

Women in Greek and Indian Mythology in the Selected Works of Devdutt Pattanaik

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*"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."
-Simone de Beauvoir*

Abstract

The papers tries to explore the feminine and masculine motifs in the works of Devdutt Pattanaik. The paper studies the treatment of feminine existence in the Indian and Greek mythological texts. The authors have examined the texts of Greek and Indian literature and the feminine gods in comparison with the masculine gods. The divinization of feminine and masculine gods and their biased treatment is palpable. The characterization of each god in Greek literature portray the traits of destruction and construction, besides, the gloomy traits were assigned to the feminine gods and the virtues of construction were assigned to masculine gods. The paper also contemplates on the treatment of feminine and masculine gods in Indian mythological texts like the Puranas and the ancient epics of India like the Ramayana and Mahabharata. The paper also investigates the commodification of feminine existence in the Indian folklore with special reference to the texts of Devdutt Pattanaik.

Keywords: Commodification; Feminine psyche; Masculine veneration.

Introduction

The women in mythology, whether of Greek or Indian, become who they are because of the situations they are put in and the actions of the patriarchal figures in their lives. This chapter will capture the sharp contrast in the portrayal of women in Greek and Indian mythology. It will also describe how the portrayal and perception of "feminine" is universally congruent.

The study of women in mythology is a well-established area in feminism. Retelling of narratives of mythical characters is a way of bringing to the center the characters that were subdued and also giving a new angle to the mythical structure. But what researchers have found in the study of myths of East and West is the identical ways of perceiving women and treating the feminine.

Wild and Vindictive Women

Greek mythology is predominantly male dominated. Female deities are shown as products of male deities and those who support the survival of the male. Women of Greek mythology are shown as cunning and jealous beings, who plot against other gods and human beings. Though the fear of human beings over powering gods drives actions of Zeus and other gods too, women are portrayed as acting out of jealousy, unlike Zeus who fears the power of human beings. Several sons of Zeus whom he fathered over mortal women are driven mad, killed or orphaned because of Hera's actions. The greatest and most popular of the sons is Heracles who is named after Hera with the hope that she would embrace the son of Zeus. Hera, the goddess of household was furious when the child that suckled at her breast, Heracles, caused unbearable pain to her. Since Heracles had drunk Hera's milk, he had become strong and so could not be killed by Hera. Hence, Hera vows to make Heracles' life miserable, which according to Greek myth, she does. But after living a painful and adventures life because of the interventions of Hera, Hercules finally kills himself. Zeus then feels that this son of his was the greatest among other mortal sons and so gives him a place in 'Olympus'. Hera make Heracles go mad, curses Echo, and casts Hephaestus out of 'Olympus' because he is deformed. She turns Callisto into a bear, punishes Semele and attacks Io all because Zeus fathers a child on each of them. She also turns the Tiresias blind because she is not pleased with the answer on who derives more pleasure during the act of sex, man or woman. Thus, there are several accounts of Hera's jealousy and cruel nature.

Zeus is the mightiest of the Olympians who defeats their father Cronus and saves his siblings from 'Typhon' and the 'Giants' sent by their own mother Gaia. Zeus warns everyone against questioning his authority and becomes 'King of the Olympians' and ruler of the sky. He takes his sister, Hera, as his wife. But Zeus also lies with many other women: Titans, nymphs and mortals too but none, not even his own wife Hera could question or stop him. So helpless, as described previously, Hera is seen being envious and jealous of women and nymphs whom Zeus pursues. Though, she is goddess of household she is shown to be cruel towards mortals. This could be attributed to the displacement of anger. Since she could not punish her brother and husband Zeus who was the 'patriarch supreme' and the ruler of the cosmos, she was driven to release her anger on those who were less fortunate and powerful than her. Devdutt Pattanaik in *Olympus* attributes the act of Hera, of dismissing Hephaestus from 'Olympus', as the rejection of imperfection or chaos. He reasons that in Greek mythology beauty is commonly associated with 'order' and ugliness with 'chaos'. Hence, Hephaestus who is ugly is seen as chaos and hence threatening to the cosmic order.

