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## **Old Wine in New Bottles?: A Study of the Representation of Mythical Heroines from Hindu Mythology in Retellings for Children**

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### **Abstract:**

Contemporary criticism has bitterly denounced the master narratives of history, myth and religion, but where myth is concerned, it continues to be cherished for its potential to transmit the beliefs and values that have sustained our cultures. But naturally, society deems it necessary to introduce their children to the gods and goddesses, the heroes and heroines of mythology. However, because myth can also operate as an ideological tool, the retelling of these received narratives for children deserves closer examination. This paper examines the representation of women in retellings of Hindu mythology for children, with a focus on those women whose depictions avoid the stereotypical images that cast them as passive victims with little or no agency. While some of the representations do give heart, more often than not, the narrators' efforts to re-imagine their female protagonists fall short each time they hesitate to reinvent these mythical women in ways that empower them. In reverting to the same old stereotypes in the guise of offering reinvented mythic heroines, it becomes a simple a case of having old wine in new bottles.

**Keywords:** children, gods, goddesses, gender, mythology, representation, stereotype.

Mythology is perhaps one of the oldest genres in the history of humankind. But whether the people of a culture choose to root themselves in these received stories or not, whether they consider myth eternally relevant or hopelessly outdated, the fact that mythology continues to be read and studied as avidly as ever, testifies to the indomitable power of myth to withstand the ravages of time. Even if the postmodern world has challenged the grand narratives of the past, mythology continues to sustain a sizeable portion of the population, especially when it comes to sacred myths which many still take seriously enough to live their lives by. Given how a culture roots itself in its myths, it is often deemed necessary to introduce children to the great gods, goddesses, heroes and heroines from the mythical world, a not surprising tendency since children have always been perceived as being in dire need of moral instruction. Mythology not only offers an exciting body of tales brimming with magic, fantasy and the impossible for the young, it also enables a society to pass on the moral codes inscribed in those stories.

If one agrees that literature can be a powerful agent of socialisation, then one cannot deny the potential of literary narratives to influence readers into seeing the world in accordance

with the ideology of the author or narrator. In 1970, Louis Althusser, in his influential essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)”, had identified literature as one of the Ideological State Apparatuses, an instrument through which the state exerted control over its citizens. In the specific domain of children’s literature, Jacqueline Rose’s book *The Case of Peter Pan, or the Impossibility of Children’s Fiction* (1984) propounded that children’s literature had completely marginalised the child, and that it was actually a “trap” that adults had set to imprison children in the fictive world (2). The ideological dimension of literature was then developed in the work of John Stephens in *Language and Ideology in Children’s Fiction* (1992) and *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture: Traditional Story and Metanarratives in Children’s Literature* (1994). In the latter book, Stephens went so far as to say that the retellings of traditional stories such as myth “have the function of maintaining conformity to socially determined and approved patterns of behaviour, which they do by offering positive role models, proscribing prosocial behaviour, and affirming the cultural ideologies, systems and institutions” (3-4). Although children’s literature scholars had long debated the didactic agenda in literature for young people, the concern about the impact of a writer’s ideology on children became an important strand with the work of Rose and Stephens. Children’s literature scholars, now more than ever, have their eyes trained on books for children, and representations of gender, nation, and culture in books for children have come under the scanner like never before.

A study of some of the retellings of mythology for children showed that the exploits of male protagonists were consistently foregrounded, while the women were usually cast as alluring, demure belles who merely acted out the destinies charted for them in mute acceptance of their fate. However, now and then one did come across depictions that defied the norm. Although the gods and heroes of mythology routinely overshadowed the goddesses and heroines in retellings for children, it also happened that some female protagonists were represented in somewhat unconventional ways as having some spunk and dare. It is these women, or more specifically, the representation of these women, that is the focus of this paper. Since the number of books dedicated to retellings of mythological stories from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are too many to consider in their entirety, only a few examples have been included for discussion. The texts from which these examples have been taken include Devdutt Pattanaik’s *Pashu* and *The Girl Who Chose*, Meera Uberoi’s *The Puffin Book of Classic Indian Tales for Children*, *Lord Ganesha’s Feast of Laughter*, and *Stories from the Mahabharata*, and Namita Gokhale’s *The Puffin Mahabharata*. The paper begins on an optimistic note by highlighting the renditions of women depicted as unusually strong-willed and self-assured but moves on to representations that appear to empower their heroines but which, in the final analysis, fail to liberate them adequately enough to give us something to really cheer about.

