voices for centuries is that led Simone de Beauvoir to write in her infamous work, *The Second Sex*, that "the reason why women lacked concrete means for organising themselves into a unit in defence of their own interests was because they had no past, no history, no religion of their own" (Beauvoir 1953: viii).

Despite this heavy presence of misogynistic attitudes, women have been able to break the burden of tradition that expects them to be mute and meek. Several Indian literary works give references to women dissenting and articulating against the dominance of the normative order. Subsequently, the *Kathāsaritsāgara* is one such significant historical text. It is believed to have been written by Somadeva around the eleventh century CE, a Saivite priest who was a court poet under king Ananta of Kashmir. *Kathāsaritsāgara* throws an extensive light on the societal and psychological set-up, prejudices, the life of women and the relationship between a man and a woman at large. Moreover, it significantly caters to the women's voices of 'dissent' against the gendered expectations of the patriarchs. Romila Thapar rightly defines dissent as the "disagreement that a person or persons may have with others, or, more publicly, with some of the institutions that govern their patterns of life" (Thapar 2010: 3). It is in this context that 'dissent' here is mainly to counter the traditional patriarchal expectations and stereotypical idea of being an ideal woman or simply her being a woman.

The first reference to such voices of dissent against the patriarchal normative order in the text comes from Queen Ratnaprabhā, the wife of King Naravāhanadatta against the confinement within the private space of a chamber. She orders the warder that "the door must never be closed against the entrance of my husband's friends…" Moreover, she makes assertive claims against such practices of exclusion, saying "…I do not think that this is the way to guard female apartments" (Penzer 1924-28, vol. III: 169). This story is significant in the sense that the queen's chamber/harem usually represents a controlled and restricted space for women created by men. Hence, the articulation of the Ratnaprabhā against this exclusion represents her voiced transgression against the idea of restrictive movement burdened over women. Further, she also addresses the observance of seclusion as a mere social custom, or rather, 'folly' produced by jealousy. It not only asserts the voice against the obligation of seclusion of women but challenges the imposition of the fundamental ideal of patriarchy, i.e., *Pativratā* ideal (seeking extreme devotion from one's wife). In Indian patriarchal society, the notion of *Pativratā* acts as a significant tool to constrain women within the notion of an ideal womanhood. The figures of Sītā, Sāvitrī, Arundhatī and so on have been idealized as a perfect woman or *Pativratā* whose sole devotion is to their husbands. Sītā, for centuries, has been a prototype of what an ideal woman should be like; this notion exists in Indian society even today.[1] Shalini Shah aptly argues that the notion of either a good or bad man is classified in accordance with his deed, in contrast to which a woman is branded as good or bad in terms of her 'sexual behaviour or their lack of docility' (Shah 2017: 81). Hence, the patriarchal society is embedded with

[1] A recent survey in northern India undertaken by Sutherland highlights how an overwhelming percentage chose Sītā among the goddesses and literary heroines to be their ideal female role model. For details see: Sally J. Sutherland (Jan-Mar 1989) Sītā and Draupadī: Aggressive Behaviour and Female Role-Models in the Sanskrit Epics, *Journal of the American Oriental Studies*, vol. 109, no.1: 63-79.

the idea of wanting to have control over women's sexuality and desires, which is often seen as a disruptive element in society. Remarkably, the ancient Indian literary creations are widespread with references to women challenging and presenting a strong disagreement with the patriarchal norms of defining sexuality. This, in a way, provides us with an understanding of values, conveying a 'different dimension of relations between the sexes' (Shah 2017: 83).

One of the earliest disagreements against the over-controlled sexual norms can be found in Ahalyā's reference in the epic of *Rāmāyaṇa.* What is remarkable is that this epic of *Rāmāyaṇa* is referred to as a text conforming mainly to the traditional norms and values frequently embedded with the notion of an ideal wife. Shalini Shah, in her work, deals with this aspect of how this story reflects the subversive ideals of patriarchy. She says, Vālmīki makes us quite clear that Ahalyā was well aware of Indra's identity, yet she did not resist the union with him (Shah 2017: 83). Subsequently, the *Kathāsaritsāgara* also presents a similar version of Ahalyā's story where it is said that Ahalyā "encouraged that husband of Śachī, being the slave of her passions" (Penzer 1924-28 vol. I: 45). A similar notion of sexual assertiveness by women is also witnessed in the story of Yogakaraṇḍikā, a female ascetic. Here, it is seen that while telling her story to Devasmitā, Yogakaraṇḍikā states "Now while he (Yogakaraṇḍikā's husband) was away from home I lived with other men at my pleasure, and so did not cheat the elements, of which I was composed, and my senses, of their lawful enjoyment. For considerate treatment of the elements and senses is held to be the highest duty" (Penzer 1924-28 vol. I:159). Hence, looking at these few references, it can be understood that women in the present text are seen as articulating against the sexual imposition concerning women's right to fulfil their carnal yearnings. This again was a privilege that was conferred on men in a patriarchal society.

