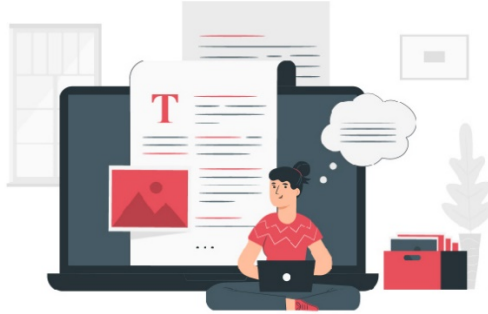


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Rereading the Myth from A Feminist Perspective: A Study of V. M. Girija's Poems

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Abstract:

Revisionist mythmaking is a method of feminist literacy criticism. It is part of an attempt to discover a feminine language through which women can express their experiences and their body. Revisionist mythmaking helps women poets to explore and to retrieve the female identity that is submerged in traditional culture and cultural productions. But if a poet uses the myth in such a way that the meanings intended by the poet diverge from the meanings accepted by the society, the use of the myth is revisionist. Revisionist mythmaking helps women to redefine the female identity, female self and their role in culture. V.M. Girija, an Indian poet who writes in Malayalam, relies on re-visionist myth-making strategy of feminist writers to question the representation of the female body in myths and folklores. The poem, "Urangunna Sundhari" is a free adaptation and pictorial narration of the fairy tale "Sleeping Beauty."

Keywords: Revisionist mythmaking, female identity, cultural resistance, Feminism.

Revisionist mythmaking or revisionist mythology is a method of feminist literacy criticism, which can be categorized as *thinking through the body*, as argued by feminist scholars like Adrienne Rich and Alicia Ostriker. Ostriker's work *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's poetry in America* (1986), is a central text that has shaped the feminist thought associated with thinking through the body. It is part of an attempt to discover a feminine language through which women can express their experiences and their body. The third chapter of the book titled "Body Language: The Release of Anatomy," discusses the link between the female body and the feminine language appropriate to express the female identity. Ostriker argues that women should write about their body and bodily experiences and learn to interpret external reality through the medium of their body. In the chapter "Thieves of language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythology," she discusses revisionist mythmaking as

an important means by which the phallogentric narrative of the female body can be challenged and a gyno-centric language, which is equal but opposite of the andro-centric language, can be invented. She finds that it is through the myths that the gender roles and codes of the female body are created and maintained. But myths are phallogentric materials which are detrimental to construct a true female identity. They are always hostile to female identity formation. One of the important challenges of the feminists is to rewrite these myths from a female point of view, to give a new expression to the female identity and to discover a language of their own. Revisionist mythmaking helps women poets to explore and to retrieve the female identity that is submerged in traditional culture and cultural productions.

Ostriker borrows the phrase “thieves of language” or “female Prometheus” from Claudine Herrmann. She agrees with the idea of Adrienne Rich that the male-centred language is not sufficient to give expression to the female experience in a patriarchy. Ordinary language, which centres on the Law of the Father, makes woman silent and invisible. Ostriker observes that writers, both male and female, use the male-centred language for literary composition. Women writers’ use of the male-centred language resembles the colonial situation where the colonized natives use the language of the colonizers. That is why she states that “women writers have always tried to steal the language, which is a male terrain” (69). Since patriarchy is often defined as sexual colonialism, Adrienne Rich calls ordinary language or the male-centred language “oppressor’s language” (151). She means that the phallogentric language is hegemonic like the colonizers’ language. Ostriker argues that women writers have the responsibility to seize that language and make it capable of expressing exclusively female experiences. Ostriker discusses the possibility of creating a female centred language which is separate and different from the male-centred language. For this, it is essential to make a study gynocentric writing in the past and the present. Ostriker brings our attention to contemporary women poets who have succeeded in changing the meanings associated with the images of the female body by transforming/altering their significance. Flower, for example, means force and not frailty for these poets. She argues that in the same way, revisionist mythmaking helps women to redefine the female identity, female self and their role in culture. Ostriker states that even though mythology seems to be a hostile terrain for a woman writer, it is the space where women writers can deconstruct and redefine the female body/identity by redefining patriarchal prejudices and phallogentric biases on the one hand and to expurgate the male-centred language of its phallogentric elements on the other. Myth is a tale or a figure for which the members of a community share the same meanings. Whenever a poet employs a myth previously accepted and defined by a culture in such a way that the meanings intended by the poet converge with