Let us begin with Devdutt Pattanaik’s *Pashu*, in which he gives us a Parvati with a rather independent bent of mind. Shiva did not seem inclined to become a father, but Parvati longed for a child to keep her company while her husband was off meditating, “So the determined Parvati decided to create a child of her own, without a husband” (136). Having created the child she had always wanted, her identity as a mother takes precedence over her duty as a

wife, but with disastrous consequences: “Parvati enjoyed the company of Vinayaka. When Shiva saw them together...He became a bit jealous for, in Vinayaka’s company, Parvati did not really miss Shiva. So he beheaded Vinayaka” (136). In contrast to most other versions of this story that tell us that Shiva beheaded Ganapati out of ignorance since he did not know that the child who prevented him from entering his own home was a son Parvati had created, in this version, it is jealousy and anger at being sidelined by his wife that apparently brought about the beheading. The mighty god comes across as a weak, insecure man threatened by his wife’s affection for the son she brought forth. Parvati’s act of creating the *kind* of son she desired, *when* she desired, negates Shiva’s status as a husband and father. His rage is the rage of man made impotent by a wife who shows him that she does not need him as procreator, because she can create just as well as he can. Shiva may be Mahadev, the god of gods, the creator of the universe, but as a mother, Parvati asserts her power as a creator in her own right, and Shiva’s violent retaliation by destroying her creation signifies more than an act of an insecure husband; it reflects an act of a man threatened by the power of the mother goddess. On learning of her son’s beheading, a furious Parvati turns on Shiva, threatening to never speak to him again unless he sets things right. Even though this story spans two short pages, and Parvati’s character is only briefly sketched, her image as a headstrong, no-nonsense woman whose fury her husband dare not ignore makes for a commendable effort.

Meera Uberoi’s Parvati is feistier than her counterpart in *Pashu*, holding her own against her illustrious husband. This is no meek, docile goddess, ready to play second fiddle to Shiva, even if he happens to be the God of Gods. In fact, it is Shiva who must mollify his wife and satisfy her whims because “Parvati’s displeasure was the only thing that put the Great God into a quake” (*Lord Ganesha’s Feast of Laughter* 5). At the outset, Parvati is introduced as a woman who “was pretty easy-going” though she “disliked being disturbed when she was bathing” (1). On the fateful day when Shiva cuts off Ganesha’s head, she is supposed to have marched “into her bathing chamber with a determined little smile on her lips”, having decided to create a son who would stand guard at the door to the bathroom because despite knowing that she hated being disturbed while bathing, Shiva “strode in whenever he wished, cool as you please, and this really annoyed Parvati” (1). When she catches sight of Ganesha’s severed head, she turns on Shiva “like a mountain lioness”, and launches into a furious tirade, mocking his status as the God of Gods: “‘You’ve killed my son, you heartless brute,’ she stormed .... And they call you Mahadeva – the Great God! Some Great God you are! I’ll never forgive you for this” (4). When Shiva protests that he couldn’t have known that the boy was his son, she retorts, “‘You should have known...You are Mahadeva, after all’” (4). All Shiva gets for apologizing and promising to set things right is “a smouldering look” (4). After he restores Ganesha to life, and asks her “‘Happy now?’”, her only reply is a curt “‘It will do’”, and Shiva is quick to thank his stars: “‘Whew! That was a close call’” (5). This unflappable, spirited Parvati is in even better form in “How Ganesha Made the Poor Man Rich”. When she spots one of Shiva’s devotees in a miserable state, she takes her husband on “in a disapproving voice” countering him with a “tart question”, and an “acid comment” as she “snapped” and “glared haughtily” at him (*Lord Ganesha’s Feast* 84-85). Though Shiva merely laughs at her insistence that the poor man should be made wealthy overnight, he does request Ganesha to make the man rich to satisfy her diktat. It is not often that Shiva’s consort

is represented as more than an adjunct to the God of Gods, and this robust, testy woman with a temper as fierce as that of her more celebrated and revered husband comes across as the proverbial breath of fresh air. Uberoi's characterization of Parvati more than adequately illustrates how narrators can infuse new life into the myths they retell by reinventing mythical characters without in any way diluting the texture and spirit of the myth in question.