Since ancient times, women as wives are said to be the property of their husbands, and their duty was to be meek, ever obedient, and to keep their husbands happy. Such a misogynistic approach to the character of a wife is also maintained in the text under review. Yet, it is remarkable that they have been able to break through the deadweight of such submissiveness and the traditional idea of fitting into a certain role and cry out their dignified individuality. The classic instance of this is seen in the story of Mānaparā, wife of Arthalobha, a merchant who worked as a doorkeeper of King Bāhuvala. She looked after her husband's business and was extremely obedient to her husband's orders. Once, he ordered his wife to carry out a transaction with a merchant named Sukhadhana from a foreign land; the dutiful wife followed the order and went to the merchant's house, overpowered with love. The merchant said he would not give goods for money, but only if she spent a night with him; she would then receive five hundred horses and five thousand garments as her reward. The wife then answered that she would ask her husband about it first. When she narrated everything to Arthalobha, as his name suggests, 'greed for wealth', said there is no harm in doing and spending a night with the merchant, so if she would receive the said reward. She, on hearing this from his spiritless husband, left the house and

went to Sukhadhana. In the morning, her husband sent a servant to summon her, whereupon she refused to return and said, "How can I return to be the wife of that man who sold me to another? I am not Shameless as he is…so depart" (Penzer 1924-28, vol. III: 286-88). This instance remarkably highlights the shift in her character from being meek and ever obedient to being articulate and assertive against the command of her husband. Similarly, in another story, Somaprabhā, though unwilling to be given in marriage, is married off by her father to a merchant named Guhacandra on the condition that she must not be treated as a wife. However, after the wedding Guhacandra's father Guhasena violating the condition ordered his son "My son, treat her as a wife, for who abstains from the society of his own wife?" (Penzer 1924-28, vol. II: 30-41), showing how a wife was expected to act on the wish of her husband disregarding her own desire. Somaprabhā, after hearing this from her father-in-law, looked angrily at him, whirled round her threatening forefinger. When Guhasena saw that the breath had left his body and he died immediately. Somaprabhā thus represents another character who contests the idea of a husband being the sole owner of his wife and her wishes.

The story of Madanamancukā, the chief Queen of Naravāhnadatta provides another reference against the notion of women being voiceless and weak to the demands and dominance of men. It is said that when she was abducted by Manasavega, the powerful chief of the Vidhyādhara, the lady repelled any caresses from him and could not be subdued at his will (Penzer 1924-28, vol. VIII: 26). In another story, Kaliṅgasenā is seen confronting King Udayana when he, seized with love, went to her and asked her to become his wife. Kaliṅgasenā articulated against his actions by saying, "You should call me as the wife of another". Seeing this, the King further blamed her for being unchaste as having resorted to three men and by approaching her, the king said that he would not incur the guilt of adultery. She argued against these derogatory words of the King and said "…I was married by the Vidhyādhara Madanavega at his will…And he is my only husband, so why am I unchaste?" (Penzer 1924-28, vol. III: 128). Such stories effectively portray the idea of changing dynamics between a man and a woman, especially with regard to them being 'powerful and powerless', where women have always been rendered as powerless. It is also to noting here that a king in a Monarchy situated at the apex represents the symbol of Patriarchy. He is also the major upholder and enforcer of the patriarchal ideal. Kaliṅgasenā, raising her voice against the baseless blame put on her by the King and also confronting him with a stern and articulated voice, is particularly symbolic of women challenging the established hegemony and authority of patriarchs.