While Hera, an Olympian and goddess of household, is showcased as jealous, Aphrodite is shown as proud and wild. Aphrodite, who was born out of the sea from the spilled blood of Uranus, is considered the goddess of love. She was in love with Ares and also made people fall in love with each other without any regard for age, gender or any other social constructs. The other gods found her dangerous because she was irresistible and could make them do her bidding when she wore a girdle around her waist. So, Zeus got her married to Hephaestus in an attempt to tame her, but she refused to be tamed and caused more problems when she chose the company of Ares over Hephaestus. There are several narratives of how Aphrodite's wild sensual nature caused death of men. Adonis was killed by Ares because Aphrodite fell in love with him. When Adonis was dead, Persephone refused to part with him too, but Aphrodite vowed there would be no spring if Adonis was not returned. Hence Zeus declared Adonis would spend one half of the year with Aphrodite and the other with Persephone. Aphrodite is also blamed for getting jealous when people worshipped Psyche instead of the goddess because Psyche was so beautiful. Aphrodite cursed Polyphonte for joining Artemis; she cursed Phaedra to fall in love with her stepson, Hippolytus, because the latter wanted to serve Artemis; she had cursed the 'women of Lemnos' so their bodies would emit a foul odour, just because they had angered her; she had offered Helen in marriage to prince of Troy, Paris, so he would declare her the most beautiful woman. This last incident earned him the wrath of her and Athena which according to myth led to the tragic 'Trojan War'.

Aphrodite with her explicit expression of sexual feelings is considered wild and tried to be tamed by all the other gods. She is proud of her beauty, which is her greatest quality, but for it she is punished. She is forced to restrict herself to one man, to be chaste unlike Zeus who is free to lay with as many women as he likes. None can question or tame him because he is the man.

Indian mythology too contains narratives of unchaste women or women who are explicit about their sexual feelings. Such women are punished and driven away by chaste men. Shurpanaka, sister of Ravana, is one such character whose nose is cut off for being explicitly sexual about her feelings. No goddess in Indian mythology is overtly sexual and even if she is it is in the form of Chinnamastika, the tantric goddess. She is the naked, headless goddess who drinks her own blood while she sits on top of her spouse. "Her nakedness and lack of modesty in both the sexual and violent acts indicate the impersonality of sex and violence in nature, their only intention being to sustain life." (Pattanaik, "Indian Mythology" 40) All female goddesses represent 'Prakriti' according to Hindu Mythology. And this act of drinking her own blood is the attempt of 'Prakriti' to remind 'Purusha' (mankind) that life can be sustained by the consumption of another life.

'Tantra' is alchemy and the art of making 'Rasa' or the juice of life move in one direction.

But Goddesses in Indian *Vedas* are epitomes of chastity. The three Goddesses in the Hindu mythology that represent material things are Saraswati, Lakshmi and Durga. They embody knowledge, wealth and power, respectively. The male Gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva who represent the spiritual are active forms. But the female forms are passive since actions are done to them. It is important to note that Hinduism does not mean something without values, but it represents the things that are under constant change or that which transforms with time. It also includes the mental processes and hence can be termed as 'Cognitive' in nature.

There is a sect in Hinduism which is called 'Shaktism' which involves worship of the Goddess in the form of Lakshmi, Saraswati or Gauri (domesticated form of Durga). Kali and Durga are the independent forms of the Goddess who are outside the circle of culture because of their wild nature. Lakshmi, Saraswati and Gauri are acceptable forms of the Goddess because they embody the components that are required and accepted by culture. Lakshmi is the goddess of fortune where Alakshmi is the goddess of misfortune. She is unwelcome and not needed in a

flourishing culture and so outside the boundary of acceptability in culture.

The descriptions of the appearances of these goddesses are quite important while understanding the representation of women. Lakshmi is worshipped in almost every household. She stands on a Lotus flower and wears a red sari that clearly represents fertility. She has a certain grace, poise and a constant smile on her face. She holds a pot from which pours gold. This represents wealth and prosperity. There are elephants on either side of the Goddess, and they symbolize power. Saraswati who is the consort of Brahma is the Goddess of learning. She embodies knowledge and inspiration. Her white sari indicates her spiritual and transcendental nature. She holds a book; a pen and the lute associate her with arts and education. Since she is the answer to Brahma's question of 'Who am I?' she is both the creation and the consort. Shakti also called Gauri and Parvati is consort of Gauri. She is the domesticated Goddess who is radiant and maternal in nature. She turns Shiva the hermit into a householder and keeps in check his behaviour. When Shiva is attracted to other women Shakti quarrels with him and she also holds up the 'mirror', a symbol of materialistic creation, to him. This allows the spiritual hermit to recognize self and distinguish himself from the material reality. Hence, she is seated on the lap of Shiva, holding a mirror up to his face.

