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From Myth to Movies: Representation of women in popular culture from ancient to the modern times.... Rituparna Mitra

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Abstract:

Art-similar to human beings- has gone through several stages of evolution. The oldest form known to mankind is that of an oral tradition involving a story-teller (usually an aged person) narrating tales of adventure, romance or great morality to a group of people seeking a little respite after a day's worth of toiling.

Slowly with the passage of time, a desire to preserve those tales and myths led to the birth of a written form of literature. The study of such myths is relevant for many reasons as pointed out by many eminent researchers and scholars.

From understanding the psychology of man to trace the evolution of society over the countless many decades, myths shape our knowledge in multiple ways.

Myths have a religious purpose to serve as well. Enriched with wisdom, such tales are handed down from one generation to another to be treated life-long as a moral compass. To navigate one's way in a world that offers too many options (both good and bad), one is always encouraged by their elders to fall back on the stories of ideal men/women such as Rama/Yudhishtir, Sita/ Savitri etc.

Another purpose that myths serve is determining the extent to which we have progressed, collectively, as a nation. While talking about progress, what is meant here are not the advancements made in the fields of Science and Technology, which have no doubt made the human life much easier and comfortable? By progression, what are meant here are to what extent our thoughts, our perceptions have evolved over the years.

One way to test an evolution of such psychological nature could very well be a close observation of the treatment meted out to specific classes of people in the society-such as women. For, Indian epics (epics and myths are oft used interchangeably) have constantly been called out for being written with a misogynist mindset in the current times.

In this paper, I shall be probing a curious kind of enquiry into the changes (if any) brought about in the living conditions of a woman in terms of the expectations she is to meet as well a kind of attitude she gets subjected to.

In order to do this, a comparative analysis would be drawn between the ancient era and the modern age by juxtaposing immortal incidents and sequences-starring women primarily-from the famous Hindu epics, on the one hand, and popular Hindi movies(as the modern era shows a greater affinity towards the audio-visual form of art) on the other.

Keywords: Art, cinema, misogynist, myth, story-teller, etc.

India has a very rich legacy of story-telling. Just like the diversity that prevails in the land, each story born out of this land carries a unique flavor. From thousands of gods and goddesses (each special in an exclusive sort of way) to eccentric rishis and munis, and from generous kings to vulnerable queens, the gifted story-tellers from India never ran short of ideas to build their characters upon.

Story-telling has always been an integral part of our culture. It is this very love of stories that often helps in bridging the gap between divided by ideologies and technology.

In his critical essay “Subtle Art of Story Telling”, Utpal Kumar Banerjee said:

“Storytelling is many things to many people. It is fun, a way of passing on a culture’s history, a way of teaching to both the young and the old. Storytelling is an art that anyone can participate in. We all are storytellers whether we realize it or not. Story-time is a wonderful way for parents to connect with their children and share a piece of their family heirloom, leaving children with a legacy of memories and a sense of identity. Stories teach us about our values, our traditions and our history.”

(147-148)

Banerjee’s commentary is crucial in understanding how an era never truly ends despite being replaced by another. The conscious knowledge of what has happened before sub-consciously affects the present.

In an interview given to The Hindu renowned contemporary author Kavita Kane-known for her mythological retellings such as Lanka’s Princess, Ahalya’s Awakening, etc- emphasizes upon the timeless nature of myths:

“If myths reflect the socio-cultural ethos of earlier times, they can also be used to contemporaries those same issues in today’s world. Actually nothing has changed. Love, rivalry, disappointment, war, anger, greed... all of these emotions still exist. There’s a chance of an alternative perspective by looking at the epics through the women and minor characters at that.”

(The Hindu)

To bear a testimony to this very presupposition, I shall be probing an enquiry into the source of inspiration for several modern day filmmakers. In the movies-I shall be discussing-the makers have shown an excessive adherence towards the past in drawing materials for their art.

Significant episodes and themes from the epics such as Mahabharata and Ramayana act as a great source of influence in these movies. Sometimes, the references are too direct. Sometimes, not so much. But all in all, the influence of such epics/myths keeps emerging to the surface time and again.

Talking about movies and the entire creative process behind making one renowned filmmaker Shyam Benegal once wrote:

“Film makers are no necessarily serious thinkers, they are essentially story-tellers. The content of their stories may be drawn from any number of sources: observations of life, their own experience of it; combined with their flights of imagination and the imaginings of others. In telling their stories through films, they create cultural works largely meant to entertain. This may on occasion, succeed in providing insights into life and society.” (354)

Citing Benegal becomes crucial because of two main reasons. Firstly, the “observations of life” he mentions is the first step in understanding why certain things are shown in a certain manner in movies despite seeming extremely far-fetched (Benegal 354). Secondly, the “insights” help us in assimilating how much has the society evolved in terms of that psychological development which was earlier discussed (Benegal 354).