Another section of women to have a firm articulate voice in the text are the courtesans and prostitutes. Throughout history, they have always remained a strong force of defiance against patriarchal domination, challenging gendered norms. This is true even in the case of the present text, which not only throws light on the authority of the courtesans but how they spoke in their own right. A courtesan was expected only to serve rich men, and she could not marry or associate solely with one man. But it is seen that when Rūpiṇikā has

been objected to be associated with Lohajaṅgha as he was poor, she, in rage, replied "…as for wealth, I have plenty, what do I want more?", thus voicing her desire to be with him, which was considered against the general rule. (Penzer 1924-28, vol. I: 140). A courtesan's authority as a voiced section can be seen in her economic prowess, sometimes presented even as an alternative to the king himself. For instance, Courtesan Madanamālā is said to be so wealthy that she lived in a splendid mansion guarded by a thousand footmen, equipped with all kinds of weapons that resembled the palace of a king (Penzer 1924-28, vol. III: 213-217). The text shows how the courtesans claimed an exorbitant amount as their fee. Courtesan Haṁsāvalī demanded a fee of five hundred gold *dināra*s as her fee (Penzer 1924-28, vol. VII: 80). Sundarī charged twenty-five lakhs of gold as her payment (Penzer 1924-28, vol. V: 7). A courtesan is said to charge five hundred elephants a day (Penzer 1924-28, vol. V: 83). This aspect is also elucidated by Shalini Shah in her work where she mentions the prostitute as a 'speaking subject' in the sense that "…She took herself to the market and named her price, and in doing so, disrupted the male-ordered social structure which had reified the exchange of women" (Shah 2017: 85).

In addition to this, there were women who defied the traditional and misogynistic idea of marriage and childbirth being their only roles, and they were the female ascetics. Their voice of defiance is seen in the story of Princess Hemaprabhā, who chose asceticism and refused to abandon the life of an ascetic. Even when the king asked her to return to the palace, she firmly said, "I will not return to the palace to indulge in pleasure, and I will not abandon the joys of asceticism" (Penzer 1924-28, vol. V: 188-190). Svayamprabhā, the daughter of Asuramaya, king of the Asuras is said to have taken the vow of virginity since early childhood as well (Penzer 1924-28, vol. III: 40). Further, there is an interesting story of a female ascetic who on account of being kicked by her father left her home in protest and embraced asceticism, dissenting both the idea of daughter being a dependent upon her father and also her role as a daughter to fulfil her life as being a wife and bearing children (Penzer 1924-28, vol. V: 188-190). Hence, looking at all these instances presented above, one can undoubtedly agree that in history, "Dissenting voices have been many, and have had a much wider articulation in the past than we are willing to concede" (Thapar 2010: 5).

In a patriarchal society where men are placed at the apex of the power hierarchy, the dominant method of expression is generated only by them. Hence, it is only natural to have the authoritative mode heard. Women's voices, or for that matter of the marginal groups representing the subservient ones, are largely muted. It is because of this method of controlled expression, women in history have always been portrayed to be submissive and voiceless. The men-centred literature, myth and legends specially made attempts to silence her expression by interpreting history from their own perspective. Therefore, it is not surprising to see such representations of women in the texts which are written, interpreted and propagated by men denying them the agency to interpret their experiences and thoughts.

Kathāsaritsāgara provides an alternate perspective of women speaking up for themselves and challenging every basic ideal of patriarchy, ranging from exclusion/confinement to sexual control and demanded subservience. For instance, Queen Ratnaprabhā protested against the restriction/confinement of women, Somaprabha and Mānaparā defied the notion of absolute ownership of husband over wife, Yogakaraṇḍikā disobeyed the control placed on women's erotic yearnings, Madanamancukā and Kaliṅgasenā raised their voices against the corrupt actions of men demanding dominance over them. Courtesans stood as a powerful and articulate force in their own right. Female ascetics disputed the notion that marriage is the only significant attribute in women's lives. Hence, 'dissenting voices' in the stories of *Kathāsaritsāgara* are multiple and varied, sometimes implicating a much wider connotation and articulation.

Having said that, it must be noted here that such instances of women's voices of dissent cannot be taken as being uniformly articulated throughout the text, as women themselves cannot be thought of as a homogenous unit. Such voices of articulation in the text mainly come from that section of women who either belonged to the upper strata in the social ladder, i.e., royals/ elite or the ones who are generally considered outside of the social strata, i.e., the courtesans and nuns. Whatever the case may be, they are those sections of women who had certain authority and agency to do so. But a similar pattern of assertiveness is not inadvertently seen among the common women, which again highlights her dependency and controlled spaces in a patriarchal set-up. Nevertheless, the *Kathāsaritsāgara* provides an alternate understanding that in every phase of history, women can be heard speaking boldly against the deadweight of tradition, ruthless custom and injustices. Such dissenting voices of women against the patriarchal hegemony are certain to be found in several other ancient literatures, hence rejecting the idea of women being 'voiceless' throughout history.

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