Saraswati and Lakshmi embody Muses and Graces in Hindu mythology whereas in Greek mythology Graces and Muses are daughters of Zeus with several Titan, Olympian and mortal women and nymphs too. The three

graces that he created with Eurynome were to fill the world with good cheer. The nine Muses that he created with Mnemosyne inspired artists to compose works of art such as music, drama and paintings. Greeks attribute the creation of good times and ability of creating to Zeus.

Women and Sexuality

The idea of sexuality in Eastern and Western Paradigm is opposite in nature. Though women are perceived as necessary for procreation, the idea of sexuality and its expression is treated differently. Western belief, especially Christianity, believes sexuality as a product of sin. Eve, women in general, are blamed for the fall of 'Man' or the suffering of mankind. Both in Christian and Greek mythology Eve and Pandora are blamed for causing suffering to mankind. What is common is the curiosity that both the women possessed. Eve is blamed of eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge though God had forbidden her. Pandora, who was created by Hephaestus on Zeus's orders, is the first woman. Zeus gifted a box and ordered her not to open it until he told so. But out of curiosity Pandora opens it and thus all the bad feelings of envy, greed, anger floods humanity. But it is only hope that emerges from the box in the end and propels humanity.

But curiosity and women in Hindu mythology are treated differently. Though the first woman, Shatarupa, was created after men, Prajapatis, by Brahma, the female embodies material truth that helps the spiritual being attain its highest form. Only through the female or the form changing Shatarupa does Brahma populate Earth with different animals. It is through Shatarupa that the feelings are stirred in Brahma and his sons Prajapatis. Hence, women are not blamed for the suffering of mankind in Hindu mythology. It is man's deeds that decide the course of his life. While in Greek mythology there are women deities such as Athena and Artemis who vow to be virgins all their life there are no such deities in Hindu mythology. Every god is associated with fertility or sexuality and there is no scope for any woman to remain 'celibate' her entire life.

Women are not expected to be celibate but to be chaste. The entire epic Ramayana revolves around the story of Sita who is celebrated for being chaste even in the most trying situations. Though many scholars draw parallels between Sita and Helen of Troy for both their stories are similar. But it is important to note that Helen elopes with Paris whereas, Sita is abducted by Ravan. Since Sita remains faithful and chaste even after being abducted by Ravan she gains greatest respect from believers in Hindu myth. While unfaithful wives are common theme in Greek myth, faithful wives are common theme in Hindu mythology. Sita is considered the epitome of wifely devotion because she not only remains chaste towards her husband but also proves her chastity every time Ram put her to test. She walks through

fire unharmed to prove her chastity but finally ends her life by diving into earth.

There are several narratives in Indian mythology that glorify female chastity that help in confining women to the household. Sita followed her husband to the forest giving up the luxuries of the palace, Kunti slept with the gods to bear children to her husband Pandu, who was condemned to live a life of an anchorite. He, mistaking a pair as deer making love, shot an arrow killing them, and earned the curse of Kindama rishi, the male deer pair. Gandhari blindfolded herself because her husband was blind and Draupadi married the brothers of her husband, Arjuna had won Draupadi in a contest, whom they brought home and excitedly declared to their mother, Kunti to see what trophy they had brought. Kunti replies without looking that it be divided among the brothers. Mother's word being the law, they do so. Chastity did not just mean to be sexually obedient to one's husband but also to follow what 'he' / or mother as elder says, even if it meant to sleep with another man to produce a progeny. Pandu, the son of Vyasa (Vichiravirya) and Ambalika, could not consummate his marriage because of a curse from a sage, Kindama. Hence, he asked his wives Kunti and Madri to seek children from gods, which they obliged. Draupadi, the Princess of Drupad, chose Arjuna as her husband in the 'Swayamvara' but she had to marry the other four brothers of Arjuna and bear them children because Arjuna had to uphold the words of his mother Kunti. Draupadi was pawned by her husband Yudishtira in a game of dice and lost her. 'The Bhagavata Purana' chronicles the story of Harishchandra who sold his son and wife to pay Maharshi Vishwamitra a thousand gold coins.