Uberoi gives us another woman who has a mind of her own and is not afraid to speak it in the form of Shakuntala in *Stories from the Mahabharata*. Uberoi's Shakuntala who refuses to stand for the kind of treatment she gets from her husband when she approaches him in court. As soon as King Dushyanata refuses to acknowledge her as his wife, and fulfill his promise to make their son his heir, an indignant Shakuntala reminds him of who she is and how she expects to be treated: "Shakuntala went pale at the cruel words and for a moment stood still. Then rage and anger filled her. Her eyes flashed. 'You know what I've said is true .... I am your wife and deserve to be treated with honour. I am the daughter of Menaka and Vishwamitra. I deserve more respect'" (8). When Dushyanta refuses to relent, she threatens to leave with her son, "'Treat me with disrespect once more and I'll leave with him'" (8). These are the kinds of representations we would like to see more of, the kinds that make us want to stand up and cheer from the sidelines.

Moving on to more extended descriptions of women as spirited, resilient individuals in little or no need of masculine interventions to fulfill their destinies and desires, let us consider the case of Amba in *The Puffin Mahabharata*. She first displays her independent streak by asserting that she will marry no one other than Salva, the king of the lands of Sambala. Later, when she is rejected by him as well as by Vichitravirya, the man she was supposed to have married, she turns her anger onto Bhishma, insisting that he must now marry her since he had won the swayamvara on behalf of his younger brother. When Bhishma also rejects her, she vows to become the cause of his death. She tries in many ways to provoke his enemies to kill him but Bhishma defeats everyone. Not willing to give up, the "exceedingly determined" Amba meditates in the forest for many years until Lord Shiva grants her wish to be the cause of Bhishma's death, though only in her next life (Gokhale 13). Frustrated beyond measure, she immolates herself, but is determined to get her revenge after she is reborn as Drupad's daughter, Sikhandin. Amba's tenacity and courage notwithstanding, it must be noted that she is as much a tragic figure as she is a heroic one. While swayamvars are often presented as a custom that allowed women the freedom to choose their husbands, Amba's example belies that representation. If a man was permitted to 'win' a bride on another man's behalf, as Bhishma does on behalf of his brother, then it clearly shows that women were simply objects to be fought over or 'won'. Though Amba tries to assert herself by refusing to marry the winner of the swayamvara (Bhishma) or his brother (Vichitravirya), her plight as a woman is eloquently brought home to her when, because she pleads on Salva's behalf, Bhishma contemptuously spares him saying, "'Your life has been saved by a mere woman!'" (12). It is on account of this public humiliation that her lover refuses to accept her; the code of masculinity will not allow him to be grateful to her for saving his life, on the contrary, the object of Salva's love now becomes the object of his hatred. Death would have been preferable to this insult to his manhood. To make matters worse, she is then rejected by her

prospective husband because she had publicly admitted that she would only marry the man of her choice. The narrator herself underscores Amba's predicament with the words, "Poor Amba! It was hard being a woman in a world where the menfolk decided on everything that women could or could not do" (12). Amba's sad fate follows her into her next life when she is reborn as Sikhandin, and is sent into exile as a punishment because she told her father that she, a woman, was ready to fight the great Bhishma. Undeterred, Amba prays until she becomes a man, for only then would she be allowed to learn the art of warfare and succeed in avenging herself. Although she does try to fight him later on the battlefield, Bhishma avoids her because though she is now a "man-woman warrior," he still sees her as "a defenceless woman" whom his code of chivalry will not allow him to fight (136). Few stories could better illustrate the wretched fate of women than the story of Amba, a victim in both of her lives.