The movie *Yugpurush* (1998) starring Nana Patekar, Manisha Koirala and Jackie Shroff in lead roles re-create the infamous betting of Draupadi by her five husbands (*Pandavas*) by making slight variations to suit the taste of the modern day audience better-involving a poker match and grand casino.

The story revolves around the lives of three characters- Ranjan (Shroff), Sunita (Koirala) and Anirudh (Patekar) - and tries to explore the theme of an ideal man. It had an interesting subtitle called “A Man Who Comes Just Once in a Way.” Directed by Partho Ghosh it also featured Aswini Bhawe in a supporting role. It was a loose adaptation of Dostoevsky’s novel *The Idiot*.

On the surface, Ranjan (Shroff) is an ideal son who nurses great love and respect for his mother in his heart. So much so that he leaves not a single chance at insulting and belittling his snollygoster of a father who he holds responsible for his mother’s demise. He deems his corrupt and unscrupulous father’s house unfit for housing her memories (in the form of a framed picture) and takes it home with him. His own home.

His nature is not very different from the *Pandavas* who are known for their devotion towards their mother. And just like them, he bets on his beloved Sunita (Koirala) having nothing left on a reckless poker match.

Here, the script-writer (Pradeep Ghatak) doesn’t engage in the act of inventing any new kind of “image” instead he “confiscates” an already existing one (Owens 69). He does so for he is acutely aware of what is “significant” or relevant in terms of his culture (Owens 69). He acts as an ‘allegorist,’ who, in laying “claim to the culturally significant” acts as an

“interpreter” of an age that worships women as goddesses on one hand (Owens 69). While the other side of the picture involves exploitation, degradation and devaluation of the same in their mortal forms.

Ghatak, in confiscating this infamous image, recognizes a kind of “tradition” that has been handed down to him (Eliot 37). He acknowledges a kind of “historical sense” which is not to be understood only in terms of the “pastness of the past” but the presence of which can be felt in the modern era, the current times too (Eliot 37).

Unlike *Yugpurush*, the *Gulzar* written *Masoom* “confiscates” an entire theme-the plight of being a woman realized through the age-old institution of marriage (Owens 69).

Masoom was released in the year 1983 and marked the debut of director Shekher Kapur alongside the popular actor Jugal Hansraj. It is based on Erich Segal’s novel *Man, Woman and Child*. Starring Nasseruddin Shah and Shabani Azmi in leading roles, *Masoom* deals with the themes of family, infidelity and responsibility. It also features Tanuja and Supriya Pathak in supporting roles.

Rahul (Hansraj) is born to Bhavana (Phatak) by DK (Shah) as a result of an extramarital affair. On a trip to Nainital for a college re-union party, he is charmed by the enigmatic Bhavana who leads a lonely life. Bhavana dies untimely leaving a fatherless Rahul to the care of her ailing father. Realizing death to be near Rahul’s grandfather urges DK to take him home as the poor boy will have no one to care for him once he is gone.

As expected the grandfather dies and DK reluctantly brings Rahul home. DK’s plan to lay his way through the ordeal goes in vain as Indu finds out the truth about his adultery.

Although she is angry at DK for doing what he did, she doesn’t leave him. Instead, she opts for silence to express her anger. And this allows ample scope for *Gulzar* (the script-writer) to weave one after another incident into the story of the movie in such a fashion that both Indu as well as the audience realizes the worth of marriages in India.

Tanuja’s character plays a very important role in furthering *Gulzar*’s case. Despite being independent in every possible way (including financial), she is ecstatic to have her husband back in her life. It is the same man who had abandoned her years ago. Her act goes on to show the kind of stigma that is associated with the concept of divorce-or separation of any kind- especially in India.

The orthodox concepts of *ardhangini* and *pativrata* make the adjustment of a divorcee woman difficult even in the modern society. Under any given circumstance, a woman is expected not to leave her husband. For, it is something the community disapproves of. In his critical essay “The Impact of Divorce on Men and Women in India and the United States,” Paul R. Amato talks about the kind of censure a woman is subjected to when she files for divorce even when she cites her “husband’s infidelity or cruelty” as the reason (212). He further adds as to how people blame her “deficiencies” to have triggered the husband’s problematic behavior (213).

Similar to Kunti, Indu is left with no other choice than to raise the child of her husband bore to him by another woman; violating the sanctity of their marriage. Certain variations can be seen here as well to suit a modern day story better.