Folklore and Women

With passing time, the folklore became popular in Hinduism. While mainstream tradition believed in the classical narratives of Gods and Goddesses, folklore gave rise to new tradition based in Tantric Philosophy. While the classical Hinduism focused on winning the grace of the divine and attaining liberation, folk tradition focused on harnessing the sources of nature. This philosophy was earth bound and all reality was believed to be divine power 'Shakti'. Commoners were more attracted to these earth-bound deities that protected their land and household causing the folk deities to become common household names. To accommodate the tantric philosophy the 'Theistic school of Shaktism' arose between 400 B.C.E and 300 A.D. This school worshipped the 'Goddess' or 'Devi' in different forms. The narratives show a clear diversion from the male dominated Vedic myths towards a more accommodative and female dominated myths. It is in these myths we see different forms of the Goddess playing major roles.

The narrative of the birth of three Gods which is considered to belong to the earliest story of creation of ancient Indian tribes is dominated by matriarchy. The three Gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are believed to have emerged from the three eggs laid by Goddess Adi Shakti in a lotus. These three male Gods created desire in the Goddesses who asked them to make love to her. Because Vishnu and Brahma refused, she turned them into ashes by casting a glance with her fiery third eye. But Shiva agreed to make love to her if she gave him her third eye. Then Shiva used this eye to reduce her to ashes and resurrected the two Gods. But the three Gods could not live without wives, so they gathered around the ashes and from the heap of ash created Goddesses Saraswati, Lakshmi and Gauri. The reduction of the Adi Shakti to ashes by Shiva might be a metaphor for the later domination of the patriarchal Vedic culture over the earlier matriarchal cultures. During the age when matriarchal culture was dominant the Goddess steps in to help the male Gods when they could not defeat a demon. 'Kalika Purana' contains a narrative about Kali's tongue. Every time the gods tried to kill Raktabija they ended facing an army of him because each drop of his blood turned into another Raktabija. Clueless about what to do next they sought the help of the Goddess who in the form of Kali entered the battle field, naked and spread her tongue over the earth. This prevented the blood of Raktabija from touching the ground.

Kali the manifestation of the Goddess is the dark goddess of the forest quite opposite to Gauri the radiant goddess of the field. Kali is blood thirsty, naked and unbound by any cultural norms. She is wild and raw form of the goddess. "Kali represents nature, the darkest recesses of the unconsciousness that can overwhelm culture when discipline gives way to desire and the social fabric collapses." (Pattanaik, "Myth=Mithya" 128). The other form of the Goddess is Durga who is the invincible one. She is bride and warrior at the same time. She possesses both the radiance of goddess Gauri and the fierceness of goddess Kali. She is the embodiment of the goddess Adi Maya Shakti. She establishes the household and fights in the war.

According to Tantric philosophy only men can ignite 'tapa' and attain 'siddhi' because they have control over their reproductive organs. But women, plants and animal are unlike men because they shed their seed involuntarily. The Goddess in the form of Mahadevi is seen placing her foot on human heads. She holds a serpent in her hand which represents the earth's fertility and associated with occult wisdom. She also wears a garland of human heads especially moustachioed male heads which representation the ego. Since the ego seeks validation it tries to control the external world. But the world is the Goddess, the infinite and impermanent being which tries to drive the beings towards the inner, formless divine within. Mahadevi nurtures the journey of an individual towards self-discovery. But when the

ego tries to control the fertility of the Goddess with pursuit of self-actualization, the Goddess ends the ego violently.

Conclusion

The comparison of female gods of Hindu and Greek myth reveals that the female is considered secondary to the male and confined to the household. Sexuality is to be controlled and expressed within the norms of the culture. But Indian mythology provides greater importance to female deities and women as a whole. Though there are Goddesses that are limited to the qualities of a householder there are also wild forms of the female Goddess. Though they are believed to be outside the code of civilization that the 'manavas' (human beings) follow, they are revered by thousands of believers and followers.

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