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**TRADITION, TRANSITION AND TRANSFORMATION:
A STUDY OF WOMEN MYTHICAL CHARACTERS
IN SELECT PLAYS OF INDIAN WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS**

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Abstract:

Delineation of women in the socio-cultural sphere remains a contentious argument owing to the dominant patriarchal discourse that seeks to undermine and suppress such expressions in order to maintain their hegemony. The feminist recasting of iconic mythical characters in contemporary times, bridges the polarities of past with present, silence with words, divine with human, and in the end from deification to the emancipation of a woman with the sense of her own will. A number of Indian women playwrights have sought to redefine the iconic mythical characters such as Sita, Draupadi and Mandodari in order to challenge, counter and subvert the stereotypes that seek to demean and devalue women's identity and agency. It is an attempt on the part of these playwrights to revisit the myths from feminist perspective and represent the profane, express the unspeakable and portray the unthinkable by foregrounding the repressed and subverting the male perspective by appropriating and supplying them with agency and ideas. The present paper attempts to study selected works by Indian women playwrights to present the perspective of the suffering subaltern and thereby voicing their concerns that remain unsaid for over centuries now.

Keywords: *Myth, subvert, stereotype, agency.*

In both Eastern and Western world the voice of women in the dramatic sphere has remained submerged for long due to the subversive practices that are usually perpetrated under the guise of convention, custom and/or tradition. With the rise in gender consciousness coupled with wide spread anti-establishment sentiments women have sought to redefine and reframe the sexual equation and devise ways and means of resistance against patriarchy. The patriarchal discourse both trivialize and marginalize the experience of women and therefore spaces like theatre are necessitated wherein women may voice their own experience, joy, sorrow and exploitation. Theatre gives these dramatists the space and agency to at once question, challenge and subvert the persisting female stereotypes, to reassert their presence and to demand equal, if not elevated, status. This is a crucial intervention in cultural practice because it presents the spectacle through gendered lenses.

A number of Indian women playwrights have sought to reframe myth and thereby redefine mythical women characters who have been objectified in the patriarchal discourse. It is an attempt, on their part, to create a counter-culture by reworking the frames between the genders. At the same time it marks their partaking in the historical process of identity creation. Playwrights such as Mallika Sarabhai, Ambai, Varsha Adalja and Kamalani Mehta have chosen dramatic oeuvre to re-read, re-interpret, re-write and thereby re-define the age old myths by devoiding them from their redundant and oppressive frames. In the plays under consideration the women playwrights have re-presented the mythical female characters from female perspective thereby contravening vilifying socio-cultural myths that depreciate womanhood. In the hands of these women playwrights' myth becomes a potent tool for resistance because here they can represent the profane, express the unspeakable and portray the unthinkable by foregrounding the repressed

and subverting the male perspective by appropriating and supplying them with the agency and ideas. Their works challenge the canonical texts by presenting the archetypal women in a manner that questions the hegemonic value system. Their protagonists shatter the stereotypes and reconstruct the image that resonate vigour, vitality and vision distinct and opposed to the suppressed subaltern. Without altering the basic outline, the mythical figures have been revived by the playwrights to reverse the interpretations and judgments of their actions.

It is noteworthy that in Indian context epics like Ramayan and Mahabharat are not mere epics but are more than that. They are the living embodiments of the socio-cultural values and practices still valid and popular with the masses. The women playwrights have chosen Sita, Mandodari and Draupadi to provide them voice and visibility that have been denied to them by the myth and deification. Mallika Sarabhai in her play titled *Sita's Daughters* brings to the fore the fractured identity of a woman who is violated in the names of sex determination, female foeticide, domestic violence and rape. She has transformed the suffering protagonist of the epic into a speaking subject full of anger and agency. Sarabhai's Sita questions Ram that if he is God then how could he not distinguish between a real and fake golden deer? Further she challenges the mythical hero by declining his offer to go back to Ayodhya by countering him if the latter believed she was pure then why did he not convince the dhobi at the time the latter maligned her. By transforming monologic performance into dialogic exchanges with the spectator, Sarabhai has chosen to break free drama from being a luminal and limiting experience. The play begins with the Ramayan story and extends to include the collage of newspaper stories of sexual abuse and violence to portray that each one of those females who have experienced power-struggle, deprivation and violence in the patriarchal world are Sita's daughters. But in contrast to the olden times, Sarabhai asserts that the women of today don't have to retract back to mother earth and vanish rather they should question and challenge the perpetrators of atrocities and misery. In an interview for the *The Hindu* Sarabhai has asserted,