Kunti is one of the most influential characters in Mahabharata. A lot of enigma surrounds her owing to the lack of a voice that forms an integral part of her characterization. She rarely speaks: no one knows what goes inside her head.

Perhaps, marked by an overwhelming desire to unravel this enigma that surrounds her character Shashi Deshpande wrote 'Hear me Sanjaya.' For the very first time, readers are allowed a glimpse inside the mind of Kunti. Undoing the injustice of history, Kunti is finally given a voice.

Deshpande dares to tell the untold in her short story. And in doing so, she makes us question everything we had earlier believed so readily.

Speaking about the life she was made to lead Kunti says:

“my father gave me away...how easily he gave me away. As if I was
A bit of property. And I can't even remember if I made me angry?
But I remember I was frightened. I thought my father had given me
To his friend because he was displeased with me, because I had
Done something wrong. And I thought- what if I displease this man
Too? Will he give me away to someone else? And so I did everything
I could to please him; I tried hard, never to displease him. (Deshpande 86)

Addressing the issue of raising Madri's son she further adds:

“Take my son and look after them, she said. And I was angry.
She is escaping, I thought, she is taking away all the glory,
leaving struggle the drudgery for me.” (Deshpande 84)

Deshpande's Kunti is hardly altruistic or benevolent. Rather, she is frightened, angry and vulnerable. Also, she is envious of Madri's dazzling beauty and accepts everything meekly for that is the only way of survival.

Not much different is Indu who not forgives her husband DK for his adulterous ways but accepts another woman's child, too, towards the end. Similar to Kunti, Indu is also aware of the position she would be made to face if her marriage fails. She knows how important her marriage is for survival.

In extending her forgiveness to DK and acceptance to his child born out of a passing affair, Indu exhibits a kind of awareness that Deshpande highlights in Kunti as well. This awareness is tied to the responsibility that lies with every Indian woman-that of holding the family together.

Just like Kunti, Indu takes full responsibility of the other child towards the end of the movie. For she knows in allowing Rahul to go, she would be losing a part of DK forever. Overridden by guilt, DK would stop being the affectionate father her daughters are so fond of.

Akin to Mahabharata, Ramayana also contains its fair number of issues and problem that the Feminist school of thought calls out time and again.

Feminism originated out of a desire for equal social, political and economic rights during the late 19th century for women who lacked the basic right to vote and had no access to any kind of economic or social security. Slowly, it made its way into the literary world where critics like Elaine Showalter, Toril Moi, and Judith Butler etc. have shown how language, literature and culture act as mediums of both the construction of gender as well as its appropriateness.

Elaine Showalter writes:

“.....Virginia Woolf consciously refrained from writing about her Own sexuality. The absence of sex in her writings may be explained Away, or defended, or even made a virtue, as a sign of her lofty Standards of wealth, normalcy and refinement; but her reticence is in Fact a renunciation. In her novels, sexual passion become a Masculine property, comprehended by women in moments of Empathy rather than experience, as in *Mrs. Dalloway* when Clarissa Kisses Sally Sewall and experiences with brief intensity what men Feel. Like other male properties-power, hierarchy, aggression and Anger- passion, we feel, is one Virginia Woolf is happy to renounce.
(208)

In renouncing “passion” Woolf shows an acute awareness of what is not prescribed for women (Showalter 208).

A great deal has been said and written on how a woman should be and what she should strictly abstain from. Ramayana also explores such similar themes of an ideal woman and specifically emphasizes upon chastity as a hallmark of womanhood- an ideal kind of womanhood.

Meenakshi is brutally punished for demonstrating this vulgar “passion” which Woolf happily renounces and become the dreadful Surpankha (208). Sita has to give agnipariksha to prove her loyalty towards her husband, Rama.

Addressing the theme of agnipariksha, Muktilaki Mangharam writes:

“.....Sita is rescued beaming with happiness to be reunited with Her husband. However, Rama receives her with coldness, saying That she can no longer be his wife after having dwelt with Ravana. Sita insists on her innocence in vain and finally and finally orders Her funeral pyre to be built, since she would rather die by the fire Than live without Rama. Rama sees her enter the flames to undergo The agnipariksha, or trial by fire, which is supposedly her test of purity. Sits passes the trial emerging unscathed in the arms of Agni, the fire Deity. She is now welcomed by Rama, whose behavior she tenderly Forgives, but not before he gods reveal Rama’s divine nature to him

By way of admonishing him for his treatment of Sita.”