Rukmini, a character usually overshadowed by her lover Krishna, is rendered as a rather spunky woman in *The Puffin Book of Classical Indian Myths*. She takes up for Krishna, a man she has never seen but fallen head over heels in love with, in the assembly no less. She stands her ground when her brother refers to Krishna as a "murdering cowherd", and argues, "He's not a cowherd, he's a prince. That awful Kansa was his cousin – so he can't be a cowherd, can he?" (Uberoi 46). When the messenger informs the court that Krishna had installed King Ugrasena on the throne though he could have taken it for himself, she cries out triumphantly, "See! That's called a hero!" (47). Her disregard for decorum and tradition comes into play once again when she overhears her father and brother discussing her marriage, and defiantly decides that she will send Krishna a letter asking him to carry her away even "if it's not the done thing!" (48).

Like Rukmini, Uruvashi, the apsara is also supposed to have fallen in love with Pururavasa based only on what she has heard about him. When she is banished to earth, she is actually glad instead of ashamed because having been "filled with a strange longing" for Pururavasa, she is secretly thrilled at the prospect of finally being able to "see this king whose very name had made her heart flutter like a turtle-dove" (Uberoi, *The Puffin Book* 67). This highlighting of female desire in women like Shakuntala, Uruvashi and Rukmini may appear to be something to cheer about, but is not at all reassuring considering how the women fear recrimination for expressing their desire. Rukmini asks the priest who gave Krishna her love letter, "Will he come? Was he disgusted by my boldness?" (49); Uruvashi worries that Pururavasa might think her "brash and bold, shameless, coming here without an invitation" (67); and Shakuntala, though smitten by King Dushyanta as he with her, hesitates to reveal her feelings for him because she thinks, "He'll despise me, he'll think I have no modesty" (110). Clearly, a woman is 'bold', and not in an approbatory way, if she dares to express her desire for a man. It is also interesting that in all these three cases, the women fall in love without having seen the men in question. Even more strange is the case of Uruvashi, whose heart had fluttered like a turtle-dove on hearing Pururavasa's name, but who later lays down the condition that she must never see him naked after marriage. Such representations smack of an attempt to create and retain the image of the heroines of mythological narratives as asexual, virginal beauties, either by negating their desire altogether or by trying to mitigate it to whatever extent possible. We find in the examples of

Shakuntala, Uruvashi, and Rukmini, that shame, propriety, and modesty are motifs invoked by the women themselves, and though they do try and defy tradition on rare occasions such as those described above, the message that goes out is that it is completely against the norm for women to articulate their desire.

In so representing the women characters, it is the narrators who reveal their inability to rise above cultural stereotypes. By casting their women characters in the same old mould, the narrators, despite hailing from a globalised, postmodern, 20<sup>th</sup> century world, reveal a singular lack of will, of courage, or both, to reinvent the myths of the days gone by. Even when they seem to allow their heroines to push against the boundaries of culture and tradition once in a while, they hold them back. Often, female assertiveness, wherever it makes an appearance, is subverted by presenting it as an illustration of a woman's love for or loyalty to her husband. Rarely do the women defy social norms for their own sake or to uphold their personal convictions. And the rare instances that show otherwise, are too few and far between to make a dent in the poor representation of the mythological heroines. Consider the representation of Sati in *The Puffin Book of Classical Indian Myths*, where her strength of character is undermined by framing her willful behavior as acts of love for Shiva. She only defies her father because he disapproves of Shiva as a suitable groom for her. And yes, she heads off into the forest to perform austerities but only to please Shiva so that he might consent to marry her. When a man performs austerities in lonely forests, he does it to gain powers to make him knowledgeable or invincible. When a woman does the same, she does it to win a man's love; the minute Shiva asks her for a boon, Sati asks him to marry her.