the meanings accepted by the society, the use of the myth is ordinary. But if a poet uses the myth in such a way that the meanings intended by the poet diverge from the meanings accepted by the society, the use of the myth is revisionist. Though this initially satisfies the need of the individual poet, it ultimately makes cultural change possible. Revisionist mythmaking is used by women poets to challenge and to correct the gender stereotype embodied in myths. Ostriker gives the example of Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus" and Anne Sexton's "Snow White" to show how these poems alter the conventional ideals associated with such myths. In this context, Adrienne Rich observes "revision-the act of looking back, seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction is for women more than a chapter in cultural history. It is act of survival" ("When We Dead" 18). She means that re-vision is not simply an art, it is a medium of cultural resistance, a form of struggle and survival. Revisionist mythmaking involves three stages of reworking on the old text. It includes re-visioning, re-imagining and re-interpretation. Re-visioning can be explained as the act of rereading the myth from a feminist perspective so as to subvert the patriarchal ideology operating in that myth. Re-imagining involves the process of rewriting the myth by redefining the identity of the female characters. It creates a new perspective of the already existing myth which is opposite to the patriarchal description of it. Finally, re-interpretation of the myth which is the result of re-vision and re-imagining that gives a completely different interpretation of an already existing myth with its female characters redefined with a new female identity.

V.M. Girija's poems are attempts to give new interpretation and meaning to the female identity, *3 Dheerka Kavithakal* is her latest anthology of poetry which is divided into three main sections. The final section "Urangunna Sundhari" is a group of poems which works on the myth of sleeping beauty as seen in Western Fairy Tales and in Indian epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharatha*. The first poem in the section with same title "Urangunna Sundhari" is a free adaptation and pictorial narration of the fairy tale, with a view to questioning the representation of the female body and its desires in the fairy tale. The fairy tale "Sleeping Beauty" is derived from existing folk tales. It is preserved in different versions in different languages. Grimm Brothers gave a version of it in early nineteenth century Germany. Every version maintained its patriarchal values. When Grimm brothers compiled and edited these stories, they censored it by avoiding its original sexual connotations and erotic content to satisfy the needs of conservative, Christian middle class. But through the tales they wanted to express the truth of the role of women in patriarchal society.

Grimm Brothers' "Briar Rose" was based on the French Version of Charles Perrault. Perrault's "Sleeping Beauty" is in two parts which even continues after the union of the

sleeping beauty and the prince. But in the Grimm's version, the myth ends with the marriage of the Prince and the Briar Rose. From the beginning of the tale, it is centred on the patriarchal narration of the female body. The childless Queen feels that to be a mother is the ultimate desire of a woman and motherhood is the ultimate position that patriarchy attributes to woman. Another important assertion in the tale is about the beauty of the princess. The identity and existence of the princess depend only on her physical beauty; even her name "Briar Rose" is based on her appearance. The king, her father, and the prince, who rescues her are equally moved by her beauty.

The gifts that the fairies give the princess at the Christening ceremony are the values that patriarchy desires in a woman, those which mould her to fit in to patriarchal system with all qualities of an ideal woman. The prince who comes to awaken her is portrayed in contrast to her; he is adventurous, brave and daring. The princess is just a sexual object of prince's sexual desires. The beautiful sleeping princess is inactive and passive who wakes up with his kisses. In Grimms's version Briar Rose never speaks, she just suggests her love for him in her eyes. By ending the story in marriage, Grimms suggest the helplessness of woman to remain alone in society. Grimms use the tale to encourage female passivity and to limit her bodily power. Sleeping Beauty also shapes the female idea of living as a "desirable object" in patriarchal world.