(77)

The Hrishikesh Mukerjee directed and critically acclaimed movie *Mili*- which released in the year 1975- burrows loosely from this theme of *agnipariksha*. The movie stars Amitabh Bachchan and Jaya Bhaduri in leading roles. It also had Ashok Kumar, Aruni Irani and Suresh Chatwal in supporting roles.

In the beginning of the movie, we are introduced to the character of Runa Singh (Irani). She is unmarried despite having no dearth of male admirers.

She smiles welcoming the recently Veer Chakra awarded Ranjeet (Chatwal) inside her apartment. Runa was abandoned by her lover for not having enough wealth that she could bring with her in the form of dowry.

When Ranjeet tries to apologize out of courtesy for her loss, she right away dismisses it. She tells Ranjeet how easily she flirts with men; making them fall head over heels. She has, in fact, excelled the art of seduction.

But all of it is a charade. Deep down, she has lost her soul. She has lost her sense of the self. Similar to Meenakshi, she has transformed into something that she no longer recognizes as her own. Her identity is as scarred as the mutilated face of Meenakshi.

The story taking a sharp turn with the arrival of Shekher (Bachchan) on the scene. He is an out and out misanthrope who gets irritated by loud noises and uses his domestic help to have all sorts of communication with the people of his building.

Shekher-being a wealthy bachelor-attracts the unwarranted attention of his neighbor who wishes to wed her daughter off to him. On being declined the angered mother-daughter duo dig up into his past and start spreading all sorts of dirty rumor about his past life.

Slowly the reason behind his aloofness is revealed- his mother. Shekher's mother took her own life to prove her innocence to a husband who was as much a prey of people's words as Rama by the subjects of his very state.

Shekher breaks down in front of *Mili* (Bhaduri) saying how her mother was as pious as any goddess. People would throw mud at her left, right and center. Tired of everything she took her life one day leaving behind a distraught and angry Shekher.

Meghna Gulzar directed "*Pooranmashi*" offers a different take on the theme of *agnipariksha*. It is a part of the anthology film *Dus Kahaniyaa* which released in the year 2007. This Amrita Pritam-Minissa Lamba starrer featured an interesting switching of generation and reversal of roles. It is based on the short-story by Kartar Singh Duggal.

Mini (Lamba) is a simple village girl who is just about to get married. Her mother, Mala (Singh), looks visibly anxious and urges her husband to stay back only to get harshly reprimanded by him. In an attempt to cheer her mother up, Mini dolls Mala using the green bangles and chunar with which she was blessed by her future in laws at her roka ceremony. She is taken aback at the swift transformation of her mother before her very eyes and

marvels at her glowing beauty. Mala scolds her for such childish behavior but doesn't take off anything.

She sneaks out later into the night remembering how her lover promised to meet her on the eve of pooranmashi. She comes back home at the crack of dawn not without catching the attention of one of the villagers.

However, she is mistaken for Mini. Later, all the villagers force their way inside the house of Mala. Mala's lover is also there.

They want to punish an adulterous Mini for bringing shame to their community. Her in laws break off the wedding too. Mini tries in vain to convince them of her innocence.

They show her broken pieces of her green glass bangles; demanding she be thrown out immediately. A realization dawns upon Mini on seeing the broken pieces of her bangles.

Left with no other alternative-for how could she expose her own mother- Mini jumps into a well and takes her own life. She is helpless, torn between an overwhelming love and an equally powerful urge to salvage her dignity in a fashion similar to that of Sita's. Preoccupation with a woman's virginity and using it to assess her character is a major practice in many parts of India. It is worth mentioning the Kanjarbhats in this regard.

Addressing their origin and way of living The Indian Express writes:

"The Kanjarbhats are a denotified tribe that migrated from Rajasthan to parts of Western Maharashtra and Gujarat. The community are governed by their own set of codified rules and a caste panchayat. As part of the Kanjarbhat caste tradition, a bride is subjected to a "character test" on the Wedding night. The husband and wife consummate their marriage on a white Cloth in a lodge immediately after getting married. The caste councils oversee This test. Both families pay Rs 300 each to the panchayat members, though Larger sums are paid as well."

Many women like Mini suffer because of such an idea of a pure woman that remains unchanged even to this date.

As a matter of fact, all these fictional characters serve the purpose of illuminating the status of women that remain unchanged despite claims of unfathomable progress being made by the mankind. On a closer inspection, their tales of woe and sufferings remind us of a past that is neither remote nor replaceable.

They act as spokesperson commenting upon the many unjust sacrifices a woman is expected to make as well the proprietor sort of mindset existing amongst men. A kind of mindset that is passed from one generation to other with little to no alteration.

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