Goddess Shakti's image as the goddess of strength is similarly diluted in *Pashu*. When their plan to use Kama, the god of love, to make Shiva fall in love is foiled, Gunakeshi and Matali appeal to Goddess Shakti for help, but the goddess of strength, here expresses her confidence in her power to seduce a man: "Fear not, I will make Shiva marry me", she claims, and proceeds to impress Shiva with her devotion in her avatar as Parvati, princess of the mountains. After she has pleased him enough for him to grant her a boon, she promptly says, "Be my husband" (Pattanaik 41). Whether an ordinary mortal like Sati or a respected goddess like Shakti, the goddess of strength no less, the power of women is mostly limited to securing a spouse or maintaining the solidarity of marriage. Going back to Sati again, that she is a woman with a mind of her own is repeatedly underscored - in marrying Shiva against her father's wishes, then in visiting her father against her husband's wishes, and then in confronting her father "in cool, clear tones" for not inviting her husband and her for the yagna. She even takes on Brahma and Vishnu together with all those who allowed this insult to Shiva: "How dare you slight my lord in front of all the gods! He doesn't need the trappings of divinity you find so essential, he is above all that. You forget, of all the gods, including Brahma and Vishnu, only my lord is Mahadeva - the Great God" ((Uberoi, *The Puffin Book* 86). But all these incidents, including her decision to immolate herself in anger, are all in aid of her husband. It is either love for him or loyalty to him that inspires her defiance, taking us right back to where we started - the stereotype of the loyal wife.

A similar pattern manifests itself in Pattanaik's *The Girl Who Chose*, subtitled *A New Way of Narrating the Ramayana*. The narrative appears to restore agency to the woman who has



fallen through the cracks of the famous epic by foregrounding her perspective: “in the din of Ravana’s cruelty and Ram’s valour, something is often overlooked – the story of Sita, the girl who chose” (2). The narrator’s lens zooms in on Sita and the five choices she made from the time she married Ram until the time she handed over her twins to him. The narrator tries to empower her as a woman whose choices influenced not just the course of her own life but the trajectory of the *Ramayana* itself. And yet, the book ultimately ends up reinforcing Sita’s image as a dutiful wife concerned solely with the reputation and honor of her husband. She refuses to go with Hanuman stating that she wants Ram to come and rescue her himself, but only because she wants to give Ram an opportunity to restore his, honour and reputation, not hers: “For Ram is a prince, and royal reputation matters a lot to Princes, especially to those who belong to the sun-dynasty” (63). Her choice to follow her husband into the forest could have been presented as the act of a woman determined to assert her right to decide where she wants to be, but the accompanying illustration subverts the strength of her resolve by supplying an altogether different reason for her decision:

Who will take care of Ram and Lakshman when they are in the forest? They are princes, who are used to servants, and warriors, who know how to fight. But do they know how to find water, and how to make friends with birds, beasts and bees? My sisters can look after our father-in-law, our mothers-in-laws and the city of Ayodhya. I will take care of the sun-prince and his brother. (23)

So, did Sita decide to be a substitute ‘servant’ for her husband and brother-in-law, of the kind they were used to in the palace?

Throughout the book, Sita claims that unlike her husband who is bound by rules, she is free to choose, but as his wife, as queen, is her position independent of his status as king? And is her freedom to choose limited to choosing to be with her husband? When Ram urges her to stay back in the palace, she responds with the statement, ““You are bound by rules, but not I. I am free to choose. I choose to follow you”” (23). Sita’s consciousness is entirely limited to that of a loyal wife. When the female rakshasas ask her why she refuses to accept Ravana as her husband, she replies: ““I was given in marriage to Ram. That is why I am his wife. I will always be his wife. There is no choice here; there are rules in place”” (48). The narrator here undermines the attempt to represent Sita as a free woman, for Sita contradicts her own admission that she was free to choose while Ram was bound by rules. If, as her reply to the female rakshasas suggests, fidelity to one’s spouse is a matter of rules rather than of choice, in what way did Sita exercise her freedom to choose? In view of such internal contradictions, *The Girl Who Chose* falls disappointingly short as a book that proposes to empower its female protagonist.

Time and again, the narratives come this close to liberating their female heroines, only to revert to the same old stereotypes. Where women characters from mythology are concerned, their personhood and strength of character is grossly undermined because their trials were experienced in their roles as wives, daughters, and mothers, in the private sphere of the home. The exploits of their male counterparts, on the other hand, are considered far more heroic, and accorded greater privilege because their adventures were acted out in the public arena



such as the battlefield or the kingdom at large. Although women like Sita and Amba proved their mettle by surviving in harsh conditions just as well as any man would have, their travails and resistances are not highlighted adequately enough for their stories to resonate as powerfully as they should have.