Many attempts to re-vision the myth of sleeping beauty were made by different feminist writers. Among them the most notable and challenging one is by Anne Sexton. Her poem is titled "Briar Rose." She does not make any change in the plot of Grimms's tale. But, instead of giving a third person narration, the poem is narrated from the point of view of Briar Rose. She intentionally maintains the story and narrates how the happenings affect the Sleeping Beauty. She explains the impact of the notions of patriarchy and gender roles on woman's body. By doing this, by allowing Briar Rose to narrate her own bodily experience, Sexton is restoring the voice of Sleeping Beauty which was denied in Grimms's tale. Sexton presents Brian Rose as a neurotic, suffering from sleeplessness. The anxiety of threatened rape keeps her under a perpetual state of sleeplessness.

Sexton places her poem in the present time when she wrote it. She makes references to contemporary products and expressions. By doing this she shows the role of myths like Sleeping Beauty in determining the female bodily experiences even today. Sexton gives priority to Briar Rose's feelings and thoughts. Her method of writing is "*thinking through the body.*" The feelings of Briar Rose are given expression through her bodily experience. Sexton has used powerful images of incest, imprisonment and insomnia. Sexton shows the passivity

of Briar Rose's body and how it is objectified. Her body is raped and is passive. The trauma of her father's incestuous relation with her controls her body and thoughts even when she awakens from the sleeps. The kiss of the prince reminds her of her father and she wakes up calling "Daddy! Daddy." In the poem, rape is used as a powerful symbol by Sexton to show the imposed passivity of the female body. In Sexton's version, the awakening of Briar Rose is not an awakening to the world of freedom; instead, she moves into another prison, the world of another caretaker.

Sexton questions the role of men in the liberation of women by pointing out that once as a child she was the object of desire of her father now she is just a sexual object of desire of the prince. By likening Briar Rose's passive role to imprisonment, Sexton's version further explores how forcing women in to passivity denies women freedom to explore and shape their individual lives and personalities. Unlike Grimm's Briar Rose who is portrayed as being freed from her hundred-year sleep, Sexton's Briar Rose merely passes from one prison into another.

In her essay, "The Darker Side of Sexton's Briar Rose," Maherm Qurshi quotes from Dawn Skorczewski's essay "What Prison is This?" (1996) Literary critics cover the incest in Sexton's "Briar Rose" so that it exposes "sexual violence as a personal, critical and cultural problem. (311). Sexton overtly uses sexual images throughout the poem to give expression to sexual violence on the female body. The poem alludes to certain autobiographic experiences or apprehensions. For her father she is a "little doll child" and he kisses her on her neck. Briar Rose is a passive victim of molestation and incest:

circling the abyss like a shark,
My father thick upon me
Like some sleeping jelly fish. (156-158)

The trauma of childhood experience haunts her even after and she awakens from sleep with the anxiety of a threatened assault.

V. M. Girija reworks on the same fairy tale myth of Sleeping Beauty. She gives two versions of the sleeping beauty: the re-vision of the myth in two subsequent poems. Both poems have the same title "*Urangunna Sundhari*." Sexton's Briar Rose was published in 1970. It is possible that Sexton's poem, along with the narratives of Grimm Brothers, might have influenced Girija in writing these poems. She gives a pictorial description of the sleeping palace as everything and everyone is standing still for a century. The only sign of life in Sleeping Beauty is her heartbeat. The stillness that Girija captures in the poems can be interpreted as passivity that has not changed for a century. To awake from that passivity, she needs the kiss of a man, who can alter all the images of stillness, and change her passivity in to activity. These

are the conventional views about the male and female sexualities. Male sexuality is aggressive and active whereas female sexuality is passive and inert. In a patriarchal culture man is expected to arouse the sexual desires of a woman who is considered as a passive sexual object. In this regard, Catherine Mackinnon remarks in "Feminism, Marxism and the State: An agenda for Theory" (1997): "A woman is a being who identifies and is identified as one whose sexuality exists for someone else, who is socially made. Woman's sexuality is the capacity to arouse desire in that someone" (73). Men and women have internalized this concept of sexuality. Therefore, it is unwomanly for a woman to express her sexual desire. Therefore, women have only restricted choices in the matters related to sexuality. Girija imagines that when the kingdom wakes up everything related to it will be outdated. Still, Sleeping Beauty will be unfit to live in the new world order. She questions the power of a kiss to wipe away the antiquity of a century.