Patriarchy has a language which makes woman weak. I realized my vulnerability and started writing, creating and performing....I read one thousand testimonies of rape victims and visited police stations to understand how rape victims were treated. The title was puzzling. Many wondered whether Sita had daughters. I believe that any woman who questions the status quo is daughter of Sita (*The Hindu*, October 29, 2015).

The Tamil playwright C.S. Lakshmi, popularly known as Ambai, has experimented with form and structure while relating the anguish and frustration of Sita in her play titled *Crossing the River*. The poetic play revisits the mythical Sita and evaluates her angst from the contemporary feminist standpoint. 'Her feminism permeates but does not restrict the subject matter of her work, which investigates the ways gender is constructed in society, explores communication between human beings and celebrates ordinary women's courage and resourcefulness'.(Miller 115) By juxtaposing the past over the present the playwright depicts the constant expectations from epic age to the present times from women to be subdued and suppressed. It extends to showcase the different faces of women's resistance that help her survive in the hostile patriarchal world. The play text has elaborate stage directions while having only a single actor-performer who calls herself Sita. In the background there is a shadow that questions her identity. Sita of Ambai's *Crossing the River* is not a mute, patient victim lacking agency and voice. She is a speaking subject who chooses to speak not just for herself but also for all other contemporary women who have been wronged at any point of time,

I am the oppressed Sita
I am Sita of a kind
Sita with many faces
living through many faces

living through
 many times
 many spaces
 I am
 Another Sita
 Another Sita (Lakshmi 436)

This way the play transposes the mythical Sita to the contemporary times through feminist recasting. She critiques the hegemonic supremacy of men by choosing to cross the river in order to reclaim her identity and re-form the 'new Rajya'. She points out the objectification of woman as a painter's model or as a statue in a temple or a church. She is everything - a goddess, a demon, an idol - but a human being having emotion and esteem. Sita shouts aloud, as if everything making an announcement, that she has suffered due to love, lust and politics of men. Thus, Sita becomes everywoman who is 'made up with words/ bound in words/ imprisoned in words.'(455) Frustrated with men's prescriptive commands and angry with her plight she declares, 'I am/ another Sita/ another Sita' - the evolved, emancipated and energetic (436). She is the one who questions, 'Who are you' and decrees, 'I shall cross the river/ to see the new world/ to assume a new form/ to create a new Rajya'(436). She is the modern woman who has decided to follow her will uninhibited. It is a brilliant attempt by the playwright to subtly topple the misplaced deification and resurrect the new emancipated woman from the pyres of age-long suffering and suppression.

Kamalani Mehta's *Sita* is a one-act play that recasts the age-old myth in a new light. Criticizing the valorization of Rama the playwright presents an alternative reading of the myth. Sita, true to her compassionate frame, agrees to partake the sons in the care of the father, king Ram, but refuses to join them. She rejects the king's offer to join them and instead questions his altered decision,

So now I question the king, is the King not under the compulsion of his subjects now as he offers me to accompany him to Ayodhya? Am I not the same Sita towards whom your subjects had raised their accusing fingers? (Mehta 374)

Mehta's play deconstructs the emasculating framework of ancient legends and presents an alternative structure wherein women are allowed to question, refute and decry at their will. Here Sita has dignity, pride and esteem that should be salvaged at all costs. If others are not ready to support and honour her self-pride she will very well decide her own course of action.