When such representations suffuse literature for children, it takes on grave implications with regard to their impact on the child reader. Prejudiced and distorted depictions of men and women in children's literature compel us to ask: What kind of inspiration is the child reader expected to derive from such depictions? To what extent, if at all, might the child reader see such women as relevant to their lives? What kind of children are such narratives hoping to shape or 'construct' through their representations? What kind of nation-building can we expect from literature that perpetuates sexism instead of teaching the young to combat, resist, triumph over or even subvert the dangers of gender stereotypes encoded in patriarchal cultures? What kind of gender-consciousness is the child reader supposed to imbibe? It is of course possible that children are smarter than we give them credit for, and one hopes that they will not naively accept these representations, but that would be to the credit of the individual child reader, and does not in any way absolve the narrators from fulfilling their responsibility to use the power of the pen to rewrite the flawed scripts of old.

Pamela Sue Anderson claims that despite certain differences between them, both conservative and radical feminist philosophers of myth "endeavour to see behind the patriarchal images in myth, in order to uncover what is prior to the loss of denigration of female identity," and both "seek to disclose the murder of the mother-goddess by patriarchy..." (Schilbrack 103-104). He cites the example of a feminist scholar like Adriana Caverero, whose reinterpretation of archetypal female heroines of mythology such as Penelope and Demeter, was prompted by an attempt to liberate these women "from the patriarchal constructions that have dominated western philosophy since the theft of these female figures by ancient philosophies" (104). He also refers to the work of the feminist philosopher Mary Daly, who "digs deep to create new versions of old myths" (104). In addition to Caverero and Daly, there are other feminists like Adrienne Rich, Luce Irigaray, and Simone de Beauvoir, who have been just as committed to feminist undertakings because they understand the power of re-presenting the unfairly represented in mythology: "When it comes to a feminist commitment to achieve more justice, the content and form of mythology becomes crucial material for the transformation of the social hierarchies that have eclipsed and excluded the contribution of women in past and present philosophy" (120).

In the Indian context, we have the mythic figures of Draupadi, Sita and Ahalya, whose stories have just as strong a potential for reinterpretation as the women of Greek mythology. Benu Verma cites the example of Manorama Mahapatra who reinvents Ahalya "to bring her closer to the modern Indian woman, who might be suffering a similar fate vis a vis her social environment and exclaims that time has changed and so Ahalya's trajectory needs a change as well..." (n.pag). Such reimaginings are entirely possible because "The very nature of myth being open-ended, every effort at particularizing it through a new story, location or purpose widens the scope for more alternative storylines for its characters, situations and objectives" (n.pag). For this very reason, it is incumbent upon contemporary authors to reconfigure the

heroines of mythology because, as Verma says, “The more they are written about the more the scope of their meaning widens. The space of myth and the instrument of the feminine figures of the mythic tradition facilitate a platform for negotiating power, social structure and cultural change for authors, performers, readers and audience participants alike” (n.pag).

Such negotiations are especially important in literature for children because it is by now universally acknowledged that storytelling plays a crucial role in transmitting cultural knowledge and moral values to the young. The images in media and in literature have been found to influence the games that children play, their academic performance, and the careers they later take up (Aina and Cameron 15-16). One might have hoped that so much talk about gender roles and stereotypes would have led writers to exercise some degree of caution in the representations of gender roles and stereotypes in literature for children, but that hope seems to be sadly misplaced. In their study of children’s literature from the 1940s to the 1980s, Kotenhaus and Demersat were compelled to conclude that not much had changed where gender representations were concerned: “The increased female representation in titles, central roles, and pictures would appear to indicate that authors of the 1980s are more aware and sensitive to women’s changing roles; however, the way in which these females are pictured is still sexist and biased” (230). Although adults apparently become more flexible in their ideas about stereotypes in later years, the effect of gender stereotypes, whether positive or negative, stays for life (Brannon 166-167). Considering the commanding power and influence of mythological narratives to influence a child’s identification with the larger-than-life protagonists of mythology, and their perceptions of what it means to be male or female, it would augur well for all concerned if new bottles of mythology came brimming with fresh batches of wine once in a while.

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