The poem can be interpreted as a re-visionist reading which highlights the unchanged role of the female body in patriarchal society. Even now the female body is attributed with passivity as was done a century before. A woman is tamed to fit in to the old patriarchal order which sustains the new patriarchal roles. She must be seductive for men and should know how to cook according to the changed new tastes, which will be a challenge for the awakened Sleeping Beauty. It is a challenge for her to adopt herself from her father's old-world patriarchy to the new world patriarchy of the prince.

Through the use of regional images and symbols, Girija tries to place the story in an Indian context. The central image of the female body used in the poem is that of the Sleeping Beauty. In addition to this, there are two more images: the image of a standing beauty, who holds water, and the image of a stooped woman, who blows fire. These images are used to show the conventional roles ascribed to women, the demands on the female body by patriarchal society. The female body is supposed to be fragile when a woman sleeps, stands and stoops. The objectified female body and the female identity in conventional views are asserted through myths and folktales and shown like a word picture in the poem. The stillness signifies the unchanged role of women even after a century. The tastes of food, music, dance and even language pattern have changed through the passing of time, but the role of women still remains unchanged. In the final stanza of the poem Girija doubts whether the kiss of the prince is capable of awakening the Sleeping Beauty and the whole palace, but its power to change the conventional role of the female body and the attitude towards female sexuality is doubtful.

In order to bring these images to the Indian context, Girija uses the term *Naishadhar*. Naishida is the kingdom of the king Nala. Nala is a character in Hindu Mythology: the story

of Nala and Dhamayanthi is told in the *Mahabharatha*. *Naishidha Charitha* is a Sanskrit poem about the life of Nala written by Sriharsha. Girija is thus making a comparative study of the western Sleeping Beauty myth and the Indian myth of Dhamayanthi who is considered an icon of Indian beauty. Nala left Dhamayanthi while she was sleeping. Sexton breaks the conventions of western patriarchy attached to the female body by making a revisionist reading of Sleeping Beauty myth. Girija also uses the same myth to reinterpret and find parallels of it in the Indian myth to break the conventions attached to the Indian concept of beauty associated with the female body. There are many similarities and even some dissimilarities in the ways Sexton and Girija treat their subject. In order to give voice to the silenced Sleeping Beauty, Sexton narrates the poem from the point of view of Sleeping Beauty. Girija uses a third person point of view for narration. Sexton uses contemporary images to signify the contemporary relevance of the subject and to denote the unchanged position of the female body and female sexuality in the present society. Girija does not use any contemporary images. Sexton uses Christian references and myths to question the conventions of Christian morality which subordinate women. Girija makes use of the epic story of Nala-Dhamayanthi and the images from the epic the *Mahabharatha* to show how the female body is controlled and subordinated through mythical representation. We can interpret that like Sexton, who challenged the conventions of Christianity in relation to the female body, Girija too questions the mythical positioning of the female body in Hindu texts like the *Mahabharatha*.