Gujarati playwright Varsha Adalja has sought to debunk the ancient myth in favour of epic Ramayana's lesser highlighted character, Mandodari - the wife of Ravana and the queen of Lanka. The play titled after the central figure, Mandodari, shows the tribulations of the Maharani as she is split between her duties towards herself, her husband and her kingdom. She writhes in agony of her husband's wanton ways and knows well that his ego and misplaced pride will lead to his nemesis yet she tries her level best to counter the moves of Kaaldevta - the God of Death - in the metaphorical game of chess. Resisting and thereby refuting to be a mute victim to unsurpassable circumstances, Mandodari of Adalja uses all her wisdom and power to save her own pride, her husband's salvation and the lives of her kingdom's citizens. By giving a peek into the innermost recesses of Mandodari's heart and soul, Adalja deconstructs the myth by recreating the past with focus on women. Partaking her self-esteem, Mandodari first beseeches Ravana to return Seeta back to her husband Rama and ask for the latter's forgiveness and thus avoid war but on being ignored she decides to take recourse to other ways instead of sitting back and moaning over her misfortune. She advises Seeta to surrender to Ravana, to save the lives of millions of innocents in the ensuing war, knowing fully well that if Seeta accepts her plea then she (Mandodari) will be relegated from her supreme office of the queen. Keeping her own insecurities at bay she continues relentlessly to convince Seeta,

With the hope for humanity. All these people scattered in different fractions, forever

fighting each other, could be united and could at last live happily in one kingdom under one emperor. This is the dream I had, Seeta, that I hoped to see reflected in your eyes. We have a great opportunity to serve humanity and prevent further hatred and bloodshed (Adalja 111).

Even kaaldevta bows before her demeanor and self-less courage, 'I am touched by your love for your country. I bow to you and bless you. May you always be honored as a great Sati.'(114) Mandodari, 'well versed in Saam, Daam, Danda and Bheda,'(107) tries to save the soul of her egoistic and myopic husband who sans his sense and sensibility, is adamant to lose his life, family, honour and kingdom due to his hubris - excessive pride. She resists defeat till the last and is praised by Kaaldevta himself for her grit and determination. Her chief concern is not to interiorize Seeta or a woman's identity but to save the lives of millions of innocents of her kingdom who stand at the margins of power praxis and tend to suffer at the hands of hegemonic patriarchal forces. She laughs scornfully at Kaaldevta and declares her own victory, 'You have lost the game and I have won,' thereby defying the myth and emancipating women mythical figures from stereotypical roles that deny them voice, power and agency to act and alter the situation (114). Her last laugh, '..I have succeeded in what I set out to do. Ha ha ha,' stuns both Kaaldevta and Adalja's readers/spectators who are reminded of Brecht's *Mother Courage* who continues in different theatres of war and decides to go on even after the loss of her children (114). Resisting and thereby subverting the normative gender roles, Mandodari exercises her wisdom and takes independent decisions undeterred by challenges offered by Kaaldevta and stubbornness of Ravana. The play highlights the bias inherent in dominantly patriarchal discourse offered by the canonical epics that willfully and knowingly silence and mute women's sacrifice, courage and contribution.

Through their dramatic oeuvre the women playwrights have attempted to present a counter mythology by displacing and deconstructing the traditional myths and giving voice and agency to the under-valued and side-lined women mythical figures such as Sita, Draupadi, Mandodari and Ahilya etc. In the hands of these playwrights the women mythical characters become an archetype to criticize the unreasonable and vacuous patriarchal values. The study illustrates how the playwrights have reconfigured the myths to re-define mythical women characters from women's perspective and seek to neutralize the effect of vilifying and denigrating socio-cultural myths that depreciate womanhood. It recovers women's voice and gives her space and agency to act and thereby resist the contravening and oppressive frameworks by foregrounding their experience within the hegemonic value system. It is a revisionist act on the part of these playwrights to provide mythical women an arena beyond the stereotypical frameworks.

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