Both the poets doubt the idea of liberation or freedom attached with the patriarchal institution of marriage. When Sexton shows that the awakening of Sleeping Beauty is just from one passivity to another, Girija also questions the power of a kiss to awaken the woman, which indirectly signifies that the identity of the woman/ her body will not be recognized within the institution of marriage. Her use of the image of *Naishidhar* brings a completely different level of signification to the whole story. In Nala-Dhamayanthi myth, there is an episode where the gods Indira, Varuna, Vayu and Agni disguised themselves to look exactly like Nala in the *svayamvaram* of Dhamayanthi. Dhamayanthi identified that the gods are there with static eyelids and non-sweating bodies, whereas there is sweat on the body of Nala. Indira is the god of lightening; Varuna is the god of water; Vayu is the god of air; and Agni is the god of fire. The images of fire, water, wind and lightening are used in the poem. The poem shows fire in the stove, water above it and air in the mouth of the stooped woman are all still. Everything is still as all are burnt in lightening. The helpless state of Sleeping Beauty can be compared to that of Dhamayanthi during her *svayamvaram*.

The term *svayamvaram* gives an impression that a woman gets the right to choose the husband of her desire and it is highlighted as a freedom of the female sexuality. But, from the myth of Dhamayanthi, it is clear that the concept is ironic as all those who participate in the *svayamvaram* are alike and therefore it is difficult to choose one or to have no choice at all, which makes her passive and controlled. The same is the state of Sleeping Beauty who does not have a choice. She has to awake in to a new life with a kiss. The act of kiss and *svayamvaram* are tools of patriarchy to stimulate the female body, to move it from one passive role to another passive position, using the patriarchal institution of marriage.

The use of the image of cooking and the use of the image of *Naishadhar* together in the poem is not coincidental. In the myth, Nala, the king of Naishadha, is well known for his culinary skills. In ancient myth as well as in the act of cooking done by a stooped woman, the authority of cooking is on a male figure. Women cook according to the taste of the dominant male figure. The stooped image of the female body stands for the submissive nature of the female body. Woman stoops to prepare food according to the taste of men who have the authority over both her body and the act of cooking. Even after centuries, even after awaking from the sleep, women are supposed to cook according to the tastes of men. Women are still expected to stoop their body for the taste of man and his needs. The ultimate power over food and over the female body is still with man: both are under his control.

In Sleeping Beauty myth, the passive sleeping of Sleeping Beauty and her palace is due to the curse of an aged fairy, who is pictured as black. The king, the father of Sleeping Beauty, did not invite the aged fairy to the celebrations on the christening of Sleeping Beauty. It made her angry and she cursed the little princess. In Dhamayanthi myth, Kali, the black goddess of wrath felt insulted and disappointed as she could not attend the *svayamvaram*, she took revenge on Nala and Dhamayanthi by taking away all their wealth and kingdom. As a result, Dhamayanthi had to wander in the forest, praying for salvation from all these disgraces. This state of Dhamayanthi is equal to the state of Sleeping Beauty. She was wandering in search of Nala who left her under the instigation of Kali within him.

Sleeping Beauty in the tale is presented as the supreme beauty or the ideal western beauty, whom everyman dreams of. The beauty concept of western patriarchal ideology is idealized in the figure of Sleeping Beauty. The significance of Sleeping Beauty is her appearance and attractiveness; she is desired by western patriarchy. All the qualities that western patriarchy desires in woman are bestowed on her by the fairies during her christening ceremony itself. Likewise, Dhamayanthi is the object of desire of Hindu patriarchal ideology:

she is described as the supreme beauty, and even gods cannot control their desire for her. Dhamayanthi is portrayed as the supreme model of Braminical beauty with all the qualities that man desires in woman.

The opposite figure to sleeping beauty is an aged fairy who is black and who lives in isolation. That fairy, who is marginalized and presented as the Other in society is not with a body that the western patriarchy idealizes. On the other hand, her body represents woman who is outside the desires of patriarchy. She is a rebel who fights against the patriarchal rules and codes that restrict the movement of the female body. In Dhamayanthi myth, Kali with black body and anger is opposite to Dhamayanthi and she is rebellious. It is difficult for patriarchal system to accommodate her. Such bodies which cannot be tamed or controlled are pictured as negative both in western and Indian myths. The prince awakens Sleeping Beauty in her passive sleep whereas Nala leaves the sleeping Dhamayanthi and reunites with her later.

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